

## Show Not Tell Examples

(i) 'He was afraid of failing'

His mother was waiting when he came home at last.

"Oh, John, where have you been? I've been worried sick.' Then, anxiously, as she noticed his pinched white face, "You don't look well, darling. Have you got a headache?"

"No." He scuffed his boots in the dust and leaned on the gate for a moment. "Dad's not home yet, is he?"

"No, he's working late. Come on in and get your tea. Here, let me take that bag for you."

"No!" John spoke so sharply that his mother stopped and stared at him, amazed. He muttered, "It's got my homework in it."

"Since when did you care about homework?" John said nothing, only clutched his satchel tighter to him and avoided his mother's eyes. As she led the way inside she was still fussing.

"Your tea's ready."

"I don't want anything."

This time she sat down and drew the boy to her. "Not want your tea? Now I know something's wrong? What is it, my boy?"

Still he could not speak, but leaned against her warm, familiar body. She was thinking deeply as she held him close, rubbing his neck where the muscles were all knotted. "John, is it that test you've been working for? Was it bad? I know your Dad's been getting on your case a bit about that."

"Oh, Mum". John's eyes were squeezed shut and he was trembling. "Mum, I've got the results from old Carpenter in my bag and he's stuck the envelope down."

She understood immediately, and jumped up. "Give it here", she said, holding out her hand.

"The kettle's boiling and we've got time for a quick look-see before your father gets home."

(ii) 'She couldn't read, but wouldn't admit it'

"What's this?"

"It's your job description."

"My what? I'm only a cleaner. I never had one of those before."

The clerk sighed and rustled her papers importantly. "New instructions from management. We've all got proper job descriptions now."

"Have they changed the job then? Only there are things I don't do that need doing. I told that lady when she came round to see us, there are better ways of doing things, and I like to do my job properly."

"The time and motion expert? Yes, she said you went on a bit."

The phone rang and Susan picked it up. Mrs. Long retreated from the counter and sat down heavily on the chair normally reserved for visitors. Her hands noticeably trembled as she held the single sheet of paper as gingerly as if it was a live snake. She glanced across at the office assistant. Still nattering. Slowly, Mrs. Long stood up and sidled towards the door. She was just reaching for the handle when Susan put down the phone with a clatter and called her back to the desk.

"No. You've got to do it here."

"Oh, do I have to? I've got to get home and cook my husband's supper. He's hungry when

he gets home, my Joe. Can't I bring it back tomorrow morning, miss? Only I haven't got my glasses with me and I'd like to go through it properly."

The clerk stared at her for a long time but Mrs. Long resolutely outfaced her, keeping a warm smile fixed on her face. Susan glanced at the clock, then grudgingly agreed. "OK, then. But you make sure you get it back to me by nine."

"Oh, I will, miss, I will. Thanks." Quickly before she could change her mind, Mrs. Long stuffed the paper into her handbag and hurried out of the room. Joe would undoubtedly have a meal ready and waiting, he always did on Wednesdays. She'd get him to read it through for her while she made a cup of tea.

(iii) "The politician was very vain'

Wilson Petrie strides into any room as if he has personally paid for and inspected it, and found it only just good enough. Over the years he has perfected an expression of genial bonhomie that masks the cantankerous nature of most of his pronouncements. One can imagine him practising 'the Look' in front of a mirror. A look of absolute sincerity lightly seasoned with sex.

He is dispensing greetings now to the diehard golden oldies who form the largest part of his majority. Here a quick handshake, there a genial pat on a stooped shoulder, yet all the time he is moving determinedly towards the platform. There he will be better seen and heard. There his designer water waits for him, his pens, his paper, and the careful arrangement of flowers to complement but not distract.

Petrie has cultivated a voice so mellifluous one can imagine that some of his Parliamentary earnings have been reserved for elocution lessons. He is inordinately fond of pinstripe suits. Someone has told him about power dressing. Someone has told him to wear them slightly rumpled. Someone has suggested the trademark buttonhole. See, he is telling us, I can be folksy, I can be real.

