



We'll explain "furniture"
and creating imagery in
your songs

HOW TO GUIDE SHOW DON'T TELL



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Show Don't Tell Made Easy

WHAT DOES “SHOW DON'T TELL” MEAN ANYWAY?

“Don't tell me the moon is shining: show me the glint of light on broken glass.” - Anton Chekhov

Essentially, “showing” is a picture worth a thousand words - “telling” is the thousand fact-focused words.

The primary issue with telling is that the language creates no visual for the listener – which means there's no emotion – and so – it's not engaging for the listener.

Since the goal of a songwriter is to get a listener into the song and engaged, the language has to connect with them. By using devices like adjectives, verbs, similes and metaphors you'll bring vitality and action to the lyric. Focusing on descriptive language that ties to core senses like SIGHT, SOUND, TASTE, TOUCH, SMELL and MOTION will help.

The songwriter Fred Eaglesmith has been known to say, when asked while pacing the floor during a co-write, “I'm going to get the movie.” Thinking about your songs as if you're watching a movie – not writing the script – is a great way to bring the senses into the song. Why? Because you have to do things like set the scene, complete with SIGHT, SOUND, TASTE, TOUCH, SMELL and MOTION.

A great example of an opening “scene” of a song (Verse 1) is Mary Gautier's [“Between The Daylight And The Dark”](#) – a co-write with . . . Fred Eaglesmith! This is also an exceptional rhyme pattern example.

Well, the grasses are swaying, sun's going down.

Music is playing, you're weaving through town.

Pull into the driveway, toss it in park.

You stare out of the windshield, out into the world,

It was all for the love of a wayward girl.

Who left you with a second place smile and a broken heart.

And the streetlights are starting to flicker to life.

They glow for a minute, then they get bright

Fireflies light up, circle and spark

There's nothing really that you can do.

Put your hands in your pockets, try to get through

The distance between the daylight and the dark.

[GET THE STORY MAP](#)

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Let's take a quick inventory of which sense they were able to hit on in just the first twelve lines:

SIGHT – “stare out the windshield” | “flicker to life” | “fireflies light up” | “circle and spark”

SOUND – “music is playing”

TOUCH – “put your hands in your pockets”

MOTION – “grasses are swaying” | “sun's going down” | “pull into the driveway” | “toss it in park”

Gauthier and Eaglesmith jam all the sense into this scene. So what are the devices you can employ to get the senses into your songs and deliver an emotional connection to your listener by putting them into the scene.

USING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE TO CREATE IMAGERY

We're going to use figurative language to create imagery. Imagery is the representation of one thing by another thing. It uses vivid, or “figurative” language, to represent objects, actions, or ideas. These figurative language devices are used with the intention of creating a deeper understanding of the thing being talked about by referencing objects, actions or ideas already familiar to the listener.

There are four types of figurative language:

A. [Simile](#)

Uses “like” or “as” to make a comparison between something and a known thing to amplify the characteristics of the thing being talked about – Love, loss, insecurity, brutality, etc. Notice how Joni Mitchell's simile gives the

Examples:

Nancy Griffith “Trouble In The Fields”

Baby I know we got trouble the in the fields

When the bankers swarm like locusts out there turning away our yield.

The trains roll by our silos, silver in the rain.

They leave our pockets full of nothing but our dreams and the golden grain.

Joni Mitchell “Sunny Sunday”

She dodges the light like Blanche DuBois.

B. [Metaphor](#)

Is an implied connection between two things. The two things are usually very different, with an understanding of the first being necessary to give meaning to the thing being defined. As Pat Pattison describes it: “In it's most basic form, metaphor is a collision between ideas that don't belong together. It jams them together and leaves us to struggle with the consequences.”

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There are three types:

- Expressed Identity, or an implied connection between two nouns (X is Y)
- Qualifying metaphor, is created through the qualification of a noun by an adjective; a verb by an adverb (the Y of X)
- Verbal metaphor, is created by the tension between the verb and its subject/object (X's Y)

Examples:

John Gorka "Night Is A Woman"

Night is a woman who embraces me – (X is Y)

OR

The frailty of night (The Y of X)

Night's frailty (X's Y)

A Thousand Horses "Smoke"

The whole song is a metaphor. The "Smoke" is used symbolically to represent something else – all the way through the song. This is extremely difficult to do.

C. Allusion

Is an indirect reference of limited length to a person, place, thing or idea of historical, cultural, literary or political significance. It does not describe in detail the person or thing it is referring to – it simply suggests it.

Examples:

Cody Johnson "With You I Am"

"I ain't no Patrick Swayze, my old boots have never danced on air."

