

SHOWING AND TELLING WITH ACTION AND SUMMARIZATION

By Mike Klaassen

Should you always "show" rather than "tell?" *Summarization* is the fiction-writing mode whereby story events are recapped. In summary mode events are *told* rather than *shown*. Action mode *shows* an event in detail as it happens, summarization *tells* about it. The old writing axiom "Show. Don't tell." implies that summarization is inferior writing, to be discouraged. This is unfortunate because telling, in the form of summarization, has a vital role.

Any event may be portrayed either in the action mode or in summarization. Consider the following gunfight in action mode:

As the sun reached its zenith, Cisco strode onto the dust-filled street and faced Bart. Without warning, Bart reached for his pistol. Cisco dived to the right as Bart fired. Cisco rolled in the dirt and drew his Peacemaker. He fanned his hand across the Colt's hammer in rapid succession, sending three slugs into Bart's chest.

The same event may be summarized as:

At noon, Cisco faced Bart and gunned him down in the street.

Summary mode has many applications. It may be used to: (1) report an event that doesn't warrant the detailed, as-it-happens treatment of the action mode, (2) shift from one time or location to another, (3) setup a writing passage by "catching up" the reader on what has happened since the previous scene, sequel, chapter, or section or (4) vary rhythm, pace, tone, or texture.ⁱ

REPORTING EVENTS

Summary mode is appropriate for reporting events that don't warrant detailed, real-time presentation. As fiction writers we make many decisions. We choose which events to report and which to leave out. We choose which events to report in detail and which to summarize. For example, depending upon the objectives of the author, the *summary* of the gunfight described above may be appropriate. Readers may need to know that event occurred but don't need to know the details. *Telling* lets the reader speed past less important action. If fiction were a video player, action would be accessed with the "Play" button, and summarization would be the "Fast Forward" button, where events are skimmed over.

Summarization may be particularly appropriate when there is repetition of events.ⁱⁱ For example, if Bart was one of five gunfights Cisco had that day, showing each of these events in action mode could become tedious for the reader.

SHIFTING TIME OR LOCATION

Summarization provides an opportunity to telescope time and shift locations. Rather than showing all the details in an uninteresting journey, the writer might summarize it. For example:

Over the next three hours as the storm continued, they followed the winding path around and over one dark hill after another.

Like a time machine fitted with a global-positioning device, summarization can transport the character across time and space.

SETTING UP A NEW PASSAGE OR VIEWPOINT CHARACTER

Summarization may be used to set up a new scene, sequel, chapter, or section—even a change in a viewpoint character. This may be accomplished at the beginning of the new passage simply by naming the new viewpoint character and describing what he is doing, thinking, or feeling. For example:

Fortney reached the top of the hill and stopped. Before him, as far as he could see, stretched rolling, grass-covered hills.

VARYING RHYTHM, PACE, TONE, OR TEXTURE

Summarization and action, even when used to describe the same event, have a different pace, rhythm, tone, and texture (Just think of the gunfight described above). The decision to use one versus the other becomes a tool for manipulating the story. For example, imagine a medieval battle with knights engaged in a series of sword fights. The writer might decide to describe the first fight in action mode, summarize the next three (Over the next hour Arthur dispatched three more dark knights.), and then show the climactic fight in gory detail.

As with each of the other ten fiction-writing modes, summarization has both advantages and disadvantages. Action involves the reader and is intimate and immediate, but too much action can fatigue the reader. Summarization distances the reader and lacks immediacy. Summarization offers one distinct advantage over the action mode, and that is brevity.ⁱⁱⁱ

Summarization deserves respect as a fiction-writing mode. Without summarization, fiction could be tedious and disjointed. For any particular passage of fiction, the challenge is to show when appropriate and to tell when appropriate.

LEARN MORE

Mike Klaassen is the author of *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the book at Amazon.com.

This article was adapted from "Summarization as a Fiction Writing Mode" published by Helium.com on August 29, 2007 and is an excerpt from *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*. Copyright 2007 and 2015 Michael John Klaassen. All rights reserved. You are welcome to share this article with others.

ⁱ Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1992, 144-145. ISBN: 9780898795073.

ⁱⁱ Browne and King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*. New York: Harper Resource, 2004, 14. ISBN: 9780060545697.

ⁱⁱⁱ Selgin, Peter. *By Cunning & Craft*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2007, 31. ISBN: 9781582974910.