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# “SHOW, DON’T TELL”: HOW TO STOP RELYING ON DIALOGUE IN A SCREENPLAY

And Push The Story Forward Through Characters’  
Actions Instead Of Words





# “Show, Don’t Tell”: How To Turn a Talky Script Into a Visual One

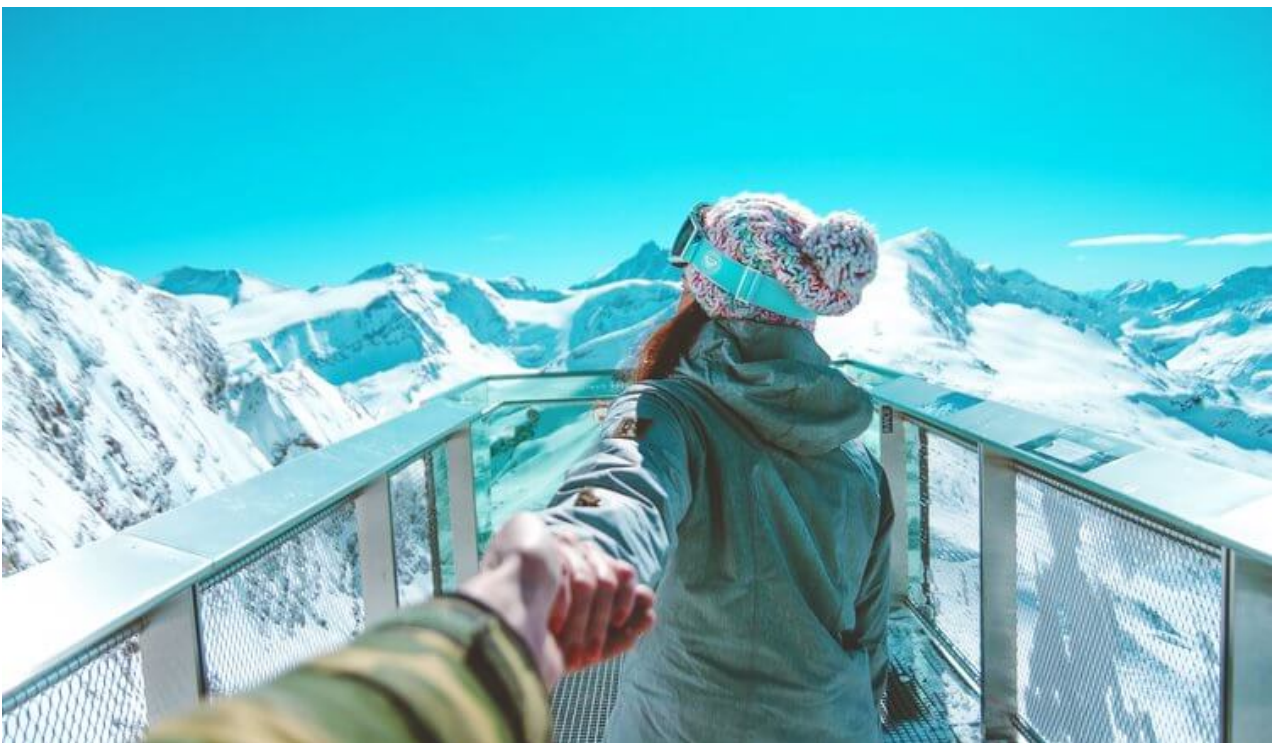
When it comes to advice on [how to write great script dialogue](#), the old chestnut “show, don’t tell” is one of the most oft-repeated out there. However, it can be deceptively hard to put it into practice.

In this post, you’ll learn how to finally master the “show, not tell” method. Here’s what we’ll be covering:

- What “show, don’t tell” really means
- “Show, not tell” examples from spec and pro screenplays
- How to perform a “show, don’t tell” audit on your own script

So let’s dive on in.

## What Does “Show, Don’t Tell” Actually Mean?



In its simplest form, “show, don’t tell” means letting your characters reveal their thoughts and emotions through images and actions rather than words.