Taylor Swift "Love Song"

"You were Romeo, you were throwing pebbles, and my Daddy said 'Stay away from Juliet'."

Billy Joel "We didn't Start The Fire"

Over 100 in the song!

D. [Personification](#)

Personification is the endowment of inanimate objects or abstract concepts with animate or living qualities.

Examples:

Mary Chapin Carpenter "I Am A Town" – whole song!

John Gorka "Jack's Crows"

Jack's Crows are loud in the morning, critical of other birds

Tim McGraw "Highway Don't Care" – title!

Sting "Fields Of Gold"

You'll forget the sun in his jealous sky

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CAN YOU MATCH THEM?

Match the "Telling" lyrics on the left with the "Showing" version on the right. Answers below.

TELL	SHOW
a. I'm at the breakfast table, listening to the radio	a. She dodges the light like Blanche DuBois
b. You pull up in your car, and the dogs are running around	b. Pulling on the apron strings looking up
c. I didn't find you for quite some time, but you and me were right in line	c. Sittin' in the kitchen, a house in Macon, Loretta's singing on the radio
d. We stumbled drunk down the hall of the hotel	d. Crankin' up a little gold heartbreak
e. When a big guy that looked awful mean	e. All the leaves are brown, and the sky is grey./ I've been for a walk on a winter's day
f. Holding onto my mother's apron, looking up at her	f. And I found you like a melody,/ You were singing in the same key as me
g. I want you to remember my kiss and know, it'll be long and slow – something that lasts forever	g. When a mountain of a man with a "born to kill" tattoo
h. She's fragile and hides in the dark	h. Wreckin' ball dancin' down the hallway
i. I'm listenin' to some classic sad songs on the radio	i. I wanna kiss you – slow as the Mississippi,/ strong as a fifth of whiskey, steady as a Tom Petty track
j. I went for a walk on a cold and dreary day. It was depressing as I made my way	j. Shiny little beamer with the rag top down,/ Dogs were all barkin' and waggin' around

Answers: TELL Letter = SHOW Letter

a = c "Car Wheels On A Gravel Road" – Lucinda Williams

b = j "Big Green Tractor" – Jason Aldean

c = f "One Man Band" – Old Dominion

d = h "Sangria" – Blake Shelton

e = g "What Was I Thinkin'" – Dierks Bentley

f = b "Bethlehem" – Paula Cole

g = i "Love You Like That" – Canaan Smith

h = a "Turbulent Indigo" – Joni Mitchell

i = d "Neon Sign" – Blake Shelton

j = e "California Dreaming" – Mamas & The Papas

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HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY & CHANGE “TELLING”?

For our examples, we'll use “What Was I Thinkin'” – Songwriters: Brett Beavers, Dierks Bentley, Deric Ruttan

Remember, done well, “showing” puts the listener right in the song. Who can't picture Bo Duke sliding across a hood? The simile brings in a visual with the excitement of why it happened. A great visual that saved the writers words, is very universal (conversational) and hyped the emotion they were after in the song.

How Do You Know When You're Telling?

The story might be chronological and very logical, but it lacks emotion. It leaves the listener out of the story and makes it hard for them to connect to something.

How Do You Fix It? *Go back and dig into your story!*

After you've written a scene, consider some basic detail questions. Drill down into the scene and pick some spots to focus on that really support the characters or main song idea:

Step 1 : Underline everything that just sounds flat or you think you could say better – i.e., in a more interesting way by using a better verb, a simile, a metaphor or different imagery (figurative language).

When a guy at the bar got into our space, and
Tried to cut in, I punched him in the face.
We ran to the car, jumped in and escaped.

Step 2: **Now rewrite it!** *(Example in fake songwriters head)*

Since escaping is the excitement of the moment, I'm not going to say it – I'll show it better! Eureka! So how come it's scary? Well, the guy he punched is some huge cowboy or biker at the honky tonk and he is TICKED! OK – how do I say that without writing down what I just said? Hmmm . . . he's big – a really big biker guy . . . he probably has tattoos – Mom, Jennifer, born to ride . . . scarier . . . born to kill! Perfect! Now what's another way to say a big guy – big man, giant dude, big as a mountain . . . mountain of a man! Dang – I really can write a great song!!

Using Verbs, Metaphors & Similes To Up The Scene

The next page shows the lyrics of Dierks Bentley's “What Was I Thinkin'” with some added highlighting. I've highlighted some of the best language that moves the story forward in an exciting way: the verbs in green, similes are underlined, and other figurative language in yellow to illustrate how much songwriting device was used to craft this song.

