



THE 'SHOW,

DON'T TELL'

FORMULA

Elevate your writing craft by using **REACTION PROGRESSIONS** to show how (and why!) your characters feel, think, and act.



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GUIDE OVERVIEW

the 'show, don't tell' formula

We've all heard the saying, "Walk a mile in their shoes." It's supposed to evoke empathy, right? But what good is slipping into someone's shoes really going to do for you? What if you could live in their skin, feel their emotions, and see the world through their eyes?

Good news: You can!

When we read, watch, or listen to engaging stories we are *living* someone else's reality. Our brain is actually firing as if we *are* them. It's why people make the weirdest faces in movie theaters, under the spell of a good narrative. In *Storytelling Animals*, Jonathan Gottschall explains it as, "Your brain looks less like a spectator on the action than it does a participant... If the scene is sad, your brain looks sad too."

Think about your favorite books and movies, how you've used them to escape reality, how it's worked so well you've lost yourself. It's magical, right?

As writers, this is the effect we want to have on our readers. Of course, that's way easier said than done. Writing prose that deeply engages readers in is *difficult*. Fortunately, there's a secret formula!

In this guide, you'll master REACTION PROGRESSIONS, a four part formula that will help you hook and hold your readers —with tips and tricks for how to manipulate the formula to 'show' your story more effectively and deepen the impact of your prose.

These are the keys to writing that grabs readers and peaks agent interest. These are the hallmarks of the best writers and they're worth studying and practicing over and over. As you write, work to put your reactions in order, work to make them layered and full of meaning, and in time your writing will shine.

ABOUT US



Golden May Editing developed this guide as one of the multiple ways we help tenacious writers finish the book of their dreams. With our 1:1 [STORY MAGIC](#) book coaching, you'll unlock your writing genius with a pro at your side. In our [TENACIOUS WRITING](#) program, you'll find every resource you need on your writing journey, forever.

THE FORMULA

the secret to great writing

In real life there is a chain of reactions that occurs when we process external stimuli. First we react instinctively, usually in our body. Then, we mentally process what's happened, before finally choosing to react externally in some way. To effectively sink your readers into your character's reality, you need to replicate this progression *on the page* for your characters.

Reaction Progression

Story Stimulus → *ie. external trigger or internal realization*

1. **Physical Instinctive** → *ie. feeling or involuntary action*

2. **Internal Processing** → *ie. private thoughts*

3. **Physical Intentional** → *ie. conscious action or dialogue*

Here's an example from *The House in the Cerulean Sea* by TJ Klune. In it, Linus Baker has been called to speak with his bosses in Extremely Upper Management. The receptionist takes his name through a metal grate in the door:

Example

"Linus Baker. Linus Baker. Linus—" Her eyes widened. "Oh. I see. Hold on one moment please."

She slammed the metal grate down again (**stimulus**). Linus blinked (**physical instinctive**), unsure of what he was supposed to do (**internal processing**). He waited (**physical intentional**).

You won't include all three reactions to every stimulus in your story, as that would risk sensory overload and choppy rhythm. But when a character is reacting to something on the page, these reactions must happen in the correct order.

A KEY NOTE

the importance of chronology

In *Techniques of the Selling Writer*, Dwight Swain explains that emotions in writing must follow a pattern. Plot events and stimuli must trigger emotional and physical reactions in a character. He says the “secret lies in the order in which you present your material... a strict chronological order, so that one item follows another exactly as they occur in point of time.”

Why is this critical? First, if the story unfolds chronologically, it’s easier for a reader to stay in the point-of-view character’s reality. Second, as Swain puts it, “to have motivation follow reaction is to invite your reader to make his own interpretation of said reaction and, on the basis of it, then to refuse to believe the motive you assign.”

If your goal is to put your readers in the skin of a character and show them the character’s reality, then you need to show the story as it unfolds to avoid readers jumping to conclusions or getting jarred out of the scene.