- **The “tell” is the line of dialogue or a conversation.** The writer *tells* the audience what the characters are thinking or feeling by what they say
- **The “show” is the visual image or action that replaces it.** The writer

*shows* the audience what the characters are thinking or feeling by what they *do*

Aspiring screenwriters often spend hours honing pages and pages of dialogue, when in fact the whole conversation could be replaced by a single visual image. This is showing, not telling.

## Here are some “show, don’t tell” examples:

- Taking a character’s line of dialogue (tell) and replacing it with a look (show)
- Taking a monologue (tell) and replacing it with an action (show)
- Taking a whole conversation (tell) and replacing it with a visual scene (show)

## Okay, But What’s So Great About The “Show, Not Tell” Method?





The natural inclination among many new and aspiring screenwriters is to **let their characters talk and talk as much as they want**. This stems from the fact that when you watch a movie it can seem like this is all it is: characters talking.

However, letting characters indulge in conversations that don't need to be had results in a happy-go-lucky, conflict-free style of dialogue known as **“shooting the breeze.”** Precious screenplay real estate is wasted as characters sit around having pleasant conversations about things that don't really matter.

Not only does this almost always result in dialogue-heavy scripts, but also in conversations that feel wooden and **“on-the-nose.”** This is because attempting to move the narrative forward primarily through dialogue feels forced.

Characters end up talking a lot about how they feel, revealing information

through Q&A sessions and explaining plot developments, which feels unrealistic because it's not how people interact in real life.

This is where “show, don't tell” comes in. Once you master this method, it will be that much easier to see where to cut unnecessary dialogue and replace with visual images and actions.

And this is usually a good thing, as film is, as you know, a visual medium in which the primary way we learn about characters is through what they *do* rather than what they *say*. It's a **character's actions** that clue us in on who they are and what they want, not their words.

## Examples Of Telling Not Showing From Spec Screenplays



Now let's take a look at **two examples** from specs in which the writer has

chosen to relay information through dialogue instead of visually.

Each example is followed by some **“show, not tell” ideas** on how the writer could have approached the scene by replacing dialogue with action.

## Example #1: The Interview

INT. CLAIRE'S APARTMENT - DAY

Claire enters the apartment, a two bedroom East Village style. Tammy, 22, sits on Claire's bed reading a copy of VOGUE.

TAMMY

Hey girl.

Claire throws her bag on the bed.

TAMMY (CONT'D)

I guess I don't need to ask how it went.

CLAIRE

Sorry.

TAMMY

Gurl, it's the look. No offense but you look like a secretary.

CLAIRE

Isn't that the idea when you're looking for a job?

TAMMY

No mamacita, you gotta look like a "sexetary" and that's how you nail the job.

CLAIRE

I haven't got time to for that eye candy nonsense. I didn't sweat my arse for a degree to be someone's geisha.

## How this scene could apply the “show, not tell” method

In this scene, the writer is relying on dialogue to get across the fact that Claire didn't get the job. A better, more cinematic approach, would be to actually *show Claire at the interview* and failing miserably.

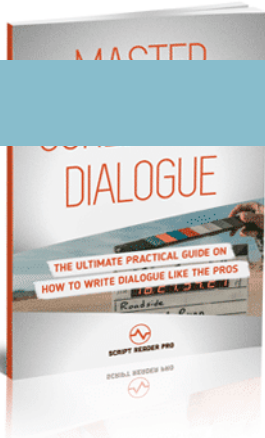
If her refusal to dress up for interviews is an issue, maybe we could see her waiting to be called in, surrounded by more dressed-up women. Maybe there could be something about the job that calls for a more extravagant dress code, but Claire's sitting there wearing the most boring clothes imaginable.

Then we could CUT TO Claire arriving home and walking straight past Tammy to her bedroom. But we'd understand why because we've *seen* why. Or maybe we see Claire in the interview and one look from the boss as she sits down says it all.

Then CUT TO a different visual **“reaction scene”**—i.e. showing us Claire's reaction to not getting the job. An obvious example could have her leave the building and scream on the busy sidewalk, making people stop and stare.

Any of these “show, don't tell” ideas would greatly improve the scene because they'd be visually showing Claire actively trying to get a job and failing. They'd show an **active protagonist** rather than a passive one. And they'd show us her reaction, rather than telling us how she's feeling.

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## Example #2: The Breakup

EXT. STANLEY HALL - DAY

Eric walks across the parking lot toward JILL, 19, standing at the steps to the entrance.

