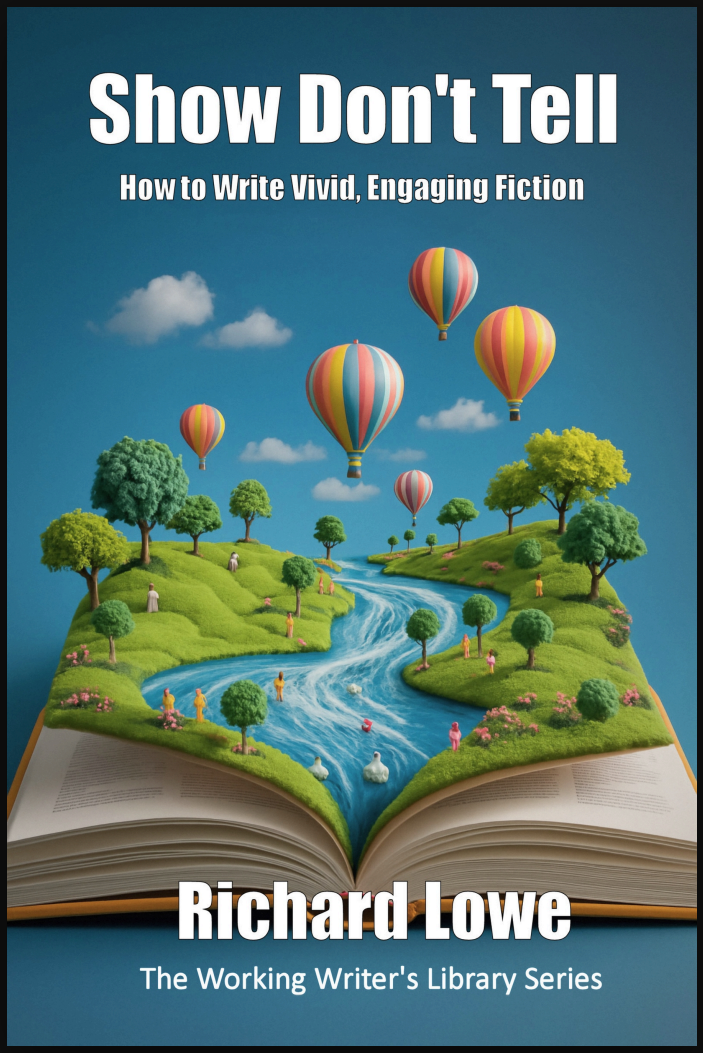
A FREE COMPANION TO SHOW DON'T TELL

Hunting the Telling

A five-pass revision workbook for finding the places your draft reports and turning them into scenes readers live through.



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How to Use This Workbook

Keep it beside your draft. Work one scene or one chapter at a time.

Show Don't Tell explains what the advice everyone gives actually means. This workbook turns that explanation into a revision routine: lists of what to hunt for, a tracker for each pass through your draft, and worksheets for the scenes that matter most.

It has six parts:

1. **The red flags**, and a three-step way to convert each one.
2. **The five-pass tracker**, one hunt at a time through your draft.
3. **Show the emotion**, six tools for feelings you've named outright.
4. **The scene planner**, for want, obstacle, stakes, senses and point of view.
5. **Show or tell?** The test, the five times telling wins, and the ways showing goes wrong.
6. **The critique sheet**, for giving other writers feedback they can use.

> *Telling leaves tracks. Once you know what to look for, you can hunt it down one pass at a time.*

Part 1: The Red Flags

Telling hands the reader your conclusion. Showing hands them the evidence and lets them reach it.

- ☐ **Emotion words:** angry, sad, confused, excited, frustrated, happy, nervous, relieved, ashamed, proud
- ☐ **State-of-being verbs:** was, felt, seemed, appeared, looked
- ☐ **Summary statements:** “It had been a long day.” “The room was messy.”
- ☐ **Conclusion words:** obviously, clearly, unfortunately, naturally
- ☐ **Trait announcements:** “She was stubborn.” “He was generous.” “They were in love.”
- ☐ **Filter words:** saw, heard, noticed, felt, realized, understood, wondered, thought, knew

The three-step conversion

1. **Find the telling statement.** “The restaurant was busy.”
2. **Ask what evidence would prove it.** What would your character see, hear, feel, smell, taste or do that would lead the reader to the same conclusion?
3. **Replace the statement with that evidence** and let the reader connect the dots. A hostess juggling three phone calls, a line snaking past the bar, kitchen doors swinging open every few seconds.