See the difference?

Reactions Out of Order:

Why did Sarah have to be so unreasonable? Eva jumped when Sarah slammed the door with a growl. Instead of following, she stormed out the back.

Reactions In Order:

Sarah growled and slammed the door. Eva jumped. Why did Sarah have to be so unreasonable? Instead of following, she stormed out the back.

See how the first example above is jarring but the second reads smooth? Putting reactions in order helps us seamlessly stay in a character’s skin.



LET'S BREAK IT DOWN

how to 'show' with reaction progressions

In our introductory guide, *Master 'Show Don't Tell'*, we break down how there are three basic levels to the age-old writing rule of *Show, Don't Tell*:

1. Put us in a scene with your character
2. Show readers what plot events mean to the character
3. Use 'show' language to reveal what they perceive

Check out the
**Master 'Show, Don't
Tell'** guide here!



REACTION PROGRESSIONS are extremely useful in implementing these 'Show, Don't Tell' tricks, as you can 'show' in different ways at every beat of the formula.

Over the next few pages, we're going to break down how to 'show' using each beat of the Reaction Progression formula. As a reminder, here are the beats of a Reaction Progression:

Story Stimulus → *ie. external trigger or internal realization*

1. **Physical Instinctive** → *ie. feeling or involuntary action*
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HOW TO "SHOW"

story stimuli

This is where your external story, or your plot, lives. A story stimulus can be something someone else does, a random event or noise, dialogue, or new information. It can also occur internally as a realization a character has, which prompts a reaction in them.

How to Show with Story Stimuli:

Put us in the scene with your character! Instead of summarizing what happened to them, write as if we are in their skin as it's happening. Show us the scene in real time, with reactions sprinkled throughout.

See the difference?

Stimulus Told:

Marie ignored Kayla in class, but she heard the other girl whispering and caught her smug looks.

Stimulus Shown:

Marie gripped the straps of her backpack as she approached Ms. Chen's classroom. Kayla stood outside with her new friends, lips cocked in a knowing smirk (*stimulus*). Marie blushed (*physical instinctive*) as she shoved past them through the door (*physical intentional*). Whispers erupted behind her (*stimulus*).

Why It Works:

In the first version, we aren't with Marie in the scene. In the second one, we are her, seeing Kayla's smirk and feeling the whispers up our spine.

HOW TO "SHOW"

physical instinctive reactions

Before anything else, our bodies react instinctively. This can be emotional—*gust twisted, heart stopped, face flushed*. Or, it can be an action—*fists clenched, blinked, bit her lip*. The key is that it must be subconscious and betray what your character truly feels before their conscious brain can intercept.

How to Show with Physical Instinctive Reactions:

Put us in your character's skin! Instead of telling us the emotion a character feels, *show* us what it actually feels like to experience that emotion. As we read, our brains will signal our bodies to echo what's happening in your character's body. If you hold us at too far a distance from their skin, we'll notice.

See the difference?

Physical Instinctive Told:

I felt embarrassed (*physical instinctive*).

Physical Instinctive Shown:

I cringed, heat flaring up my neck (*physical instinctive*).

How It Works:


As readers trying to sync with this character, we don't know how to feel in the first example, but in the second one our brain immediately responds, signaling us to feel as the character does.

IMPORTANT!

Show language is critical to both Stimuli *and* Physical Instinctive Reactions. Externally, we need to see what a main character is seeing in another character's body language. Don't tell me **Bob looked horrified**, show me that **The blood drained from Bob's face as his lips parted**.

HOW TO "SHOW"

internal processing

Internal thoughts are critical to putting us in the skin of a character. Thoughts are how we see and interpret the world through their eyes. For an extensive deep dive into why this is important, check out our blog [How to Put Readers in Your Character's Skin](#). 



How to Show with Internal Processing:

Through your character's internal thought reactions to what's happening around them, you can show the reader what those plot events *mean* to the character, and therefore signal how the reader should feel about what's happening.