JILL

Hey, Eric.

ERIC

So... you still going up to your parent's house this weekend?

JILL

No, uh, actually me and Fernando, we're having our anniversary.

ERIC

Of course you are. I was just a rebound for you after the first time he cheated on you. Even though you didn't say that at the time. What did you say? "We're moving too fast" or something like that.

JILL

I also said I still wanted to be friends.

ERIC

Yeah, because no one ever says that during a break up.

JILL

Jesus, I can't believe I thought I could actually have a civil conversation with you. I told you I didn't want anything serious. And when we broke things off you act like I pulled the rug out from under you. I was never anything but honest. You're the one who doesn't answer my calls and you're the one who makes your roommate answer the door when I come over. You're the one who made things this way. Not me.

ERIC

Yeah, well you dumped me for your ex.

JILL

Go to hell, asshole.

She turns and walks away. Eric watches her disappear.

## How this scene could apply the "show, not tell"

## method

This scene is another great example of characters talking about things that have already happened in the past rather than showing them actually doing them in the present (or perhaps in Flashback.)

We meet Eric's ex, Jill, and learn he's still bitter about being dumped by her. A much more interesting version of this, however, using the "show, not tell" method, would actually *show him getting dumped*.

Admittedly, the "boy gets dumped" scene isn't overly original in itself, but this doesn't mean there aren't are a million different ways you can make it original. Seeing Eric get dumped by Jill would automatically **make the audience care for him** in a way they'd find harder just by hearing about it.

They actually would *see it*, and therefore *feel it*. Likewise, if the writer actually showed Eric avoiding Jill's calls and sending his roommate to answer the door, they'd get a much **better idea of his flaw** because it'd be represented visually, rather than just hearing about it.

Again, there are multiple comedic, dramatic and pathetic situations the writer could get Eric into simply by deciding to show him indulging in his flaw, rather than have him and his ex-girlfriend talk about it.

## "Show, Don't Tell" Examples From Pro Screenplays



Now let's take a look at **two “show, not tell” examples** from professional scripts in which the writer relays information through visual images rather than **film dialogue**.

This time each example is followed by some of the ways a novice writer might have approached the scene by relying on dialogue over action, to give you an idea of what not to do.

## **Example #3: La La Land**

INT. SEBASTIAN'S APARTMENT - DAY

Sebastian enters his one-bedroom apartment in the Valley. Has to jostle the door handle to open it, then jostle it again to lock it. Moseys over to a record player, pops on a Monk LP.

We look around. An old Steinway grand piano, posters on the wall: Coltrane, Armstrong, a photo of Wilshire Boulevard in the 50's. Sebastian glances inside his fridge, pulls out a carton of chicken-and-rice with a handwritten note on it: "EAT". Sits at his piano. Plays one key, then another. Slow, careful...

Then he launches into a 100%-perfect rendition of Monk's solo, playing along to the record with virtuoso precision.

He reaches one passage. Stops. Gets up, moves the record back a few bars, starts it again. Sits back down, and plays the same passage over. Dissatisfied, he stops again. Moves the record back a second time, replays the same passage. This time he gets it right.

No one else could tell the difference. But to him, it's crucial.

## Why the “show, don’t tell” method works

If Damien Chazelle had written this scene from *La La Land* while forgetting to “show, not tell,” he’d have placed Sebastian somewhere random, engaged in a conflict-free conversation with a friend.

Sebastian would talk about how he’s living in a crappy apartment in the Valley, and maybe that he gets a little lonely sometimes. And his friend might ask how his piano playing’s going and suggest he find himself a girlfriend.

Instead, Chazelle gets all of this information across *visually* by placing us with Sebastian in his one-bed apartment. When we see him struggle with the faulty lock, eat an old Chinese takeout and play a near-perfect Thelonious Monk solo, etc. this all **tells us 100x more about Sebastian** than if we’d heard about it all during a conversation.

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## Example #4: The Girl on the Train

**RACHEL'S MEMORY:** Rachel, in the Blue House, turns from the window to come face to face with a handsome man, **TOM**. They smile and laugh as Rachel grabs him. He kisses her passionately as they enjoy their empty, **NEWLY-PURCHASED HOME**.

