Simple "Description Rule" That Launches Writing Careers

By Mindy McHorse

Mindy McHorse here. This is going to sound a bit strange, but there's a piece of writing advice I want you to flip on its head. Do it, and you could land more paid writing jobs this month than you have in a year's time.

You've surely heard the tip to "show, don't tell" when writing, right?

It's the simple art of helping your readers feel something instead of just seeing it. Nobel Prize-winning novelist Ernest Hemingway was a proponent of this approach, as were other notable writers like James Scott Bell and Orson Scott Card.

But I think Copywriter Jen Stevens, who’s also editor of International Living, put it best when she wrote The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program:

"Show don't tell' means that you shouldn't just announce directly what a place is like and how it makes visitors feel. Instead, you should describe it in such a rich way that your reader experiences it for himself …"

She goes on to explain how instead of calling a place "remote," you might explain how you got there — "the four-hour ride into dense bush in the canvas-topped back of a 1979 Peugeot pick-up truck with three chickens, four shrouded women, and an infant for company."

Or, instead of labeling a setting as "peaceful," you describe the night — "how the only sounds you hear are the rustling of lemurs in the trees above, the squeaks of the fruit bats, the sloshing of the Indian Ocean as it slides between the jagged lava rocks that frame the sandy cove where this hotel sits."

It's the art of appealing to all five senses. You can tell someone a beach is beautiful. Or you can show them by describing the sharp sent of salt in the air, the way the white sand warms the spaces between your bare toes, the sapphire-blue sky that reflects off the ocean, the musical caw of the hooded plover as it hops across the sand …

You get the idea, right?

Writing with a show-don't-tell approach gives your readers a richer, vivid, more memorable experience. They're more likely to remember what they read … and more likely to keep reading, or to come back later for more.
Surely, then, you'd want to take the same approach when it comes to landing paid writing assignments, right?

And this is where you flip that approach on its head.

You know, I'm always delighted to get new pitches from up-and-coming writers who want to write for *Barefoot Writer*.

But too often, those pitches start out with a variation of the following: "I'm an excellent writer and I deliver quality work and know a lot about things that relate to your publication."

Sounds nice. I'd like to believe it's true. Problem is, when you take an approach like that with a potential client, you're simply *telling* them what you think they want to hear.

And you're probably telling them the same things everybody else tells them.

Instead, *show* them. Send a sample. Send a spec piece. Describe an idea and follow it up the next day with that idea fleshed out as an article, or an email sample, or whatever kind of writing project you're trying to land.

Not only does this make you more memorable to the prospective client, it shows them your skills as a writer right up front.

AWAI Member Lee Nourse is a terrific example of someone who made this approach work for her. She submitted multiple specs to *Barefoot Writer* last year. The content didn't fit our needs at the time, but it put her on our radar. Since then, we've not only asked her to write for us … but Lee also landed a major contract with a new client that includes a full *three months* of projects!

All because she knows how to "show it" as opposed to "tell it."

Think about your ideal clients and find a way to help them experience your writing. You never know, it could be the start of multiple great assignments! Share your ideas here.

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Loved your article. You described exactly my problem. My normal conversation and writing is something like you might find in a 12 page, B2B, electronic component white paper. I have a lot to learn.

*Robert Phillips* – February 2, 2016 at 2:38 pm

A sample is more appealing in life too... a sample of fudge vs. a picture of fudge, a rose vs. a picture of a rose... Anytime the senses are involved, the mind will be too!

*Guest (Sally Ferguson)* – February 2, 2016 at 3:35 pm

Providing a service, we’re to "show, not tell" a pitch that’s somehow going to render "added value" and not merely an "extra cost." Therefore, one’s either going to give them what they want or give them what they don’t yet know they want.

And the best means to accommodate either is to duly tap the fountainhead of imagination whence written descriptions BOTH satiate AND espouse well-being to respectively survive quarterly targets while adapting to the big-picture vogue of consumer change.

*Guest (Chris Morris)* – February 2, 2016 at 4:27 pm

This article is a great reminder when approaching to a potential client. This is the skill that separates the writers from the extraordinary writers. Thanks for the valuable advice.

*Guest (Nusrst)* – February 2, 2016 at 6:17 pm

Mindy, this tip in your article of showing & not telling is just what I needed to hear. As I learn day by day the fascinating world of copywriting, I look forward to working and using my skills on a regular basis and soon. Thanks for your timely advice.

Regine

*Guest (Regine Baptiste)* – February 2, 2016 at 8:25 pm

Last year, I decided that men who were no longer regarded as "young adults" and were no where near "senior citizens" needed a voice. For the first time in their lives, this group wasn’t the target audience for media, or for advertisers. This is a fast-growthing demographic with buying power and decision influence. So, I launched www dot TheRelevantMan dot com as an online community intended to address the topics that are specific to men in the prime of their lives.
And sometimes, short is sweet. Like a plate of Belgian chocolates and a paired wine.

Randy King – February 3, 2016 at 8:48 am

Thanks Mindy!

A great reminder of the importance of description in sparking the imagination.

I have a question... Where should the line be drawn on knowing whether you are becoming a little "long winded?"

I enjoy story-telling but wonder about what is interesting to me, may be, enough already Lyn, get to the point!

Beware, I am going to follow your advice and send you a sample and spec next week for Barefoot Writer. Are you feeling like you may be inundated?

Cheers

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Guest (Lyn Marler) – February 3, 2016 at 10:18 am

Thanks for the mention Mindy. What a delight to be reading through your article and stumble across my name!

Guest (Lee Nourse) – February 3, 2016 at 2:20 pm