

Showing and telling

KS3 > Prose > Holes

How it works

Holes breaks the normal writer's rule that says that it is better to *show* readers things than *tell* them. *Holes* uses a very simple, direct, almost monotonous, 'telling' style. This resource looks at the difference between showing and telling and introduces a guided writing plan to support students in exploring the difference.

Try this!

Guided group work will not work unless the whole class has been carefully prepared and have become used to working collaboratively and independently of the teacher. If you are trying to work exclusively with one group you will not be successful if you are constantly interrupted by poor surrounding behaviour and trivial requests for help. Here are some ways to build the necessary conditions in the classroom to facilitate guided work.

Over a couple of weeks keep a log of all the questions and cries for help pupils throw at you while they are supposed to be working independently. These will typically include:

- 'I haven't got a pen'
- 'What are we doing?'
- 'How do you spell ...'
- 'What could I put in my fourth paragraph?'

Now type up all these 'problems' and share them with the class. Ask students to provide at least three solutions for each of some of the problems. Display these solutions and expect students to try them before asking you. Use this slogan: 'try three before me'.

Solutions may well include things like providing pens and paper that are controlled by a stationery monitor. Three non-teacher solutions to spelling are: just give it a go (do you need to know?); ask a friend; look it up.

Staffordshire County Council's [English and Literacy](#) site has some good materials on [Guided reading and writing](#) – in particular a very simple report on how guided work was introduced in one classroom and fabulous, detailed, practical advice about how to put guided work into operation.

Richard Durant

Show or tell?

Good writers usually say they write in a style that lets the reader work out for themselves the writer's viewpoint. This is called **showing** the reader. **Telling** is when the writer simply gives information directly to the reader. Here is a simple **example**:

Tell: He was frightened

Show: He crouched behind the bins, fighting to hold his breath and dripping with sweat.

Sometimes *telling* is the right style: for example, if you want to let someone know how to bake a cake, then you must tell them: they don't want to be left to work it out for themselves! But in other contexts *showing* is better: for example, we normally prefer a novelist to describe a character and let us know what they say and then let us work out for ourselves what they are *like*. We don't want the writer to *tell* us; we want to make up our own mind, and we want to work things out *gradually*.

The writer of *Holes* – Louis Sachar – often breaks this rule: he simply tells us things about Stanley: this extract from the novel (*Holes*, Collins cascades, London, 2000) is a very good example of *telling*:

Tell

'He looked at the guard who sat slumped in his seat and wondered if he had fallen asleep. The guard was wearing sunglasses, so Stanley couldn't see his eyes.

Stanley was not a bad kid. He was innocent of the crime for which he was convicted. He'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time.' (p7)

So, Sachar *tells* us the following:

- Stanley looks at the guard to try to decide if he is asleep
- He doesn't know if he is asleep or not because he can't see his eyes
- Stanley is good
- He has been wrongly convicted
- He was unlucky

Here is the same extract re-written so that we have to work out those five things for ourselves:

Show

For a long time Stanley sat still in the intense heat, watching the guard who was slumped and motionless, his dark glasses hiding his eyes.

After a while, Stanley began to think back over what had happened to him and how worried his parents must be, and then he thought about how the bad luck curse that had hung over generations of his family had caught up with him too.

This *showing* version leaves the reader to work things out for themselves:

We might *infer* that

- the guard appears to be asleep and that is why Stanley is watching him
- Stanley worries that his parents are suffering; his consideration for others suggests he is a 'good' boy
- His imprisonment has been caused by bad luck

We can't know these things for certain: we can only *infer* them.

Which is better?

The real question is why does Sachar do so much direct telling? And why do we like it? What effect does it have on the reader?

Lesson Plan

Learning objective	Assessment focus	Framework objectives
<i>Appreciate the differences between 'showing' and 'telling' in fiction</i>	RAF3 Deduce, infer or interpret information, events or ideas from texts	W7 Recognise layers of meaning in the writer's choice of words TLR11 Analyse how an author's standpoint can affect meaning in non-literary as well as literary texts

Starter

Get students to explore the differences between show and tell versions like the brief examples above. Get students to

- compare the different versions
- identify the differences
- say which one is more characteristic of the style of *Holes* (don't tell them which is which)
- decide which one they prefer and why.

