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Show and Tell

by Patrick Barry

Showing can get out of hand.

—Poet Richard Blanco¹

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“Show don’t tell.” Teachers preach these words. Style guides endorse them.² And you’d be hard pressed to find any editor or law firm partner who hasn’t offered them as feedback in the last year, month, week, maybe even day. There’s only one problem: “Show don’t tell” is bad advice.

Or at least, it is incomplete advice.

I don’t mean to deny the wisdom of an oft-quoted 1886 letter by Anton Chekhov to his brother Alexander about the importance of being concrete and specific when writing. “In descriptions of nature,” Chekhov counseled, “one must seize on small details, grouping them so that when the reader closes his eyes he gets a picture. For instance, you’ll have a moonlit night if you write that on

the mill dam a piece of glass from a broken bottle glittered like a bright little star, and that the black shadow of a dog or a wolf rolled past like a ball.”³

I agree with Chekhov wholeheartedly. Suggesting that to be a good writer his brother will need to “seize on small details” is incredibly helpful, as is explaining that he’ll need to group those details together “so that when the reader closes his eyes he gets a picture.” That’s exactly what I tell my students. Be particular when you are writing legal briefs. Be particular when you are writing grant applications. Be particular when you are writing important emails and memos and text messages. Learn how to show and not just tell.

But I also tell them that they can’t just show and never tell—because writing that only shows is like a too-long weekend in Las Vegas: at some point, people get sensory overload. Francine Prose, who is a great admirer of Chekhov, puts the point well in *Reading Like a Writer*, her bestselling guide to the mechanics behind some of the most elegant and effective writing around. Here is how she describes a great passage from Alice Munro, the winner of the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature and an expert when it comes to knowing when to show and when to tell:

The passage contradicts a form of bad advice often given young writers—namely, that the job of the author is to show, not tell. Needless to say, many great novelists combine ‘dramatic’ showing with long sections of the flat-out authorial narration that is, I guess, what is meant by telling.⁴

So the advice should really be “show and tell” not “show don’t tell.” Great writers, Prose notes, do both.

¹ Amy Bloom, *Visiting Writer: Richard Blanco*, COURSEERA.ORG, <https://www.coursera.org/lecture/craft-of-character/visiting-writer-richard-blanco-XegNq> (last visited June 21, 2018).

² See e.g., ADAM LAMARELLO AND MEGAN E. BOYD, *SHOW, DON’T TELL: LEGAL WRITING FOR THE REAL WORLD* (2014); WILLIAM ZINSSER, *ON WRITING WELL: THE CLASSIC GUIDE TO WRITING NONFICTION* 68 (2006) (“Verbs are the most important of your tools Active verbs also enable us to visualize an activity because they require a pronoun or a noun or a person to put them in motion. Many verbs also carry in their imagery or in their sound a suggestion of what they mean.”); JOSEPHINE NOBISSE, *SHOW, DON’T TELL: SECRETS OF WRITING* (2004); WILLIAM STRUNK AND E.B. WHITE, *THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE* 21 (4th ed., 2000) (“Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract The greatest writers . . . are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. Their words call up pictures.”); George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*, in *A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS* 169-170 (1970) (“Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one’s meaning as clear as one can through pictures and sensations. Afterward one can choose—not simply *accept*—the phrases that will best cover the meaning, and then switch round and decide what impressions one’s words are likely to make on another person.”); Chuck Palahniuk, *Nuts and Bolts: “Thought” Verbs*, LITREACTOR (Aug. 12, 2013), <https://litreactor.com/essays/chuck-palahniuk/nuts-and-bolts-“thought”-verbs> (“In short, no more short-cuts. Only specific sensory detail: action, smell, taste, sound, and feeling.”).

³ ANTON CHEKHOV, *THE UNKNOWN CHEKHOV: STORIES & OTHER WRITINGS HITHERTO UNTRANSLATED* 14 (Avraham Yarmolinsky trans., 1999).

⁴ FRANCINE PROSE, *READING LIKE A WRITER: A GUIDE FOR PEOPLE WHO LOVE BOOKS AND THOSE WHO WANT TO WRITE THEM* 24-25 (2007).

“But I also tell them that they can’t just show and never tell—because writing that only shows is like a too-long weekend in Las Vegas”

Another master of composition, Phillip Lopate, takes a similar stance in a book he specifically titled *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*. As he explains, “It seems obviously desirable for a writing style to be able to move freely and easily from the concrete to the general and back.”⁵ In his view, “The initially salutary correction against abstract language (Williams Carlos Williams’s ‘no ideas but in things’) has gone too far, extending to a virtual gag order in students’ minds against abstraction.”⁶

Two concepts familiar to folks who have taken a creative writing workshop may help: summary and scene. Learn how to distinguish between them and you’ll develop a better sense of how to move from the concrete to the general and the general to the concrete. Your writing will become more earthy and alive, more vivid and affecting—but also more analytic and expository. It will, ideally, shed needless abstractions while at the same time retaining useful ones, maybe not quite as well as Alice Munro does but at least a little better than you do right now.

A. Time Passes

One way to think about the difference between a summary and a scene is that a summary is more general and usually covers a longer span of time. You don’t describe one event or development, as you would in a scene; you describe many events and developments. You also might add in some analysis and context, synthesis and compression, grouping and classification. It’s a way of communicating a lot of information in a short amount of space.

A great example in fiction comes in *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf. In a novel otherwise filled with many exquisite “scenes—by which I mean individual settings and moments described in close, intimate detail—there is a powerful section of summary in the middle. It’s called “Time Passes,” a perfect title for a section of summary.

In just twenty pages, Woolf covers ten years in the lives of her characters. People marry. People die. A house deteriorates and then is brought back to life. And there’s a war—a world war in fact. World War I falls right in the middle of the section.

