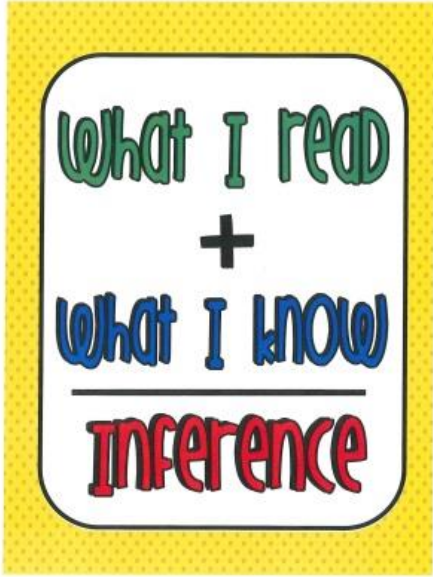# Making Inferences

Inferences are **evidence-based guesses**. They are the conclusions a reader draws about the unsaid based on what is actually said. Inferences drawn while reading are much like inferences drawn in everyday life. If your best friend comes in from a blind date and looks utterly miserable, you would probably infer the date was not a success. Drawing inferences while you read requires exactly the same willingness to look at the evidence and come to a conclusion that has not been expressed in words. Only in reading, the evidence for your inference consists solely of words rather than actual events, expressions, or gestures.

To pull meaning from the page, readers need to draw all kinds of inferences. They need to infer main ideas; figure out how sentences and paragraphs relate; connect supporting details to main ideas; match pronouns to antecedents (the words to which pronouns refer); understand the function of allusions (references to people and events that are used to make a point); and determine how visual aids contribute to the author's message (This is just a partial list). While it's commonly assumed that writers supply every word readers need to construct meaning, nothing could be further from the truth. Readers almost always help create the texts they read. Those readers who don't draw inferences to fill in gaps in the text are likely to miss or misunderstand the meaning intended by the author.

For an illustration of how important inferences are to communication between reader and writer, read the following sentence: "After reading that Paris Hilton told an interviewer how the beauty of her hit song 'Stars Are Blind' made her want to cry, I couldn't help thinking of a quotation from Mark Twain: 'Man is the only animal that blushes—or needs to.' " To understand that sentence, readers need to draw at least three essential inferences:

a. The author thinks the song is just awful.

b. Mark Twain thought that only humans blushed because they were the only ones who did things they needed to be ashamed of.

c. The author makes a connection between Hilton and Twain because she thinks Paris Hilton is one of those humans who should blush from shame.

Note as well how the author expects readers to infer that the antecedent for the pronoun "her" is Paris Hilton. Linking pronouns to antecedents is one of the most common kinds of inferences readers are expected to draw on a consistent basis.

What You Need to Know About Inferences:

1. There are logical and illogical inferences, inferences that "fit" the rest of the text and inferences that don't. **Make sure your inference has the right fit** by relying on the author's words more than on your own feelings and opinions. To give you an obvious example: If the writer uses glowing language to describe the presidency of Bill Clinton but never states an opinion of the Clinton years in office, you probably shouldn't infer that the writer is a Clinton critic just because you yourself thought Bill Clinton was a terrible president.

2. Think of inferring implied main ideas as a **two-step process**, moving from part to whole. Your first step is to

understand what each sentence contributes to your knowledge of the topic. Next ask yourself what the sentences combine as group to suggest. The answer to that question is the implied main idea of the paragraph.

3. If you draw an inference about the main idea, check to see if the your inference is contradicted by any statements in the paragraph. If it is, you have probably drawn an **illogical inference**, one that does not follow from the information given. With particularly difficult readings, see if you can actually identify the language or statements that led you to the main idea you inferred. This kind of close reading is a great inference check. It also gives you practice doing the kind of thoughtful reading that guarantees remembering.

4. **Transitions** such as "consequently," "next," and "in summary" definitely help readers make connections between sentences and paragraphs. Transitions are the considerate author's way of saying, "This is the connection you need to make between what you just read and what's coming up." However, transitions are not as commonly used as readers might like. It's often the reader's job to supply sentence and paragraph connections. In other words, it's the reader's job to draw the right inference. If a sentence doesn't open with a transition—and a good many won't—make sure you know how the sentence you are reading connects to the ideas that came before.

5. Pay especially close attention to **sentence openers**. That's where you will often get the clues you need to infer relationships between sentences and paragraphs.