**BACK ON THE TRAIN:** Rachel blinks: she is still looking at the blue house.

RACHEL (V.O.)  
Every day, I tell myself not to  
look.

RACHEL'S POV: NOW, in reality, a woman, **ANNA**, stands in the window holding a **BABY, EVIE**.

RACHEL (V.O.)  
But then I look...

Rachel watches as Anna becomes a tiny dot that vanishes in the distance.

WOMAN (O.S.)  
Are you alone?

Rachel looks up to see a Woman holding a one-year-old little boy.

And now the moment of truth for Rachel:

RACHEL  
(polite)  
Yeah.

She pats the seat next to her and takes her bag from it.

RACHEL  
No, come. It's all yours.

Rachel smiles at the child.

RACHEL  
Your baby's so cute.  
(to boy)  
Hi, baby.



WOMAN  
Thank you.

RACHEL  
Is it... Is it a boy?

WOMAN  
Yeah.

RACHEL  
So sweet. How...how old is he?

WOMAN  
Six months.

RACHEL  
Six months.

Rachel softly squeezes the boy's hand and giggles. The Woman begins to pick up on Rachel's slurred speech and notices two little empty vodka bottles at the mouth of Rachel's purse.

RACHEL  
So sweet.

Rachel realizes the Woman knows she is drunk. The Woman repositions her child away from Rachel.

CLOSE ON: Rachel's eyes, bleary, blink in slow motion.

Rachel, now seated alone, drinks from her squirt bottle.

## Why the “show, don’t tell” method works

If Erin Wilson had approached this scene from *The Girl On the Train* through telling rather than showing, it would likely show Rachel talking to a friend somewhere, like in a coffee shop or in her apartment.

We would hear Rachel talk about the cute baby she met on the train, and how the mom moved away when she realized she was drunk. Then the friend would advise Rachel to do something about her drinking, like go to an AA meeting, and so on.

Instead, Wilson employs the “show, don’t tell” method by visually **reinforcing one of Rachel’s flaws** (that she’s an alcoholic) by making her drunk in a public and potentially awkward situation—on a train. She is the “girl on a train” after all.

At the same time, by *showing* Rachel interact with the baby, we get a much better idea of how she yearns to be a mother, and would probably make a good one too. This is far more effective than if she'd just said "I'd like to be a mom someday," or been told by a friend "You know, you'd make a great mother."

## How To Perform a “Show, Don’t Tell” Audit On Your Script



A good way to learn how to “show, don’t tell” is to always start by thinking, **What’s the purpose of this scene?** What do I want to show the audience?

In the case of Example #1, it’s to reveal that Claire didn’t get the job. So then you could think, What’s the most interesting and visual way to show

she didn't get it?

Having her come home and talk about it with her roommate is probably the least interesting way of achieving this. So **brainstorm** and think in terms of visual scenes that will reveal information in an interesting way.

In Example #2, the writer wants to reveal to the audience the fact Eric and Jill used to date and he's still sore about it. Therefore a little brainstorming on all the different ways we could see Eric get dumped would be certain to bring up some much more interesting alternatives to hearing about it in a conversation.

Go through **every conversation** in the script and do the following:

- **Ask yourself what you're trying to reveal to the audience.** See where this information could be revealed by characters *doing things* rather than talking about them
- **Look out for instances of carefree “shooting the breeze” conversations.** In most cases, if characters are talking and there isn't much pressure being put on any of them—they're not being made to feel uncomfortable in any way and nothing much is at stake—then it generally means the dialogue can be cut in favor of a visual

Once you begin to approach scenes from a “show, don't tell” perspective instead of a dialogue perspective, a ton of possibilities arise for much more interesting scenes, and ultimately a much more interesting screenplay.

## How To “Show, Not Tell”: Conclusion



This isn't to say that you'll want to apply the "show, don't tell" rule to *every single scene*.

The movie, *The Way, Way Back*, for example, opens on a great dialogue-only scene between the teenage protagonist, Duncan, and his mean-spirited step-father, Trent. *Pulp Fiction* opens on a long conversation between inept gangsters, Pumpkin and Honey Bunny. *The Social Network* opens on an even longer conversation as Mark Zuckerberg gets dumped by his girlfriend, Erica.

