

## Notes from a Traveling Author – December 2007/January 2008

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One of the single most important “rules” for strong writing is one that I did not learn until I began my professional writing career: “Show, don’t tell.”

When I was in school, writing instruction focused on adjectives—or, at least, I remember adjectives as a primary focus. I vividly remember one lesson, in 6th grade, in which a teacher suggested that we strengthen our writing by changing sentences such as, “Her eyes were kind,” to sentences such as, “Her eyes were exciting.”

Even as a relatively undeveloped writer, I recognized several fundamental flaws in this lesson.

First, her suggested edit did not *strengthen* the existing meaning, but *changed* the meaning. Yes, in editing, sometimes we do want to change the sense of an initial draft. But more often, I think, we want to maintain the existing meaning, but find a way to express that sense or meaning or thought with a bit more oomph.

Secondly, replacing an adjective that does not *mean* “exciting” with one that *does* mean “exciting” does not make the *writing* more exciting. In other words, the fact that “exciting” means “exciting” does not necessarily make “exciting” an exciting adjective for exciting writing!

Though I recognized these flaws in the argument for the kind-to-exciting edit, I had no information at the time about what would make a better edit—so I spent my 6th grade year, at least, editing my writing by replacing kind-style adjectives with exciting-style adjectives. I’m sure this helped develop my vocabulary, and in that regard was not a complete loss, but I doubt it did much for the quality of my writing.

What I learned much later is that strong writing has little to do with “exciting” adjectives and much more to do with *strong, action* verbs. To strengthen writing, “show” your reader through the use of strong, action verbs, rather than “telling” your reader through the use of weaker linking verbs plus adjectives. “Her eyes were exciting” *tells*. A simple (albeit rather clichéd) example of a stronger sentence that *shows*: “Her eyes sparkled.”

The quality of writing instruction today seems much improved from the days when I learned to upgrade adjectives. I hear teachers talk about strong verbs; I see lists of “juicy verbs” hanging in classrooms; some teachers even use the specific phrasing, “show me, don’t tell me.”

As a writer, I love to see this focus on verbs rather than adjectives. Nevertheless, I continue to see students struggle with showing, rather than telling—and a tendency to want to upgrade adjectives, rather than changing sentence structure to use strong action verbs. When I present writing programs, I talk about “show, don’t tell,” then challenge students to rewrite a sentence such as, “John was angry,” to show rather than tell. The first responses I hear are almost invariably adjective upgrades or adverb insertions: “John was *furious*.” “John was *outraged*.” “John was *extremely* angry.”

“But show me!” I say. “What do people DO when they are angry?” I stomp across the room. I cross my arms over my chest and scowl. I clench my fists. Soon the students get it: “John stomped!” “John clenched his fists!”

This newsletter ties in with my last; as I wrote in October/November, children seem to struggle with verbal *description* of what they see; children likewise struggle with *showing* in their writing, rather than telling. Strengthening the verbal-visual connection is a pervasive theme when it comes to the development of strong readers and writers!

One exercise I might suggest for strengthening students' ability to revise their writing to show rather than tell: After students write a first draft, ask them to review their writing and circle every instance of the verb "to be" (remind them to look for both present and past tenses: am, is, are; was, were). Next, ask students to rewrite each sentence that contains a circle, using a strong action verb to show rather than tell. Ask students to share their edits, and see what happens!

*A few final thoughts:* For more examples of "show, don't tell" that you might wish to share with students prior to this exercise, please feel free to download my writing tip sheet at [www.lynneberry.com/StoryWritingTips.pdf](http://www.lynneberry.com/StoryWritingTips.pdf). In addition, with my continued focus on verbal-visual, I have posted a new (December/January) illustration contest for kids at [www.lynneberry.com/contest.htm](http://www.lynneberry.com/contest.htm). (Winners of the October/November contest are posted at [www.lynneberry.com/contestwinners.htm](http://www.lynneberry.com/contestwinners.htm)—some really impressive illustrations!)