Writing Devices (SEW Feb 2026)

“Show, don’t tell”

“Show, don’t tell” is a writing device that asks the writer to demonstrate an idea through action, detail, and experience rather than announce it as a conclusion.

When you tell, you hand the reader a label.

When you show, you hand them evidence and let them do the thinking.

For example:

Telling: He was angry.

Showing: He folded the newspaper with surgical precision, laid it on the table, and spoke in a voice so calm it scared everyone in the room.

The second version never uses the word angry, yet the reader feels it more strongly because they’ve observed it rather than been instructed.

At its core, “show, don’t tell” works by engaging the reader’s senses and judgment. Instead of stating emotions, traits, or themes outright, the writer uses:

Behaviour (what the character does)

Dialogue (what they say—and what they avoid saying)

Physical cues (posture, tone, habits, reactions)

Specific detail (concrete, observable facts)

It’s the difference between saying someone is generous and showing them slipping a folded note into a stranger’s pocket while pretending to tie their shoe.

Importantly, “show, don’t tell” is not an absolute rule. Sometimes telling is efficient, necessary, or stylistically appropriate—especially in exposition or summary. The device becomes powerful when used deliberately, particularly in moments of emotion, conflict, or character revelation.

In short: Telling explains. Showing convinces.

And readers almost always trust what they discover for themselves more than what they are simply informed is true.

The Rule of Threes

The rule of threes is a writing device based on a simple psychological truth: people notice, remember, and respond to patterns—and three is the smallest number that feels complete.

One item is an observation.

Two items suggest comparison.

Three items create rhythm, emphasis, and meaning.

In writing, the rule of threes works by building expectation and then satisfying it. The first element sets the idea, the second reinforces it, and the third delivers impact—often with a twist.

For example: He came looking for answers, stayed out of stubbornness, and left because pride wouldn't let him admit either.

The third element doesn't just repeat—it lands.

You'll see the rule of threes everywhere once you start looking:

Lists: "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"

Character traits: brave, loyal, and quietly reckless

Escalation: she knocked, she waited, she turned the handle

Humour: two sensible beats followed by an unexpected third

Comedy, in particular, leans heavily on this device. The first two items establish a pattern; the third breaks or exaggerates it. That's where the laugh lives.

It also works structurally. Many stories follow a three-part movement: setup, complication, resolution. Even at the sentence level, three beats feel intentional, while four often feel indulgent and two feel unfinished.

Used well, the rule of threes gives writing a sense of balance and inevitability. The reader doesn't consciously count—but they feel when the thought is complete.

In short: One informs. Two suggests. Three convinces.

That's why three endures.

Dialogue

There aren't rules of dialogue in the legal sense—no one will arrest you for breaking them—but there are conventions that, when ignored, make writing harder to read, flatter, or unintentionally confusing. Think of them as traffic rules: you can drive on the wrong side of the road, but you'll spend most of your time explaining yourself.

Here are the ones that matter.

1. Dialogue must sound like speech, not writing

People don't talk in paragraphs. They interrupt, hedge, repeat themselves, trail off, and leave thoughts unfinished.

Bad dialogue explains.

Good dialogue reveals.

If a character says exactly what they mean, all the time, they're either lying to someone—or written by a committee.

2. One speaker per paragraph

This is non-negotiable if you want clarity.

Each time the speaker changes, start a new paragraph. Even if the line is short. Even if it feels wasteful. This rule is how the reader keeps track without needing name tags.

3. Use dialogue tags sparingly—and invisibly

"Said" is not your enemy. It's a courtesy. Readers skip over it without noticing, which is exactly what you want.

Avoid acrobatics:

he exclaimed

she retorted

he opined

If the line needs an emotional label to work, the line itself isn't doing its job.

4. Let action do the heavy lifting

Dialogue becomes powerful when paired with behaviour.

"I'm fine," she said.

tells us nothing.

"I'm fine." She wiped the bench again. It was already clean.

Now we know she's lying—possibly to herself.

Action grounds dialogue and keeps it from floating like disembodied voices in a void.

5. Don't explain what the dialogue already shows

This is a common beginner mistake.

"I don't trust him," she said angrily.

If we can't hear the anger in the line, the problem isn't the missing adverb—it's the line.

Trust the reader. If you feel the need to explain, rewrite instead.

6. Dialogue should have a purpose

Every line should do at least one of these:

reveal character

advance the plot

increase tension

expose conflict

deliver subtext

If it's just there to fill space or relay information the reader already knows, it's clutter.

Real conversations ramble. Good dialogue doesn't.

7. What's not said matters as much as what is

The best dialogue lives in subtext.

People avoid topics. They dodge questions. They answer the wrong thing on purpose. They speak around the truth because saying it outright would cost too much.

When dialogue feels flat, it's often because everyone is being too honest.

8. Punctuation is part of the performance

Commas, dashes, ellipses, and full stops control pace and tone.

Short sentences speed things up.

Long ones soften or ramble.

A dash interrupts.

An ellipsis hesitates.

Used well, punctuation becomes timing. Used badly, it becomes noise.

9. Read it out loud

If it sounds unnatural when spoken, it will feel unnatural when read.

