



The Ladder of Inference

When we find ourselves at odds with someone who “just can’t accept the facts,” we may find useful a discourse tool called the Ladder of Inference. Proposed by Chris Argyris, the Ladder of Inference asks us to **slow down** to examine how we select and use data to reach our conclusions and judgments.

This metaphor uses ladder rungs to describe how we climb from directly observable data—the actions or aural or visible material a video camera could record—to putting that data in context, naming it, and then to drawing a conclusion about it.

Of course, what we value informs what we “see” in the data, as well as the judgments we ultimately infer. Because we are meaning-making machines, we select data and make inferences automatically—so fast we don’t even know we’re doing it.

We may see a meeting colleague with crossed arms and *believe* we are seeing disagreement or frustration. But disagreement and frustration are inferences (inside our heads) that we drew from the data we selected. Selecting even the same data (crossed arms), we could also infer she finds the room too cold for comfort—or she sloshed coffee on her shirt earlier and is trying to hide the damage.

The Ladder of Inference is useful in aspects of our lives when we want to understand how others—or how we—might select different data or make different interpretations on each rung of the ladder to draw different conclusions. When writing professional narratives, we use the Ladder of Inference deliberately to help the reader draw the desired inference—“demonstrates accomplishment in research,” for example—from the evidence that we provide. We do this by consciously describing directly observable data and offering middle-rung inferences about the data along the way.

That often includes context-setting. Not everyone may know the usual length of published papers

in your field. If a reader assumes 2-to-3-page papers are customary, and your discipline advances on 15-to-20-page published papers, that is valid information shaping expected frequency of publication.

Sharing middle-rung inferences includes naming—linking directly observable data to terms that can later be connected to high-level inferences. “Frequency of citation” and “frequency of invitations to present research” provide naming bridges from specific citation counts; H and i10 indices; and a record of research presentations in Mexico City, Bern, and Delft to a high-level inference about making noticeable contributions to your area of expertise.

As you craft and revise your professional narratives, notice sentences that are high on the Ladder of Inference. They sound like generalizations with some judgments mixed in. “Amazingly innovative researcher” or “thoroughly competent instructor” could be examples.

Stating generalizations or judgments in your narrative is absolutely appropriate—*when they are preceded by or followed by compelling data, usefully interpreted by you*. We make our judgments and conclusions *credible* by sharing our data and our mid-level inferences on the way to the desired high-level inferences of meeting or exceeding the standards for each criterion. Use the Ladder of Inference to help you—and your reader—navigate gracefully from data to conclusion and back again.