

Read the two versions of the same event below. Which of these passages is the most successful?

### Passage One:

Jamie slumped down. She had failed to win the race. She hung her head in shame.

### Passage Two:

As soon as she saw Shannon's body ripping through the tape ahead of her, Jamie knew that the race was over. She had lost. But it was not simply a question of losing a simple race. For the past two years they had been rivals in the classroom, on the track and most importantly, in the affections of Jim Peterson. Now, realizing that all eyes would be upon Shannon as she made her victory lap, Jamie hung her head in shame. Sweat from her forehead beaded and dripped. 'I'll never recover from this,' she thought as she walked away by herself.

These two passages represent two key approaches to narrating a story.

Passage one is an example of the Telling approach to narration while Passage two demonstrates how Showing is used to describe the same incident.

Each of these approaches has certain characteristics, advantages and disadvantages.

### Advantages of Telling

- allows a writer to convey the "bare bones" of an event with a minimum use of language.
- is often used to summarize long periods of time that are not important in a story. For instance, "for weeks and weeks it rained" may make more sense than describing this period in minute detail.
- may be used to provide background information that sets up a particular series

of events. For example, "For eight long years, he had served the King faithfully. In Corsica, Tyre and Jerusalem, they had campaigned for victory. Now they were ready for the final battle."

## Advantages of Showing

- allows the writer to convey a full range of sensations to the reader, so that the reader may see, smell, taste and even touch or hear the events in the story.
- allows the writer to create vivid detail to put the reader in a particular setting
- allows the reader to share the experience of a character
- is used to effectively dramatize conflict
- is not merely a summary of events, therefore the plot can be shown to advance through decisions made by a character

Which of these is better? Perhaps another way to answer this question is to ask ourselves what would happen if an author used solely one or the other approach:

## Exclusive use of telling ...

### Disadvantages of Telling

- results in very little reader involvement since it is a summary of events
- asks the reader to believe a "second hand" narration of incidents
- can move the plot too swiftly so that it becomes a confusing, disjointed blur
- can promote a "so what?" response from readers because it doesn't allow them to focus on a single significant moment

## Exclusive use of showing...

### **Disadvantages of Showing**

- can result in too much focus on unimportant detail
- can slow the pace of the story's plot to a standstill
- demands so much concentration that readers may find a story tedious, since not every moment is equally significant
- detail can artificially increase the length of a story far beyond what is appropriate

The key to success with both these techniques is their appropriate balance. Good writers are able to choose the right moments to use either showing or telling -- or even a combination of the two. These guidelines should help you know when to use each of them.

### **Guidelines for Using Showing and Telling**

#### **Use telling when...**

- you need to cover long periods of time or to summarize a series of events and you don't want to decrease the pace of the plot

#### **Use showing when...**

- the conflict needs to be dramatized with dialogue
- the reader will learn something very important about a character that affects his/her development as the story progresses
- the plot must slow down so that the reader can focus on a significant moment which will move the plot forward