

Story Details: Openings and Show, Don't Tell

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Story Openings

- Story “Hook” - probably the single most important part of the story
- A strong short story opening has to grab the reader right from the first paragraph
 - (preferably, the first sentence)
- Three types of hooks:
 - Conversation, incident, description

Hooks - E.B. White

- 11 July 1899 – 01 October 1985 – American Writer born in Mt. Vernon, New York
- Long-time contributor to “The New Yorker” magazine, eventually joined the staff
- Famous for writing *Charlotte's Web*, *Stuart Little* and co-authoring, *The Elements of Style*

Charlotte's Web - 1952

- It's the story of a pig named Wilbur who is saved from slaughter by his friend, the barn spider, Charlotte
- Opening Line:
 - “Where's Papa going with that ax?” said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.

Conversational Hooks

- Start with a Conversation
 - “Where's papa going with that axe?”
- Let's the reader “overhear” a key conversation which *propels the story forward*
 - (If this conversation doesn't move the story forward, it's not the right one to start with)
- How the characters react (shock, horror, amazement) sets the tone of the story

Hooks – Franz Kafka

- 3 July 1883 – 3 June 1924 – German Language novelist, born in Prague, Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic)
- Most of his work was published posthumously (after his death)
- His work are regarded as one of the major achievements of world literature

Metamorphosis - 1915

- Opening Line:
 - *“When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous insect.”*
- Samsa is the sole provider for his parents and sister. His first thoughts are not about what's happened to him, but how he will continue his job as a traveling salesman. The story details how their lives deteriorate and Samsa's eventual death.

Incident Hooks

- Start with an incident:
 - *When Gregor woke up...he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous insect.”*
- (Usually) Reveals the key event in the story right from the beginning
- More often, it's the slamming of a door, a dog barking, anything which moves “normal life” into a higher gear:
 - “A screaming comes across the sky.” (Thomas Pynchon)

Hooks - Edward Bulwer-Lytton

- 25 May 1803 – 18 January 1873 - 1st Baron Lytton, English politician, poet, playwright and novelist.
- Prolific and popular, wrote a steady stream of “best sellers”
- Coined the phrases, “the great unwashed,” “pursuit of the almighty dollar,” and “the pen is mightier than the sword.”

Paul Clifford - 1830

- About Paul Clifford who leads a double life as both a criminal and a gentleman.
- Opening (Partial) Line:
 - *“It was a dark and stormy night;...”*
- BL should have stopped there, he continued:
 - the rain fell in torrents—except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the house-tops, and fiercely agitting the scnaty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.

Paul Clifford – 1830 - Continued

- Opening line often cited as the best example of “Purple Prose” in the English Language
- Purple Prose: prose so extravagant, ornate or flowery as to break the flow of the words and draw attention to itself.
- Avoid it!

Descriptive Hooks

- Describe something integral to the story, could be:
 - The weather
 - A person
 - The location
- Focus on the senses: what is seen, felt, heard, tasted or touched.

Assignment!

- Read the first line or paragraph of several stories
- Find an example which appeals to you
- Be prepared to read the opening and discuss what about it draws you into the story. Also be able to tell which type of opening it is:
 - Conversation
 - Description
 - Incident

Show, Don't Tell

- A primary tenet of good writing
- “Telling” states facts or observations: i.e, the details.
 - George was an old man.
- “Showing” invites deeper understanding.
 - George moved slowly to the kitchen, his gnarled fingers gripped tightly on the four-legged walker that helped him keep his balance.

Show, Don't Tell

- Why is showing better?
 - Creates a better mental picture for the reader
 - It's interactive, forcing the reader to think about the story (such as deducing George's age)

Show, Don't Tell - Examples*

- Telling:
 - All the kids knew that Lucinda was the meanest kid in the third grade. She was prissy and cute, and she thought that meant she could get away with anything. She would always go out of her way to torment me. I wasn't one of the "cool" kids, and the few kids I knew were just the guys I played chess with during recess -- they weren't really friends. Plus, I was clumsy. So I was a good target. She tormented me so much she made the third grade a living hell.

Show, Don't Tell – Examples*

- Showing:
 - When the recess bell rang, I grabbed my chess set and dashed to freedom, eager to win the daily tournament of outcasts. I didn't look, but I knew Lucinda was watching, I could feel her hair curly locks swaying as her head tracked me. Of course, I tripped in the doorway. Tennis shoes and sandals stepped around me as I scrambled after pawns and bishops. And there was Lucinda, waiting for me to notice her. She smiled, lifted her shiny patent-leather shoe, and slowly, carefully ground her heel down onto the head of my white queen.

Show, Don't Tell - Examples*

- Both make the same point: Lucinda is mean
 - But, in the first passage, the author expects us to believe him
 - In the second, we hear a detailed account of Lucinda's behavior
- 1st Passage: focuses on “what usually happens;” includes details: what Lucinda looks like and the narrator's nerdiness...but once we've read, there's nothing for us to do about it...

Show, Don't Tell - Examples*

- 2nd Passage focuses on one specific event:
 - The narrator trips and falls
 - He brings the reader to the ground with him so that we see what he sees and feel what he feels
- The writer never says, “I don't have any friends,” but it's shown to us...(no one helps him up)
- The writer never says, “Lucinda is mean,” but we gather that from her crushing the chess Queen

Show, Don't Tell - Examples*

- We also learn something else about Lucinda...
 - She's not just mean, she wants the narrator's attention, too
- And notice that she attacks not just any chess piece, but the Queen...
- Does she consider the chess set to be her competition?

Show, Don't Tell - Examples*

- Showing or Telling?

“He looked at me in a way that wasn't exactly threatening, but still made me uncomfortable.”

Show, Don't Tell - Examples*

- Showing or Telling?

“He looked at me in a way that wasn't exactly threatening, but still made me uncomfortable.”

- Showing

- What did this guy do to make you feel uncomfortable? Waggle his eyebrows? Chew with his mouth open? Leer at you?

Show, Don't Tell - Examples*

- Showing or Telling?

“Clearly, something must be done about this terrible crisis.”

Show, Don't Tell - Examples*

- Showing or Telling?

“Clearly, something must be done about this terrible crisis.”

- Showing

- “Clearly,” “Obviously,” or variations (“Nobody can doubt that...”) are often signs the writer knows he hasn't done a good job proving the statement which follows.

Show, Don't Tell - Examples*

- A confident assertion is another way of telling
- Just because it's said “forcefully” doesn't make it true

* Examples from Dennis G. Jerz,

- professor at Seton Hill University

Show, Don't Tell - Examples

- Sometimes, telling is a *good* thing
- Tell when you need to summarize an event
 - creating a scene would be wrong in terms of pace (action!)
 - more commonly, if you've already written the scene earlier and you don't need to drag your reader through it again
 - “April told May how June told Julie where to stick her opinion.”

Show, Don't Tell

- Tell things which aren't important to the story.
 - “It's raining,” instead of a full-blown description of the weather.
- Tell mundane things:
 - She hung up the phone.