

The Writing Center @

Show More and Tell Less for Vivid Style

Which excerpt will keep you reading?

Excerpt One:

The morning I was to receive my package, I went downstairs and watched television. I thought about how excited I was as I ate breakfast. I wondered what my best friend had bought for me in South America and decided that I would call her as soon as I received the package. I was really looking forward to her return to the United States. I thought about all the things we would do together once she returned. All of a sudden, the doorbell rang, and I went to the door. I opened the door and looked outside.

Excerpt Two:

The morning I was to receive my package, I bounded down the stairs and flipped on the kitchen television. After I grabbed a bagel and settled down in my favorite chair, my mind began to race. “What did she send me?” I wondered aloud. I pictured the possible contents of the package: a bag of aromatic South American coffee beans, colorful pottery crafted by villagers, or perhaps a brilliant, hand-woven tapestry. I grabbed my cell phone off the counter so that I could call Sarah the instant I received the package. When I glanced over at a picture of us at our favorite restaurant, I smiled. I couldn’t wait to visit Moe’s Eatery with her again when she returned to the United States. The doorbell chimed, and I sat straight up in my chair. It was here! I shoved my chair away from the table and raced to the door, nearly tripping over my dog. I flung open the door and stuck my head outside. “Where do I sign?” I nearly shouted.

Which of these excerpts was more interesting to read? Which one makes you want to read more?

The second excerpt was more interesting to read because it showed the reader the events rather than simply telling them. Vivid style isn’t reserved for fiction. Give readers more to picture any essay by following these suggestions that will help you show more, as you tell less.

To show rather than tell, try these techniques.

- Use vivid, active verbs—Note these in the second excerpt: bounded, grabbed, flung, glanced, and shoved.

- Use adjectives and adverbs to create a strong image in the reader’s mind—Note in the second excerpt: aromatic, brilliant, hand-woven, crafted, and nearly. Eliminate adverbs that weaken a verb by stating the obvious: excitedly bounded or happily smiled.

- Use dialogue to show people’s feelings and thoughts: “What did she send me?” or “Where do I sign?”

- Describe the movement of characters.

The sentence, “I...decided that I would call her as soon as I received the package” is less effective than, “I grabbed my cell phone off the counter so that I could call Sarah the instant I received the package.”

The sentence from the second excerpt shows the narrator’s excitement to call Sarah, while the sentence from the first excerpt merely states that she wants to call Sarah.

- Use very specific examples.

The sentence, “I thought about all the things we would do together once she returned” is less effective than, “I couldn’t wait to visit Moe’s Eatery with her again when she returned to the United States.”

The sentence about Moe’s Eatery from the second excerpt names a specific activity and a specific restaurant, so it creates a more vivid image in the reader’s mind than, “the things we would do together.”

- Stimulate readers’ interest by inviting them to make inferences based upon the text’s action, instead of feeding dull information.