TELL, DON'T SHOW

How to decide when it's best to "show" and when it's best to simply "tell."

Welcome to this short presentation, Tell, don't show. How to decide when it's best to "show" and when it's best to "tell."

"TELL, NOT SHOW?"

CLUTCHES PEARLS

I am not recommending to never "show." What I propose is to let students know that many times,

…it is ok to tell.

The problem, I think, starts with the lack of a proper definition. What does it mean to show?

Showing uses dramatized exposition and evocative descriptions to present action as if directly perceived by the reader.

Laura thought she'd love to climb the tree.

Laura sighed. "I would kill to climb that tree!"

For instance, this sentence is all telling, but if we dramatize it [click], "Laura sighed. "I would kill to climb that tree!" It becomes more vivid.

Vividness

The production of strong, clear images in the mind.

Showing increases vividness, the production of strong, clear images in the mind. [click] It makes readers feel as if they were first-hand witnesses of the events.

Good showing is like using a high-resolution virtual reality headset. It increases the sensation of presence.

There's an important difference, though: virtual reality involves actual sensory perception. We see [click], hear, and sometimes even feel the simulated world.
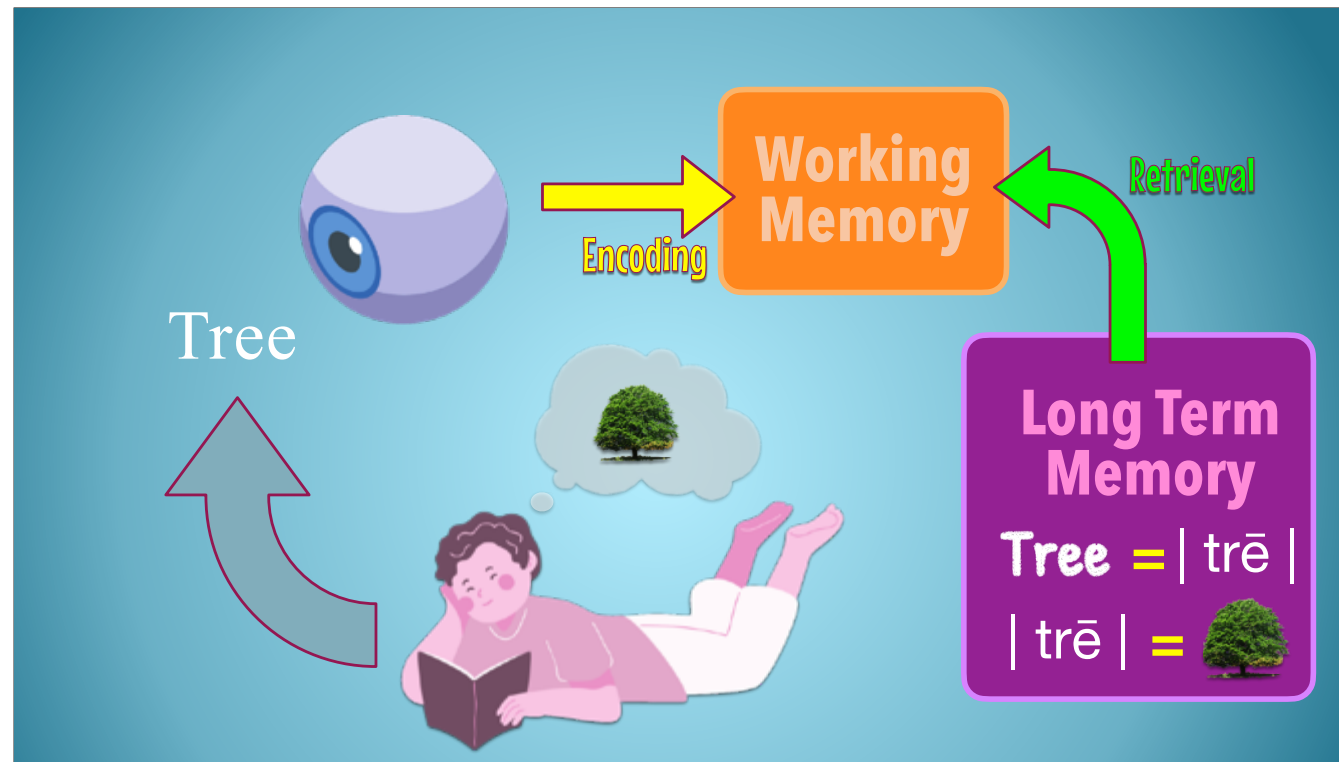
In prose, when we read the word tree, we don't see a tree. We see an image that represents the word "tree." To extract meaning from that image, we must encode it into working memory first [click] then use information from long term memory [click] to recognize the image as a written word, transform into a sound, and finally [click] into the mental image of a tree.
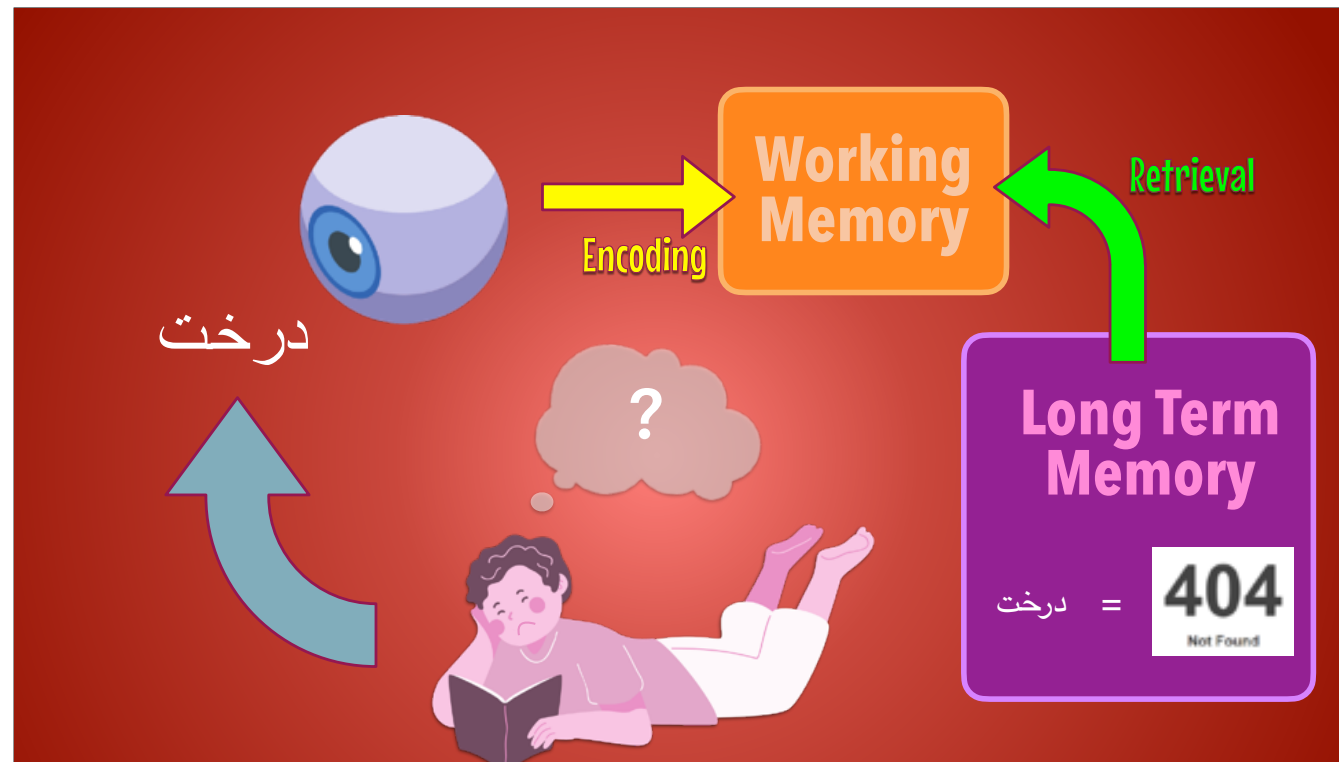
The bulk of the information doesn't come from the outside world, it comes from our memories.

