Fun While Showing, Not Telling: Crafting Vivid Detail in Writing

Jennifer Renner Del Nero

Are you tired of saying to students, “Show, don’t tell,” during writing time? These minilessons help students craft vivid detail in their fiction and creative nonfiction writing.

As a teacher educator and literacy coach, I often hear teachers discussing their students’ reluctance to incorporate vivid sensory detail (detail appealing to one or more of the five senses) in their writing. It is a challenge all too familiar to me as a former language arts instructor. Phrases such as “Show, don’t tell” or “This part needs more detail” are commonly repeated to students during the drafting process. These statements are often met with student resistance (Lane, 1993). Mrs. Faye (all names are pseudonyms), a fourth-grade teacher I coach, bemusedly noted that she asked students to “flesh out detail” in their drafts. She thought a change in terminology might get their attention. Instead, she relayed, “The students thought I said flush, which caused giggling, and it was downhill from there!”

For young authors, learning to show using vivid sensory detail is paramount in their writing journeys (Calkins, 1994; Fletcher, 2013). A primary difference between skilled and novice writers is that skilled writers show, or paint a picture for the reader to visualize, but novice writers often convert the task into telling about the topic (Lane, 1993). Crafting vivid detail is essential for both fiction and creative nonfiction writing (Dollins, 2016; Fletcher, 2013). This is a challenging task for student writers (Lane, 1993). In order for students to develop this skill, they need ongoing teacher support (Calkins, 1994).

We live in a world of summary. Rarely in our day-to-day speaking and composing do we use vivid sensory detail. When mentioning this distinction to students, I use the following example:

One of the most common questions to ask someone is “How was your day?” Most of the time, people answer with one-word summaries, such as “Good” or “Bad,” and this telling is acceptable and expected. Imagine answering like this: “Great! When I woke up, the sunlight glistened through my window as I slipped my ice-cold feet into warm, fuzzy slippers that hugged my toes….”

Most of the time, I stop there, and students erupt into giggles because they too understand how ridiculous such a response is. Yet, readers need this level of detail to visualize important moments (Lane, 1993). When we write, this task is difficult, I explain, because we don’t do it regularly. In this conversation, I acknowledge students’ “show, don’t tell” challenges with humor and understanding. Common ground is established, and we can begin.

This teaching tip provides an overview of three writing minilessons aimed at helping students craft vivid sensory detail in their fiction and creative nonfiction writing. By minilesson, I refer to a short (15–30 minutes), strategy-driven, teacher-supported exercise aimed at helping students develop a particular writing skill (Blau, Elbow, Killgallon, & Caplan, 1998). These minilessons can be executed before, during, or after a lengthier writing assignment. I showcase the three minilessons in the order in which I teach them. However, they can be taught in isolation or in a different order, depending on teachers’ instructional goals.

Within the sequence of instruction, I offer some possible variations that teachers can use to differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of their students. These activities are appropriate for middle and upper elementary students.

Minilesson 1: “Chelsea Morning” as a Mentor Text

Using mentor texts (texts illustrating a particular writing concept that students use as a model) is a common practice among writing teachers (Dollins,
When mentor texts are used properly, student writing significantly improves (Dollins, 2016). I frequently use excerpts from books and articles to illustrate writing concepts. However, I also use songs as mentor texts. These nontraditional “texts” come as a surprise to the students, and the textual detail is enhanced by musical elements. Joni Mitchell’s (1969) song “Chelsea Morning” is an excellent example (for the full lyrics, see http://jonimitchell.com/music/song.cfm?id=89). The purpose of this minilesson is to expose students to a song using vivid sensory detail that can serve as a mentor text for their own writing.

**Minilesson Execution Guidelines**

1. Tell students they will listen to a song that can help them with their writing. Pass out copies of the song lyrics. Play the song and ask students to follow along. Encourage them to enjoy just listening on this first “read.”
2. Provide suggestions for notes students might make when they listen/read again: underlining or circling words and phrases that stand out, putting question marks next to confusing parts, and so on.
3. Play the song a second time. Have students mark up their copies of the lyrics.
4. Ask students to discuss with a partner(s) what they marked up.
5. Reconvene as a class to talk about phrases that stood out. I often begin by sharing my favorite line, “The sun poured in like butter-scotch and stuck to all my senses” (Mitchell, 1969), because it reminds me of eating candy. When instructors model their metacognitive processes, they can encourage student participation (Lane, 1993).
6. Ask students what they found confusing. A common question is “What does the phrase ‘Chelsea morning’ mean?” After soliciting predictions, explain to students that this piece was inspired by Mitchell’s experience of living in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City and what she noticed looking outside her window one morning.
7. Write on the board, “Writers make the ordinary extraordinary.” Ask students to reflect on what this means and how the statement connects to the song. The point is to show students that this song is not about an event that, by itself, is particularly enthralling. Rather, Mitchell makes it extraordinary through sensory detail. Student writers often mistakenly assume that their writing has to be about a grand event. Explain to students that great writing often comes from zooming in on small moments that are overlooked.

