



The Hero's Journey

Part 1: Inferences & Evidence

From the book **Adventure! Three Goals of the Hero**

<https://three-goals.com>

Wherever they live and however old they are, most people spend at least some of their free time reading or watching stories. Whether the story is in a book, comic book, a tv show, a movie, or even in a videogame, people love stories.

Many of these stories involve **heroes**. For stories involving adventure, intrigue, or suspense, it is through the hero's eyes that we experience the story.



Much of this will be covered in the second lesson, but the most important element of a story is the **journey** the hero undertakes. **The Hero's Journey** is a universal idea among stories from almost all cultures around the world. Be they from Greece, China, England, or Benin, myths and legends almost always involve a hero that goes on a journey to right some wrong, to obtain a treasure or to save the world.

A university professor named Joseph Campbell was among the first to quantify the ideas around The Hero's Journey. We'll cover much more of the hero, his or her journey, and their goals in lesson 2, but first let's discuss reading well and how to tease out the meaning of a story.

Inferences and Evidence

Discussions in classrooms and among friends sometimes involve different opinions and ideas. A discussion like this is called a **debate**. A debate is a great activity for expressing what you think and discovering the best available answer.

evidence: noun

something that gives proof or a reason to believe.

Scientists have not yet found evidence of life on Mars.

When debating about stories, if you want to support an idea, you must refer to

evidence, either in the form of the written words of a book, spoken words in a movie or tv show, or the actions of a character.

debate: noun, verb

a discussion between two people or groups who disagree on an important subject.

The debate in Congress lasted two days.

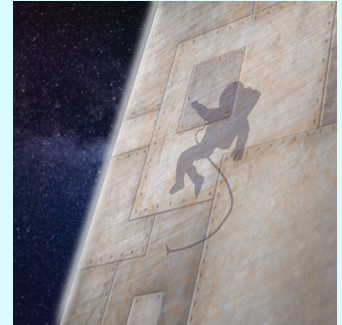
Let's explain with an example from a very short story.

The Captain wiped the visor of his helmet. Contrary to the report, the hull looked fine. That's when he noticed it.

His line had been severed.

The tether had been the only thing connecting him to the ship. Now he was floating in vast nothingness. The cut was clean. His heart was already racing when he noticed that the engines started preparing the ship for propulsion. It was then that the radio crackled to life:

"I guess I'm the Captain now."



As a reader, we try to **infer** the meaning of things when they aren't spelled out in detail, but anything we conclude should come from the words of the story, which we call **textual evidence**.

In this story, our first clue that something unusual is happening is when "Contrary to the report, the hull looked fine." Perhaps a mistake was made and there's nothing wrong, but in stories, most everything is motivated by the actions of a character. There's a reason why for everything.

infer: verb

to make a guess based on facts and observations; conclude.

I inferred from the books on his shelf that he enjoyed reading adventure stories.

The next thing we notice is that the tether connecting him to the ship was cut. Notice that this one sentence has its own paragraph. That's the writer telling you that this is important. By now, we should be suspicious. Someone is behind this.

Our suspicions should be confirmed once the engines roar to life. The final confirmation happens when he gets the radio message - cold and ruthless, telling the Captain that there's been a mutiny (illegal seizure of a ship).

Writers don't always tell you things plainly. The artistry of writing is such that the author assumes that you can take a hint. However, in a book, any conclusions you come to must be supported by textual evidence. You need to be able to back up what you think.



Inferences and Evidence

Now it's your turn. Let's transition from outer space back to America's Old West.

Cal was looking forward to supper at Abbie's place. It was a scorcher today, and the new bronco was proving hard to tame. Considering the day he had, the old cowboy was really looking forward to some fine lemonade.

The rusty door creaked as he entered, and Cal noticed that the room was empty, except for one other customer - Charlie Nightwell.

He hadn't expected to ever see him again; last he heard, Charlie had left with a wagon train. His reputation as a crack shot would always guarantee him a job; his personality would guarantee that he'd never get re-hired.

"Howdy, Cal. Fancy seeing you here."

"Nice to see you, Captain."

"No need for formalities, I didn't re-enlist. Call me Charlie."

"Where's Abigail?"

"She went out back to fetch the chicken I ordered. Come on, have a seat."

Darn, thought Cal. Not wanting to be rude, he pulled up a chair.

"I thought you were going west with the settlers."

"I took them as far as I could."

"How far was that?"

"Not far enough."

He waited for him to say more, but Charlie didn't.

"Captain, I thought they'd have made you a General by now, especially after Jackson's Bluff."

"You were there too, Cal. What did you think?"

"You were brave. It said so in all the papers."

Charlie shifted in his seat, yawning as he did, though Cal's old fighting instincts noticed that he had freed up his pistol hand.

"Well, my promotion got blocked. Apparently, someone talked to the Governor. They gave him what you could call an 'alternate account' of what happened."

That's it. That's why he's here, Cal thought, and he realized that it was only a matter of moments now.



There are two characters: Cal and Charlie. They know each other, apparently they were in the army together. Let's hear what you think. Support all of your ideas with evidence:

- Do they like each other?
- Was it really a coincidence they met?
- After Charlie told Cal to call him by his name, why do you think Cal continue to refer to him as Captain?
- What do you think happened next?

Inferences and Evidence

When discussing this or any other story, always return to the text to make inferences and arguments. In movies and TV shows, refer to the **dialogue** (what characters say) and **action** (what characters do). As you learn more about how movies and tv shows tell stories, you can also refer to **visual evidence**; filmmakers will express ideas or hint at truths with techniques such as lighting, composition, editing, or music. Often, this is how they tell you who the bad guy is.



