SHOW, DON'T TELL

*Exposition* means facts—the information about setting, biography, and characterization that the audience needs to know to follow and comprehend the events of the story.

Within the first pages of a screenplay a reader can judge the relative skill of the writer simply by noting how he handles exposition. Well-done exposition doesn’t guarantee a superb story, but it does tell us that the writer knows the craft. Skill in exposition means making it *invisible*. As the story progresses, the audience absorbs all it needs to know effortlessly, even unconsciously.

The famous axiom “Show, don’t tell” is the key. Never force words into a character’s mouth to *tell* the audience about world, history, or person. Rather, *show* us honest, natural scenes in which human beings talk and behave in honest, natural ways... yet at the same time indirectly pass along the necessary facts. In other words, *dramatize exposition*.

Dramatized exposition serves two ends: Its primary purpose is to further the immediate conflict. Its secondary purpose is to convey information. The anxious novice reverses that order, putting expositonal duty ahead of dramatic necessity.

For example: Jack says, “Harry, how the hell long have we known one another? What? About twenty years, huh? Ever since we were at college together. That’s a long time, isn’t it, Harry? Well, how the hell are ya this morning?” Those lines have no purpose
except to tell the eavesdropping audience that Jack and Harry are friends, went to school together twenty years ago, and they haven’t had lunch yet—a deadly beat of unnatural behavior. No one ever tells someone something they both already know unless saying the obvious fills another and compelling need. Therefore, if this information is needed, the writer must create a motivation for the dialogue that’s greater than the facts.

To dramatize exposition apply this mnemonic principle: Convert exposition to ammunition. Your characters know their world, their history, each other, and themselves. Let them use what they know as ammunition in their struggle to get what they want. Converting the above to ammunition: Jack, reacting to Harry’s stifled yawn and bloodshot eyes, says, “Harry, look at you. The same hippie haircut, still stoned by noon, the same juvenile stunts that got you kicked out of school twenty years ago. Are you ever gonna wake up and smell the coffee?” The audience’s eye jumps across the screen to see Harry’s reaction and indirectly hears “twenty years” and “school.”

“Show, don’t tell,” by the way, doesn’t mean that it’s all right to pan the camera down a mantelpiece on a series of photographs that take Harry and Jack from their university days to boot camp to the double wedding to opening their dry cleaning business. That’s telling, not showing. Asking the camera to do it turns a feature film into a home movie. “Show, don’t tell” means that characters and camera behave truthfully.

Dealing with the knotty problems of exposition so intimidates some writers that they try to get it all out of the way as soon as possible, so the studio script analyst can concentrate on their stories. But when forced to wade through an Act One stuffed with exposition, the reader realizes that this is an amateur who can’t handle the basic craft, and skims to the last scenes.

Confident writers parse out exposition, bit by bit, through the entire story, often revealing exposition well into the Climax of the last act. They follow these two principles: Never include anything the audience can reasonably and easily assume has happened. Never pass on exposition unless the missing fact would cause con-
fusion. You do not keep the audience’s interest by giving it infor-
mation, but by withholding information, except that which is
absolutely necessary for comprehension.

Pace the exposition. Like all else, exposition must have a pro-
goingle pattern: Therefore, the least important facts come in early,
the next most important later, the critical facts last. And what are
the critical pieces of exposition? Secrets. The painful truths charac-
ters do not want known.

In other words, don’t write “California scenes.” “California
scenes” are scenes in which two characters who hardly know each
other sit down over coffee and immediately begin an intimate discuss-
on of the deep, dark secrets of their lives: “Oh, I had a rotten child-
hood. To punish me my mother used to flush my head in the toilet.”
“Huh! You think you had a bad childhood. To punish me my father
put dog shit in my shoes and made me go to school like that.”

Unguardedly honest and painful confessions between people
who have just met are forced and false. When this is pointed out to
writers, they will argue that it actually happens, that people share
very personal things with total strangers. And I agree. But only in
else in the world.

