

# Episode 3 Show, don't Tell Writing Podcast

**Suzy:** [00:00:00] Welcome to Show Don't Tell Writing with me, Susie Vidori, where I teach you the tried and true secrets to writing fiction and nonfiction that will wow your readers, broken down step by step. This show explores writing techniques and shows you a glimpse behind the scenes of successful writing careers and coaches writers live on their pages so you can learn and transform your own storytelling.

Whether you're just starting out drafting, editing, or currently rewriting your first book or maybe even your 10th, this show will help you unlock the writing skills you didn't know you needed but you definitely do. We're looking forward to helping you get your amazing ideas. from your mind onto the page in an exciting way for both you and your readers so that you can achieve your wildest writing dreams while having fun doing it.

Let's dive in

**Suzy:** We have writer Wayne. He is traveling in Florida right now as he joins me for the podcast. But where are you from Wayne?

**Wayne:** We call home in Northern Virginia, actually North Central, which is a little place called Winchester, the northern tip, right up against West Virginia.

**Suzy:** Amazing. And Wayne has submitted one page for feedback today, so we're going to go through that and I'm going to live coach him today and give some tips so that everybody out there can follow along and learn as well.

Wayne, can you just tell us what this book is about that you submitted the page from? Yeah.

**Wayne:** It's about the early development of the Western US and the search for the seven cities of gold.

**Suzy:** Awesome. It sounds amazing. And it's written for adults? Like it's an adventure book written for adults?

**Wayne:** This is [00:02:00] actually based on actual events over 40 years.

A 400 year period, uh, with an early sequence, uh, and a following sequence 300 years later that are related through the gold and through individual egos, uh, greed, search for gold, obsession. And it's all I love

**Suzy:** that. It sounds amazing. So historical fiction. So there's got like a dual timeline where you've got a past sequence and then a present or a future sequence.

**Wayne:** Yes. The present. Uh, it's actually Actually, recent history. So we go from the 16th century to the 19th century and most people reading will be familiar with the incidents and a number of the players.

**Suzy:** So Wayne, why are you writing this particular book at this, it's a, it's an entire book though, right? It'll be novel.

Yes. Why are you writing this particular [00:03:00] book at this moment in your life?

**Wayne:** Uh, A, because I'm retired, and B, because I'm actually from out west, from the territory that the, the book and the scenes and the events all take place. And not realizing how close I was to that history until about now when I'm digging into it and realizing I was living right on top of it.

I've been in traveling quite a bit and researching the story, recovering a number of the footsteps, and it's a good opportunity with the time I have to share this story and piece together all the pieces I've learned over the years. That are now falling into place with the rest of the stories is I find the parts of it.

**Suzy:** It's really cool. So you lived there and you, you know, you were busy working, you weren't really paying that much attention. And then when you left, you realized, Oh my gosh, I was literally sitting on a gold mine of [00:04:00] information, right?

**Wayne:** Absolutely. And the very, very footsteps of Coronado and, uh, and the history that follows.

**Suzy:** I can't wait to dive in. Historical fiction is my favorite genre to read, actually. Um, I don't write it because I don't enjoy researching myself. I like making things up. Um, my, my, you know, when I work with other writers on historical fiction and, and other, um, period, uh, pieces, as an editor, I have to do a lot of research to make sure that everything kind of hangs together.

And when I write, I just want to make things up. So, thank you, thank you for writing a genre that I really enjoy. Okay, so we're going to dive in, Wayne, and I'm going to read, um, so that everybody at home can hear the page that you sent in. My memory is a bit faulty at times, if it works at all. Many things I remember as if I were just coming in from the day.

At other times, the last few hours are a complete loss. Once in a while, I will remember events at random. [00:05:00] Other times, something will remind me of moments in details buried deep in the past. I rest now, imagining I can escape once again, one last time. Here at the home, they take quite good care of me. I can no longer walk stuck in this damn chair for whatever lies ahead.

