

# *A Day in the Life of a Writer Show, Don't Tell*

*By Tami Brothers*

**November 2008**

Show. Don't tell. How many times have I heard this phrase since I started writing? So much so that these three words have become a mantra in my head as I compose my stories. The problem is how in the world do you incorporate showing into your writing? I mean, the concept sounds easy enough. When I grab any book from my bookshelf, I can 'see' how well the author did by how easily the book reads and how smooth each scene flows to the next one. I find myself falling in love with the characters and drawn into the story without even trying. I know this is illustrates showing.

In contrast, I also 'see' that other books can feel choppy and preachy. I find myself skipping over paragraphs and scenes just to get to the next part; hoping to be rewarded for continuing with the story. Or I can read through a page and not be able to generate a mental picture of anything the writer has just written. This is obviously telling.

The problem arises when I try to find these issues in my own writing. For some reason, my inner critic shuts down when I read through my manuscript. All I can 'see' are the words I painstakingly labored over. Not a good thing when a writer is trying to get published.

I know what my problem is, so how do I fix this? Does anyone else wear blinders when they read through their own work? As often as the phrase 'Show. Don't tell.' is repeated; I'm guessing I'm not alone.

Hoping to find a solution, I decided to do a little digging into the matter. The first place I looked was back at my bookshelf. All those books I fell

in love with were written by some fabulous authors who obviously have a grasp on this subject. Who better to ask for help with the issue than those who have mastered it?

With this in mind, I contacted the five published authors below. Without hesitation, they each stepped up to the plate and provided an idea of what techniques they use when they are writing their stories. Some responses were quite detailed, and I devoured them as I would any of their books. Others were short and sweet, right to the point, giving just as much information as the longer ones.

Being an avid fan of each author, I could see their writing style reflected in their answers, and I learned a tremendous amount from each person. I share their responses with you in hopes of giving you the same "aha" moment I experienced when I read them.

Being a book nut, I also asked about their favorite reference books and am sharing that as well. So, strap on your seat belts and dive in. Neither you nor your writing will ever be the same again.

## *Can you help us understand the concept of showing versus telling?*

**Berta Platas**—Sometimes, for expediency's sake, you can gloss over the action with a little "tell." Most times, it's better to move the story along with your description and dialogue. Here's an example: *There was a knock at the door. Suzi answered, certain that it was Molly, but it was Jared. Unnerved, Suzi showed her former fiancé into the parlor.*

Why not add her reaction right in the middle of the action? That's how you "show."

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*There was a knock at the door. Suzi answered, certain that it was Molly, but it was Jared. Dumbstruck, Suzi stared at the man who had sworn in front of fifty people that he'd never marry her. Why weren't you at the dance?" His smooth voice sent shivers up her spine. She stepped aside to allow her former fiancé to enter, noticing the small smile that now adorned his lips. She cursed silently. He knew the reaction his presence had caused.*

**Stephanie Bond**—Learning to show versus tell just takes awareness and practice.

*Tell:* She saw the red car rolling down the hill toward her.

*Show:* The red car rolled down the hill toward her.

See the subtle difference? In the first example, the reader is further removed from the action than she could be.

*Tell:* She felt uncomfortable.

*Show:* She fidgeted on her chair.

In the first example, we're being *told* she's uncomfortable; in the second example, we're being *shown* she's uncomfortable. The second sentence is more vivid and evokes more sensory detail.

Words like *feel*, *felt*, *watched*, *saw*, and *heard* are red flags for telling, not showing.

Keep in mind that telling isn't grammatically wrong—it's just not as vivid for the reader. You probably won't be able to write a complete manuscript without SOME telling; but as a wordsmith, you should always know what you're doing and why, and strive to make your story jump off the page.

**Jennifer LaBrecque**—When you tell, it's just that.

*She was frightened.*

When you show, you're actually experiencing it from the character's point of view.

*A shiver raced down her spine and fear froze her motionless.*

**Dorene Graham**—Showing instead of telling isn't complicated. Instead of having your reader floating in the ethers and watching while you give a play by play, put her in the story experiencing the scene as it unfolds. Do this by establishing your point of view (POV) character at the start of the scene. Put your reader inside that character, seeing through her eyes, hearing through her ears, smelling through her nose, feeling through her skin and directly thinking her thoughts.

Avoid telling instead of showing by eliminating the use of filters. Filtering is when the writer gets in between the reader and the POV character by telling the reader what that character is sensing or thinking. If you've done a good job of establishing POV, you don't have to tell us *He watched her walk across the room*. You have only to say, *She walked across the room*. Think about where the reader is in each example. In the first, she's outside of the POV character, watching him watch the woman. In the second example, your reader is inside the POV character, seeing the woman through his eyes.

Look for sensory words like *watched*, *heard*, *smelled*, *felt* and *thought*. When you see them in your writing, ask where the reader is. If she's inside your POV character, you've mastered the art of showing and not telling.

**Dianna Love**—There are plenty of examples to show character and reactions, but what about showing active setting and descriptions? When you have to describe a setting or describe a character, don't do a laundry list description even

if it is brief. Find some way to add to the story, especially in introspection since that's where we'll find 99 percent of descriptions and where most readers get bored with a scene.

From **Phantom In The Night** by Dianna Love and Sherrilyn Kenyon

Opening line shows setting:

*A dangerous damn place to run out of dirt.*

The grim stench of death in this hand-hewn tunnel strangled every breath Sergeant Nathan Drake sucked in. He hated caves.

Only one way in...or out.

[You know immediately this is a military setting so it's very likely a black ops mission and that he's in a cave tunnel where he's just hit a dead end, and that something or someone has died in there to give off that stench. You also know he isn't happy about being there. Below is the same man, but at a different point in the story.]

