

SHOW v. TELL

By Blair Bancroft

I'm sure there are entire books written on the importance of an author "showing" what's happening as opposed to standing back away from the action and "telling" the reader what's happening. In the current publishing market, *Show* is good; *Tell* is not. With many authors raised on nineteenth century classics that are heavy on "Tell," this can be a difficult transition for some. But even more of a problem are authors who get so hung up on avoiding passive voice that they try to weed out every single "was" in their manuscript. This is absurd. The very best, most published authors use "was" right and left. Sometimes it's the only way to say what you have to say. So instead of concentrating on the negative of passive voice, think positively. Think of getting inside the hero's, heroine's, or villain's heads and let us see the action from their point of view (ONE at a time, of course). Let us see what they see, hear what they hear, feel what they feel. That's "Show." If you stay in storyteller mode—the author looking at the scene and telling us what's happening—that's passive voice. That's "Tell."

Below is an excerpt from my award-winning Regency, *The Indifferent Earl*. Following it is a re-write of the same scene, using "Tell." Hopefully, this example will help clarify the slippery difference between "Show" and "Tell."

The Original - using "Show"

Excerpt from *The Indifferent Earl* by Blair Bancroft

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The Indifferent Earl was a RITA finalist and also won the Best Regency of the Year award from *Romantic Times* magazine.

Chapter 1

Miss Abigail Todd, far from the scrutiny of her pupils in Miss Todd's Academy for Young Ladies in Boston, peered out the window of the post chaise with unabashed curiosity. Now that the city of London had been left behind, the countryside was remarkably familiar. New England had been aptly named, she decided. Although the

fields here were smaller and laid out in a fantasy maze of uneven shapes framed in hedgerows, the overall feel of the land was so similar she might have been traveling the post road from Boston to Providence. There were fewer acres of towering trees in this much older country, she conceded, but that was a boon, surely, for highwaymen could shelter in heavy woods, lying in wait for two lone women traveling the road to Bath.

Enough! A woman of eight and twenty, owner and headmistress of her own school, had long since learned not to ask for trouble. She would leave the conjuring of bogeymen to her wide-eyed thirteen-year-olds.

"I cannot like it," declared a voice beside Abby for perhaps the twentieth time in the past two days. Mrs. Hannah Greaves, a lady of imposing angular shape that belied a heart as soft as butter, had been pressed into service as Miss Abigail Todd's companion for the long journey to England. "That man was surely hiding something," Mrs. Greaves continued her complaint. "And I fear to know what. Here we are, off to some unknown spot in the English countryside, just the two of us—"

"But it's an adventure," Abby teased, her usually solemn features dancing into a grin. "With Mr. Smallwood making the arrangements, for all we know we could be headed for Gretna Green or some Gothic castle with dark dungeons—"

"Abigail Todd!" Forgetting her own doubts, the older woman was shocked. "You cannot truly suspect Mr. Smallwood of such ah—*treachery*."

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The same basic story, rewritten, using "Tell," a not-so-acceptable alternative, with an added dash of Too Much Mystery and a dollop of cliché.

Abigail peered out the window of the post chaise. She was surprised to discover England looked so much like the countryside back home in New England. She was grateful, however, that this older country did not have so many woods that might shelter highwaymen.

Foolishness, she thought. She was twenty-eight years old, headmistress of her own school. She would not let her imagination run away with her.

"I cannot like it," Hannah said. "That man was surely hiding something."

"But it's an adventure," Abby teased. "With Mr. Smallwood making the arrangements, we could end up anywhere, perhaps even some dark castle."

"Surely not!" Hannah was shocked.