6. Be on the look-out for **key allusions or idioms** (expressions that might seem completely out of place to those just learning the language, but which make sense to those who grew up hearing or reading these expressions), e.g., she loved her job; the money was "icing on the cake"). Allusions and idioms often suggest meanings that are central to the author's message. For instance, if the writer says that "the shotgun marriage between the unions and management dissolved once the war was over" you can infer that the unions and management were working together because they were forced to by necessity. However, the writer doesn't say anything about either side being forced by necessity. Instead, she uses an idiom and expects reader to draw the correct inference.

7. If the text includes visual aids, but neither the title nor caption tells you exactly how they relate to the author's meaning, **take the time to figure out the relationship between text and graphic**. Inferring relationships between the author's words and the visual aids will deepen your overall understanding of the point or points being made. You will also have two ways, one verbal, one visual, to anchor information in long-term memory.

Try these Practice Exercises
(answer key is below)

Exercise 1

Directions: Each item in this exercise describes a famous person. It's your job to infer the name of the person described.

1. A small-town lawyer from Illinois, tall and lanky with an Adam's apple that could have gone down in the Guinness Book of Records had it existed in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, he changed the face of American history, steering it through a civil war that left both sides bloody. Who knows what more he could have done had an assassin's bullet not cut him down.

The person described is _____

In drawing the correct inference, which piece of information is more useful:

a. He had a big Adam's apple.
b. He steered the nation through a civil war.

Explain your answer:
_____

2. Glittering and shaking to the strains of "Proud Mary," this lady ruled the stage in the sixties, but Ike ruled the roost until she walked out the door. It took her almost a decade to get back on top but she still remains one of pop's great divas. Closing in on sixty, she can still belt out rock and roll with singers half her age, and "Simply the Best" just may qualify as her own personal theme song.

The person described is _____

In drawing the appropriate inference, which piece of information is more useful.

a. She ruled the stage but Ike ruled the roost.
b. She was a popular singer in the sixties.

Directions: For each situation, draw what you think is an appropriate inference.

1. You have just gotten a pit bull puppy from an animal shelter. He's lovable but nervous. If you raise your voice for any reason, he cowers and trembles. If you scold him, he hides. When you got him from the shelter, he had a slight limp and a deep scratch across his nose.

Inference:

_____

2. You are a high school student sitting in class when a substitute teacher walks in and announces that your regular teacher is ill. Everyone in the class including you erupts in applause. The substitute raps his knuckles on the desk for order, but the students ignore him and talk louder.

Inference:

_____

Exercise 3

Directions: Each item in this exercise introduces a topic. Six specific statements about the topic follow. Read them carefully. Then choose the more appropriate inference.

1. *Topic:* Shakespeare in nineteenth-century America

Specific Statements:

a. In the early nineteenth century, Shakespeare was the most widely performed playwright in both the North and Southeast.

b. In the first half of the nineteenth century, English and American actors could always earn money by performing Shakespeare in towns both big and small.

c. American audiences were famous for their participation in performances of Shakespeare's plays: They hurled eggs and tomatoes at the villains and cheered and whistled for the heroes.

d. By the end of the nineteenth century, theater owners claimed that most ordinary people couldn't understand Shakespeare, and they were refusing to stage his plays.

e. In the early 1800s, theater goers in big cities could often choose between three different productions of *Macbeth* or *Romeo and Juliet*; by the end of the nineteenth century, it was hard to find one production of a Shakespeare play, let alone several.

Inference

a. Early American audiences embraced Shakespeare's plays enthusiastically because they wanted to prove that they were as clever and sophisticated as their former British rulers.

b. The role of Shakespeare in America changed dramatically as the nineteenth century drew to a close.

2. *Topic:* The medics in World War II

Specific Statements:

a. During training for combat, the medics were often despised because most of them had refused to take up arms.

b. The medics had their own barracks and were separated from combat soldiers, who referred to them as "pill pushers" and laughed at their medical drills.

c. In actual combat, it was often the medics who meant the difference between life and death for soldiers wounded in battle; they were the ones who braved gunfire to carry wounded soldiers to the hospital.

d. In many divisions, soldiers who had lived through combat took up collections in order to provide bonuses for the medics.

e. Interviewing veterans of World War II, author Stephen Ambrose consistently heard from men who believed they owed their lives to some member of the medical core.

Inference

a. The combat experience profoundly changed the way soldiers felt about the medical core.

b. Despite their bravery in the battles of World War II, medics never really received the respect that was due them.

Exercise 4

Directions: Read each paragraph. Then choose the inference that could effectively sum up the main idea.