Women here are very kind and attentive. They keep blankets on my legs. I get to enjoy sitting outside on the large shaded porch. There's room for several of us out here. Although it's getting harder, I still read. Thank you. It's about all I have left. I can't see as well as I used to. It's limited mostly to daylight hours.

Sometimes, when I read things or the recent past or people I knew, I tend to drift away for a while and become there in the story once again. Oh, forgive me please. I'm told I have been rude again. I don't mean to be, but it is just that I am forgetful. Please allow me to introduce myself, Mitchell Steelman [00:06:00] Pace.

Most of my family is long gone now. In our early years, my younger siblings would call me Meech as they learned to talk. It also stuck with my parents. Thus, I became Meech at the old homestead farm. I just like that name. I've been known as Pace since I left home. Wayne, I asked you to send me a page that you thought needed some work or that you wanted some help with.

Why did you send me this page?

**Wayne:** Because I am having trouble envisioning the impact this page has on the reader. This will become the narrator for the second half of the book, uh, this particular individual. Okay, so where does this, is this,

**Suzy:** this isn't the first page of the book then, this is the first page of like part two or something?

**Wayne:** Let's call it act two or book two in the pages. And this, this is in the [00:07:00] 19th century. So this begins the life of this individual begins developing about the latter part of the 19th century, roughly the 1880s.

**Suzy:** Um, so I'm going to go ahead and open it up for questions because I couldn't tell where you were in a time and space.

So let's dive in. Awesome. We can definitely address those questions that you had. Always hear my feedback in my incredibly positive supportive voice. Um, this is actually a really great page, but there are some opportunities, as you said, you sent it in because you knew that you weren't sure how the readers were going to impact it.

So we're learning about this new character that we haven't met yet in your book. And this, you told me that this is in the 19th century. So what I would say is this first paragraph or the first two paragraphs, you've actually done some things really well. So in terms of grounding us in story present.

Right. So what we want is when we are sort [00:08:00] of jumping around, you're the God of your story. So when we start a new, when we start a new scene or a new chapter, we need to ground your reader because they trust you. And literally you've got this dual timeline. You've got multiple points of view that you're telling this story from.

You've got all these different characters, so you can jump us 300 years in time, and so you got to tell us where we are, um, or we won't know. And you know what happens, it's kind of this weird thing, the human brain actually pictures white. Is the default, right? Like a white room, a white wall. They call it white room syndrome.

So if you don't tell me where I am, then I kind of picture this nothing. And then your characters float. Now that is the problem here because you've done a couple of things. You've got some setting details. We know that they're in, uh, I thought a retirement home. Um, but if we're in the 18th century, it's probably something different.

And there's nothing here that told me that I was in the 18th century, which is a problem. Right. [00:09:00] That's

**Wayne:** wonderful. Yes.

**Suzy:** Yeah, there's things that you can do. Even you've got, you know, blankets, they keep the crocheted blank. Like you could, you could do something that was period specific. You could do something here.

Right. And we've got a wheelchair, um, this damn chair you could say made of. Wooden chair or it's like there's a lot of things that you could do without adding a ton. Make each of those details do so much more work Wayne, right?

**Wayne:** I envisioned this as the beginning page in the book number two leaping 300 years into a new act a new book and and this is the character born in 1880 and this You Discussion begins in about 1937.

**Suzy:** Okay,

**Wayne:** so he is in his approaching 60 or or 60 years of age or whatever in a retirement setting, and you're right about the [00:10:00] setting it envisioned as a retirement. So that

**Suzy:** 1937, give us something on this first page, preferably in the first two paragraphs. Mm-Hmm. gonna make it challenging. That sets us in the thirties.

Right? Something. I don't know what. Um, put something there because we know you did some things really well in these opening paragraphs. You've got two pieces of grounding. We know whose head we're in. So we know, we don't know the character's name yet, but that comes. Um, but we know whose character, like that we're in this retirement home.