The next phase is for students to practice this skill on their own and “explode a moment” (Lane, 1993, p. 65) in vivid sensory detail.

**Minilesson 2: Using an Observation Chart to Explode a Moment**

This idea comes from *The Writer’s Craft* by Blau et al. (1998). The purpose of this minilesson is to give students a specific device for brainstorming sensory detail. The observation chart in Figure 1 is a powerful tool for a number of reasons. As a graphic organizer, it is less intimidating than composing complete

---

**Figure 1**

The Observation Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moment to explode in detail:</th>
<th>Skip</th>
<th>Sound</th>
<th>Smell</th>
<th>Taste</th>
<th>Touch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smell</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taste</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This chart is based on ideas in *The Writer’s Craft* (Gold level), by S. Blau, P. Elbow, D. Killgallon, and R. Caplan, 1998, Boston, MA: McDougal Littell.
sentences in a draft. It provides a tangible scaffold for students to use when showing, not telling. Also, students can use it before drafting as a brainstorming device or during drafting as a creative revision technique.

Minilesson Execution Guidelines

1. Write a boring “telling” sentence on the board. If it’s September and summer break is still fresh in students’ minds, I might start with something like “I went to the beach this summer. It was a lot of fun.”
2. Ask students to raise their hands if they find this text interesting or if they can picture this moment. Explore why it is challenging to visualize this moment.
3. Explain to students that this text is an example of a writer telling about the event. As a reader, this type of text is not enjoyable because the writer (in telling the reader what to think) does not let the reader have any fun in visualizing this experience! Tell students you will share with them a tool that will help them craft vivid detail on a particular moment.
4. Show students a blank observation chart (see Figure 1).
5. Discuss how the graphic organizer works. The moment to explode in detail is placed on the line. The columns underneath are areas to brainstorm vivid phrases related to the five senses.
6. Model filling in the chart (see Figure 2). You can do this for students or invite their assistance. A good moment to model is the “boring” sentence you used in step 1. For additional scaffolding, you may choose to return to “Chelsea Morning” and fill in another observation chart using the song’s images.
7. Have students try it out. You might have students stay with the same small moment you modeled or have them select a new one on their own, or you can supply a list of possible small moments for students to select from. Challenge students to come up with at least one description in each category. Initially, have them practice using the chart (perhaps multiple times) in isolation of drafting longer pieces.

Once students become comfortable with the graphic organizer, they will have a tangible brainstorming and revision tool to aid them in crafting vivid sensory detail corresponding to any piece of writing. The final step is providing a scaffold for students to become comfortable in crafting figurative language.

Minilesson 3: Paper Bag Similes and Metaphors

Once students gain comfort in crafting vivid detail, they have the necessary background to create figurative language. Two of the most common types of figurative language are simile (a comparison of two things using the words like or as) and metaphor (a comparison without like or as). Both of these writing techniques convey vivid sensory detail (Blau et al., 1998). This minilesson should occur after students have seen numerous text models and can recognize similes and metaphors with relative ease. You may even revisit “Chelsea Morning” and have students identify some of the similes, such as “the sun poured in like butterscotch” (Mitchell, 1969), and metaphors, such as “by jewel-light” (Mitchell, 1969). The purpose of this lesson is to support students in crafting similes and metaphors through kinesthetic engagement with objects.

