

Showing, Telling & the Unique Detail

"Show don't tell" is a writing maxim that gets thrown around with little explanation. It's true that "telling" the entire way through your story doesn't immerse the reader in what's happening. On the other hand, "showing" every. single. thing. is very time consuming and not always that effective - especially if you've got a limited word count to work in.

The important thing is to think about *what you need to show*. You could "tell" your reader that the room is messy. You could "show" them the clothes on the floor, the half-eaten bowl of melted ice-cream, the balls of dust and pet hair in the corners. But if your character is only in the room for ten seconds as they pass through to where they find a dead body, how important is it to include all of that? Is this place important? Are you using it to set a particular mood? If not, save the "showing" for things you need the reader to focus on.

A good middle ground is what I call "the unique detail". Here, the key is to focus on what makes this place/person/object different or more noticeable. For example, if you were describing a bedroom, I can usually assume that there's a bed in there and something to keep clothes in. So, think about what makes that room *your character's* bedroom and what the narrator might notice when they walk in. Fill in the table below with some details and what they might reveal about a place or person.

Detail	Idea
Big white mirror that takes up half the wall	Is the character or narrator very vain?
A piano in the corner, piled high with objects and a thick layer of dust	The character doesn't practice their instrument, but at some point, cared enough to buy one.
Books on the shelf are colour-coded and in height order	
Cat curled up on the bed	

This is also an opportunity to use similes or metaphors. Consider these three examples:

There was music playing loudly.

The stereo was turned up so high that he couldn't hear the words of the song, but it had a steady, pulsating beat that vibrated through the whole room with each strum of the bass guitar.

The throbbing of the bass felt like it was under his skin.

The first is "telling" and not very interesting. The second is "showing" - detailed, with a sense of how the music affects the character. The third focuses in on a detail (the bass) and a simile (like it was under his skin). It uses fewer words than the second example but is far more effective than the first.

The same principle applies to describing people. Let's move beyond hair and eye colour into what makes that character special. You can choose mannerisms that show us something about the character's personality or past, or just pick something short and sweet that makes them interesting to the reader. Add some interesting details to the list below.

- She had no shoes on.
- He was nearly thirty, but he smelt like baby powder.
- When she spoke, it sounded like her mouth was full of marshmallows.
- He was wearing two wedding rings.
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It can be a good exercise to write out the unique detail for places and people you know. Think about what makes your kitchen different from your best friends' kitchen. Consider what would help you to pick out your mum in a crowd.



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