A certain breed of West Coaster carries around prepared deep
dark secrets to share with one another at cocktail parties to validate
themselves one to the other as authentic Californians—“centered”
and “in touch with their inner beings.” When I’m standing over the
tortilla dip at such parties and somebody tells me about dog shit in
his Keds as a child, my thought is: “Wow! If that’s the prepared
deep dark secret he tells people over the guacamole, what’s the real
stuff?” For there’s always something else. Whatever is said hides
what cannot be said.

Evelyn Mulwray’s confession, “She’s my sister and my
daughter” is nothing she would share over cocktails. She tells
Gittes this to keep her child out of her father’s hands. “You can’t
kill me, Luke, I’m your father” is a truth Darth Vader never wanted
to tell his son, but if he doesn’t, he’ll have to kill or be killed by his
child.
These are honest and powerful moments because the pressure of life is squeezing these characters between the lesser of two evils. And where in a well-crafted story is pressure the greatest? At the end of the line. The wise writer, therefore, obeys the first principle of temporal art: Save the best for last. For if we reveal too much too soon, the audience will see the climaxes coming long before they arrive.

Reveal only that exposition the audience absolutely needs and wants to know and no more.

On the other hand, since the writer controls the telling, he controls the need and desire to know. If at a certain point in the telling, a piece of exposition must be known or the audience wouldn’t be able to follow, create the desire to know by arousing curiosity. Put the question “Why?” in the filmgoer’s mind. “Why is this character behaving this way? Why doesn’t this or that happen? Why?” With a hunger for information, even the most complicated set of dramatized facts will pass smoothly into understanding.

One way to cope with biographical exposition is to start the telling in the protagonist’s childhood and then work through all the decades of his life. THE LAST EMPEROR, for example, covers over sixty years in the life of Pu Yi (John Lone). The story strings together scenes from his infancy when he’s made Emperor of China, his teenage years and youthful marriage, his Western education, his fall into decadence, his years as a Japanese stooge, life under the Communists, and his last days as a laborer in Peking’s Botanical Gardens. LITTLE BIG MAN spans a century. CARNAL KNOWLEDGE, FAREWELL, MY CONCUBINE, and SHINE all start in youth and leapfrog through the key events of the protagonists’ lives into middle age or beyond.

However, as convenient as that design may be in terms of exposition, the vast majority of protagonists cannot be followed from birth to death for this reason: Their story would have no Spine. To tell a story that spans a lifetime a Spine of enormous power and persistence must be created. But for most characters, what single, deep desire, aroused out of an Inciting Incident in childhood, would go unquenched for decades? This is why nearly all tellings pursue the protagonist’s Spine over months, weeks, even hours.
If, however, an elastic, endurable Spine can be created, then a story can be told over decades without being episodic. Episodic does not mean "covering long stretches of time" but rather "sporadic, irregular intervals." A story told over twenty-four hours could well be episodic if everything that happens in that day is unconnected to everything else that happens. On the other hand, LITTLE BIG MAN is unified around a man’s quest to prevent the genocide of Native Americans by the whites—an atrocity that spanned generations, therefore a century of storytelling. CARNAL KNOWLEDGE is driven by a man’s blind need to humiliate and destroy women, a soul-poisoning desire he never fathoms.

In THE LAST EMPEROR a man spends his life trying to answer the question: Who am I? At age three Pu Yi is made Emperor but has no idea what that means. To him a palace is a playground. He clings to his childhood identity until as a teenager he’s still nursing from the breast. The Imperial officials insist he act like an emperor, but he then discovers there is no empire. Burdened with a false identity, he tries on one personality after another but none fit: first English scholar and gentleman; then sex athlete and hedonist; later international bon vivant doing Sinatra imitations at posh parties; next a statesman, only to end up a puppet to the Japanese. Finally, the Communists give him his last identity—gardener.

FAREWELL, MY CONCUBINE tells of Dieyi’s (Leslie Cheung) fifty-year quest to live in the truth. When he is a child, the masters of the Peking Opera ruthlessly beat, brainwash, and force him to confess that he has a female nature—when he does not. If he did, torture wouldn’t be necessary. He’s effeminate, but like many effeminate men he is at heart male. So, forced to live a lie, he hates all lies, personal and political. From that point on all the conflicts in the story stem from his desire to speak the truth. But in China only liars survive. Finally realizing that truth is an impossibility, he takes his own life.

