

Showing vs. Telling

By Azalea Dabill

C. J. Cherryh is a master at showing. Here is an excerpt from *Foreigner*.

. . . The shadow of the vines outside moved with the breeze that, finally, finally, flared the curtains with the promise of relief from the heat. The next flicker lit an atevi shadow, like a statue suddenly transplanted to the terrace outside. Bren's heart skipped a beat as he saw it on that pale billowing of gauze, on a terrace where no one properly belonged. He froze an instant, then slithered over the side of the bed.

The next flash showed him the lattice folding further back, and the intruder entering his room.

He slid a hand beneath the mattress and drew out the pistol he had hidden there—braced his arms across the mattress the way the aiji had taught him, and pulled the trigger, to a shock that numbed his hands and a flash that blinded him to the night and the intruder. He fired a second time, for sheer terror, into the blind dark and ringing silence.

He couldn't move after that. He couldn't get his breath. He hadn't heard anyone fall. He thought he had missed. The white, flimsy draperies blew in the cooling wind that scoured through his bedroom.

Showing takes you into another world. Telling gives you a report of that world. In the first way of writing, you walk the world's surface in fascination. In the next method, if you are generous, you try to conceal your yawns and feign interest in a dry summary of what should be exciting action. Which brings me to another point. Showing needs to be balanced with some telling in your writing. If you show every stopping place on a long journey I will skip. Summary has its necessary place. Still, most of our work must be done on the showing end because we naturally tend to tell.

Pick a book you enjoy and read the first chapter. See if you can find scenes that show, that pull you into them, and some good summarized scenes. Hint: summary is often used to transition characters between scenes in time and in location. Showing can come on the sentence level, paragraph level, the scene level, or even the chapter level. So can telling. But if it's getting beyond a paragraph, it might be too long.

To find out which way is best in a given bit of your writing, both show it and summarize it. Then analyze. Does the showing scene bore you because it drags out a simple change in place or time until you are pulling your hair out? Or did the telling scene leave you frustrated and hungry for more detail? What you feel, your reader will often feel. Leave them happily turning pages, oblivious to time, transported into wondrous lands of adventure.

In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.