Dialogue is meant to be heard—even on the page. Your ear will catch what your eyes forgive.

In short:

Dialogue isn't about people talking. It's about people wanting different things in the same moment—and trying not to say that out loud.

Get that right, and the rest is just punctuation.

Setting a scene

Setting a scene is not about describing a place. It's about orienting the reader—emotionally, physically, and psychologically—so they feel grounded before anything happens. Done well, the reader doesn't admire the scenery; they inhabit it.

Here are the best ways to do that.

1. Anchor the reader quickly

Early in a scene, the reader needs a few quiet certainties:

- Where are we?
- When are we?
- Who is present?
- What's the mood?

You don't need a paragraph of description. Often a single, specific detail does the job.

The bus stop smelled of hot bitumen and old impatience.

We're placed. We're ready.

2. Filter the setting through a point of view

Scenes should not be neutral. The same room feels different depending on who enters it.

- A grieving character notices silence.
- An anxious one notices exits.
- A liar notices mirrors.

Describe only what this character would notice in this moment. That makes the setting feel alive rather than staged.

3. Use selective detail, not inventory

Listing everything in a room is not scene-setting—it's housekeeping.

Choose two or three details that suggest the rest:

- a cracked mug instead of the whole kitchen
- one flickering light instead of the entire street
- the sound of a clock instead of a full lounge-room description

Let the reader's imagination do the unpaid labour.

4. Engage the senses—but not all of them

You don't need sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste every time. That's a checklist, not writing.

One unexpected sensory detail often works better than five predictable ones.

The air conditioner rattled like it had something to confess.

Now the room has personality.

5. Let action reveal space

- Movement is one of the cleanest ways to show a setting.
- A character squeezing past a chair tells us the room is tight.
- A door that won't close tells us the house is old—or neglected.
- A long walk without dialogue tells us distance and isolation.

If characters interact with the environment, the environment becomes real.

6. Match the setting to the emotional tone

The setting should support—or deliberately contradict—the emotional state of the scene.

- Conflict feels sharper in cramped spaces
- Grief echoes in wide, empty ones
- Tension thrives in places where escape is limited

If the mood and the setting are at odds, make that contrast intentional.

7. Avoid stopping the story to describe

This is the cardinal sin. Never pause the narrative so the reader can admire the wallpaper. Fold description into motion, dialogue, or thought.

- Bad: The room was large and painted blue…
- Better: His voice disappeared into the blue space above them.

Same room. Story still moving.

8. Know when to get out of the way

Once the reader is oriented, stop describing.

The purpose of setting a scene is not to impress—it's to clear the stage so the characters can perform. After that, anything extra is interference.

In short: A well-set scene doesn't say "look where we are." It quietly whispers, "you're here now—pay attention."

Pacing and rhythm

Pacing and rhythm are the invisible mechanics of writing. You don't see them on the page, but you feel them in your body. They control how fast the reader moves, where they pause, and when something lands with weight.

If plot is what happens, pacing and rhythm are how it happens.

Pacing: how quickly the story moves

Pacing is about speed. It determines whether a scene rushes, lingers, or stalls.

Fast pacing comes from:

- short sentences
- brief paragraphs
- minimal description
- active verbs
- rapid dialogue

He ran. Slipped. Got up. Ran again.

Nothing decorative. No breathing room.

Slow pacing comes from:

- longer sentences
- layered description
- interior thought
- reflection and memory

He stood there longer than necessary, watching the dust settle, wondering when he'd started mistaking delay for caution.

Same character. Different tempo.

Good pacing is situational. Action scenes need momentum. Emotional scenes need space. Problems arise when the pace doesn't match the moment—when a chase meanders or grief is rushed.

Rhythm: how the language flows

Rhythm is about pattern. It lives in sentence length, repetition, punctuation, and sound.

Read this silently, then aloud:

He waited. He always waited. For permission, for clarity, for something that never arrived.

That's rhythm at work.

Writers control rhythm by:

- varying sentence length
- repeating key words or structures
- using punctuation deliberately
- arranging clauses for emphasis

Monotonous rhythm—sentences all the same length, all the same shape—puts readers to sleep. Varied rhythm keeps them alert.

How pacing and rhythm work together

Pacing is macro. Rhythm is micro.

Pacing decides how long a moment lasts.

Rhythm decides how it feels while you're in it.

A scene may be short but heavy. Or long but effortless. That's the difference between pace and rhythm working in harmony.

Using rhythm for emphasis

Writers often slow the rhythm right before something important.

He opened the letter.

Read the first line.

Sat down.

The white space matters. Silence matters. Rhythm creates anticipation.

When writers get it wrong

Common mistakes:

- constant high speed (exhausting)
- constant slowness (self-indulgent)
- decorative language in urgent scenes
- flat, uniform sentence structure

Good writing breathes. It accelerates and decelerates on purpose.

The simplest test

If you want to know whether your pacing and rhythm work: read it out loud.

Your voice will stumble where the rhythm is wrong. Your breath will tell you when the pace is off.

In short: Pacing decides when the reader turns the page. Rhythm decides how their pulse feels while they do. Master those, and the story starts driving itself.