

# Don't Tell

Show  
Be specific

Show it, stronger  
Common Problems

don't be too obvious or a reporter

1. Avoid filtering. When you write from one person's POV, readers see/hear/feel only what the person senses. If you say "I noticed" or "I saw," you have pulled yourself out of that POV and are now an observer of the POV person. (a) I noticed the blue haze of flashing lights against the dark sky. [The blue haze of lights flashed... or something] (b) I was surprised to see a blue haze of flashing police lights against the dark sky. [A blue haze...shocked/surprised me.]

2. Avoid absolutes. Unless you know it is without exception, avoid words such as always, never, ever, entire, all. (a) The entire Brighton police department (b) our entire year was a never-ending battle of his substance abuse, rehabilitation centers, Alcoholics Anonymous. [Entire year means every hour and every day for 365 days; never-ending means...] (c) victor over all the tragedy (d) g because eventually all the different groups will (d) The "life map" is all that the family brings to reality.

insecure

3. R.U.E. Resist the Urge to Explain. Don't stop in the middle of the action to explain or describe. Keep the story moving. (a) You see police cars in front of your house but you stop to describe your three sons.

4. Don't be afraid of contractions. If you don't use them, the writing sounds stilted. (a) *Please God do not let this have anything to do with their father.*

5. Don't try to be dramatic. Write in a natural voice. (a) My long dark brown hair tousled, transforming my composed look. [transformed my composed look? What do you mean?] (b) But months later, when I felt lost and lonely within the walls of that home, I'd forgotten Papo's declaration. I'd forgotten that it was right. I'd forgotten that God was with us. (c) Memory shadows occupied every corner.

6. Learn the difference between this/that and these/those. This refers to present time or something nearby; that refers to the past or far away. (a) I couldn't shake this vision of him. (b) Would you welcome this opportunity? Would you be willing to accept an offer like this? [You could argue for this, but I think that is better.] (c) Driving home this cold December night, blue police lights flashed against the dark sky [This is past tense so it must be that.]

past

past

7. Avoid clichés. Find new ways to express yourself. (a) when he was clean and sober (b) lean into the challenge and (c) to make matters worse, (d) Before I knew it, (e) What seemed like forever (f) hey spiced things up

B

8. In English, adjectives cannot modify each other. The only way to do that is to use a hyphen so they function as a single word. (a) looked through the milky glass of century old windows. (a) It's not century, old windows. (b) His once strong shoulders were (c) my rear view mirror (d) here were night and day contrasts = night-and-day contrasts. All three words amplify contrasts.

9. Avoid meaningless, empty words such as manage to, just, very, really (a) We managed to delve into gut level conversation (b) Something was very wrong. (c) She was really amazed at our indifference. (d) "Just another near miss."

10. Don't insult readers. Avoid stating the obvious. (a) ~~And time was valuable.~~ (b) God made each human being unique and special to Him. Every person on earth has a plan created for the good of their soul and the strengthening of their purpose. (c) I needed to find out what was going on. [She drives home and 8 police cars with flashing lights are in front of her car. Obvious?]

11. The British use *afterwards* and *towards*; Americans omit the s. (a) Afterwards, as I lay in the quiet of my hospital room I thought, (b) man from the audience to stand eight feet above the ground and fall backwards.

12. Interior thought. When we think or have interior thoughts, we use italics only if there is no other indication that they're not spoken. If we say thought, felt, or wondered, we don't use italics. (a) *thought, Okay, I can handle this, it's over now.*

Chicago Manual of Style

13. Nouns in apposition. When a noun and a relationship refer to the same person, you separate with commas. For example, my wife, Shirley. King David had at least 7 wives so we would write, David's wife Abigail. (a) . My husband, John worked near the hospital (b) God led Abraham and his son, Isaac, through a trial, and then

My brother Steve  
no commas if more than 1

14. Avoid for *some reason, somehow* or *for whatever reason* because they say nothing. If you don't know the reason, don't tell us you don't know. We assume that. (a) For some reason, I couldn't reach any of my three friends (b) But somehow I knew I was not supposed to die

15. When you use exact numbers, it's *more than*; inexact is *over*. (a) *We've been here for over a year.*

16. Don't use *said* before the name. It's old-fashioned and stiff. We don't talk that way. (a) *said* our middle boy. [our middle boy *said*.]

stammered puts the emphasis on how  
keeps the emphasis on person

17. Watch the use of only. (a) I could only look out the window.

18. You start a new paragraph every time the camera shifts from one person to another. (a) "I think I'm having a heart attack," ~~was my desperate reply.~~ NEW PARA With steadied precision she verified my address. [The camera was on you;

New paragraph

the camera shifts to the 911 operator.] (b) Kylie and her mom, Jane, waved from the sidewalk. Samuel heaved our wrought iron gate wide open. "Come on in."

19. Watch the use of ladies. Generally we mean women, even though people use it that way. If you use ladies, you need to contrast it with gentlemen. The opposite of men is women. (a) of four young and small ladies. (b) I was told about a group of ladies (c) When the pregnant lady hiked up her skirt

20. Prefer the active voice (where the subject of the sentence does the action). The passive voice is weaker and takes more words. (a) I was told about a group of ladies who went on a spiritual enrichment retreat.

21. Watch the use of present participles (phrase with -ing words). It means simultaneous action: (a) Reaching for the phone, I dialed 911.

subject

prefer the active voice

Jesus rose from the dead

Jane told him → Jesus was resurrected from the dead