In a 2014 piece for *The Atlantic*, the author Maggie Shipstead praises the powerful economy of this section. “To me,” she writes, “*To the Lighthouse*, a masterpiece if there ever was one, is defined and spectacularly elevated by [the section “Time Passes”].”⁷ She describes it as “20 [sic] pages of expansive vision and extreme beauty,”⁸ a nice combination of traits that highlights the best of what a summary can be.

But we don’t have to look all the way back to the publication of *To the Lighthouse* in 1927 to find helpful examples of summary and scene. Nor do we have to read classic works of literature. We can do something much more commonplace and contemporary, something that many of my more athletically minded students do at least once and maybe even two or three times a day: Watch *SportsCenter*.

B. This Is SportsCenter

The success of *SportsCenter*, the flagship news program of sports giant ESPN, depends on the ability of its anchors to move back and forth between summary and scene. Anytime they are working with a highlight from a basketball game, a tennis match, or any other sporting event, they need to do what great writers do: skillfully pair detailed looks at certain key moments with more broad-scale, context-providing sections of narration.

It wouldn’t be helpful if anchors simply showed an entire football game, baseball game, or NASCAR race. The *SportsCenter* audience doesn’t want to see every little thing that happened. They want to see the important parts, the big plays, the good stuff. So the best anchors—no doubt helped by experienced

“Two concepts familiar to folks who have taken a creative workshop may help: summary and scene.”

⁵ PHILLIP LOPATE, *TO SHOW AND TO TELL: THE CRAFT OF LITERARY NONFICTION* (2013).

⁶ *Id.*; see also Phillip Lopate, *Reflection and Retrospection: A Pedagogic Mystery Story*, *THE FOURTH GENRE: EXPLORATIONS IN NON-FICTION* 143-156 (Spring 2005) reprinted in <http://philliplopat.com/2011/08/reflection-and-retrospection-a-pedagogic-mystery-story/> (last visited November 4, 2018).

⁷ Joe Fassler, “What Plot is Grander or More Essential Than Time Passing?”, *THE ATLANTIC* (Apr. 8, 2014), <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/04/what-plot-is-grander-or-more-essential-than-time-passing/360341/> (last accessed November 4, 2018).

⁸ *Id.*

“You don’t rush through or abridge a golf putt that wins the Masters. Instead, you show it.”

producers and other staff members—learn to summarize. They become experts at compression and consolidation as well as selection and synthesis. They figure out how to not just show, but tell.

They still, of course, devote time to showing. You don’t “tell” a last-second field goal or game-winning homer. You don’t rush through or abridge a golf putt that wins the Masters. Instead, you show it. You slow down your commentary, you focus the audience’s attention, and you let them try to experience the moment for themselves.

But you do this judiciously. Having too many scenes will ruin the story. You need the occasional summary not just to move things along but also to turn individual incidents into a more coherent whole. A summary provides connective tissue. It identifies patterns, organizes data, and imposes much-needed structure. Without summaries, you’ll just have a collage of images and ideas. That wouldn’t work well on *SportsCenter*, and it certainly won’t work well in legal writing, where a premium is placed on organization and analysis.

Judge Edith Jones of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, for example, articulated an approach to composition shared by many lawyers and judges when she wrote in a 1993 issue of *Scribes Journal of Legal Writing* that her own strategy followed what she learned doing high school debate: “Tell ‘em what you’re going to tell ‘em;

then tell ‘em; and finally, tell ‘em what you told ‘em.”⁹ That’s essentially summary-scene-summary.

“This is not a rule of redundancy so much as of forcefulness,” Jones explains. “Moreover, the rule connotes that an argument is either not worth making, or it makes no sense, if it cannot be expressed as easily in summary as in complete fashion.”¹⁰

The precise amount you summarize versus the precise amount you use scenes will, of course, vary depending on the circumstances. The proper ratio is not a scientific formula. But the more you remember the way each complements the other—the more you balance synthesis with specifics—the better your writing will be.

Same goes, perhaps, for your job prospects at ESPN.

⁹ Edith Jones, *How I Write*, 4 SCRIBES JOURNAL OF LEGAL WRITING 25 (1993); see also ROBERT L. HAIG, 4 N.Y. PRAC., COM. LITIG. IN N.Y. STATE COURTS § 40.27 (4th Ed. Sept. 2017); STEVEN J. KIRSCH, ET AL., 5 MINN. PRAC., METHODS OF PRACTICE: CIVIL ADVOCACY § 1.3 (Sept. 2017); W. DENT GITCHEL AND MOLLY TOWNES O’BRIEN, TRIAL ADVOCACY BASICS 242-243 (2006); James A. Johnson, *Jury Argument: Winning Techniques*, 90 MICH. B. J. 34 (Mar. 2011)

¹⁰ Jones, *supra* note 9, at 25.

Micro Essay

Will AI affect the way we teach legal writing? Definitely. And likely in some drastic ways. But as Kai-Fu Lee writes in a recent essay, “[W]hile AI is superhuman in the coldblooded world of numbers and data, it lacks . . . the ability to make another person feel understood and cared for.”¹ In the legal writing world, writing specialists are uniquely situated to make students feel just that.

As technology continues its inevitable disruptions, writing specialists—through their supportive dialogues with students—will remain an essential force in providing the empathy and understanding that students need to thrive.

By Lurene Contento, Director, Writing Resource Center, The John Marshall Law School, Chicago.

¹Kai-fu Lee’s essay, printed in *The Wall Street Journal*, September 15-16, 2018, is adapted from his book “AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley and the New World Order.” Dr. Lee is the former president of Google China and is currently CEO and Chairman of Sinovation Ventures.