Showing resorts to memory to mimic sensory perception

That is, showing resorts to memory to <u>mimic</u> sensory perception.

If we don't know the meaning of a word or cannot understand a sentence, we fail to create an image. Showing depends heavily on what we already know and our ability to transform information.
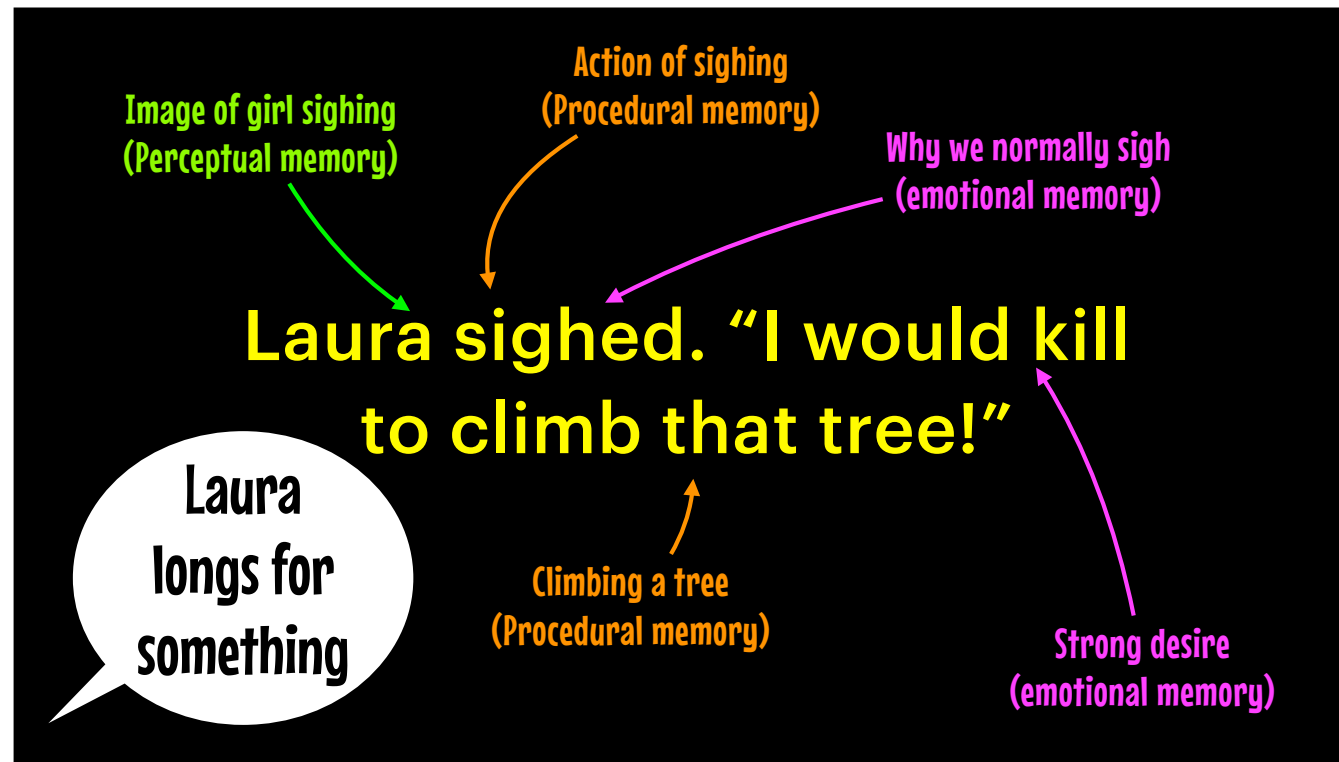
In my example, the first sentence pulls from memory what a girl sighing looks like [click], which is a perceptual memory;
how to sigh, a procedural memory [click],
and why we normally sigh, an emotional memory [click]. We infer that Laura longs for something [click]

