

## 'Show, Don't Tell'- the Art of Believable Characterisation

'Show, don't tell' seems to be the standard advice given to budding fiction writers across the board. It has received something of a backlash in contemporary literary blogs as it has been relatively uncontested advice. It is arguable that fine writing is a carefully crafted balance between showing and telling. Even some novels are magnificently successful at primarily telling the reader, rather than showing. However it is the showing of a character that forces the reader to form a relationship with them which reinforces their believability and accessibility.

Showing is defined by the Open University as a 'more dramatic presentation of events and characters through use of direct speech, dialogue etc. without the overt involvement of the narrator'. We are taught that the nuances and quirks of a character can only truly be accessed through the narrative technique of showing. If I were to write simply 'Ned was happy', the reader can only form a very flat perception of Ned. If I was showing the reader Ned's emotional state it would be more effective to write 'Ned flung his arms into the air and joyously skipped down the road whistling his favourite tune'. The reader is instantly involved in Ned's mental state and they are given a picture of his movements.

Despite this, and contrary to much creative writing advice, it is not exclusively the technique of showing which give character's believability. Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* is continuously celebrated for the realism of its characters. The heroine, Elizabeth Bennett, is a character who is championed and identified with, even today. It is the believability of Austen's writing that facilitates this. For example: Austen's narrator states that Elizabeth is 'unable to resist the temptation' of bringing Mr. Wickham into the conversation with Mr. Darcy. This use of focalisation through the narrative voice allows the reader to form an emotional relationship with the character of Elizabeth as it projects her mental state. Focalisation can be seen to be an element of 'telling' by Austen, a technique contrasted with 'showing', through which characters appear to have more psychological depth. Meaning is created in the passage as the reader has now emotionally invested in the characters and thus is more receptive to the moral concerns of the novel.

It is evident that showing is necessary for believable characterisation, but only as one element amongst many other narrative techniques. Common creative writing advice is not always thoroughly thought through!

***And when you have completed your manuscript use the Words Worth Reading Ltd [professional proofreading service](#) or [writer's mentoring service](#).***