Conversion Practice

Copy five telling sentences from your draft. Work each one through the three steps.

TELLING SENTENCE	WHAT EVIDENCE WOULD PROVE IT?	MY SHOWING VERSION

Choose the detail that does three jobs

The best showing details establish physical reality, reveal character, and carry emotional weight. Write the first detail that comes to mind, then push past it to the particular.

FIRST DETAIL THAT CAME TO MIND	THE PARTICULAR DETAIL THIS PERSON NOTICES NOW

Quick fixes from the book

PROBLEM	TELLING	SHOWING
Linking verb	Jane felt tired.	Jane rubbed her eyes and yawned.
Vague adjective	Jane wore a beautiful dress.	Jane wore a knee-length, royal blue dress that caught the light when she moved.
Adverb	She was brutally murdered.	During the autopsy, the pathologist found that she'd been stabbed over forty times.
Weak verb plus adverb	Sally quickly ran home.	Sally rushed home.
Redundant adverb	Donald whispered quietly.	Donald whispered.

Part 2: The Five-Pass Tracker

Do these passes separately. Looking for everything at once is overwhelming, and you'll miss things.

Chapter or scene: _____ **Date:** _____

PASS	SEARCH FOR	FOUND	CHANGED	THE MOST IMPORTANT CHANGE
1. Emotion words	angry, sad, happy, afraid, excited, nervous, relieved, ashamed, proud, confused, devastated, frustrated			
2. Filter words	saw, heard, noticed, felt, realized, understood, wondered, thought, knew, seemed, appeared			
3. Was and were	Static sentences that describe a state. Can this be rewritten as action?			
4. Adverbs	"-ly" words on dialogue tags and action verbs. What behavior is the adverb covering for?			
5. Dialogue tags	shouted, whispered, snapped, pleaded, growled, sighed, exclaimed, muttered			

Rules for the passes

- [ ] Every hit is a candidate for revision. A brief emotion label can still be the right tool when it's a conscious choice
- [ ] Keep a filter word when the act of perceiving is the point, such as a delayed realization
- [ ] Replace an expressive tag with "said" plus an action beat, or with no tag once the speakers are clear
- [ ] Read the revised section aloud after each pass. Flat telling sounds inert; strong showing sounds like something is happening
- [ ] Don't try to fix everything. Make the single most important change in each pass

Second pass log

CHAPTER	PASS 1	PASS 2	PASS 3	PASS 4	PASS 5

Part 3: Show the Emotion

Stating an emotion is telling. These are the six tools the book gives you instead.

TOOL	EXAMPLE FROM THE BOOK
Body language	Bill glared at me and held up his fist.
Expression	Bill frowned and looked to the ceiling. He rolled his eyes as if to ask for help from the heavens.
Physical response	She reached into her purse but dropped it on the ground. She picked it up, her hands trembling, and fumbled around until she found the money.
Dialogue	Dana slammed her fist on the table. “Damn you,” she said.
Thought	Dana licked her lips. Where is he? Dana thought. He said he was going to be here at nine.
Senses	He gently pressed his lips against hers, and he tasted the faint flavor of cherry from her lip balm.

Mix the tools across characters. If everyone raises a fist when angry, the reader notices the pattern instead of the people.

My emotion worksheet

CHARACTER	NAMED EMOTION	TOOL I'LL USE	REWRITE WITH NO EMOTION WORD, NO SYNONYM, NO FILTER WORD

> *When a character's emotion is too large to name, go to the body.*

Part 4: The Scene Planner

Fill this in before you write or revise a scene. If you can't answer the first three questions, the scene will feel flat no matter how well you write it.

Scene: _____ Chapter: _____

QUESTION	MY ANSWER
What does my character want?	
What's in the way?	
What are the stakes if they don't get it?	
What is the scene's emotional center, underneath the surface action?	
Whose point of view? What can they perceive from where they stand?	
What does this place want to do to my character?	
What do the characters want and refuse to say out loud?	

