Writing Techniques: Show, Don't Tell

Monday, April 3, 2017 • 6:30-8:30 p.m.

Marvin Auditorium 101B

Using the story “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway, Professor of English Literature Anthony Funari will teach writers to “show” rather than just “tell” important details to readers. Learn to analyze from a writer’s perspective and improve your writing. Sponsored by the Kansas Humanities Council.

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“One don’t say the old lady screamed. Bring her on and let her scream.” -- Mark Twain

Background on Ernest Hemingway

We associate Hemingway with many things.

- Ex pats came into existence during Prohibition. You can actually go to Paris and have a drink.
- We associate Hemingway with bullfighting, Death in the Afternoon. One last place a person can actually face death.
- We associate Hemingway with Cuba. To Have and to Have Not.
- We associate him with safari in Africa. The Snows on Kilamanjaro.
- We think of him as a big game fisherman. The Old Man and the Sea.

The place we don’t think about Hemingway is Kansas in the 1910s.

- Believe it or not, Kansas is where Hemingway gets his start as a writer, where he was first published.
- As a KC Star cub reporter at age 19, Hemingway was the lowest paid writer on their staff for 6 months.
- We think of his style in certain terms— masculine, terse, short sentences. We don’t usually think of it as a newspaper style.
- “If I start to write elaborately, or like someone introducing or presenting something, I found that I could cut away that scrollwork or throw it away and start with the first true simple declarative sentence.” Hemingway.
- His time at the KC Star was very influential in Hemingway’s style.
Handout: The Star Copy Style from Hemingway’s time.


- “Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English.”
- This first few lines informed Hemingway’s understanding of how to write. It was the best rules of how to write.
- We can see the origins of his style in the rules he followed as a cub report.
- Hemingway describes his writing in an interview he gave to George Plimpton back in 1958, two years before he would commit suicide.
- "If it is any use to know it, I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that does" 
- Hemingway writes on the principle of omission. It’s about what’s left out, what can be inferred. It’s about subtext.

It’s distilling the story down to the essence. The writer has to be an incredibly keen observer of detail.

In a baseball game, the final score is incidental. The key detail to remember is that at the end of the ninth inning, the left outfielder threw down his glove and walked away.

Hills Like White Elephants

Handout: the story Hills Like White Elephants by Ernest Hemingway.


Exercise: Listen as the story is read aloud.

Exercise: What was it like reading this story for the first time? (jot down your thoughts)
Interactive Discussion of Show Don’t Tell and Hills Like White Elephants

- Hearing it read out loud was helpful to slow down the story and not skim the dialogue.
- Didn’t feel like a story, felt like a conversation that was part of a story. No plot, no resolution to a plot.
- Don’t know enough about the characters to decide of I like them or not. And I wanted to edit it.
- I could picture it in my mind and I was intrigued by the dialogue.
- One person who shared didn’t know what the man wanted her to do.
- In a train station, you would overhear their conversation, you are eavesdropping, you look for the details.
- When you hear a conversation like that you try to piece it together to see what it is.
- The story felt stunted, I was clumping along the road with these people.
- Comparison to Napoleon Dynamite, waiting for it to start and then it’s over and you have to figure out what just happened and what you missed.
- This is just a little bit of the conversation.
- Hemingway is a master of capturing people talking about cross purposes.
- I saw that they were at a pivotal moment, there is a lot of weight to this moment. Something turns. This is set in a crossroads, a train station. The heat of the environment, heat of the moment, heat of the decision.
- Unbalanced from the beginning – the American and the girl.
- You could picture the scene but not in detail. You could see the characters and the setting. Like a one act play.

Further Discussion of Show, Don’t Tell: What ARE we given, and what is left out

- We aren’t given anything about what they physically feel. No interiority. Their state of mind, they psychological stuff. He leaves it out, but hints at it.
- He takes that in, in the conversations. He goes to show don’t tell.
- After the initial layout of the scenery, he withdrew from descriptions and then all of the sudden, props just appeared in the story. He left it open for our imagination to fill in, based on the information we were given initially. He is great at giving us the key details. The details are there, to help tell the rest of the story.
- It’s never actually said the nature of their relationship. We have to look at the clues that are given.
- No resolution. Just a snapshot of just that few minutes before the next train comes. A short scene without resolution. Hinted, but not explicitly told.
- No exposition, no interiority given to the characters, no lead up to the context of their conversation.
- A Clue: Labels from all the hotels where they spent nights. The detail doesn’t make it clear if they live together usually or if they are sneaking, traveling together, it may suggest a more transient nature of their relationship.
Discussing Show, Don’t Tell: The operation

- Let’s talk about the elephant in the room. Who gets to have the operation? They are both anxious, traveling to have an operation, it’s optional, it’s only her. They are talking about terminating a pregnancy.
- Why doesn’t Hemingway just tell us? This is published in 1927. This is very taboo. They would speak in euphemisms. You would need a big city with a “back alley”.
- Why else doesn’t he reveal what it is about?
- It keeps you reading. It draws you in. It adds an element of realism to it.
- I’m not sure this would get published today. Hemingway challenges us, and he is a challenge to read. Especially when it comes to short stories. Easy to consume and I’m done. But the art of writing a great short story is that it has to be read over and over again to dig out the layers.
- Do we not really know the resolution?
- People shared some ideas for the resolution from their own interpretations.