Even without a single action or line of dialogue, we would know that Norman Osborne, as played by Willem Dafoe, was the villain of *Spider-Man* just by his expression, the lighting, and the minor chords in the soundtrack.

Visual media such as movies, tv shows and even comic books have access to tools that written media doesn't. Filmmakers can express ideas and reveal things using images, visual composition, editing, the creative use of lighting and cinematography, and music. As with novelists, filmmakers expect the viewer to have a basic understanding of non-verbal clues to understand what they're trying to say.

In *Spider-Man*, Willem Dafoe plays the rich industrialist Norman Osborne. In the scene in which he turns evil, shadow covers half of his face, hinting at the division inside of him and also giving him an air of general menace. The soundtrack is full of minor chords, an omen of the conflict to come. Of course, there's Dafoe's performance itself, his tone of voice rapidly transitioning from good to evil. There's a visual vocabulary we develop to 'read' movies that filmmakers use to tell stories and make them entertaining.



Inferences and Evidence

Let's see an example of how filmmakers use all of the tools at their disposal to introduce characters. Watch these two videos from *Kung Fu Panda*. Use what we've discussed to make inferences about the characters. Cite evidence to support your ideas. What do the filmmaker's choices tell us about the characters? Are they good or evil? Are they competent or inept? What other evidence is there, and what does it tell us?

Kung Fu Panda - Introducing Po



Kung Fu Panda - Introducing Tai Lung



In animated movies, rather than casting certain actors for the roles, filmmakers can actually make a character from the ground up. Called *Character Design*, animators use shapes, textures, and proportions to create the character they see in their mind's eye.

In spite of the different mediums, writers and filmmakers have subtle ways of expressing ideas and imparting information. Look for clues and base your conclusions on evidence contained within the text or in the film. This is not only how to best understand what's happening, but also how to get the most enjoyment out of the story.

Instructor's Notes

The Old West

Some ideas you may want to mention to inspire a debate and discussion:

Do they like each other?

They could be old friends, having fought aside one another in the army. One says “Howdy”, an old west way of saying ‘hello’, and the other says “Nice to see you, Captain”. These seem like affectionate greetings among old friends.

However, there’s evidence that they might dislike each other. When Charlie invites Cal to sit, Cal thinks *Darn*, a negative exclamation that means he’s not happy, and sits because he didn’t want to be rude. If you see someone you actually like, you sit with them because you *want* to sit with them, not to avoid being rude. Based on that, we can conclude that Cal, at least, dislikes Charlie.

Was it really a coincidence that they met?

Cal was surprised to see his old Captain at Abbie’s, we know that it’s so because we’re reading the account from his perspective; we hear his thoughts. Was Charlie surprised to see Cal? He said so - “Fancy seeing you here” is another way of expressing surprise at seeing his old acquaintance. We’re not hearing Charlie’s thoughts, though; he could be lying.

It’s not a sure thing, but consider this:

- The two men have a history. They don’t reveal enough for us to determine the nature of their friendship, but we do know that they experienced a battle together (Jackson’s Bluff).
- Charlie was hailed as a hero for his actions and was considered for a promotion.
- He didn’t get promoted, however, and Charlie thinks it’s because someone gave the Governor an ‘alternate account’ of his actions in battle.
- From Cal’s perspective, Charlie shifted in his chair to ‘free up his pistol hand’, and after the Captain’s failure to receive a promotion is mentioned, Cal seems convinced that’s the reason for the visit.
- Where’s Abbie? It’s her restaurant. Did Charlie send her away because of what he intended to do?

I think it’s fair to infer that Cal thinks that Charlie is here to confront him, and that Charlie thinks that Cal is behind the ‘alternate account’ that prevented his promotion.

Here are a couple of other questions to consider regarding this story:

- After Charlie told Cal to call him by his name, why did Cal continue to refer to him as Captain?
- What do you think happened next?

Kung Fu Panda

Class discussion about other types of evidence used in visual media.

Lighting and Cinematography

We’re introduced to Po in his childhood bedroom. The scene is well-lit, everything is visible. The things we see are common to boys’ rooms almost universally, full of action figures and posters. There’s no mystery in these images, his life is an open book.

Tai Lung’s introduction is the complete opposite. We can barely see him at first because his prison cell is so dark. Students may interpret the darkness as making Tai Lung seem threatening or mysterious. The chains provide additional evidence that he is considered dangerous.

Character Design

The real comedy of the pairing comes from the contrast between the panda (playful, chubby, cute) and a snow leopard (stealthy, muscular, lethal). Po’s body consists of a series of circles, soft edges that jiggle due to his fat. Even his eyes are big and round, friendly and open.

Instructors Notes

Tai Lung is hidden in the dark for much of his first scene. At one point, we see his eyes, glowing and full of threat. His are “angry eyes”, aggressive and furious. He emits pure hatred with every glance.



The eyes of Po (left) and Tai Lung are strong indicators of their character and what we can expect from them.

When he emerges from confinement after his escape, his body and face are full of sharp angles, everything in support of what we first saw in his eyes. This is a predator, relentless and ruthless in his quest to get whatever he wants.

Music

The music when we first meet Po is subtle, but its intentions are clear. This is a mid-tempo piece in a major scale. The music is unobtrusive, a subtle message that Po himself is tame and nothing to worry about.

Not so with Tai Lung. Once he starts his escape, the low-pitched minor key music that accompanies him is ominous. Tai Lung is going to war.

Remember, when discussing inferences with your students, a strong response should:

- 1 identify specific evidence from the text or film;
- 2 make a reasonable inference from that evidence;
- 3 explain how the evidence supports the inference.

Best of luck with your classes!