We kind of, it's clear who's telling that story. So you know, the point of view and you know, where they are. Um, Um, what was missing and, and you can see here in the comments also wanting to know here, where are we in time and space? So that piece was missing for me. So if the answer is 1937, I mean, you can do a few things.

Some people, especially if you've got dual timelines and things, you're going to probably put that in your, um, chapter headings, you're going to give us [00:11:00] that clue. But. Assume that people don't read them or don't want to do the math on where that is, right? So you also have to ground us in that moment. So what would be specific to 1937?

**Wayne:** An automobile leaving the driveway.

**Suzy:** Yeah, right, right. Totally. Or a Model T that's way out of date, right? Like something, something. Um, or, but what would be true inside? Like what would a telephone look like at that time? Or what would the wheelchair look like at that time? Or what would be popular? Um,

**Wayne:** Yeah,

**Suzy:** or even what, what color the walls were or what the nurses were wearing or anything, right?

Like, it doesn't have to be all of these things. These are brainstorm things. Take a detail or two.

**Suzy:** You don't need to write pages of description. Unless you want to, um, for yourself, but please don't put that in your book because it'll be boring. Just give us a detail or two so that we [00:12:00] don't have to guess and we don't have to go back and do the math on where we are

**Wayne:** or the dim electric lights.

**Suzy:** Yes. Yeah. Right. Like even that sort of sepia tone that I'm picturing, when you think of the thirties, it's not a well lit hospital with fluorescent lights buzzing overhead. Right. It's something else. Um, okay, so, so that's important. Now, I was really happy to see that you grounded us in that scene, but I will say that here, when you're saying how engaged will the reader be, you've set it up like this.

You've got this guy, right, Mitchell, um, or Pace that you're calling him. You've got this guy and he's resting in his room and the rest is his thoughts. On this entire page, the rest is his thoughts. And so if you were to imagine this as a movie, or you're imagining that the reader is the character, we're like lounging around thinking, which is not as exciting, right?

So he has to tell us everything. So, [00:13:00] so it's not as exciting as going around and doing this stuff with the guy. Now, we don't want to blow this into five pages, right? So, so it's tricky. But what you could do here. Um, so what you um, just a little bit down the page here. Um, you've got there's an opportunity to be more active in this scene, and that would really help.

And so these showing details are what I usually teach and practice. Um, so you've grounded us in this moment, but the rest is in thinking. So a more active way to introduce this information would be to bring us to a specific moment in time, rather than generalizing the care that he's getting. Right. We've got some things listed, like they're pretty good to me.

The women bring me blankets and it's kind of this oftentimes or every day, instead of being a specific moment in time, if you take it to a specific moment

in time, because he's already resting in bed instead of having a resting bed, [00:14:00] or I don't even know if he's in bed. It didn't say, um, I think he's in his chair.

Excellent point.

**Wayne:** Yes.

**Suzy:** Yeah, but, but instead you could actually have it flip it to all day and kind of speed it up. You don't have to make it much longer, but all day I've imagined my escape one last time, but then you could show us a woman covering his legs and you could show that they headed outside and he sat on the porch.

You don't have to hang out there for the length of time. He can still kind of just do it for a moment. Um, but it allows you to give us some more specific details, which would, would. Help with your setting and help with that time and space thing that we need to resolve. So what we really want is for your reader to care when you have until one way to do that is to bring us into their point of view or bring us into their body to feel what does it feel like to be in 1937 in a retirement home frustrated.

Right. I do love this escape. And, and [00:15:00] so you do, one of the questions that, um, you need to establish pretty early on with a brand new character is actually what do they want? Um, it's a question that my clients are always like, Oh my gosh, I know you're going to ask me this. And they sometimes put it in their own margins.

Um, I know I haven't answered this yet. I'm figuring it out. What does he want? So you actually did answer it a little bit or at least tease to the fact that he wants to get out one last time. Um, so in the fall, I mean, this is only one page. You can't fit everything into one page. I challenge you to fit a lot into a page.

