

WRITERS' TIP SHEET

1: How to Show rather than Tell

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When you "show, rather than tell" readers discover the story for themselves and are more invested in the outcome. Get a first draft on the page, then go back and analyze what needs fixing, using this checklist.

1. Symptom: Too many cerebral verbs.

Your characters think, feel, hope, suspect...

Solution: Rather than naming emotions or describing what's going through Jorge's head, let your readers discover it for themselves. Consider how fear, grief and joy are experienced physically and viscerally, then convey emotional states through the characters' actions, reactions, interactions and dialogue.

2. Symptom: Weak verbs such as entered, moved, went, fell, rose describe an outcome rather than an effect.

Solution: If Jorge lumbers into a room, or Lydia glides, readers can see their specific actions and have a clearer sense of the characters' physical presence at the same time.

3. Symptom: Use of the verb 'to be' produces static writing.

Solution: Rephrase using stronger verbs. 'It was a hot day when Jorge found a dead man who was slumped over the workbench,' could be rewritten as: The heat pounded Jorge's back as he heaved open the garage door and found a dead man slumped over the workbench.

Bonus tip: Be brutal in replacing 'to be' verbs when they appear in power positions--the beginning and end of sentences, paragraphs and chapters.

4. Symptom: Adverbs weaken action

Solution: Jorge belted/charged/ along the sidewalk in pursuit of the purse-snatcher is more evocative than 'Jorge ran quickly.' Use your word processor's "find" function to identify words ending with -ly. Then remove the adverbs and replace their attendant verbs with stronger ones.

5. Symptom: Missing senses.

Most writers use visual detail automatically and overlook hearing, taste, touch and smell.

When you employ all the senses, you transport

readers more fully to the places you're writing about.
Solution: Identify the sensory details in your piece. If you haven't engaged all five senses, add specifics that do.

6. Symptom: Nonspecific adjectives.

Mention an old man or a decrepit house, and readers must make their own interpretation of what they're looking at.

Solution: Use specific images to convey what you want them to see. Telling details of a building's weathered siding, or a man's liver-spotted hands evoke decrepitude and age. Instead of saying Jorge was shy, show him standing apart from the partygoers.

7. Symptom: Generic nouns.

Nouns such as 'children', 'building' and 'vehicle' do not offer specific images for readers.

Solution: Move the camera a little closer to reveal toddlers or teenagers, a warehouse or corner store, a dune buggy or pickup truck.

8. Symptom: Narrative summary.

Some narrative summary, such as 'Jorge and Lydia greeted each other and sat down', effectively moves readers to the meat of the story. Just be certain that you're not rushing through material that ought to be covered in full scenes.

Solution: Use full scenes rather than narrative summary to convey significant action and development--include action, reaction and interaction, description and dialogue.

9. Symptom: Overloaded dialogue.

Dialogue that's too long or is weighed down with information contributes to writing that tells.

Solution: Use a light hand. Keep exchanges between characters short and oblique. Avoid "info dumping." And read dialogue aloud to find out how realistic it sounds. Ask yourself whose voice readers are hearing.