“Handout: Show Don’t Tell”

The purpose of this activity is to allow you to understand the use of showing writing for the setting, characters, and the plot as you begin to revise your short story.

**Telling Writing**

- Bores the reader by telling, advising, and judging.
- Tells the reader what to think or how to feel.
- Uses dull words such as bad, good, fun, cool, exciting.
- Tells the events as a list.

**Showing Writing**

- Engages the reader through description of actions, movements, and appearances.
- Allows the reader to make his or her own conclusions about events in the story.
- Uses active words, adjectives, expressions, and adverbs.
- Uses sensory words that describe sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell.
- Uses description and dialogue to guide the story.

**Setting**

**Telling**
Example: The man was bored. It was raining. It rained yesterday and he wanted to go outside.

**Showing**
Example: “Lost in his thoughts, he stared out the window at the gray clouds hanging low over the dark water of the bay. It looked like it would rain again today.” Disclosure by Michael Crichton.

**Try this:**
Use showing words to describe someone walking through the desert. Don’t use the words desert, hot, or dry.

**Character Description**

**Telling**
Kevin felt sick. He had a fever and couldn’t sleep.
Showing
“Some hours later, after midnight, Kevin Bourque wakes sweaty in his bed as the snow ticks against the window of his room. He has a fever, one that will last as long as this three-day storm, and he’s lightheaded, can’t make sense of the cracking, splitting sound of the wind through the woods behind the house.” “The Blizzard of 1959,” Graham Hewson. The Sun. June 2002.

Try this:
Describe a young boy who is waiting in line to go on a ride at an amusement park for the first time in his life. Do not use the words excited, fun, or line.

Plot

Telling
I drew a picture of a boat and the man liked it. He called for his family to see it and they liked it too.

Showing
“He squatted down beside me and ... asked me what I was doing. I showed him the drawing, and his face lit up. “Just like it! Just like the boat!” He cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled something in the direction of the junk, and right away a family appeared on deck. “Let’s show it to them!” he said, and dragged me down to the water.” Iron & Silk, by Mark Salzman.

Try this:
Use descriptive language and dialogue to show a conversation between two people who don’t agree on which movie to rent.

Putting Your Skills to Work
Now examine your preliminary story ideas. As you draft, keep in mind the importance and power of specific descriptive language related to characters, setting and plot. Your revision partner will remind you of this.