Um, but. I would be watching, you know, on page two or three of the scene, I would want more detail pretty quickly about what this escape plan is, because I want to track it. I want to know what does he want, and the reason I want to know that is because I want to know if he's doing good or not. Right? It gives him stuff to do, gives him agency.

So instead, you know, when he's sitting on the porch, maybe he's looking at that, you know, sedan that's going by. Right. And [00:16:00] he's planning to hitch a ride, you know, I could, I can hitch my, I don't know what your character

might do, but I could hitch my wheelchair up there and he could pull me along. Right. Um, but I don't know if he would do that.

And sometimes when I say something and you're like, yeah, that's awesome. Take it. But if you're like, he would never do that, then it actually answers a question for you. And maybe, you know, he would never do that, but what, what might he do?

**Wayne:** Yeah. What would

**Suzy:** he do? Does that make sense? So this whole scene, I would suggest to try to make it more active without making it longer.

And that's tricky, right? Um, so I've got a few things here. You do have some really great pieces or moments, especially if this is a character that's just being introduced where you make their voice very distinct. Right. I can no longer walk. I'm stuck in this damn chair for whatever lies ahead. Right. Like you're doing a good job of leaning into that.

And that's a confidence that will serve you well through the entire book. It shows like it's a [00:17:00] skill to learn that, um, to be able to lean into that and to be able to give that character voice. You did a great job there. Thank you. Um, so speaking of that, when you are deepening his point of view and establishing who he is as a character, there's a lot of ways that you can do this, and there is an opportunity to do it even more.

Right? So for instance, Um, you have a sentence here that says, I get to enjoy sitting outside on the large shaded porch. There is room for several of us out here. So that's fine, and it's very serviceable. But if you are to give him a personality, what would he, I would love for you to name us. You can change that word, us, which is very generic.

And you can make it something else which will actually deepen your character, right? So would he say, and I didn't know the time frame so this probably doesn't make sense, but there are several of us old fogies out here, right, which show that he's funny and [00:18:00] flippant. There are several of us discarded out here might say that he doesn't feel connected to society.

There are several of us patients out here means that they view, he views himself as dependent. There Or in need of care, right? So the choice of words everywhere when you're using point of view, especially when you're establishing multiple points of view and multiple characters, the choice of

words when you're using something generic, you can almost always use something stronger to count.

And then you don't have to have a whole paragraph on the fact that he, you know, pokes fun at his age, or that he. It doesn't feel useful in society. You've got it with one word. So that's what using those details and getting really specific can really help. So for instance, I still read, I'd love a detail.

What does he read? Because each detail that you use can start to show us who your character is. Right. It could all, that could [00:19:00] also help the timeframe, the newest blah, blah, blah novel, whoever the amazing fancy person was in 1937, right? Whoever that writer is, that, that is important. Look at the bestseller list.

Um, or maybe he's reading popular mechanics or maybe he's reading, I don't know, the, the farmer's almanac because he likes the jokes. What, what would he be reading in 1937? Again, he's reading, Oops. It's not that you have to share everything, um, and you don't have to implement every suggestion that I have, but if you implement one or two of them on this page, then you don't have to say the year was 1937, right?

Um, and I was in a retirement home. You can do it more interestingly. So here's another one. I can't see as well as I used to. It is limited mostly to daylight hours. So again, name, quote unquote, it, right? Instead of being generic about it, frame it from, name it and frame it, right? Frame it from the character's point of view.

Um, so. My escape [00:20:00] into books is limited mostly into daylight hours or my enlightenment times if he's just studying like I don't know what he thinks that time is. So wherever. Yeah, and it's, there's nothing wrong with it. I'm just looking for. I mean, you could send me a surprise winning novel and I would probably brainstorm ways to make it stronger.

So, um, so here and then I love that. Um, he breaks the third wall, right? And he speaks directly to the reader. So this is interesting. I didn't know when I went through this page that you had multiple points of view. Do all the, all the characters do this?