From inside his mother's house, Nathan watched the woman flee across the front lawn to the other side of the street. Moonlight shimmered along her shapely form.

[Plus another snippet a little further down, but still his POV...]

She smelled like a spring day when flowers start to bloom. Like nothing he'd breathed in for the past two years.

[A female intruder broke into Nathan's deceased mother's home. When he allows the woman to leave, he watches her – that's when we get a visual of the outdoor setting with moonlight. Then his thought of how good she smelled shows us he's been denied the simplest pleasure such as smelling a spring day for two years – very likely somewhere he's been against his will. We get setting and a couple brief descriptions of her in a

way that allows us to see inside Nathan at the same time.]

**OUT OF CONTROL** by Suzanne Brockmann

That program was a neat little piece of training software. Ken knew it inside and out.

He ought to, he'd helped design it.

Its one major flaw was that it could be uncomfortable to train with in hot weather – something they didn't have to worry about on freeze-your-balls-off winter day like today. It required all the players in the training op to wear specially designed, long-sleeved uniforms, the fabric laced with a sensor grid.

[In this scene, Suzanne lets you know it's very cold where Ken and his men are training plus what type of specialized suits the men are wearing in an active and interesting way. Note how you get a little "technical" information about the program and suits in a way that does not slow the scene or burden the reader to keep up.]

Molly Anderson had never flown in a Cessna quite like this one before.

It occurred to her that she should probably be afraid for her life, considering she was all these thousands of feet up in the sky in a plane that spent more time in pieces on the ground than in the air.

[A good opening for a subplot scene. Suzanne shows you where Molly is – flying in a Cessna – and that the airplane she's riding in is not the most dependable. And based on all that, Suzanne shows us that Molly has faith in the pilot since the opening line gives us the impression Molly is in this situation voluntarily. If she'd have been there involuntarily, Suzanne would have let you know right away by focusing more on the people/situation forcing Molly to go and her emotional state rather than the condition of the airplane.]

## **Do you have a favorite reference book?**

**Berta Platas**—Favorite reference book has got to be Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat!* Best planning book ever. Also love Stephen King's book, which is encouraging just because he's so cussed ornery that he accumulated many, many rejections and kept on writing – and submitting. He's my hero.

**Stephanie Bond**—My most helpful reference book for research is *Forensic Pathology* by M.D., Vincent J.M. DiMaio and Dominick DiMaio; my most helpful reference book for writing is a tossup between *Writing the Breakout Novel* by Donald Maass and *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne and Dave King. I keep going back to those books again and again.

**Jennifer LaBrecque**—*A Natural History of the Senses* by Diane Ackerman is great for making you aware of the world around you in a different way. I double-check with Strunk and White often enough and I have Rodale's *The Synonym Finder* within easy reach.

**Dorene Graham**—The reference book I've found the most helpful lately is Donald Maass' *Writing the Breakout Novel* and accompanying workbook.

**Dianna Love** – *Break Into Fiction* by Dianna Love and Mary Buckham

## **Conclusion**

Writing this article was the best thing I ever did for my (hopeful) career. Not only am I able to share a ton of information with you, but I've found several different techniques and tips I am happily incorporating into every aspect of my writing.

Please join me in thanking the authors who shared their insight into this topic. Each person is wonderful and as I've discovered on more than

one occasion, always willing to share their time and experience with those of us who are unpublished. Check out their Bios below and definitely grab one of their books. I promise you will be able to 'see' how well they use their own advice and exactly why I chose them when I went hunting for answers. Get busy writing, everyone!

## **Author BIOS**

**Berta Platas** writes fun, sexy romance and co-writes with Michelle Roper as young adult author, Gillian Summers. Check out the third installment to their Faire Folk trilogy coming out the summer of 2009.

**LUCKY CHICA:** St. Martin's January 9, 2009 - is about a young woman who has to answer a question we all wish we had: What would you do with \$600 million dollars?

[www.bertaplatas.com](http://www.bertaplatas.com) and  
[www.gilliansummers.com](http://www.gilliansummers.com)

**Stephanie Bond** is the author of more than 40 romance and suspense novels, including the *Body Movers* series for Mira Books. Check out Stephanie's library of how-to writing articles, instantly downloadable from Amazon Shorts. Stephanie also writes a regular column in *The Galley*.

**BODY MOVERS** available now in paperback, large print, and e-book formats! **BODY MOVERS: 2 Bodies for the Price of 1** available now in paperback and e-book formats! **BODY MOVERS: 3 Men and a Body** available now in oversize paperback, e-book and audio!

**BODY MOVERS books 4, 5, and 6** available back to back in 2009!

Check out the **Open Book** blog on [www.stephaniebond.com](http://www.stephaniebond.com).

**Jennifer LaBrecque** Smart, sexy romance... just how you like it! **NOBODY DOES IT BETTER**, Harlequin Blaze, 06/08 **YULE BE MINE**, Harlequin Blaze, 12/08

[www.jenniferlabrecque.com](http://www.jenniferlabrecque.com)

**Dorene Graham** writes for Blaze and is a Waldenbooks bestselling author. Check out more information about her and her books on her website at [www.doriegraham.com](http://www.doriegraham.com).

**Dianna Love** is a NYT best seller.

**MIDNIGHT KISS GOODNIGHT**: December 2008

**PHANTOM IN THE NIGHT**: June 2008

[www.AuthorDiannaLove.com](http://www.AuthorDiannaLove.com).

*Tami Brothers is the current GRW PRO-Liaison '07/08; as well as the '08/09 Moonlight & Magnolias Writers Conference Registrar. She writes sexy contemporary romance with the hope of one day becoming published. Check out her website and blog at [www.tamibrothers.com](http://www.tamibrothers.com).*



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