In other words, it's perfectly fine to drive a scene through dialogue but, as in the above "show, not tell" examples, it should be a **stylistic choice**. The dialogue in these examples is not only first class, but it's also kept to a minimum during the rest of the film.

- **We don't go on to hear how Duncan lost his inhibitions that summer.**

We see it visually represented by moments like him breakdancing at the waterpark

- **We don't hear how crazy Pumpkin and Honey Bunny are.** We see it for ourselves when they hold up the diner

- **We don't hear how Zuckerberg still wants to be friends with Erica.** We see his desperation as he constantly refreshes his Facebook friend request to her



In other words, think of the advice to “show, don’t tell” as a **best practice**, but one that can be reversed occasionally when you really want to show off your dialogue writing chops.

We discuss the importance of both driving a scene with dialogue and of the “show, don’t tell” method in our book “**Master**

**Screenplay Dialogue: The Ultimate Practical Guide On How To Write Dialogue Like The Pros.”**

“Show, don’t tell” might be an important technique to master but, as we say in the book, learning **how to write dialogue between two characters** that jumps off the page is just as important.

###

We hope you got a lot out of our take on how to “show, don’t tell.” How do you approach scenes when you want to “show, not tell”? Do you have any other techniques you use to stop relying on dialogue in a scene? We’d



love to hear from you in the comments section below.

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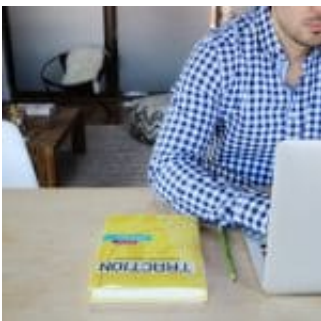
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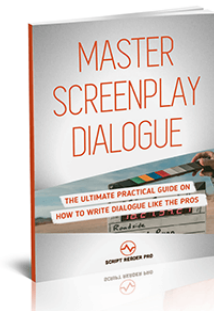
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## 8 COMMENTS

**NINA DYSON**

Good advice. I'd like to know more about show don't tell.

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**SCRIPT READER PRO**

We have a book on dialogue that goes into this in detail in case you haven't seen it:

<https://www.scriptreaderpro.com/screenplay-dialogue-book/>

[Reply](#)

**SOPHIA**

Having too much dialogue and not showing characters actions is something I really struggle with so thank you so much for this. 😊

[Reply](#)

## SCRIPT READER PRO

You're welcome, Sophia!

**Reply**

## TSIETSI MALEDI

Hi, how do I create a dialogue that shows action of character

**Reply**

## SCRIPT READER PRO

Hi Tsietsi, I'm not 100% sure what you mean. Dialogue reveals story, character, emotion etc. but actions show actions.

**Reply**

## DANIEL DAVISON

I finally understood what show don't tell actually means when it comes to screenwriting. Thanks for these great examples.

**Reply**

**JESSE**

A really good script to see the show don't tell method is a QUIET PLACE. This screenplay brings the show don't tell approach to the next level.

