# Effective Writing and the Art of Inferences

Picture this scenario:

*It is a typical afternoon in your home town: partly cloudy with a forecasted 10% chance of precipitation. Rain had not materialized when you entered the building one hour ago. You are seated in a windowless classroom, listening attentively to a lecture, when a tardy student enters the room and sits next to you.*

*You notice immediately that the tardy student's hair, books, and clothing are drenched, dripping water onto the desk and floor. Distracted from the lecture, you sigh and curse your poor judgment in failing to bring an umbrella and rolling up the windows in your car. Why? Because you now know it's raining--or do you?*

*You **see** the wet hair, the soaked clothing. Perhaps you even **hear** the dripping water hit the desk or floor; maybe you **smell** the unmistakable wetness. Thus you **believe** that rain is presently (or was recently) falling from the sky outdoors. But what do you really know about the rain?*

*You **know** the wetness; you **infer** the absent rain.*

*You have made an inference, and perhaps the inference is valid, but perhaps it is an incorrect (though educated) guess. (Consider that the student could have just fallen in the campus fountain. Or maybe the local hooligans had pelted him with water balloons. It's even possible that some plumbing in the old building had exploded, causing the wetness that you interpret as proof of rain.)*

*Now ponder the difference between what you actually know and what you truly believe. Can you think of some examples?*

An inference is a belief (or statement) about something unknown, made on the basis of something known.

The ability to make inferences is a basic human skill. You hear a siren; you infer _____ (?). You smell smoke; you infer _____ (?). A husband comes home late with lipstick on his collar; his wife infers _____ (?). All inferences have two parts: a **basis** (the known factors; specific and indisputable) and the **conclusion** (the educated guess: a generalization based on evidence, but nonetheless uncertain).

Understanding inferences is crucial to effective development of most essays, particularly argumentation. A GOOD WRITER SHOWS, NOT JUST TELLS. That is, he or she clearly establishes the basis (details, facts, examples, descriptions) for any conclusion (thesis, topic sentence) offered in an essay. For any claim, the reader must be shown the grounds upon which that claim rests. Most readers prefer to see for themselves, rather than being merely told what to believe.

In a sense an essay is thus an attempt to get the readers to make the same inferences the writer has made. Your readers are like a jury in a court of law; they will accept your claim (conclusion, thesis) only if you present sufficient evidence (basis, grounds).

Many students have difficulty with providing adequate development in their essays. One help in understanding development is to discuss inferences. If, in a narrative essay, a student writes "The hotel clerk was a slob," the instructor might remark, "How do you know? Details? Proof? Descriptive imagery? Examples?" If, in an argumentative essay, a student declares "Americans today are more politically conservative than three decades ago, " the teacher could (and should) again request some development of support, some proof. In both cases, the student/writer has made an inference, possibly valid. But the out-of-context examples simply tell, not show. Thus the teacher/reader is informed of the conclusion, but not necessarily the basis for the inferences, and therein lurks the major weakness in such writing.

Effective writing (narration, description, exposition, and argumentation) depends more upon showing the known details that triggered the writer's point of view than upon telling the readers (however eloquently) what the point of view is.

As a means of checking for adequate development of supporting details in any type of essay, writers may follow a process of inference examination, as follows:

1. Identify the key inferences you make in the essay (particularly in the form of thesis statements, topic sentences, conclusions).
2. Scrutinize (take inventory) of the specific support you have developed for these key inferences. Have you made assumptions or come to conclusions that are unsupported?
3. If you are satisfied with the validity of your main ideas, be sure to also satisfy your readers' needs for clearly seeing the basis for each inference.
4. To flesh out the basis for inferences, describe in specific details what is known: give examples and focus on the objective elements that trigger a subjective belief.
5. When necessary, explain how and why the known factors cause you to infer your conclusions.

REMEMBER TO SHOW, NOT JUST TELL.

Make the readers experience the particulars of your reality, not just hear what you believe.