Because lifelong Spines are rare, we take Aristotle’s advice to begin stories in medias res, “in the midst of things.” After locating the date of the climactic event of the protagonist’s life, we begin
as close in time to it as possible. This design compresses the
telling’s duration, and lengthens the character’s biography before
the Inciting Incident. For example, if the Climax occurs on the
day a character turns thirty-five, instead of starting the film when
he’s a teenager, we open the film perhaps a month before his
birthday. This gives the protagonist thirty-five years of living to
build the maximum value into his existence. As a result, when his
life goes out of balance, he is now at risk and the story is filled
with conflict.

Consider, for example, the difficulties of writing a story about a
homeless alcoholic. What has he to lose? Virtually nothing. To a
soul enduring the unspeakable stress of the streets, death may be a
mercy, and a change in the weather might give him that. Lives with
little or no value beyond their existence are pathetic to witness, but
with so little at stake, the writer is reduced to painting a static por-
trait of suffering.

Rather, we tell stories about people who have something to
lose—family, careers, ideals, opportunities, reputations, realistic
hopes and dreams. When such lives go out of balance, the charac-
ters are placed at jeopardy. They stand to lose what they have in
their struggle to achieve a rebalancing of existence. Their battle,
risking hard-won values against the forces of antagonism, gener-
ates conflict. And when story is thick with conflict, the characters
need all the ammunition they can get. As a result, the writer has
little trouble dramatizing exposition and facts flow naturally and
invisibly into the action. But when stories lack conflict, the writer is
forced into “table dusting.”

Here, for example, is how many playwrights of the nineteenth
century handled exposition: The curtain comes up on a living room
set. Enter two domestics: One who’s worked there for the last thirty
years, the other the young maid just hired that morning. The older
maid turns to the newcomer and says, “Oh, you don’t know about
Dr. Johnson and his family, do you? Well, let me tell you . . .” And
as they dust the furniture the older maid lays out the entire life his-
tory, world, and characterizations of the Johnson family. That’s
“table dusting,” unmotivated exposition.
And we still see it today.

OUTBREAK: In the opening sequence, Colonel Daniels (Dustin Hoffman) flies to West Africa to halt an outbreak of the Ebola virus. On board is a young medical assistant. Daniels turns to him and says, in effect, “You don’t know about Ebola, do you?” and lays out the pathology of the virus. If the young assistant is untrained to fight a disease that threatens all human life on the planet, what’s he doing on this mission? Any time you find yourself writing a line of dialogue in which one character is telling another something that they both already know or should know, ask yourself, is it dramatized? Is it exposition as ammunition? If not, cut it.

If you can thoroughly dramatize exposition and make it invisible, if you can control its disclosure, parsing it out only when and if the audience needs and wants to know it, saving the best for last, you’re learning your craft. But what’s a problem for beginning writers becomes an invaluable asset to those who know the craft. Rather than avoiding exposition by giving their characters an anonymous past, they go out of their way to salt their biographies with significant events. Because what is the challenge that the storyteller faces dozens of times over in the telling? How to turn the scene. How to create Turning Points.

THE USE OF BACKSTORY

We can turn scenes only one of two ways: on action or on revelation. There are no other means. If, for example, we have a couple in a positive relationship, in love and together, and want to turn it to the negative, in hate and apart, we could do it on action: She slaps him across the face and says, “I’m not taking this anymore. It’s over.” Or on revelation: He looks at her and says, “I’ve been having an affair with your sister for the last three years. What are you going to do about it?”

Powerful revelations come from the BACKSTORY—previous significant events in the lives of the characters
that the writer can reveal at critical moments to create Turning Points.