**Wayne:** No, this, this is a unique character for the book.

**Suzy:** Okay. So he's the only one that speaks to the audience. Yeah, I'm imagining like Ferris Bueller's day off when he's like, Hey, little did he know,

right? Um, and that's what, that's what it's about. It's breaking that wall, um, breaking the third wall and talking to the audience are talking to your reader. So if it's not done, you'll have to watch because it's kind of weird.

If it's only [00:21:00] in certain sections of the book, if you use it through the whole book, it's really a cool choice, but you need to keep it fairly consistent. You might be able to do it consistently with just this guy if he was the main narrator, but if he shows up halfway through the book, that might be tricky.

Um, because if you're doing that technique, you want it to serve a purpose, right? So usually that's used to show humor or sarcasm, right? For instance. If you if they're doing something mundane, but their minds going faster and actually thinking something really off the wall. That's a great use of it.

Otherwise, um. I don't know. You'll have to, you'll have to see, uh, whether, how that fits. And then he introduces himself, which is a great way to introduce a character. However, we haven't had a lot happening in this first, um, in this first page, right?

**Suzy:** so my question is, do we actually need this information?

[00:22:00] It's backstory. Um, and if you have, how many characters do you have? Do you know how many point of view characters?

**Wayne:** Point of view characters. It is primarily going to be his narrative, his point of view through the story, but we're going to have a plethora of characters.

**Suzy:** Okay. But it's primarily his point of view, but he only shows up halfway through the story.

**Wayne:** This is a change in the century. And then the first half of the book is pretty much a setup for the entirety of the second.

**Suzy:** Okay, so you have somebody different narrating being the main character in the first part of the book, correct?

**Wayne:** Um, that is, uh, a third, what do you call it, third party narration, just telling the story of the characters.

So you've got like

**Suzy:** third, third, third person omniscient, right? Where you can [00:23:00] hear multiple? Mm

**Wayne:** hmm.

**Suzy:** And so you haven't tried to weave it together. You've got sort of one chunk and then another chunk, but there should be connections.

**Wayne:** I intend to work this, the connections in fairly quickly.

**Suzy:** Awesome. Okay. So, so my question is, I generally don't advise, I always work with writers who love making up nicknames.

Um, and so you've got this paragraph about his name. It's taking up a lot of real estate. And you have three different names. He goes by, his name is Mitchell, but they used to call him Meech, but he didn't like it, so some people call him Pace. Right? So I've got a track all of a sudden, and I'm meeting this character, and instead of giving me details about what he's all about, and what he wants, and you know, his frustrations and his desires, I'm having to remember his name three different ways.

So you need to decide, is it important enough or do you need to pull it out? And I know people get really attached to the nicknames. I I've worked on many books where [00:24:00] nicknames are important. It's part of the story. Like the fact that, you know, or somebody doesn't know who somebody, you know, they're talking about the same person, but they don't know because they call them by different names or something.

If there's a reason, then great. If there's no reason, I would say, you know, Kind of info dumping here about all his different names, what purpose does it serve and is there something else that you could put here that would be more exciting

**Wayne:** in, in this case? And lemme leap ahead. A couple hundred pages.

Yeah. Um, the, the nickname, uh, me will not be used until the last page of the book and it's gonna be a tri, gonna be a trigger for a lot of his past. Explain that. So there is a reason a lot of his past.

**Suzy:** There is a reason that we do need it. You could introduce it in a more interesting way if you have a scene later where he's, where he's, um, on the farm as a child and they're calling him [00:25:00] Meech and he's getting pissed off, right?

Um, So just a thought because this is your first introduction and so yes you need that information as a writer and sometimes we confuse that especially when we have multiple points of view we think that we need to share everything up front about your person but really we're tracking you know what they want and their change their their arc of change and just don't let information when we need it so don't stop the story to tell us a whole paragraph about his name.

Right? Um, if you can just keep going. What happens next? What happens on the next page?

