

# Levels of Showing and Telling

Writers are often urged to *show* stories rather than *tell* them, to get specific and write the details. The more sense detail we use to narrate an experience, the more strongly that experience is recreated in the reader’s mind. When we write an event using imagery, we can slow time down so the reader gets the full effect. If we need to speed time up and skip over unnecessary particulars, however, we can summarize an event. Both summary and imagery are important for any narrative.

Tip: To practice showing instead of telling, describe a sensation without using any signifiers. For example, try to show your reader that something is cold, but don’t use the word “cold” or any of its synonyms, only descriptions. Another way to practice is to describe an emotion but only use actions to communicate what the emotion is.

<b>Summary</b>	<i>I was excited.</i>
<b>Summary</b> expanded to offer more information	<i>I was excited to finish the climb.</i>
<b>Summary</b> with <b>imagery</b>	<u>My arms burned, but as I pulled my body past the overhanging rock</u> <i>I was excited to finish the climb.</i>
Greater <b>imagery</b> with remaining <b>summary</b>	<u>My arms burned, but as I pressed my fingers against the stone, pulling my body past the overhanging rock, I felt a cool rush of excitement. As I finished the climb, the familiar “clink” of the carabiner as I clipped the rope in place reverberated through my entire body.</u>
<b>Scene</b> (includes even greater <b>imagery</b> along with various <b>summaries</b> to form the complete narrative)	<p>The sun licked at my back as I moved up the cliff, leaving Logan River and its refreshing mist below. <i>Each moment required a strength I was not sure I had. But I kept on, playing a sadistic game of Twister with the cliff face.</i></p> <p><i>The overhang was daunting.</i></p> <p><i>I braced myself for the stone’s difficult angle. <u>My arms burned, but as I pressed my fingers against the stone, pulling my body past the overhanging rock, I felt a cool rush of excitement.</u> I lifted the rope from its knot at my harness to the chains at the end of the climb. The familiar “clink” of the carabiner as I clipped the rope in place reverberated through my entire body.</i></p>

This handout was adapted from one developed by Christopher Cokinos at Utah State University.

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