Two or three senses, chosen on purpose

SENSE	WHAT THE BOOK SAYS IT DOES	MY DETAIL FOR THIS SCENE
Smell	Builds setting fast and carries memory	
Sound	Presence and danger beyond what the character can see	
Touch	Texture, weight, temperature; grounds the reader in a body	
Taste	Only where the moment demands it	
Interior senses	Balance, hunger, muscles: emotions a character can't or won't name	

Part 5: Show or Tell?

Telling gives the story its skeleton. Showing gives it flesh. You need both.

The test

1. **Does the reader need to experience this moment, or just know it happened?** If the scene depends on feeling it from the inside, show it. If knowing is enough, tell it.
2. **Is this one of the three or four most important moments in this chapter?** If not, consider telling it. Save your showing for what matters most.

Five times telling is usually right

- [ ] **Transition:** time passes and nothing important happens. "Three weeks passed. Neither of them called."
- [ ] **Summary:** similar events repeat over time, like a whole summer of mornings at the lake
- [ ] **Backstory:** a sentence or two, grounded in the present scene, never a dump
- [ ] **Minor characters:** a taxi driver who appears for three paragraphs gets a sentence or two
- [ ] **Pace acceleration:** short declarative sentences drive toward a climax

When showing goes wrong

- [ ] I showed every step of a mundane action (opening a door) when only the fact mattered
- [ ] I showed details that don't serve the scene's emotional center
- [ ] I showed the tears and the gripped table but not who this person is
- [ ] I showed a moment that should have been one line of telling
- [ ] I explained an image after I had already shown it

Fixing purple prose in four steps

1. **Name the passage's purpose,** then find the one specific detail that achieves it.
2. **Cut every adjective that isn't doing specific work.**
3. **Replace abstract nouns with concrete ones.** "Fear" becomes the door she checks twice.
4. **Read it aloud.** If you feel like you're performing, the sentence is performing.

Part 6: The Critique Sheet

The vocabulary in this book is also the vocabulary of useful feedback. Name the type of issue so the writer knows what to look for.

INSTEAD OF	TRY
"I didn't feel connected to the character."	"The emotion is being named rather than shown. What would each of them do or notice that would let the reader feel it?"
"This scene felt slow."	"Every physical movement is described. What is the one thing that matters here? Tell the rest."
"I didn't believe this character."	"The character is being described by adjective. Show me one scene where the behavior produces that conclusion."
"This felt distant."	"This paragraph has three filter words in a row, and they're pushing the reader outside the character's experience."

Notes for a writer I'm critiquing

PAGE	ISSUE TYPE	WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND CHANGE

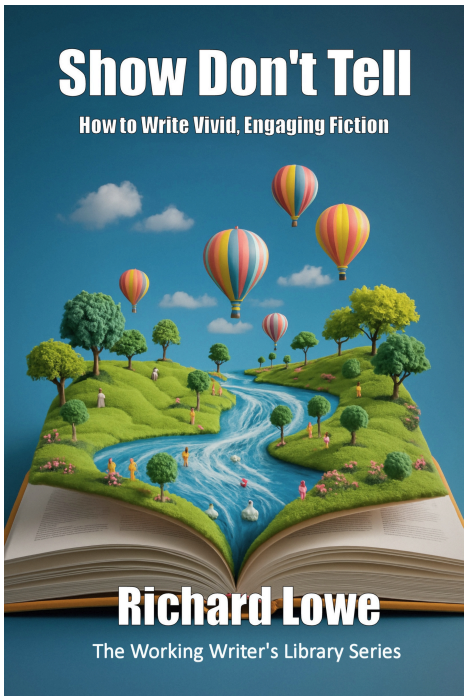
The self-editing checklist

- ☐ I have eliminated most emotion words like angry, sad and happy
- ☐ I replaced weak verbs with strong, specific ones
- ☐ My characters are doing things rather than being things
- ☐ The reader can draw their own conclusions from the evidence I've provided
- ☐ I used concrete, sensory details instead of abstract descriptions
- ☐ Each scene immerses the reader rather than reporting to them

> *Trust them. Readers are active participants.*

The Whole Story

This workbook gives you the hunt. Show Don't Tell gives you the craft behind it: paired Telling and Showing examples for every technique, when telling is the right choice, how showing goes wrong, purple prose, genre by genre advice, and five annotated scenes taken from marked-up draft to revision.



Show Don't Tell:
How to Write Stories That Are Vivid, Alive and Engaging
The Working Writer's Library

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