

## Writing with the Five Senses: How to Show Instead of Tell

by Will Hobbs

From an early draft of *Bearstone*:

**He made a cut in the dozen or so peach trees, about a third of the way through. He didn't want them to die. He just wanted the leaves to wither and yellow, and the peaches to shrivel.**

Revised:

**He cut through the skin of the nearest tree and winced as he withdrew the saw. Beads of moisture were forming along the edges of the fresh wound. From one to the next he ran with the saw roaring at full-throttle, and he cut each of the twenty-two peach trees most of the way through. Each time, as the saw's teeth bit into the thin bark, he hollered with hurt as if he felt the saw himself. He didn't want to cut them down, he wanted them to die slowly. Before they died, their leaves would yellow and the peaches shrivel, and they would look just like his grandmother's peaches.**

Commentary:

I used to hear that it was especially important in fiction writing to *show*, not *tell*, but for a long time I didn't know how to make that happen. Cutting Walter's peach trees, I presumed, would show Cloyd's anger without telling it. But in the first version above, how involved can the reader become? Most of us have heard a chain saw before, but does the first version bring that vivid sound to mind? What makes the difference in quality between the first draft and the revision? It's the extent to which I wrote with the five senses. Everything we experience comes through our five senses, and this holds true when we're reading. In the first version, the narrator mostly *told* that Cloyd cut the trees. In the second, the narrator *showed* it. Showing happens when you use the five senses as you write. In the second version we're inside Cloyd, experiencing this awful moment through his senses. We see the teeth of the chain saw biting into the thin bark of the peach trees. We see the beads of sap forming. We see and feel the cut in the peach tree as a wound in a living thing. Implicitly, we feel the saw in our own hands and feel the vibration running through our bodies. We hear the saw roaring at full throttle. We hear Cloyd hollering with hurt, and it feels as if we're hollering with hurt. The writer poured all of this through the five senses of the reader, engaging the reader's intelligence and imagination, treating the reader as a 50/50 partner.

You won't go wrong if you tell now and again rather than show, but if you overdo it, you're hitting readers over the head instead of engaging their intelligence and imagination. Give them what they need to figure things out for themselves and they'll keep turning the pages. When readers are shown, writing comes alive and they get emotionally involved. The scene becomes so real to them, it's as if they are in it.

As you revise, keep an eye out for what you did well in the first draft. In the revision above, I kept the images of the leaves turning yellow and the peaches shriveling. Most beginning writers assume that adjectives and adverbs are the key to description. They try to write with the five senses by using lots of modifiers. Modifiers contribute, but the verbs win the day when it comes to *showing*. Take a look at the verbs in poetry you admire. How many weak verbs do you find? Very few! Strong, descriptive verbs also power your prose. They evoke the five senses extremely well and save you from throwing in unnecessary adjectives and adverbs to prop up weak verbs. Take a look at the sensory verb "winced" in my revision. "Winced" wasn't there in the first draft. It shows a picture of Cloyd's face in pain. Note "ran," "bit," "hollered," "yellow," "shrivel." These simple yet strong verbs make pictures and sound—strong description. "Yellow" functions as a strong verb here though it's usually used as an adjective or noun.

In the paragraph below from Chapter 17 of *Bearstone*, having just caught a trout with his hands, Cloyd glimpses a bear on two legs watching him from the edge of the forest. Look for words that employ sensory language to create images. Concentrate on the role the verbs play:

**The big fish flip-flopped against Cloyd's leg. He nudged it back into the water with his foot, then leaped across the Rincon stream and took off running in hopes of a second glimpse of the huge bear. Once in the trees Cloyd walked softly, looking all around, and tried to listen for the bear's passage. All he could hear was the furious pounding of his own heart.**

The verbs (flip-flopped, nudged, leaped, etc.) power the sentences and play key roles in the imagery. "Flip-flopped" may be an unusual verb, but it works. It makes an image full of motion. As to the modifiers, each one earned its place. I've had readers relate that the way I write, it's like a movie is playing in their head. What a compliment! Here's what I find amazing and wonderful about novels: every reader is seeing a different movie.

Remember, a first draft is only to get something on paper you can work with. Then you apply what you have learned about writing at a higher level, including showing instead of telling, and work toward making your story come to life. I minimize the use of inherently weak verbs of being that merely connect subject and predicate. When I come across a weak verb I rebuild the sentence around a strong one and weed out extraneous modifiers. Revision becomes downright enjoyable as you recognize your improvements.