



# Showing. Not Telling

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## Verbs Aren't Always the Key to Showing Vs. Telling

### Telling

*Lauren stood by the steam clock on the corner of Cambie and Water Streets in Vancouver's Gastown. An argument had broken out between the popcorn peddler and the RCMP officer who'd just arrived on the scene. The smell of hot butter and salt was in the air and now everyone's head turned from the popcorn to the vendor whose voice was escalating. She started to feel sorry for the man. Clearly, he was being told to move on from where the tourists gathered. He'd lose money, which was too bad.*

### So what's wrong with this narrative?

It's narrative; that's all it is. A summary of what should be action. Is there a way to turn this around and allow the reader to experience the sensations with Lauren? Yes, there is and it's called filtering.

### Filtering

*Lauren stood by the steam clock on the corner of Cambie and Water Streets in Vancouver's Gastown. From her vantage point, she could see an argument developing between the popcorn peddler and the RCMP officer who'd just arrived on the scene. She could smell, too, the hot butter and salt and hear the pop-pop of the vendor's popcorn wagon. But now all she could hear was the vendor's voice escalating. She felt her chest tighten in commiseration. If he was forced to move on, he'd clearly lose the money to be gained from a crowd of tourists. That made her feel badly.*

### Better, but...

The rewrite enabled us to stand alongside Lauren at the steam clock in Vancouver, BC's, Gastown. The romance genre relies heavily on this technique because it puts the reader solidly in the character's point of view, letting them, the reader, live vicariously through the character. An important essential; otherwise, readers would feel too guilty by what's going on between sheets other than their own and ruin the safe fantasy romances provide.

### Showing

#### So let's now move from "ordinary" to "riveting"

Filtering only goes so far and can actually become cumbersome in other fiction genres. Fortunately, we have other tools to help us "show, not tell." Let's try stronger verbs, dialog, detail—and let's close that psychic gap between the character and reader by eliminating all the filtering. This will allow our readers to experience the scene not *vicariously* but actually *be* a participant. The difference is often subtle, but produces powerful results.

*Lauren stood by the steam clock on the corner of Cambie and Water Streets in Vancouver's Gastown. Across the street, an argument blazed in escalating bursts between the owner of the popcorn stand and the RCMP officer who'd just arrived on the scene.*

*"You see this? Are you seeing this?" the vendor screamed over and above the pop-pop coming from his popcorn wagon. "You think I can afford to move to another intersection? Where there are no tourists? How am I going to buy tomorrow's popcorn if I can't sell anything from this spot, huh? How am I going to send my kids to college, huh, huh?"*

*The smell of hot butter and salt drifted across the street without pleasure. Poor guy. Of course he'd lose money.*

No more "she felt," "she saw," "she heard." *We see, we feel, we hear.*

*We hear the vendor's voice rise. We smell that butter. We sense Lauren's commiseration? Congratulations! We've shifted from Lauren's senses to the **sensory stimuli themselves**. We've switched from telling right into showing. Drum roll, please.*