Figure 2
Observation Chart With Detail

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moment to explode in detail: Arriving at the beach</th>
<th>Sight</th>
<th>Sound</th>
<th>Smell</th>
<th>Taste</th>
<th>Touch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>shimmersing ocean</td>
<td>crash of waves</td>
<td>summer breeze</td>
<td>melting snow cone</td>
<td>ice-cold water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father and son</td>
<td>ice cream truck bells</td>
<td>sweat</td>
<td>chocolate fudge pop</td>
<td>warm sun on my back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>searching for sand crabs</td>
<td>wind blowing</td>
<td>cry of seagull</td>
<td>wind in my hair</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seagulls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This chart is based on ideas in The Writer’s Craft (Gold level), by S. Balu, P. Elbow, D. Killgallon, and R. Caplan, 1998, Boston, MA; McDougal Littell.
Minilesson Execution Guidelines

1. Fill paper bags with common household objects. I’ve used anything from a stack of sticky notes and a stapler to a whisk, a flashlight, and so on. Depending on your resources, time, the number of students, and the needs of the class, you could make a bag with a single item in it for each student and have them pass the bag to a peer after a minute or two, or you can fill fewer bags with more items for students to complete this task collaboratively.

2. Instruct students to divide a piece of paper in half and write “Simile” at the top of one side and “Metaphor” at the top of another. Pull an item from a bag and model your own meta-cognition as you show students how you try to see the common object with new eyes. You can even tell students to imagine that they are aliens from another planet. Ask them how they might describe the item using a simile. For example, while examining a stapler, fourth grader Brian came up with “The open stapler looks like a crocodile’s jaw.”

3. Have students complete the activity, writing down the similes they craft.

4. Give students the opportunity to share their similes.

5. After students are comfortable creating similes, they are ready to create metaphors. Students often have more difficulty writing metaphor because it lacks the tangible like or as. One means of getting students comfortable in writing a metaphor is to revise a simile. To model this, show students how eliminating words or changing words around can transform a simile into a metaphor. For example, the simile “Her eyes are like emeralds” can be changed to a metaphor by simply dropping like, becoming “Her eyes are emeralds.”

6. Once students grasp this concept, they can further play with the wording, creating a metaphor such as “Her emerald eyes.”

7. Have students start from their initial paper bag similes and play with the wording to create metaphors.

8. Give students the opportunity to share some of their metaphors.

Student Exemplars

Improvement in writing comes with repeated practice, emphasis, and revisiting (Lane, 1993), but the effort is well worth it. In this section, I include excerpts from my former sixth graders’ drafts after engaging in these minilessons and crafting vivid sensory detail in longer writing workshop assignments. Note that in both exemplars, students pull from different minilessons. Students’ ability to select particular techniques aligns with Ray’s (2001) suggestion that through minilessons, you expose students to different strategies; ultimately, students have the agency to use the techniques that resonate with them as individual writers.

In this first exemplar, Dylan went back to the similes and metaphors that he had created during the paper bag activity. Those served as a model for him to devise the figurative language in the following excerpt, taken from his nonfiction report on the Indian Ocean tsunami:

Feeling the ground shiver and shake like a dog after its bath, you begin to wonder what is happening. Suddenly, like a horror movie, high-pitched screams are heard from swimmers in the ocean. A monstrous wave dashes towards the beach like a cheetah chasing a zebra.

In the second exemplar, after having difficulty describing a scene in her autobiographical account of a summer vacation, Elsie used an observation chart to brainstorm sensory detail that she transferred into her draft:

Early sunlight trickled through the withered branches and dark leaves faded into the shade of a dying sunset while our bulky green minivan drove down the road. My car was far from quiet. “Cornflakes and milk! Da Da Dum!” my sister sang while mom thumbed through a magazine.

In Closing

Watching students fill with pride as they learn to craft vivid sensory detail is a wonderful experience. A student once told me it was “like magic.” The effect is just that. However, the work comes with time, patience, and effort in refocusing and retraining the brain. In doing so, students learn to capture moments with an artist’s eye, captivating readers’ imaginations with their prose (Fletcher, 2013). Above all, they learn that not only is the ability to “show, not tell” important, it can also be fun!
REFERENCES


LITERATURE CITED

Creating Strategic Readers: Techniques for Supporting Rigorous Literacy Instruction
Third Edition
VALERIE ELLERY

In this revised edition, author Valerie Ellery addresses today’s rigorous standards, with timeless tools to help you empower your students to be motivated, engaged, strategic, and able to direct their own learning. Find new classroom-tested strategies, an expanded focus on educating the whole child, and an appendix with digital resources of printables to organize your classroom!

ORDER NOW! literacyworldwide.org/strategicreaders3
Enter this code for priority processing: CSR3
800.336.7323 (U.S. and Canada) | 302.731.1600 (all other countries)