1. When World War II broke out in Europe in 1939, the United States was the only major power without a propaganda agency. More important, despite prodding from England and France, the U.S. had no plans to create one. During World War I, a government-based group known as the Committee for Public Information had successfully stirred up public feeling against German-Americans because America was at war with Germany. As a result, many innocent German-American citizens had been insulted, beaten, even lynched. In addition, a good portion of the American public still believed that the United States had been tricked into entering World War I because of British propaganda. Distrustful of propaganda in general, there was little widespread support for a government agency dispensing it when the second world war broke out.

Inference

a. Because of what had happened during World War I, the American public was suspicious of propaganda and not inclined to support its use when World War II first erupted.

b. Aware of how the German government was using propaganda to spread hate and violence, the American public was reluctant to make use of it at the beginning of World War II.

2. At his death in 1971, trumpeter Louis Armstrong was much loved as a celebrity. Yet as a musician, he no longer commanded wide respect among the general public. To most people, he was the man with the toothy smile who made occasional appearances in television and movies usually singing what had become his signature songs "Hello, Dolly" and "It's a Wonderful World." Jazz enthusiasts, however, had another take on the passing of Louis Armstrong. To them he was the New Orleans-born musician who had, along with Bix Beiderbecke, introduced the solo to jazz. With records like "Struttin' with Some Barbecue," "I'm not Rough," and "Potato Head Blues," Louis became the first great jazz influence. As music critic Terry Teachout has written, Louis Armstrong was "the player other players copied." Still, at his death, few really knew what Louis had accomplished. In his honor, radio and television broadcasts played "Hello Dolly," not "West-End Blues," his 1928 recording that starts off with what may be the most famous horn solo in jazz.

Inference

a. A hero to much of the jazz community, Louis Armstrong was forgotten by the general public at the time he died.

b. At his death, Louis Armstrong was a beloved celebrity whose spectacular achievements had been forgotten by all but devoted jazz fans.

Exercise 5

Directions: Read each paragraph. Then draw an inference that sums up the main idea.

1. In the movies, England's King Richard the First—he of the lion heart and Robin Hood fame—is a hero of spotless reputation. In Hollywood's many versions of the Robin Hood story, for example, Robin worships good King Richard and would willingly die for him. History, however, offers a different slant on Richard's supposed goodness. In 1189, the Pope called for yet another crusade to take back the holy land of Jerusalem from Moslem rule. Intent on following the Pope's order, Richard combined forces with King Philip the II of France. Together, they managed to take the town of

Acre, a port on what is now Israel's Northwestern coast. Attempting to blackmail the Moslem ruler Saladin into giving up sacred lands, Richard took 2,500 civilians hostage, many of them women and children. When Saladin refused, Richard promptly slaughtered every last one of his hostages.

Inference:

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2. When Bonnie Parker met Clyde Barrow, she was twenty years old. Although she had been a rebellious child and teenager, she had never broken a law in her life. The worst thing she had done in her mother's opinion was run off and get married to a shiftless womanizer who humiliated and neglected her. When Clyde came along, Bonnie was ripe for the attentions of a man who seemed to think she was both important and attractive. As long as he didn't desert her, Bonnie didn't much care about Clyde's two-year jail sentence. In jail at least, she knew where he was, and she could write him daily letters about how much she loved him. Bonnie, however, got nervous when she heard that Clyde was planning a jailbreak. To bind him more tightly to her, she smuggled him a gun and helped him escape. After he got caught and sent back to prison, Bonnie was even more determined to wait for the man she called her "one true love." Upon his release from jail, Bonnie took Clyde home to meet her folks and announced she was going to Houston, Texas to get a new job. The next time her mother heard from her, Bonnie Parker was sitting in jail and had formally started her career as one half of the most famous bandit duo in history.

Exercises: Answer Key

Exercise 1

1. Abraham Lincoln
   Clue: He steered the country through civil war.
   Explanation: Lots of people have big Adam's apples, but America has had only one civil war.

2. Tina Turner
   Clue: She ruled the stage but Ike ruled the roost.
   Explanation: There were many popular women singers in the sixties but only one was linked to a domineering husband named Ike.

Exercise 2

Answers may vary.

1. **Inference:** The puppy may well have been abused by its former owners.

2. **Inference:** The students are going to take advantage of the substitute teacher.

Exercise 3

1. b; 2. a

Exercise 4

1. a; 2. b

Exercise 5

Answers will vary.

1. Richard the Lionhearted was not so pure of heart as some movies suggest.

2. Her romantic attachment to Clyde Barrow led Bonnie Parker into a life of crime.