See the difference?

Without Internal Processing:

Bobby started laughing (*stimulus*) and my blood boiled (*physical instinctive*). I rushed forward and shoved him in the chest (*physical intentional*).

With Internal Processing:

Bobby started laughing (*stimulus*) and my blood boiled (*physical instinctive*). Isla had been sick for weeks. He *knew* that. Even if he hadn't, that didn't give him *any* right to make fun of her. I hadn't thought I could hate him any more, but apparently I'd been *wrong* (*internal processing*). I rushed forward and shoved him in the chest (*physical intentional*).

How It Works:

In the first example, we have no idea why we're shoving Bobby. You didn't know how to feel, so your brain likely superimposed meaning (as a writer, you DON'T want this!). In the second one, we know exactly how to feel.

HOW TO "SHOW"

physical intentional reactions

Last, but certainly not least, we *consciously* choose to react to stimuli. This can be through action, dialogue, or even pointed inaction.

How to Show with Physical Intentional Reactions:

It's relatively easy to show a character acting, since it's external in the story. However, the key to showing **physical intentional** reactions in a way that engages readers lies in the other beats. Use **physical instinctive** reactions and **internal processing** to ensure readers understand *why* your character is acting the way they are.

See the difference?

Physical Intentional Without Other Reactions:

Mateo waved at Avery across the parking lot (**stimulus**), but she stayed where she was (**physical intentional**).

Physical Intentional With Other Reactions:

Mateo waved at Avery across the parking lot (**stimulus**). **Her heart stumbled (physical instinctive)**. **He wanted to talk now? It had been three weeks since their fight. Surely there couldn't be anything left to say (internal processing)?** It took all her resolve to stay where she was (**physical intentional**).

How It Works:

In the first example, we get Avery's Physical Intentional reaction to the stimulus of Mateo waving, but we don't know what it means. We're left grasping for straws to understand what's going on. In the second one, however, the Physical Instinctive and Internal Processing reactions reveal exactly why Avery does what she does, and how she feels doing it—so we live her discomfort alongside her.

TAKE IT ONE STEP FURTHER

effectively using reactions

You shouldn't use all three reactions with every stimulus. So how do you choose which to include? The answer will vary from book to book. It's where voice and character lie. The key to good prose is knowing what to include and what to leave out to show a character's reality.

Trick #1 **Show dissonance between Physical Instinctive and Internal Processing.**

Humans gaslight themselves often. We love to tell ourselves we feel or think one way, when we definitely don't. You can show so much about a character in the dissonance between their instinctive reactions and what they tell themselves is happening.

Michal and Samantha snuck into the alcove, giggling quietly (*stimulus*). Chelsea's heart nearly stopped (*physical instinctive*). This had to be a mistake. There's no way Michal would do this to her; he loved her too much (*internal processing*).

Why it Works:

In the dissonance between what Chelsea feels and thinks, we can tell she's lying to herself about the reality of Michal's betrayal.

Trick #2 **Show dissonance between Internal Processing and Physical Intentional.**

Humans constantly trick one another. We rarely say exactly what we're thinking. You can show a lot about how a character views their role in the world, and what is and isn't worth confronting, by the dissonance between what they think privately and then do externally.

Mr. Hernandez was seriously asking her to do his job? (*stimulus*) Naomi just had to bide her time. The payoff would be exponential, if only she could keep control of her emotions now. It would be worth it (*internal processing*). "Yes, sir. I'd be happy to," she replied with a saccharine smile (*physical intentional*).

Why it Works:

In the dissonance between what Naomi thinks and says, we see her willingness to lie and appease in order to achieve her dreams.

Trick #3 **Leave out a reaction beat to call attention to its absence.**

Sometimes it can be fun to leave out a beat on purpose to evoke a certain impact. Perhaps a character doesn't want to face their thoughts about something. Perhaps they don't note their instinctive reaction because they don't want to admit it. Perhaps they purposefully want to mislead or redirect the reader.

