



Show, Don't Tell: Specific Examples and Concrete Details

Showing means to “give evidence”; if you say your teacher is unfair, for example, I don't know exactly what you mean. But if you give me a **specific example**—“my teacher gives all the boys in the class A's and all the girls F's even when they have the same answers”—then I do know just what you mean by “unfair.” If you say “My sister is attractive,” would I be able to picture her? No, but if you describe her button nose, her consilk-soft blonde hair, her twinkling green eyes, and her tinkling laugh, I can begin to both see AND hear her. Think of **showing** as anything that can be tape-recorded or filmed--in other words, proven by **the senses**. Compare these:

The children were having fun. (What were they doing?)

Tumbling off the couch, letting out banshee-like screams, the toddlers fell to an imaginary death at the foot of the torn and tattered “cliff.”

The soldier was impressive. (What did he look like?)

He was a stocky, barrel-chested man in his thirties with thick, muscular forearms, a jagged scar running along his forehead, a Purple Heart and Vietnam Service Ribbon emblazoned on his chest.

I was angry. (Why? How did it feel?)

I clenched my fists and glared at my mother, pressure welling up inside me like a volcano. How dare she tell me how to dress, as though I were a child!

The class was interesting. (Why? What did you do or learn?)

The class taught me how to control stress and manage my time effectively by teaching relaxation exercises and requiring a weekly schedule.

Instead of using **abstract** words like “interesting,” “angry,” “fun,” or “good,” use **concrete** and **specific** words to show. But be careful: some sentences that have no abstract words are still not specific. Compare:

The car went around the corner.

The battered red VW van skidded around the corner of Fifth and Main.