

Mike's Fiction©

Show, Don't Tell

A good writer is uncompromising when it comes to the *Show, Don't Tell* rule. Nothing slows down a story and takes the reader “out of the moment” than a long dissertation of facts or background information. Accordingly, “telling” must be minimized or better still—eradicated.

Telling takes different forms. One of them is introspection by a character or a narrator that conveys information outside of dialogue or without being integrated with an action that advances the story. An example of “telling” without being integrated with the an action in the story appears in the fifth full paragraph on page 4 of *A Small Sin in Nuremberg*, where the narrator outlines some key details of the processes used by the International Military Tribunal. Telling can also be a narrator simply describing something, such as “Joe shoved his brother aside roughly and grabbed the ice cream cone from his mother’s hand.”



Showing conveys information in a way that is part of a dialogue or integrated with action that advances the story. Showing can also be a metaphor that evokes an image in the reader’s mind. For example, a “showing” alternative to the “telling” description of Joe and his brother, might be, “Joe stood close and thrust his hip into his brother’s, scooting the boy away as if pushed by a powerful gust of wind. In the same motion, he managed to yank the ice cream cone from his mother’s grip with a sweeping left hook.” Showing can be wordier than telling, but it is worth it to the reader.



Sometimes telling and showing are hard to distinguish from each other. A good example of “showing” (or “telling”—you be the judge) is the fourth full paragraph on page 4 of *A Small Sin in Nuremberg*. This paragraph contains descriptions, but they are linked to story actions, albeit small ones.

“Telling” problems often occur as you try to convey a complicated back story. Back stories are necessary to develop characters or convey information supporting the story line. Rookie writers usually make the mistake of “telling” back story information in a lump at the beginning, which is not only unnecessary, but a good way to repel the reader. The way I deal with back story information in the first draft is to break it down into bite-size elements and “show” as many as possible by “dribbling” them throughout the story. I break the problem into its elements because it is often impractical to “show” a whole bunch of facts all at once. If I still have a “telling” problem, I go ahead and let it go in the first draft. Then I attack the problem again as I am editing. Often, I may decide something isn’t even necessary to show *or* tell the reader. Remember: less is always better in conveying back stories.



After applying this editing process for as many “telling” elements as possible, the result is either they are eliminated or limited to only a few of no more than one or two sentences. I may give up and tolerate these few. Getting rid of the other kind of “telling”—simple descriptions—is usually easier. As I spot them in the editing process, I will replace as many nouns, adjectives and adverbs as possible with metaphors.



I think it is useful to illustrate how I was able to convey much of a complex back story by showing instead of telling. In *A Small Sin in Nuremberg*, Efraim, the protagonist,

is a doctor employed by The International Military Tribunal to evaluate the psychiatric fitness of war crimes defendants to stand trial. During the War, Efraim and his family were shipped off to Auschwitz. His wife dies on the way and his daughter is later gassed in the camp. While in Auschwitz, Efraim tends to the ill as best he can. A war crimes defendant to whom Efraim has been assigned (one SS Colonel Weber) is accused of committing war crimes in Auschwitz. The Colonel claims to have amnesia, which calls into question his competency to stand trial. Joseph Mengele, an infamous Nazi doctor/torturer was also at the camp, and as it turns out, Colonel Weber may have been associated with him and one or the other may have abused Efraim's daughter. Working all this information into the story is critical to its effectiveness.



The first scene shows Efraim making his rounds in Auschwitz during his captivity. This approach adds the stark background of the women's barracks, provides intensity. It also provides a means to work in some of the back story as well as show Efraim's character. For example, we see by Efraim caring for an old woman that he is a man of strong character and compassion. As he gives the woman a placebo, the reader learns that Mengele was there. How? Efraim obtained the placebo from an SS pharmacist in exchange for administering the pharmacist morphine shots to feed his addiction. The pharmacist is the one who supplies Mengele with chemicals for his diabolical experiments on children. So, Mengele's presence in the camp is conveyed by integrating it with the story's action.

A critical fact is the death of Efraim's daughter. By telling that fact, all the drama of that terribly traumatic event would have been lost. Instead, in the second scene, at the

bottom of page 2 and onto page 3, I “showed” the event by setting up a situation where Efraim is the one who actually drags his daughter’s body out of the gas chamber. In a particularly creative moment, I also worked in Efraim discovering something “glinting” on his daughter’s body that becomes useful later in the story (page 5) as a means of integrating information about Efraim’s wife into the story’s action.



In order to put *A Small Sin in Nuremberg* into context, the reader also required information about the defendants at the Nuremberg Trials. I was able to integrate much of that information, as well as a physical description of Efraim and a hint about his role in the trials into the action of Efraim walking in the jail toward Colonel Weber’s cell. Here is the opening of the third scene:

Nuremberg Jail, November 29, 1946

Even amid the cacophony of black boots stomping on stone, Efraim is captivated by the cathedral-like corridor, and its tangle of catwalks scaling three tiers of cells like steel ivy. The Sergeant, who is new, must slow the escort to compensate for the doctor’s lopsided gait. With each painful step, Efraim grows more amused at how out of place he must seem: a wizened old man in baggy brown tweed, vest, and gold watch fob, marching clumsily alongside these muscular MPs. The swarms of guards might also appear misplaced, because those who wander about their dim-lit greasy cells—men with short-cropped hair and dingy gray coveralls—look harmless as monks. They are accused of multiple offenses, including crimes against humanity. A few—Karl Brandt, Oskar Schroeder, Kurt Weber—are guilty of a special sacrilege; they are men of medicine who defiled the Hippocratic Oath. Yet, behind thick wooden doors they

still brush their teeth, pick at their scabs, take their bowel movements, pretending to be unaware the good doctor is an avenging angel.

Remember, showing is essential to bringing a story alive and engaging the reader. Showing adds drama, color and scope to what otherwise would be a dry and boring “telling” of events and facts.