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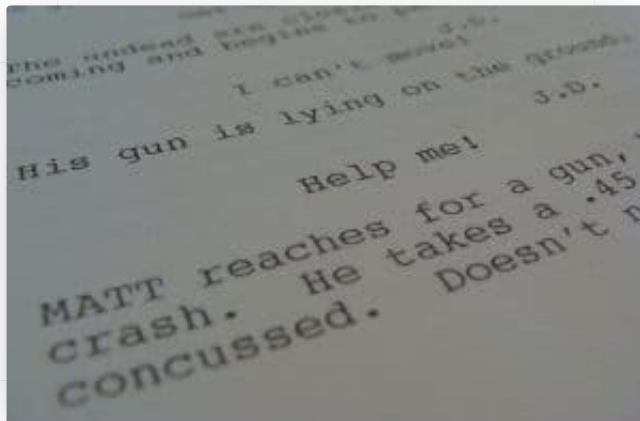
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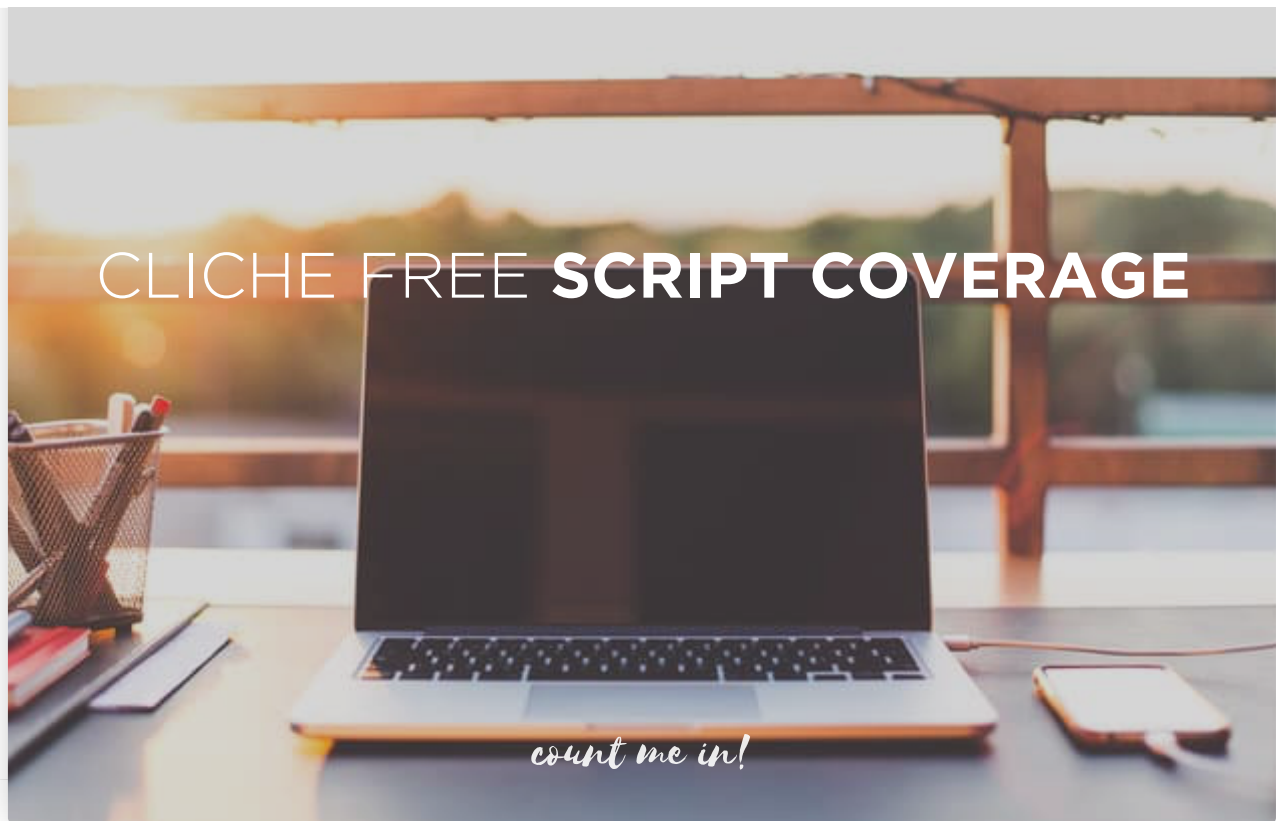
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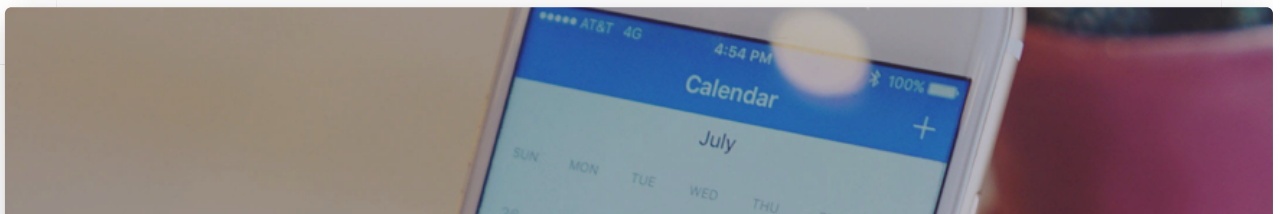
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