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Document Title: Showing and Telling: The Ethnographer's Trade Secrets

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## Fall 2022 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of secondary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice; coordination/ subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it, addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

Winning entries will be deposited in a web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See [creativecommons.org](http://creativecommons.org) for more information about cc licensing. **No undergraduate student's writing will ever be published in this archive.**)

To facilitate future searching of the Institute's archive, we ask that you provide a brief descriptive abstract (about 75 words) of your document, and a short list of appropriate keywords that might not appear in the text. Examples might include terms like "rhetorical situation," "style," "citation," etc. **Any borrowings such as quotations from course texts or handbooks must be cited properly in the document itself.**

The two winning entries will receive \$350; second place winners (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due by Tuesday, January 3, 2023. No exceptions can be made.

## Fall 2022 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

~Please type or print clearly. Do **not** staple. Use paper clips only~

Instructor's name \_\_\_\_\_

Dept & Course # \_\_\_\_\_ Course title \_\_\_\_\_

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of the writing exercises, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the writing exercises in a web accessible archive and make them available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to Amanda Munson ([anm94@cornell.edu](mailto:anm94@cornell.edu)) in the Knight Institute. I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning essay upon submission of the electronic text.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Rachel Homer*

## Showing and Telling: The Ethnographer's Trade Secrets

*Read the following description of Laura and answer the following questions.*

Something about seeing Laura again feels like coming home. Her hair seems shorter than I remembered, and maybe a bit darker, too. But as soon as I hear that thick New England accent pushing through her Spain-inflected Spanish, a wave of familiarity overcomes me. Laura's first instinct, after planting a kiss on each of my cheeks, is to make sure I've eaten. She cuts my answer short—did it really matter if I'd said yes or no?—and guides me into the kitchen, where she's already been preparing a lentil stew, her grandmother's recipe, that fills the apartment with an earthy warmth. She lifts the lid to reveal a sea of vegetables, gives them an attentive stir, and then guides me to her office where I'll be sleeping. Photographs line her desk with younger, no less vibrant, images of herself with her two young (now teenage) children. She lets me alone to begin unpacking. A few moments later, she calls from the other room: "Raquelita, soup's on!"

1. Where is Laura from, and where does she live now?

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2. Where am "I" from?

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3. How old is Laura?

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4. Why does Laura offer me soup?

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*It's all in the details!* Specific details, taken from personal observation and transformed into narrative, are what make ethnographic writing tick. General descriptions of musical practices, festivals, or even people can be gleaned from any number of secondary sources. In ethnography, what matters is to **show** readers (instead of **telling** them) what is important or noteworthy about someone or something. You can do this by assessing how you make these judgments yourself. For instance:

- What about someone's mannerisms shows you something about their character?
- What about a particular type of music shows you the country where it may have originated?
- What about an event shows you something about the place where it takes place?

These types of narratives are much more engaging for a reader of ethnography. If they were looking for something more general, they could easily go to a textbook (or even Wikipedia!) instead. Your job as the ethnographer is to *show* your reader why your observations matter in the claims you try to make. Make your writing, not your reader, do the work of understanding a particular scene, community, or practice through description.

### Description and Rationale of Handout:

This worksheet introduces students to the distinctions between active and passive descriptions, which I describe here as ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ respectively, to demonstrate how writing from observation-based details, rather than conclusions drawn from these details, often makes for more engaging and effective writing. This is especially the case in ethnographic writing where observations are not only a descriptive device but are also a source and means of analysis. Although the worksheet centers ethnography and thus might be best suited for instructors and students in the social sciences, it can easily be tailored to teach descriptive writing in any discipline.

The principles that underlie this worksheet are fleshed out on the second page of the handout where I provide sample questions that prompt the writer to reflect on the observations that lead them to particular conclusions. As I describe in this section, it is the specificity and artful crafting—in short, the showing—of these observations that make ethnographic writing and descriptive writing in general enticing for the reader. Moreover, the handout is designed to encourage students to slow down the process of inference and interpretation, asking them to identify the details that lead to their conclusions. When reviewing the worksheet answers aloud, instructors should ask students to pinpoint the words or phrases that led them to their answers. Instructors might consider using this worksheet as a jumping off point to work with student writers on how to balance showing and telling in their writing (rather than *always* showing). The worksheet privileges showing, however, because this skill is likely less familiar for student writers than more passive forms of description.

### Abstract and Keywords:

This worksheet introduces students to the distinctions between active and passive descriptions, which I describe here as ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ respectively, to demonstrate how writing from observation-based details, rather than conclusions drawn from these details, often makes for more engaging and effective writing. Although the worksheet centers ethnography and thus might be best suited for instructors and students in the social sciences, it can easily be tailored to teach descriptive writing in any discipline.

Keywords: showing and telling, active and passive description, ethnography, creative writing

Sample student responses:

1. Where is Laura from, and where does she live now?

Laura is from New England, but lives in Spain

Laura is from New England, and she now lives in Spain.

2. Where am “I” from?

“I” am from New England as well

“I” is from the same place as Laura as they say it feels like coming home when seeing Laura

3. How old is Laura?

Laura is middle-aged

Mom aged? like 45?

Laura is fairly mature and middle-aged as she has two teenage children.

4. Why does Laura offer me soup?

Laura offers soup as a gesture of love and kindness.

As a motherly and welcoming gesture to make them feel more comfortable and because some people use food and feeding others as a way of showing love and caring for someone.

I am a guest at Laura’s