"You have to do this," he pleaded, grabbing my hands. "You *have* to take your place as Queen. It's the only way to save us." (*stimulus*)

My gut twisted as I yanked my hands back (*physical instinctive*). "I don't. I gave up that role a long time ago." (*physical intentional*)

Why it Works:

Leaving out this character's *internal processing* serves two purposes: we see how she avoids confronting the responsibility thrust upon her, and we're drawn in because we want to understand why.

Trick #4 **Use Stimuli and Internal Processing to avoid infodumps and exposition.**

By showing us what things mean to a character, you can reveal world building and other information in a scene rather than in the dreaded infodump. Show us a person, a political poster, a stranger doing magic, and show us the character's thoughts about the stimulus in question. By doing so, you'll not only show us the world, but also how to feel about it.

A fireball flew past my face, singeing the hair on my temple (*stimulus*).

Was this for real? Was that actually *real magic*? There was no way. Magic was a myth, part of the stories Grandmother told me at bedtime. Yet here I was, standing in front of a woman with fire blooming out of her hands.

No, not a woman. A witch. The stories were *true* (*internal processing*).

Why it Works:

Through this character's eyes, we get a peek into the world of witches and magic without an infodump. Her thoughts show us how to feel about them and why.



SEE HOW IT WORKS

published examples

Let's break down two real life examples to look at how Reaction Progression beats can be brilliantly wielded to show layers of a story.

MUDBOUND, by Hillary Jordan

This excerpt from the opening pages of *Mudbound* shows two brothers digging a grave for their father's body. Jamie is taking a break when Henry's wife Laura comes over.

Henry was back to digging again when I saw Laura coming toward us, picking her way across the drowned fields with a bucket in each hand (**stimulus**). I fished in my pocket for my handkerchief and used it to wipe some of the mud off my face (**physical instinctive**). Vanity—that's another thing I got from my father (**internal processing**).

"Laura's coming," I said (**physical intentional**).

Why It Works:

This brief paragraph shows a lot about Jamie. First, he instinctively tries to clean up in Laura's presence, showing some level of attraction. Notably, he doesn't reveal an emotional instinctive reaction to her arrival, he just shows an instinctive action in grabbing his handkerchief. This cleverly hints that he's hiding his emotions from himself. He chides himself for vanity, showing us what he thinks of himself, and showing us his hatred for his father. Instead of heading toward Laura, he stays where he is and calls for his brother, indicating a certain level of respect for his brother's relationship.

AN EMBER IN THE ASHES, by Sabaa Tahir

This excerpt from the opening pages of *An Ember In the Ashes* shows Laia confronting her brother Darin late at night about where he's been and what he's hiding.

“Are you working for the Empire, Darin? Are you working for the Martials?”
(*physical intentional from previous*).

He is silent. I think I see the answer in his eyes (*stimulus*), and I feel ill (*physical instinctive*). My brother is a traitor to his own people? My brother is siding with the Empire?

If he hoarded grain, or sold books, or taught children to read, I'd understand. I'd be proud of him for doing the things I'm not brave enough to do. The Empire raids, jails, and kills for such “crimes,” but teaching a six-year old her letters isn't evil—not in the minds of my people, the Scholar people.

But what Darin has done is sick. It's a betrayal (*internal processing*).

“The Empire killed our parents,” I whisper. “Our sister.” (*physical intentional*)

Why It Works:

This is an excellent example of how Internal Processing can be used to world build without exposition. We learn about how oppressive the Empire is as Laia's mind whirls through the depths of her brother's betrayal. It's also an excellent weaving of character: through Laia's thoughts and actions we learn that she is timid and self-conscious. She sees herself as weak.

Lastly, this is an excellent example of *misreading*. Darin isn't actually working with the Martials, but Laia *misinterprets* the look in his eyes and prescribes meaning to it that we believe right along with her.



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