# Showing Emotion in Your Writing

If there's one area where "show don't tell" is almost always a good rule, it's when showing the reader your character's emotions. Here are three effective ways to do this, that will bring your writing to the next level.

## Action

Consider the following sentence:

<center>She put the glass of water on the table.</center>

There is nothing *wrong* with this sentence - not every sentence needs to be a supernova of literary wonder. But I like to think of your basic sentence as a rock. You can use a rock in lots of ways – to edge a garden bed, weigh down papers, throw it at someone's window – but sometimes, to build a wall that's neat and smooth, you might need to carve the rock into a different shape.

If we wanted to demonstrate how this character is feeling, we can make some tweaks to this basic sentence. Fill in the corresponding emotion for each sentence:

| Action | Emotion |
|---|---|
| Ripples trembled in the water as the glass slipped from her quivering fingers. | |
| She half-flung the glass in the general direction of the table. | |
| She slammed the glass down and water sloshed onto the table. | |
| She dragged herself to the table and let go of her glass. | |

Notice the use of strong verbs (trembled, slipped, flung, slammed, sloshed, dragged) that change the tone of each sentence.

If you're struggling to know whether you've chosen the right words, give a few lines of your work to another person to read and ask them to label how the character is feeling. Don't second-guess your ability by writing "she was afraid" in the next sentence.

# Dialogue

No, I don't mean dialogue tags and replacing "said" with "yelled". I mean the actual word choice in the dialogue.

Here's a pre-edit example:

    "I want it."
    "You can't have it."
    "But I really want it."
    "I know, but you can't have it."

And here are two alternatives:

    "I – I need to… please, can I have this?"
    "Oh. No, I'm sorry, I can't give you that."
    "You don't understand. Please. I'm begging you."
    "I wish I could. I'm so sorry."

    "I want it."
    "Tough. It's mine."
    "You don't have to be such a prick about it. You could share, you know."
    "Shut up. You're not getting it."

Here, the differences don't just tell us how each character is feeling, but the relationships between the two characters. We have no idea what "it" is, or who has the better claim to it. We don't need to. Just from their dialogue, we can tell what each character feels and the power dynamic in their relationship.

If I took character 1 from the first example and character 2 from the second, I have a strong power imbalance, like this:

    "I – I need to… please, can I have this?"
    "Shut up. It's mine."
    "You don't understand. Please. I'm begging you."
    "Tough. You're not getting it."

You may find it helpful to take the conversations in your story and remove every word that isn't spoken by somebody. By this I mean dialogue tags, actions in between speech, description of the environment or other things happening at the same time, and thoughts of the POV character that they're not saying out loud. You can put most of that back in at the end, but looking at the dialogue by itself can help to highlight how emotive it is and whether the character voices are distinct from one another.

# Observation

Unlike magazine catalogues, most rooms are full of stuff. Even if my living room is relatively clean, there are lots of different things to notice: the phone charger plugged into the wall, the screensaver on the computer screen, toy boxes, an empty drink bottle, mail that's just been brought inside etc. When imagining your settings, try thinking about what your characters might notice each time they walk in to the same space.

| What does the character see? | How might they be feeling? |
| --- | --- |
| A bed or lounge | |
| An open window | |
| | Angry |
| Photographs on the walls | |
| | Excited |

This is also a place where doing your work early can help you later on. Let's say I created a girl, Sally, who is passionate about music and who connects with a boy, Luke, when they play in a band together. Then they are separated, through break-up or moving house or death. In any scene where I want to show that Luke is thinking about Sally, all I need to do is have him notice musical instruments, CD players, iPods, the songs playing on the radio, or kids with toy maracas.

So. There you have three ways to show what your characters are feeling. And all without using the words scared, tired, angry, excited, nervous, sad, elated, lonely or weak.