The second sentence uses the made-up phrase "would kill" [click] to suggest a strong desire. That is also an emotional memory. By suggesting that strong desire, the indirect object, "to climb that tree," [click] becomes a stronger reference to procedural and perceptual memories, what climbing a tree feels like: looking up, grabbing a branch, etcetera. The result is more than a mental image.
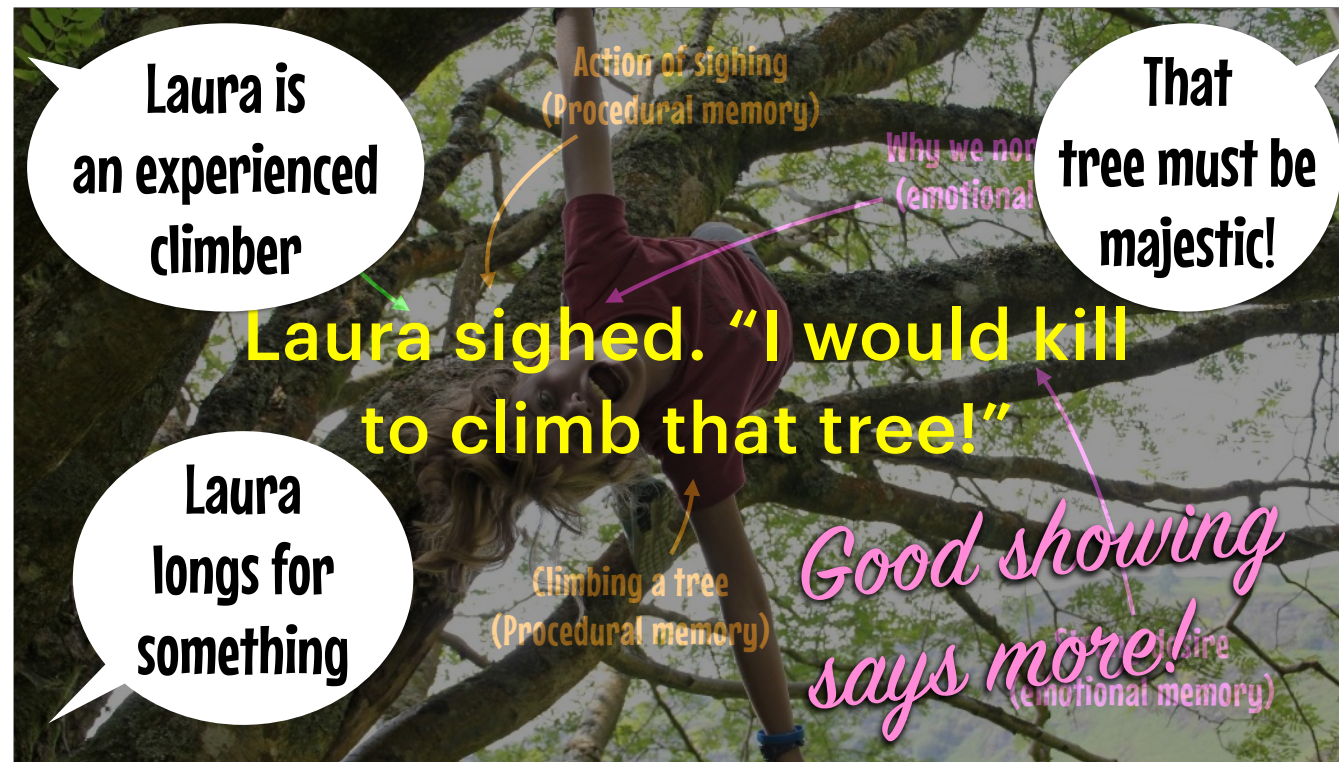
It's a better understanding of what Laura feels.

