"Who doesn't?" I said.
"Gatsby, Somebody told me—" The two girls and Jordan leaned their heads together.
"Somebody told me that they thought he killed a man."
A thrill passed over all of us. The three Mr. Mumbles bent forward in their seats.
"I don't think it's so much that," Lucille said. "It's more that he was a German spy during the war."
One of the men nodded. "I heard that from a man who knew all about him, grew up with him in Germany."
"Oh, no," said the first girl, "it couldn't be that, because he was in the American army during the war. You look at him sometimes when he thinks nobody's looking at him. I'll bet he killed a man."

Even within descriptions that have nothing to do with character emotion, there are ways you can show rather than tell. Rather than telling your readers that your hero's car is an old broken-down wreck, you can show him twisting two bare wires together to turn on the headlights or driving through a puddle and being sprayed from the holes in the floor. That way your readers can draw their own conclusions about the car's condition.

And just to show that editors aren't the only ones who notice showing and telling imbalances, here's a quote from Frederick Busch's Los Angeles Times review of Peter Ackroyd's Dickens: Life and Times:

SHOW AND TELL

The need to announce, along with a need to reinforce with comment what has just been clearly shown, results in tones more appropriate to Dickens' funnier re-creations of his father's pomposities: "So far had the young author already come...; "So did the real world enter Dickens' fiction..."; "So did his life, interior and exterior, continue... Where was Ackroyd's editor?

Bear in mind that "show, don't tell," is not a hard-and-fast rule. (In fact, none of the self-editing principles in this book should be treated as rules.) when telling will create more of the Fitzgerald passage, for instance, "over all of us" is clearly telling. close on the rumor that Gatsby, a flavor of cheap gossip to the setting.

But in good fiction this son and a rare exception at that. But story rather than tell, you treat. And that respect makes it easier the world you've created.

Checklist

- How often do you use narrative summary? Are there long passages where nothing happens in real time? Do
the main events in your plot take place in summary or in scenes?
• If you do have too much narrative summary, which sections do you want to convert into scenes? Does any of it involve major characters, where a scene could be used to flesh out their personalities? Does any of your narrative summary involve major plot twists or surprises? If so, start writing some scenes.
• Do you have any narrative summary, or are you bouncing from scene to scene without pausing for breath?

Exercises

Spot the telling in the following and convert it to showing. The answers (at least, our answers) appear at the back of the book.

A. “Mortimer? Mortimer?” Simon Hedges said. “Where are you?”

Show and Tell

“Look up, you ninny. I’m on the roof.”
“Shat in blazes are you doing perched up there?”

Mortimer Twill explained to Simon how his long-awaited cupola and weather vane had finally arrived. He just couldn’t wait for Simon to install the gadgets, so Mortimer had decided to climb up to the roof and complete the installation himself. He was still sorting through the directions.

“Come on down before you kill yourself,” Simon said. “I swear I’ll put them up for you this afternoon.”

B. I’d known Uncle Zeb for years, of course, but I didn’t feel like I really knew him until that first time I walked into his shop. All that time I’d thought he was just kind of handy, but looking at his tools—hundreds of them—and what they were used for and the way they were organized, well, I could see he was a craftsman.

If you’re in an ambitious mood, take the following bit of narrative summary and convert it into a scene. Hint: feel free to create any characters or elaborate on the settings.

C. Once you got off Route 9W, though, you were in another world, a world where two streets never met at a right angle, where streets, in fact, didn’t exist. Instead you had “courts,” “terraces,” “ways,”
a "landing" or two. And lining these, street-like things were row on row of little houses that could be distinguished, it seemed, only by the lawn ornaments. Travelers who disappeared into the developments had been known to call taxis just to lead them out again.

Chapter 2

Characterization and Exposition

Eloise had always assumed she would grow up to live like her mother—a quiet, sensible life full of furniture wax, good nutritious breakfasts, and compulsive bed making. But her first college roommate, Randi, introduced her to a whole new world, a world where you didn’t have to tidy up before you invited friends in, where you didn’t have to squeeze the toothpaste carefully from the bottom, and where you didn’t have to pick up an iron for the rest of your natural life. Eloise felt like she had been granted a reprieve after eighteen years in the June Cleaver Institute for Neurotic Young Girls.

Now, after spending ten minutes rooting through a pile of clothes to find a blouse that wasn’t too dirty, then crunching across the living room carpet to spend another five hunting up a clean cereal bowl, she began