CHINATOWN: “She’s my sister and my daughter” is exposition, saved to create a stunning revelation that turns the second act Climax and sets up a spiraling Act Three. THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK: “You can’t kill me, Luke, I’m your father” is exposition from the Backstory of STAR WARS saved to create the greatest possible effect, to turn the Climax and set up an entire new film, RETURN OF THE JEDI.

Robert Towne could have exposed the Cross family incest early in CHINATOWN by having Gittes unearth this fact from a disloyal servant. George Lucas could have exposed Luke’s paternity by having C3PO warn R2D2, “Don’t tell Luke, he’d really be upset to hear this, but Darth’s his dad.” Rather, they used Backstory exposition to create explosive Turning Points that open the gap between expectation and result, and deliver a rush of insight. With few exceptions, scenes cannot be turned on nothing but action, action, action. Inevitably we need a mix of action and revelation. Revelations, in fact, tend to have more impact, and so we often reserve them for the major Turning Points, act climaxes.

FLASHBACKS

The flashback is simply another form of exposition. Like all else, it’s done either well or ill. In other words, rather than boring the audience with long, unmotivated, exposition-filled dialogue passages, we could bore it with unwanted, dull, fact-filled flashbacks. Or we do it well. A flashback can work wonders if we follow the fine principles of conventional exposition.

First, dramatize flashbacks.

Rather than flashing back to flat scenes in the past, interpolate a minidrama into the story with its own Inciting Incident, progressions, and Turning Point. Although producers often claim that
flashbacks slow a film's pace, and indeed badly done they do, a well-done flashback actually accelerates pace.

CASABLANCA: The Paris Flashback comes at the opening of Act Two. Rick is crying in his whiskey, drunk and depressed, the film's rhythm deliberately retarding to relieve the tension of the Act One Climax. But as Rick remembers his affair with Ilsa, the flashback to the tale of their love affair while the Nazis invade Paris sweeps the film into an ever swifter pace that peaks around a sequence Climax as Ilsa runs out on Rick.

RESERVOIR DOGS: The Inciting Incident of a Murder Mystery combines two events: A murder is committed; the protagonist discovers the crime. Agatha Christie, however, opens her stories with only the second half—a closet door opens and a body falls out. By starting with the discovery of the crime, she arouses curiosity in two directions: Into the past, how and why was the murder committed? Into the future, which of the many suspects did it?

Tarantino’s design simply reworks Agatha Christie. After introducing his characters, Tarantino launched the film by skipping over the first half of the Inciting Incident—the botched heist—and cut immediately to the second half—the getaway. With one of the thieves wounded in the backseat of the getaway car we instantly realize the robbery has gone bad and our curiosity runs into the past and future. What went wrong? How will it turn out? Having created the need and desire to know both answers, whenever pace in the warehouse scenes flagged, Tarantino flashed back to the high-speed action of the heist. A simple idea, but no one had ever done it with such daring, and what could have been a less than energetic film had solid pace.

Second, do not bring in a flashback until you have created in the audience the need and desire to know.

CASABLANCA: The Act One Climax is also the Central Plot’s Inciting Incident as Ilsa suddenly reappears in Rick’s life and they share a powerful exchange of looks over Sam’s piano. There follows a scene of cocktail chat, double entendres, and subtext that hint at a
past relationship and a passion still very much alive. As Act Two opens, the audience is burning with curiosity, wondering what went on between these two in Paris. Then and only then, when the audience needs and wants to know, do the writers flash back.

We must realize that a screenplay is not a novel. Novelists can directly invade the thoughts and feelings of characters. We cannot. Novelists, therefore, can indulge the luxury of free association. We cannot. The prose writer can, if he wishes, walk a character past a shop window, have him look inside and remember his entire childhood: "He was walking through his hometown that afternoon when he glanced over at the barbershop and remembered the days when his father would take him there as a boy and he'd sit among the old-timers as they smoked cigars and talked about baseball. It was there that he first heard the word 'sex' and ever since he's unable to sleep with a woman without thinking he was hitting a home run."

Exposition in prose is relatively easy, but the camera is an X-ray machine for all things false. If we try to force exposition into a film through novel-like free associative editing or semisubliminal flutter cuts that "glimpse" a character's thoughts, it strikes us as contrived.