Moreover, we can infer some information about Laura. She's probably an experienced tree climber. [click] And the tree must be a majestic one if she wants to climb it so badly [click]. The text doesn't say it; the reader infers it. [click] Good showing conveys extra information.

So here's my definition of what showing is.

Showing

Appealing to the reader's perceptual, procedural, and emotional memories through the representation of action to mimic sensory perception.

Appealing to the reader's perceptual, procedural, and emotional memories through the representation of action to mimic sensory perception.

That is, showing conjures up memories of what it is like to do and feel something so that the body aids the brain to interpret the story. If we can imagine how it feels, we can empathize.

Motor Mimicry (sensory empathy)
Tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person.

Davis, M. H. (1983). Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *44*(1), 113–126. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.44.1.113

We mammals tend to mimic the movements of the other [click]

When we see people laughing, we may start laughing too. From this simulation of the other's state we come to recognize intention and infer how the other may feel.

Because showing depicts action, we tend to simulate that action. We empathize with the characters through motor mimicry. Not because we perceive their movements but because we imagine them.

Showing's Function

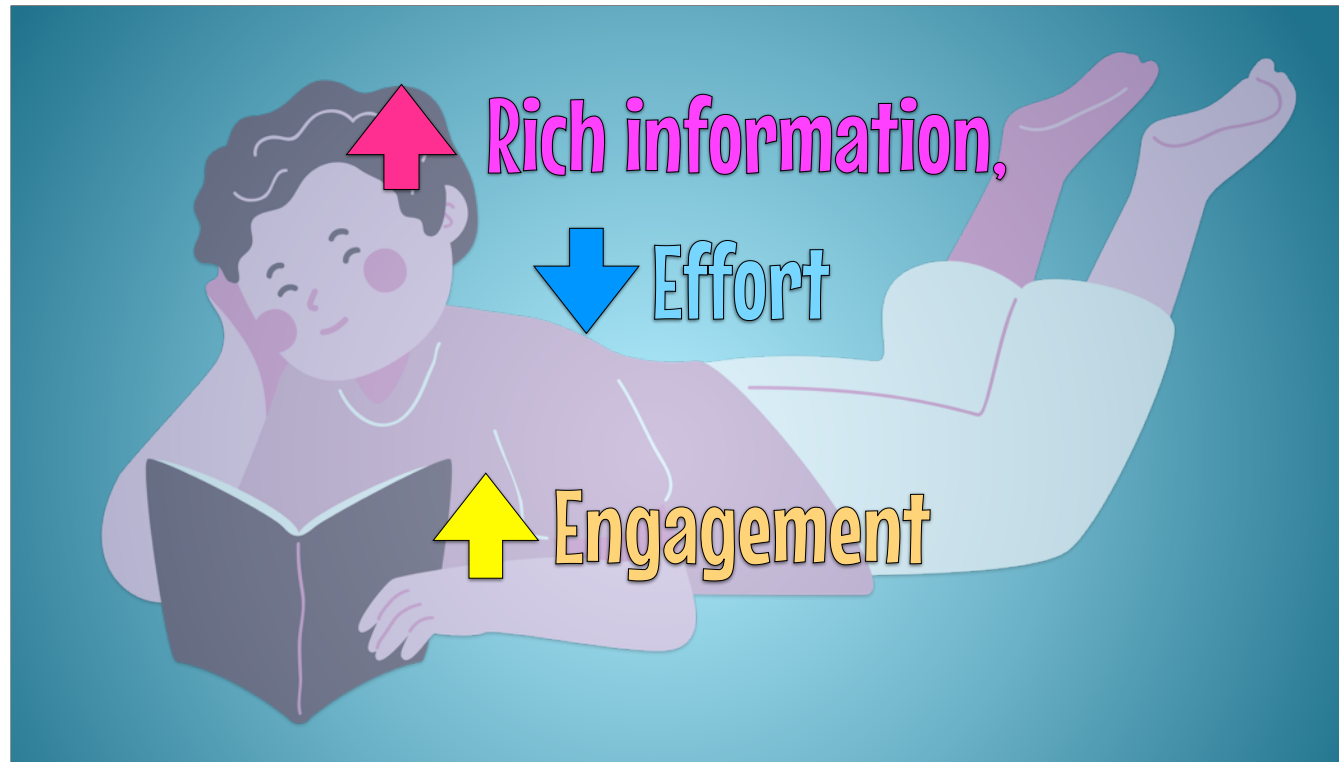Increase Vividness

Facilitate Comprehension

Imply

Showing's function is to [click] increase text vividness, facilitate comprehension, and to imply, to convey information indirectly, so that ultimately…
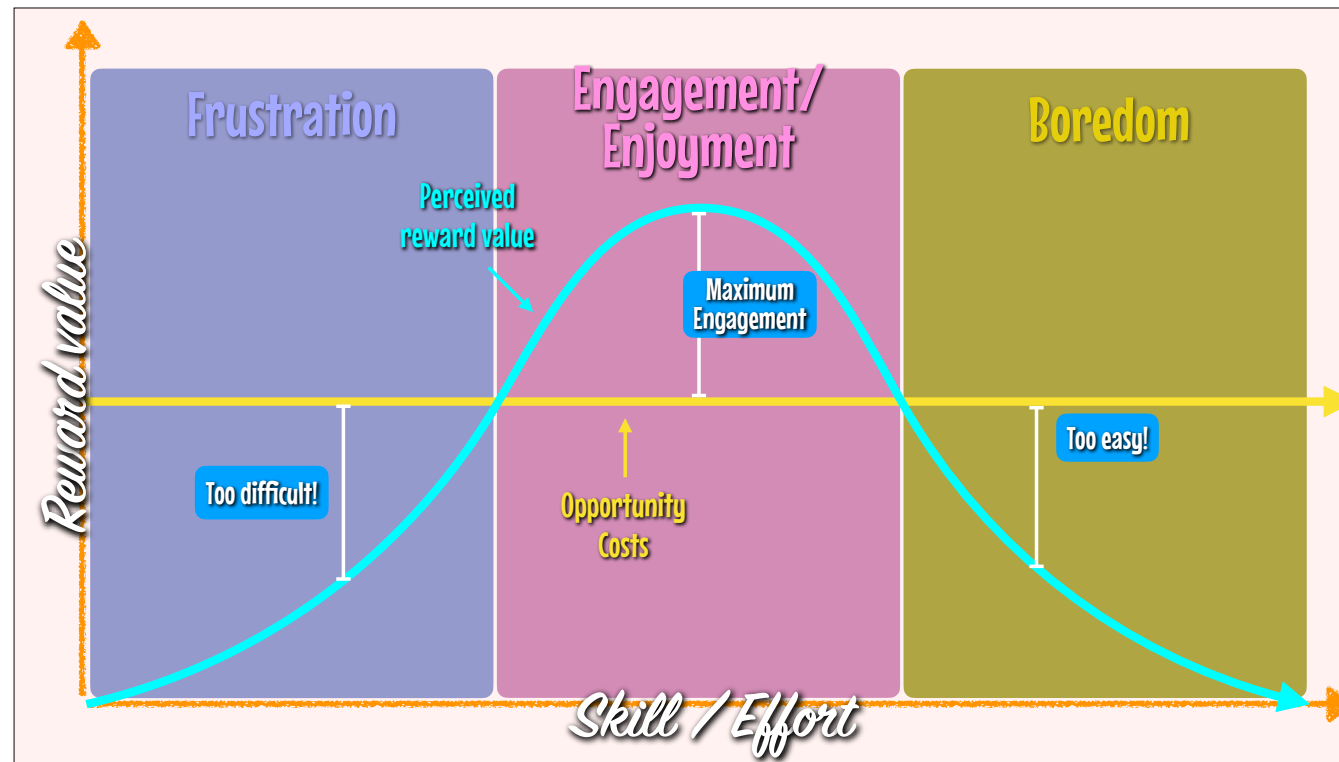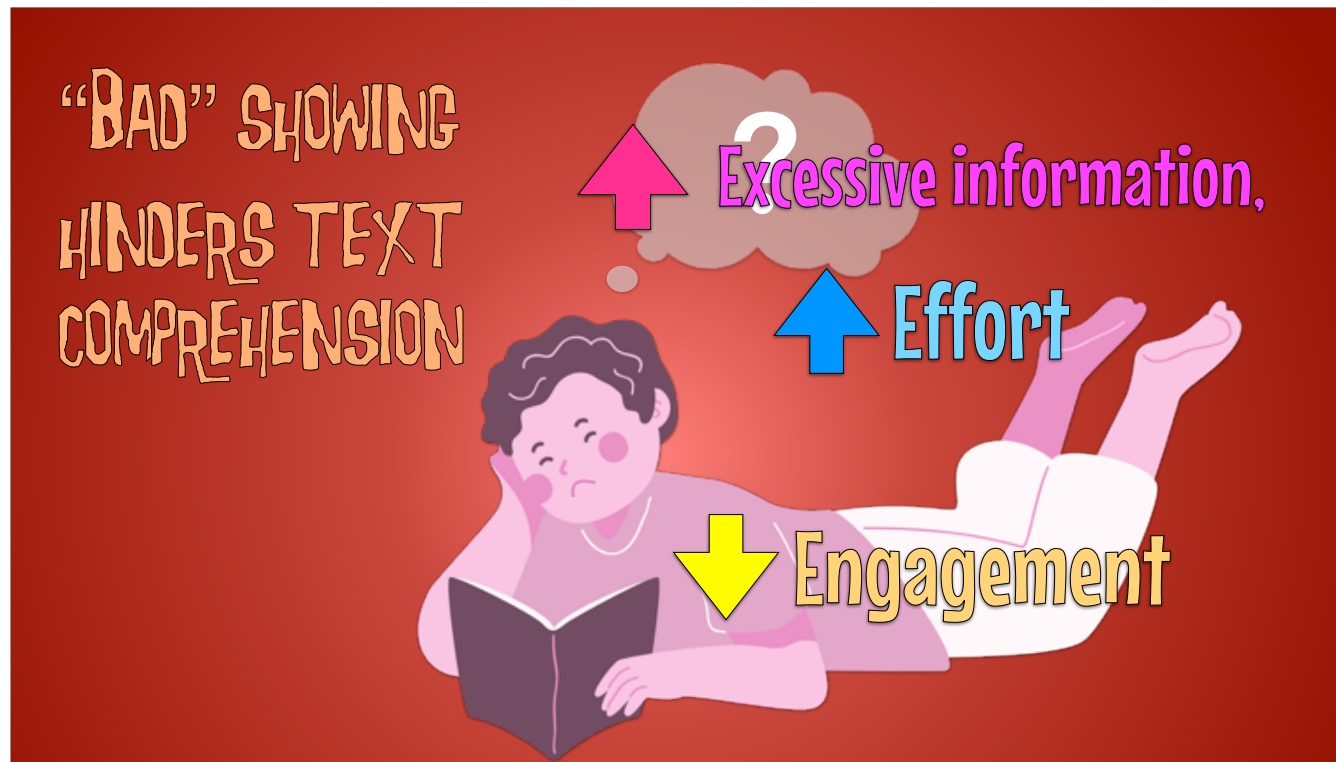
Engagement grows.