Now he is only a few feet from the steps that will take him up where we can pay him the attention that is his due. Petrie pauses long enough to lick his first and second finger and rapidly slick down the curl of hair that is permitted to adorn his forehead. He is patting his breast pocket lovingly. Ah, yes. The speech. No tablets of stone, but surely some poor wage slave has put draft after draft after draft through her word processor to get it just so.

Before he bounds lithely up the steps – though no photographers are waiting – he does a last careful check in the darkened window of the hall. Now he is at the podium, waiting for silence and his necessary ration of applause.

(iv) 'She was convinced that she had psychic powers'

When Mrs. Martin entered the main bedchamber of Glamis Castle, she uttered a loud scream that made all of us jump, and clutched her chest dramatically. "Oh, I feel it", she said, in thrilling accents that would have put Meryl Streep to shame. "I feel it. Tragedy and despair."

The guide looked at her in a perplexed fashion. He was not as intimately acquainted with Mrs. Martin's responses to the quaint and to the ancient as we had come to be in the week we had been touring Historic Homes of Scotland together. He resumed his account of the Queen Mother's family in a dry as dust manner that didn't suit the lady at all.

She leaned forward and asked him, "Have you ever seen her? Since she passed over, I

mean.”

He was curt. “No, madam, I have not.” He gestured at the grim portrait above the room’s vast mantel. “In 1798, the fifth earl ...”

She interrupted him again, drawing her cardigan closely around her. “Is there anybody here?” she asked in a high-pitched voice, and cocked her ear beguilingly. There was no answer. She fixed her eyes imperiously upon the poor man, and held out her hand. “Give me something of hers to hold”, she demanded. “She is trying to get through. She has a message for the Queen.”

Behind me I heard the American mutter, “You’d have thought that by 102 when the old lady died, she’d have said everything she had to say.”

Mrs. Martin ignored him. Her eyes were closed and she was sniffing the air ecstatically. The guide smiled grimly, and put a finger to his lips before he beckoned us to follow him as he tiptoed quietly away.

### Dialogue

Good dialogue can energise your narrative, drive forward the plot and reveal much about your characters. Poor dialogue can be stilted and unwieldy, and be as a lead weight to your story. The key points to remember in writing good dialogue are:

- Keep it crisp. In real life people mumble and repeat themselves, and say ‘ah’ and ‘um’ a lot. Unless vital, don’t use this in your dialogue.

- Leave out unnecessary chit-chat – again, unless vital to the plot. There’s little point, for instance, in including the general ‘Oh, hello, how are you?’ ‘I’m fine, how about you?’ type conversations.
- Don’t be afraid to use abbreviations, colloquialisms and poor grammar IF it’s right for your character.
- Conversely, don’t overdo dialects.
- Break speech with action/narrative to give added emphasis.
- If you don’t feel confident with your dialogue, remember that ‘less is more’. Perhaps one of the greatest ‘clunkers’ seen in new writing is when dialogue is used in an unnatural way to get information across to the reader. It’s called ‘info-dumping’ and don’t do it.
- If you’re not sure of the dialogue you’ve written, read it out loud. Ask yourself ‘Would anyone really say this?’
- Develop a ‘listening’ ear when you’re out and about, and analyse how people really speak. Read aloud some of your favourite dialogue passages in books, and analyse why they sound good to you.

### Exercise

Choose a subject and practise writing the same conversations as if they’ve taken place

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between different characters. Think about which aspects of the subject would appeal to or repel the particular characters.

For example, two elderly ladies discussing gardening may focus on what they can't do – their aches and pains. A couple of men might be complaining about 'the missus' getting them to chop down a tree, and working out how to do it. Teenagers might bemoan having to mow the lawns.

Try for accurate speech patterns, and think about the informal and formal ways of speech.