**DREAM SEQUENCES**

The Dream Sequence is exposition in a ball gown. Everything said above applies doubly to these usually feeble efforts to disguise information in Freudian clichés. One of the few effective uses of a dream opens Ingmar Bergman's WILD STRAWBERRIES.

**MONTAGE**

In the American use of this term, a montage is a series of rapidly cut images that radically condenses or expands time and often employs optical effects such as wipes, irises, split screens, dissolves, or other multiple images. The high energy of such sequences is used to mask their purpose: the rather mundane task of conveying information. Like the Dream Sequence, the montage
is an effort to make undramatized exposition less boring by keeping the audience's eye busy. With few exceptions, montages are a lazy attempt to substitute decorative photography and editing for dramatization and are, therefore, to be avoided.

**VOICE-OVER NARRATION**

Voice-over narration is yet another way to divulge exposition. Like the Flashback, it’s done well or ill. The test of narration is this: Ask yourself, “If I were to strip the voice-over out of my screenplay, would the story still be well told?” If the answer is yes . . . keep it in. Generally, the principle “Less is more” applies: the more economical the technique, the more impact it has. Therefore, anything that can be cut should be cut. There are, however, exceptions. If narration can be removed and the story still stands on its feet well told, then you’ve probably used narration for the only good reason—as counterpoint.

Counterpoint narration is Woody Allen’s great gift. If we were to cut the voice-over from HANNAH AND HER SISTERS or HUSBANDS AND WIVES his stories would still be lucid and effective. But why would we? His narration offers wit, ironies, and insights that can’t be done any other way. Voice-over to add nonnarrative counterpoint can be delightful.

Occasionally, brief telling narration, especially at the opening or during transitions between acts, such as in BARRY LYNDON, is inoffensive, but the trend toward using telling narration throughout a film threatens the future of our art. More and more films by some of the finest directors from Hollywood and Europe indulge in this indolent practice. They saturate the screen with lush photography and lavish production values, then tie images together with a voice droning on the soundtrack, turning the cinema into what was once known as Classic Comic Books.

Many of us were first exposed to the works of major writers by reading Classic Comics, novels in cartoon images with captions that told the story. That’s fine for children, but it’s not cinema. The art of cinema connects Image A via editing, camera, or lens
movement with Image B, and the effect is meanings C, D, and E, 
expressed without explanation. Recently, film after film slides a 
steady-cam through rooms and corridors, up and down streets, 
panning sets and cast while a narrator talks, talks, talks voice-
over, telling us about a character’s upbringing, or his dreams and 
fears, or explaining the politics of the story’s society—until the 
film becomes little more than multimillion-dollar books-on-tape, 
illustrated.

It takes little talent and less effort to fill a soundtrack with 
explanation. “Show, don’t tell” is a call for artistry and discipline, a 
warning to us not to give in to laziness but to set creative limitations 
that demand the fullest use of imagination and sweat. Dramatizing 
every turn into a natural, seamless flow of scenes is hard work, but 
when we allow ourselves the comfort of “on the nose” narration we 
gut our creativity, eliminate the audience’s curiosity, and destroy 
narrative drive.

More importantly, “Show, don’t tell” means respect the intelli-
gence and sensitivity of your audience. Invite them to bring their 
best selves to the ritual, to watch, think, feel, and draw their own 
conclusions. Do not put them on your knee as if they were children 
and “explain” life, for the misuse and overuse of narration is not 
only slack, it’s patronizing. And if the trend toward it continues, 
cinema will degrade into adulterated novels and our art will shrivel.

To study the skillful design of exposition, I suggest a close 
analysis of JFK. Obtain Oliver Stone’s screenplay and/or the video 
and break the film down, scene by scene, listing all the facts, indis-
putable or alleged, it contains. Then note how Stone splintered this 
Mount Everest of information into its vital pieces, dramatized each 
bit, pacing the progression of revelations. It is a masterpiece of 
craftsmanship.