When we acquire rich information with little effort, [click] engagement grows.

An engaged reader continuously compares how rewarding the task is to the opportunity cost of engaging attention in anything else.

Thus, good showing must lead to an effortless understanding of what's being portrayed.

Bad showing, hinders text comprehension. Excessive information increases effort [click]

And when the experience becomes more taxing than rewarding, [click] we disengage.

Because we insist on telling writers that they should always show and never tell, they err by creating unnecessarily specific images or dramatizing incidents that instead of increasing, reduce engagement.

Squatting her haunches
down to the ground in one
smooth motion, her bum
kisses the gravel and she
She sits on the ridge.
dangles her legs out over the
edge of the ridge.

For instance, one of my students wrote this line: "Squatting her haunches down to the ground in one smooth motion, her bum kisses the gravel and she dangles her legs out over the edge of the ridge." It creates a powerful image but do we need to see the girl's bum kissing the gravel? Unless we're writing erotica, probably not. The sentence requires too much effort for the amount of information it provides. It is better to simply say [click], she sits on the ridge.

When wondering whether to show or tell, what we need to ask ourselves is [click] how to make readers learn and experience more without increasing effort?

Telling is economical, and many times, that is best because our working memory is quite limited.

When we read, we don't transform the text into rich visual images but into fuzzy mental images [click], into concepts that we can easily recreate in consciousness. We only need enough details to choose material that already exists in memory. And considering how much media we consume, there's a lot already in there!
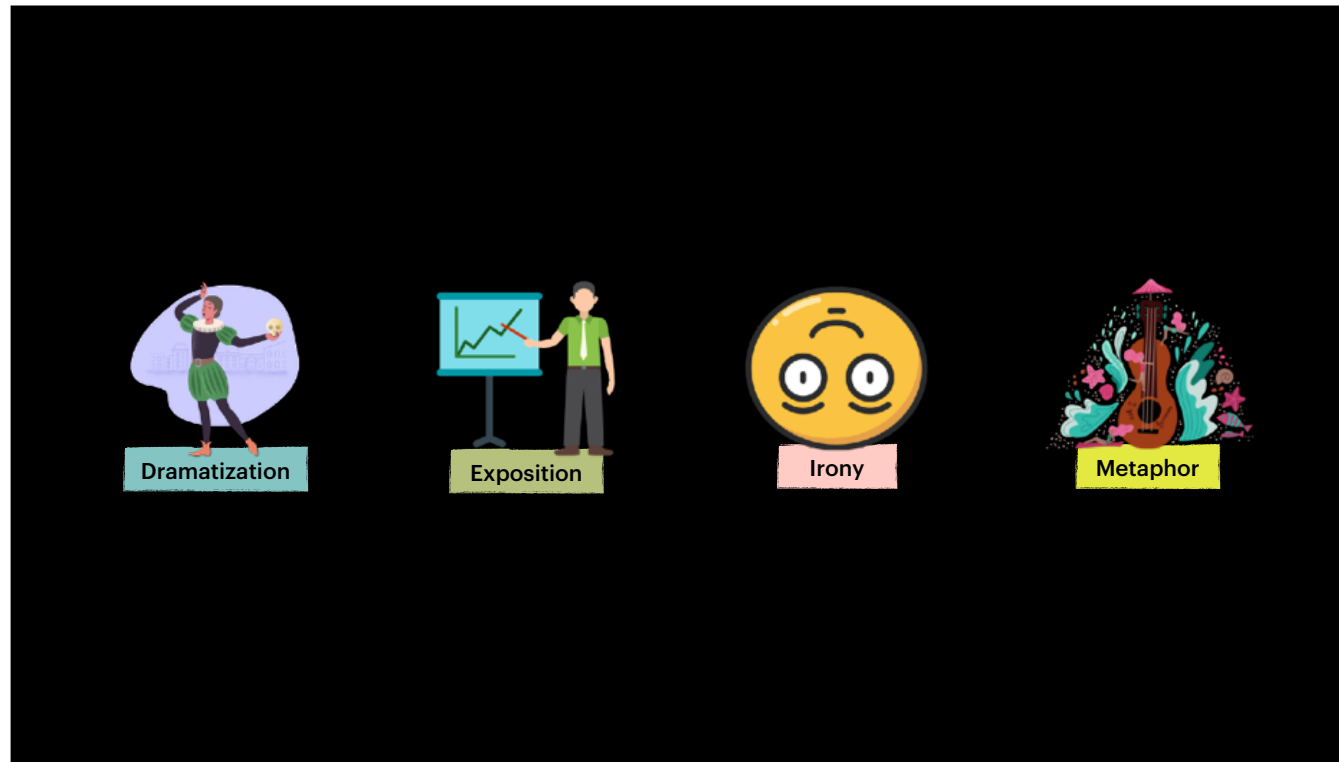
Moreover, exposition can be just as evocative as dramatization when accompanied by [click] irony and metaphor