**Wayne:** The next page from that, it goes into, I was born on the farm in 1876. My father took over the farm. It gives a little bit of the family history. We spoke of their

**Suzy:** moment. So in that, if you can, it's a little bit more advanced technique, but instead of having him still sitting around resting, thinking about that, drop it into a flashback, drop it into a scene break when he was growing [00:26:00] up.

Um, because again, that would allow us, instead of picturing him in the retirement home telling us about the story, it allows you to give many, many more details and feel like we're in the moment. So this might actually be, um, so the reason I asked what was next was because I'm trying to decide if this paragraph belongs here, it might.

Um, but wouldn't it be more interesting if you didn't tell us this and instead you drop into a paragraph where people are calling him a meat and he's annoyed. Um, then he would show us and then you don't have to tell us.

**Wayne:** Okay. That's show. That was illustrate. How

**Suzy:** are you feeling? That's a lot. I know. And those are the basic things.

Just, just really taking those words and seeing how specific you can be is the biggest piece. Um, show don't tell one of the biggest things that I see writers do is when you're generic or general, it's just a missed opportunity. Right. It's a missed [00:27:00] opportunity. So then you don't have to describe all of the things or tell us the year or anything like that.

If you, if you're dropping these details throughout, it's all here. Um, just those little replacements means it doesn't change the length of your story, but you're packing so much more into it. And, and really. When you're writing such a detailed and rich history and all these, like, you've got a very complicated, I

gotta hand it to you, Wayne, you've chosen a very complex construct for your book.

It's not the easiest, right? Right. But from what I'm hearing you talk about and what I'm seeing, you can do it. You can handle it. You've got the writing skill to do it. So great, because I think it will pay off. Sometimes I advise writers to keep it much simpler, because if it's done poorly, like if you've got this really convoluted construct for your, um, for your book and you, you don't kind of follow all those pieces through, it's harder and the payoff might not be there, [00:28:00] but it sounds like, you know, you're very methodical.

You have a plan. And so I'm excited to see where it goes. What's your big dream for this book when it's done?

**Wayne:** To get it published.

**Suzy:** To get it published? And how do you want to publish it? Or does it?

**Wayne:** To get the story out there. It would be just, I would just want to tell the story and put it out there. You want to tell

**Suzy:** the story because you want to start a conversation?

**Wayne:** I want people to be able to put all the pieces together that I see. Yeah. Start a conversation. I want an understanding of. The two different, the relationship of the two different eras in history and how they merge into each other so well, and it is something I've seen or that I'm perceiving because of common purpose in the two different eras

**Suzy:** of the characters that play them.

I think, you know, just speaking with you and your passion about it and how clear this idea is in your mind, you're the right [00:29:00] person to write this book. So I'm excited for you. Um, you might be the only person who can write this book, right? Because you see that connection. Um, and, but it is a very difficult concept to put into your pages.

And so the more. You know, the more you can, um, hack into it or the more you can think about it clearly, you're going to have to work on that because the first draft of that really complicated concept is probably going to be completely lost on your reader. And then you've got to go through and make sure that you've

got all of that so that they have that same experience that you want them to, right?

So they're seeing what you're seeing. So this is awesome. Um, I wish you the best of luck with this book. We're going to be here cheering you on. Please, please, please reach out and let us know how your writing journey is going along the way.

**Wayne:** Thank you so much. I'm really looking forward to working with you on this, this whole awesome project overall.[00:30:00]

**Suzy:** Thanks for tuning in to show. Don't tell writing with me, Susie Vidori. Help me continue to bring you the straight goods for that book you're writing, planning to write. Please consider subscribing to this podcast and leaving a review on Apple podcast, Spotify, or wherever you're listening. Also visit [SuzyVadori.com/newsletter](https://SuzyVadori.com/newsletter) to hop on my weekly inspired writing newsletter list to stay inspired and be the first to know about upcoming training. Front some writing courses in my community. If you're feeling brave, check the show notes and send us a page of your writing that isn't quite where you want it to be yet for our show.

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