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“What Was I Thinkin’” Lyrics

VERSE

Becky was a beauty from south Alabama
Her Daddy had a heart like a nine-pound hammer
Think he even did a little time in the slammer
What was I thinkin'
She snuck out one night and met me by the front gate
Her Daddy came out wavin' that twelve gauge
We tore out the drive he peppered my tailgate
What was I thinkin'

PRE-CHORUS

Oh, I knew there'd be hell to pay
But that crossed my mind a little too late
'Cause I was

CHORUS

Thinkin' 'bout a little white tank top
Sittin' right there in the middle by me
I was thinkin' bout a long kiss - man just gotta get
Goin' where the night might lead.
I know what I was feelin' - but what was I thinkin'
What was I thinkin'

VERSE

By the county line the cops were nippin' on our heels.
Pulled off the road and kicked it in four-wheel.
Shut off the lights and tore through a corn field.
What was I thinkin'
Out the other side she was hollerin' faster.
Took a dirt road had the radio blastin'.
Hit the honky-tonk for a little close dancin'.
What was I thinkin'

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PRE-CHORUS

Oh, I knew there'd be hell to pay
But that crossed my mind a little too late
'Cause I was

CHORUS

Thinkin 'bout a little white tank top
Sittin' right there in the middle by me
I was thinkin' bout a long kiss - man just gotta get
Goin' where the night might lead.
I know what I was feelin' - but what was I thinkin'
What was I thinkin'

VERSE

When a **mountain of a man** with a **"born to kill" tattoo**
Tried to cut in I **knocked** out his front tooth
We ran outside **hood-slidin'** like Bo Duke
What was I thinkin'
I finally got her home at a **half past too late**
Her Daddy's in a lawn chair sittin' on the driveway
Put it in park as he **started my way**
What was I thinkin'
Oh what was I thinkin'
Oh what was I thinkin'

BRIDGE

Then she gave a come-and-get-me grin
And like a bullet we were gone again
'Cause I was

CHORUS

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SONGWRITING EXERCISE: FIND THE ALLUSIONS AROUND YOU

Spend the weekend looking for allusions!

STEP 1: Make sure you've always got something to write on or talk into to capture those you find.

STEP 2: Select five places to go that are extremely different.

You'll want to select places where you can either see things you can use for an allusion (e.g., objects, billboards, signs) or overhear things (e.g., conversations, music) that might be used as an allusion.

STEP 3: Write down what resonates with you. Be sure to include what it made you think of and the emotion felt.

For example, if you're at the zoo and see a red balloon floating across the sky and it reminds you of the French film "Red Balloon" write the image and the reference down. If seeing a red balloon in the sky makes you feel hopeful, note it. How does it usually make others feel? A good thing to find out if the image is a bit obscure.

STEP 4: Now choose one and use it in a song.

You can write a new song or replace some flat imagery in a song you've already written.

STEP 5: Are there other songs you have that could use some imagery help?

Circle those lines and note them. Choose one to replace. When you've done that, go to the next one. This is a great way to make your older songs stronger and maybe rewrite song ideas to create better songs.

RESOURCES

[Between The Daylight And The Dark Story Map](http://songchops.com/2018/08/mary-gauthier-between-the-daylight-and-the-dark/)

<http://songchops.com/2018/08/mary-gauthier-between-the-daylight-and-the-dark/>

[Lyric Basics: What's A Simile?](http://songchops.com/2017/02/lyric-basics-whats-a-simile/)

<http://songchops.com/2017/02/lyric-basics-whats-a-simile/>

[Creating Effective Similes In Songs](http://songchops.com/2017/02/similes-in-songs/)

<http://songchops.com/2017/02/similes-in-songs/>

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[Daily Creator Worksheet: Simile Generator](#)

<http://songchops.com/library/worksheet-simile-generator-songchops.pdf>

[Lyric Basics: What's A Metaphor?](#)

<http://songchops.com/2016/11/lyric-basics-whats-a-metaphor/>

[Lyrics Basics: What Is Allusion?](#)

<http://songchops.com/2017/04/allusion-what-is-it/>

[Songs Using Allusion: Joel To Swift](#)

<http://songchops.com/2017/04/songs-using-allusion-billy-joel-taylor-swift/>

[Personification In Songs](#)

<http://songchops.com/2014/11/personification-songs/>

[5 Personification Songs You Need To Know](#)

<http://songchops.com/2015/06/5-personification-songs/>

[Personification In A Song: "I Am A Town"](#)

<http://songchops.com/2015/04/personification-in-a-song-i-am-a-town/>

[Songwriting Exercise: Verb Power](#)

<http://songchops.com/2013/12/songwriting-exercise-verb-power/>

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