> And so saying [the king] calls his secretary, commands the trumpeter to come and *too-too!* makes a proclamation, that all the women of that country should come to a public party and a banquet which he had decided to give. And when the appointed day comes, oh dear, what feasting and frolic! From whence came all those pies and pasties? From whence the stews and ragouts? Whence the macaroni and the ravioli? So much stuff, it could have fed a whole army.

Basile, G. (2020, July 30). La Gata Cenerentola. Retrieved April 17, 2021, from https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Pentamerone,_or_The_Story_of_Stories/ Cenerentola

For instance, I like a lot this fragment from La Gatta Cenerentola.

And so saying [the king] calls his secretary, commands the trumpeter to come and too, too! makes a proclamation: that all the women of that country should come to a public party and a banquet which he had decided to give. And when the appointed day comes, oh dear, what feasting and frolic! From whence came all those pies and pasties? From whence the stews and ragouts? Whence the macaroni and the ravioli? So much stuff, it could have fed a whole army.

The readers understand that there was a magnificent party without dramatization. The specific details of the party remain particular to their imagination. And that's what good showing and good telling do: provide simple, easy-to-follow instructions of what to imagine to say more with fewer words.

As a task conducive to experience flow, the reading experience should feel effortless.
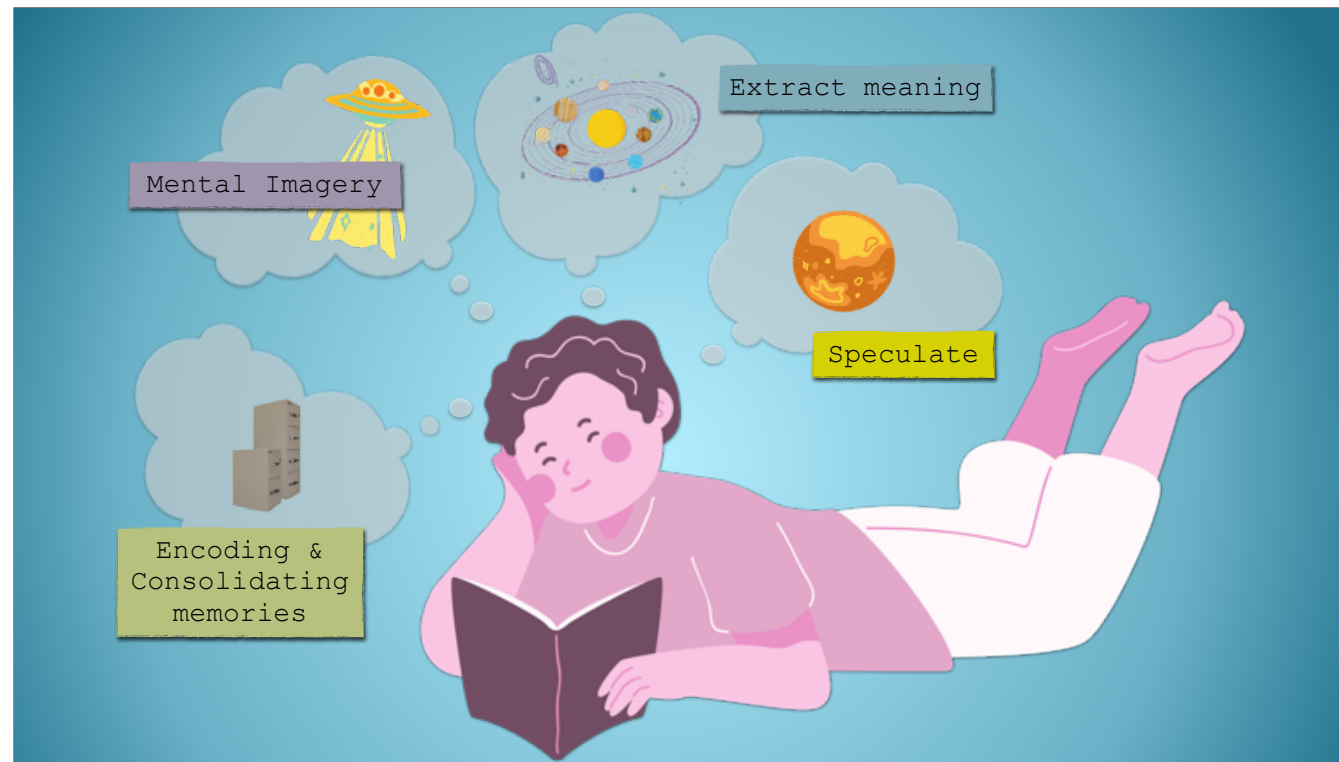
When done well and used appropriately, showing facilitates the creation of mental imagery [click], enhancing the readers' sensation of presence; it helps readers extract meaning from a text [click], infer unstated facts, and create speculative thoughts [click]. Good showing also improves the process of encoding and consolidating information in memory [click] because the information already exists there; readers only need to retrieve it and transform it.