Main/development

Show the class a longer extract from the novel on OHT (see below) and model for them how to identify the characteristic 'telling' style. Note: lots of individual pieces of information; lots of simple sentences; the rare complex sentences almost all start with the main clause; jerky, oral style.

Model for the class how to re-write parts of the text in a more formal style, especially starting complex sentences with subordinate clauses: e.g. *Handcuffed to his armrest, Stanley was sitting about ten rows back* instead of "Stanley was sitting about ten rows back, handcuffed to his armrest." (p6)

Model for the class how to only *imply* that Stanley had promised to write every week: e.g. convert "and a box of stationery his mother had given him. He'd promised to write to her at least once a week" (p6) to *He glanced over at his pack where the special stationery box his mother had pressed on him was peeping out. He reached out and clutched it.*

Now ask students – in pairs - to re-write six lines ("Now Stanley..." down to "...his size" p7 – see **OHT 1**) in a *showing* rather than a *telling* style. Get most pairs to work on mini-wipeboards, but ask two pairs to work on blank OHTs.

Run a guided writing session with one less able group of about six (see plan below).

Plenary

Ask the OHT pairs to show their versions. Invite the class to rate the version on a 1-10 scale: 1: completely telling; 10: completely showing. Ask which version is better. How are the two versions different in effect? Get other pairs to read out their versions and put these through the same rating and questioning process.

Stanley was sitting about ten rows back, handcuffed to his armrest. His backpack lay on the seat next to him. It contained his toothbrush, toothpaste and a box of stationery his mother had given him. He'd promised to write to her at least once a week.

He looked out the window, although there wasn't much to see – mostly fields of hay and cotton. He was on a long bus ride to nowhere. The bus wasn't air-conditioned, and the hot, heavy air was almost as stifling as the handcuffs.

Stanley and his parents had tried to pretend that he was just going away to camp for a while, just like rich kids do. When Stanley was younger he used to play with stuffed animals, and pretend the animals were at camp. Camp Fun and Games he called it. Sometimes he'd have them play soccer with a marble. Other times they'd run an obstacle course, or go bungee jumping off a table, tied to broken rubber bands. Now Stanley tried to pretend he was going to Camp Fun and Games. Maybe he'd make some new friends, he thought. At least he'd get to swim in the lake.

He didn't have any friends at home. He was overweight and the kids at his middle school often teased him about his size.

Guided writing session plan

Sequence	Activity	Questions / prompts / teaching points
Clarify task and framework objectives	Very briefly re-cap the task and remind students of the objective for the session: <i>To appreciate the differences between 'showing' and 'telling' in fiction</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>We are trying to write more formally and to avoid telling readers things that they could work out for themselves.</i>
Revise text types	<p>Through discussion, re-establish what the group knows about the way that Sachar tends to write and how other writers might have chosen to write less 'directly'. Refer them to the work you did with the whole class.</p> <p>Now display this sentence: <i>Now Stanley tried to pretend he was going to Camp Fun and Games.</i></p> <p>Then pose the questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>What does the writer tell us?</i> <i>How could we re-write it so that we focus on suggesting Stanley's feelings?</i> <p>Re-write the sentence with the group.</p>	<p>Underline "tried to pretend" and ask how the guard might guess that Stanley was doing this.</p> <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facial expressions Movements The way he is sitting
Strategies check	Check that the group know ways of making the next sentences more formal and 'implicational'.	<i>How could we make the sentences longer? How could we suggest his 'aleness' in the next sentence, and his desire to swim in the lake in the next? How could we make the writing more formal, less 'oral'?</i>
Try it out	Students now work in pairs using mini-wipeboards.	<p>Watch pairs working, intervening only briefly and deftly to keep students on track and to head off mis-conceptions. <i>For example, they may try to turn the writing into a first-person narrative by the guard.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does that suggest the same thing that Sachar tells us? How could you write that more smoothly and fluently?
Review and feedback	Share results. Praise efforts and keep returning to the purpose of the exercise: to explore the difference between showing and telling.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>That's good. Why did you choose that word/phrase?</i> <i>What would the reader think about Stanley if that was in the novel?</i> <i>How is the style of your sentence different from Sachar's?</i> <i>You now appreciate ...</i>
Next steps	When would you show and when would you tell in your own story writing? What are the advantages of each method?	