

• ACTION IS EXCITING •

*A lesson in creative writing.*

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In countless fiction classes, you will be told again and again “Show, Don’t Tell.” While probably good advice, it is advice I could never quite understand. (Someone clarified it to mean, “Show whatever you can, and tell the rest.” Hmm. Still no go.)

My best way, though, to explain how to get readers into the scene you’re creating, to get readers to see the characters and feel the situation for themselves, is simple: Action is Exciting. I always write this up on the board on the first day of class. And I think it’s getting at the same basic idea as “Show, Don’t Tell,” except in a way I like more.

Action will seize the imagination of the reader, and it will give you, the writer, something fun to do. It will also flesh out a story, so that characters interact “in scene” more, which is also good for the writer in a simple-to-achieve way. With exponential results.

After all, what’s more exciting to read: *She was angry* or *She leapt up and hurled her water glass against the wall*. (Besides, the second one practically writes the rest of the scene’s plot for you. Bonus!) And besides, when something is exciting on the page, readers stay involved and keep reading. Another bonus.

To warm up writing students, I usually start class out with five emotions, and focus on what actions will betray those emotions to an outside observer.

The trick is to differentiate - - find the subtle but unmistakable tip-offs that make Surprise and Anger so obviously distinct when seen in action. “Red-faced,” yes, but we need more.

(A red-faced surprised person wouldn’t throw her glass of water into the face of the waiter, for instance, though she might knock it off the table.)

(And however that water ends up spilled, a red-faced angry person wouldn’t apologize. Whereas a surprised person probably would.)

We warm up for a couple of days with emotions that can be seen through action, and then move on to more complicated situations.

For the culminating lesson I ask the class to come up with five female-male relationships, so we could go with something like this:

- 1) Mother & Son
- 2) Wife & Husband

- 3) Illicit Lovers
- 4) Coworkers
- 5) Teacher & Student

I ask the class to imagine that these pairings of unknown females and males are seen from across the room in various situations: at a party, at a restaurant, at the grocery store. In class we call out new situations as we think of them, to complicate the game.

The object of the game is to figure out what actions would betray the nature of these listed relationships to us if we were observing these pairs from across the room.

Now the great thing to keep in mind is that we are all already experts on being human. You've practically got a PhD in it by this point. You can do this. You already do it all the time. So let's go!

For instance, in a restaurant I think a Mom would pay the bill without reaction from either the Mom or the Son. And if the Son paid, I think the Mom would act proud, maybe reach over and pinch his cheek, or ruffle his hair. I can also imagine that finger-wagging, or other sorts of scolding, would tell me that this pair is Mom and Son. Or eye-rolling on the Son's part, but done openly - - if it were Wife and Husband, there might still be eye-rolling, but I think that then it might be more covert.

For Co-Workers, the telling details might be in the accessories: do they both whip out briefcases? Pocket calendars? Or, if it's funny, are they both wearing their Del Taco uniforms while sharing a pitcher of beer at a pasta place? If it's upscale, maybe they pay with a company card.

As for Illicit Lovers, there's the old classic: no touching on top of the table, but footsie underneath. Or they're each really done up, and maybe one nervously keeps taking cell phone calls out in the hallway. Seeing someone remove a wedding ring would also be a dead-giveaway, if a little obvious.

I love doing this exercise in a big group, because people always come up with new giveaway details I would never have thought of. But that feel just right.

Using what you already know about how people behave will almost always resonate with readers because it will paint a picture and feel "true," or "alive" on the page.

What you want to do is take the subtle knowledge we all have, and find out how to set that down on the page. I call this being an expert in being human because you see people all the time, and use their actions to gauge their situations. We do it without even thinking - - the trick is to get that humanity down on the page in a way that is involving. And the idea behind Action is Exciting helps you capture emotions and situations with immediacy and plot that readers will fall right into.