However, one must be careful to never, ever…

Showing should never become filler

Letting showing become filler.

We don't need to show what is either too difficult or worthless to imagine

- [click] Details the readers could easily infer, like what happened during an uneventful car trip, unless we do it with the intention to increase suspense.
- Events too difficult to describe with concrete images or too cumbersome to recreate from the text, like every punch in a fight.
- And whatever would neither create suspense nor reward the reader. If we're going to make readers work, let's make them work for a good reason.

https://witchesandbeatniks.com
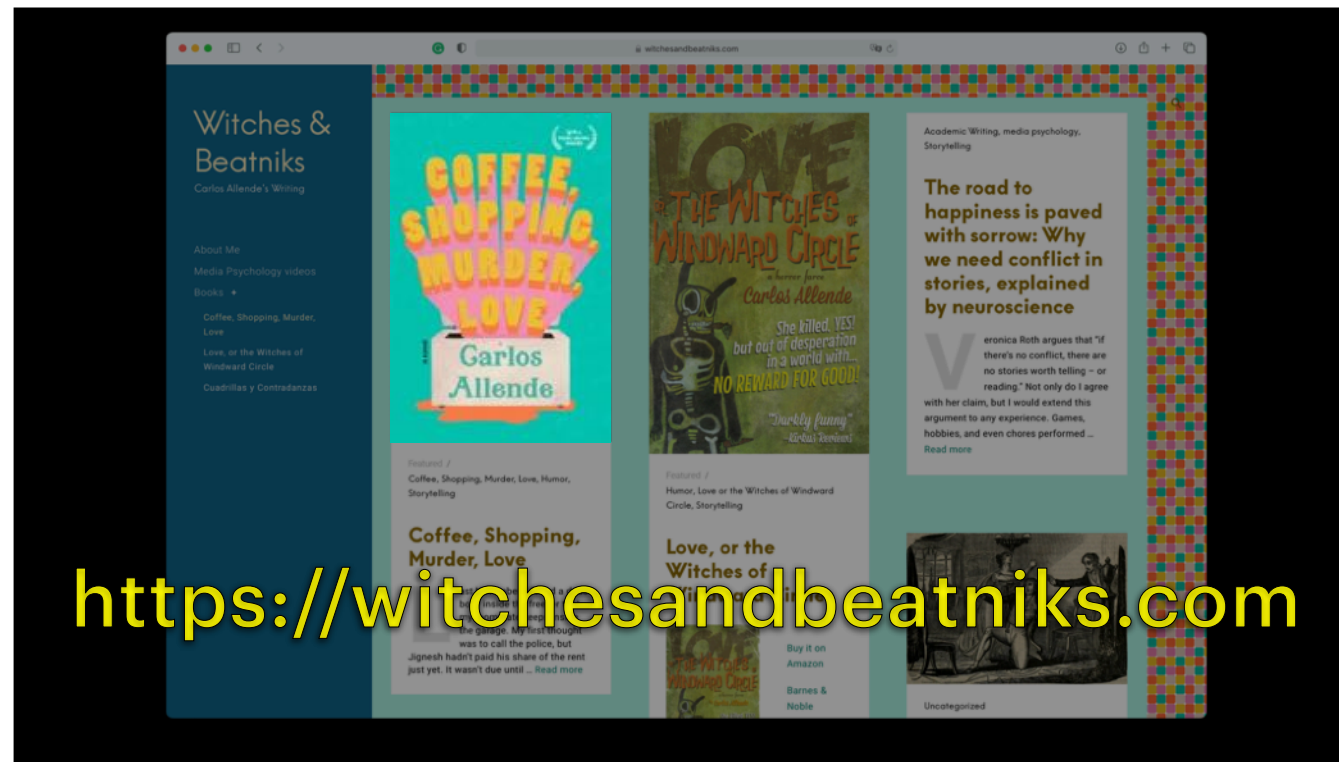
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