Exercise: Two volunteers came up to read, starting with page 2 “The girl did not say anything.” through “You know how I get when I worry.” The audience discussed the scene and tried to give them stage directions and suggestions for how to perform the lines, what to emphasize and what meaning to try to give the words when spoken.

Suggestions for reading and interpretation of those lines:

- The American wants to convince her passively that it’s her idea
- Jig is manipulating him, making him suffer
- Jig is childlike, she wants love, forever, security, permanence. Back to the way it was and always be that way. She wants some guarantees to their previous life.
- Does she really want it to go back to the way it was? Maybe that lifestyle wasn’t as satisfying as he claims.
- He’s very manipulative, he’s trying to convince her that she wants this too. The American’s motivation is “I want you to agree to this, I need to alleviate my guilt.”
- Notice that he is the one that speaks Spanish, that there is an unequal power distribution.
- He is childish because he isn’t content enough to get what he wants, he needs her to have to want it too.
- “I think she’s over him.”
- The drinking is also a clue, used as an anesthesia, (Fetal Alcohol Syndrome wasn’t announced until 1973)
- How should the lines be delivered? “And afterwards they were ALL so happy” delivered dripping with sarcasm.
- He uses the future tense, playing on the idea of time. “I love you now.”
- Hemingway doesn’t give us any exposition. He hints at the subtext. That’s what makes it so masterful.
Discussing Show, Don’t Tell: Let’s focus on the question of Jig and how we need to understand her. Who’s story is this?

- She’s the only one I care about at the end. She holds the power. She is in control in this limited situation. She tells him when to stop talking. She uses the sarcasm to her advantage. She has some power here.
- The title is Hills Like White Elephants, she is the creative person, the one who adds something that isn’t straight back and forth.
- White Elephant – some context for that reference: if you angered the King in South East Asian culture, where the white elephant is incredibly sacred, and you are given a white elephant as a gift, you have to take care of it, and it might bankrupt you. It’s a sacred gift that might ruin your life.
- Three white elephants in this story—her stomach/she’s showing her pregnancy, the hills, and her mentioning the white elephant legend.
- One interpretation: It’s a white elephant but it’s a red herring. It’s not the pregnancy but it’s the fact that they have a relationship that is great for him but not great for her.
- And the elephant in the room also may have been a reference. (Elephant in the room or Elephant in the living room is an English metaphorical idiom for an obvious problem or risk no one wants to discuss, or a condition of groupthink no one wants to challenge. The phrase may have been in use in 1927. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elephant_in_the_room](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elephant_in_the_room))
- Her name bothers me. And the name doesn’t seem that affectionate. Is it a nickname? But she is the only one that gets a name. Is it an offensive name? Or childlike?
- We think of Hemingway as a male-centric writer. He has male characters and his female characters are considered weak or emasculating. But with this story, Jig is different. I’ve personally always read this as Jig being powerful, that this is her story. She is the only one who goes through change. She isn’t the same person as she was at the beginning of the conversation.
- Her final line is “There’s nothing wrong with me. I feel fine.”
- Do you read this as an evidence of change? We don’t know if she is going to go through with it. There is a signal that she has grown that she has gone through something. That this relationship is over. She’s seen him for what he is. He sees that she wants something different.
- He is the American in a foreign country. In Spain, it’s just one more foreigner being a jerk and the barmaid knows it and has it all figured out. Noticing the age difference, younger female companion.
- This is an indictment of the bad behavior of Americans in foreign countries.
- “Are you calm now?” but now at the end, “I feel fine.”
- Jig is not American and doesn’t speak Spanish – is she French?
- Symbolism of her looking to the fertile side, there is more to this environment that what’s on the page here. A beautiful fertile world.
- All these moments of breakdown in communication. He doesn’t get what she’s trying to communicate. They keep talking at cross purposes.
Discussion of Show, Don’t Tell: How does Hemingway do this?

- He rewrites and rewrites and rewrites.
- I know people think of him as a lush and on safari, but he was actually an incredibly disciplined writer. Got up at 5am and write until noon everyday. He edited a lot of his work down. He cut out a lot.
- As writers, we give the readers too much. Because we are thinking they need it and won’t think about what we are writing more critically to figure it out.
- It’s about making it an enjoyable experience for the reader. Spoonfeeding is not as interesting. But slogging through is a challenge. Find a balance.
- This is one of my favorite stories to teach in my literature course. I always open with this story. Students don’t get it right away. Most haven’t read it when they come to class. We read it in class. When we start discussing it, we become engaged.
- It’s challenge to the reader, when you introduce them to the in depth reading.
- *There is a thing that the writers critique sites are very down on and it’s “being on the nose” – when your characters are too perfect and say just the perfect things. This recording the conversation as it would be overheard is much less “on the nose” and much more realistic.

Hemingway’s career

Hemingway had some unique experiences at the end of his career. People thought he was over the hill, and then he published Old Man and the Sea and became popular again. And then he’s on safari and then a plane crashes and his obituary is published even though he survived, and an additional resurgence of his popularity happens. Some people think this is the spark that helped him win the Novel Prize.

Exercise: Listen to Hemingway’s Nobel Prize speech

- (He isn’t able to get to receive the prize in person because he is still in the hospital.)
- Listen and/or read his speech here.  