

How to

show and don't tell

when writing essays

The perennial advice for writers, especially novelists and essayists, is to show, don't tell. But what exactly does that mean?

It means to present your story or essay with specific examples, details, and illustrations, and not just with long-winded explanations. In fiction, it means using sharp dialogue and good scene setting. For personal essayists, it means getting personal in effective ways –using real details from actual experiences to convey deeper or more universal points.

This is easy advice to give, but hard advice to follow. The big humanities questions are almost always obvious. What is justice? What defines the good life? How should we learn? These and other questions have fascinated readers in every era. The challenge is finding (and arranging) personal experiences in a form that can help shed light on these issues.

It's usually best to start small. Readers need to feel they are part of a vivid, almost immersive experience. That's the only way it will seem real to them, and yet that's very hard to convey with a big, sprawling story. Keeping it real means keeping it small, or at least focused.

Then essayists need to think about –no, actually obsess about-- the rhythm of their narrative. The structure of a good personal essay is flexible, but the attention span of any audience is short. Essayists have to grab readers at the outset, somehow hold their attention while building interest, and then find a way to close the piece with a sense of insight. That is all very difficult to achieve, but it's a memorable accomplishment when it's done well.