MODULE INTENSIVE READING
(PBI 221)

MODULE SESION 10

MAKING INFRENCES

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MAKING INFERENCES

Inferences

What Is It?

Making an inference involves using what you know to make a guess about what you don't know or reading between the lines. Readers who make inferences use the clues in the text along with their own experiences to help them figure out what is not directly said, making the text personal and memorable. Helping students make texts memorable will help them gain more personal pleasure from reading, read the text more critically, and remember and apply what they have read.

Making inferences is a comprehension strategy used by proficient readers to "read between the lines," make connections, and draw conclusions about the text's meaning and purpose.

You already make inferences all of the time. For example, imagine you go over to a friend's house and they point at the sofa and say, "Don't sit there, Cindy came over with her baby again." What could you logically conclude?

First, you know there must be a reason not to sit where your friend is pointing. Next, the reason not to sit there is related to the fact that Cindy just visited with her baby. You don't know what exactly happened, but you can make an inference and don't need to ask any more questions to know that you do not want to sit there.

Practice Making Inferences

Imagine you witness the following unrelated situations—what can you infer about each one?

1.   You see a woman pushing a baby stroller down the street.

2.   You are at a corner and see two parked cars at an intersection, and the driver in back starts honking his horn.

3. You are walking down the street, and suddenly a dog comes running out of an opened door with its tail between its legs.

For the first, you probably came up with something simple, such as there was a baby in the stroller.

For the second, you might have inferred that the first car should have started moving, or was waiting too long at the corner and holding up the second car.

For the third, you could reasonably guess that the dog had done something wrong and was afraid to get punished.

You do not know for 100% certainty that these inferences are true. If you checked 100 strollers, 99 times you would find a baby, but maybe one time you would find something else, like groceries.

Making Inferences as You Read

To make inferences from reading, take two or more details from the reading and see if you can draw a conclusion. Remember, making an inference is not just making a wild guess. You need to make a judgment that can be supported, just as you could reasonably infer there is a baby in a stroller, but not reasonably infer that there are groceries, even though both would technically be a "guess."

When you are asked an inference question, go back over the reading and look for hints within the text, such as words that are directly related to the question you may be asked (such as for a multiple choice test) or words that indicate opinion.

Here is an example:

Hybrid cars are good for the environment, but they may not perform as well as cars that run only on gasoline. The Toyota Prius gets great gas mileage and has low emissions making it a good "green" option. However, many people think that it is unattractive. The Prius also cannot accelerate as quickly as other models, and cannot hold as many passengers as larger gas-fueled SUVs and vans. Compared to similar gas-fueled options, hybrid cars also cost more money up front. A new hybrid car costs almost $3,500 more than the same car configured to run just on gasoline.

Which of the following can you infer from the passage?

1.   hybrid cars are more dangerous than other options

2.   Toyota is making a lot of money from the Prius

3.   cars that use gasoline are going to destroy the environment

4.   hybrid cars may not be the best choice for everyone

All four answers are about hybrid cars in some way, but none of the answers can be found directly from the text. Read through and see what hints you can find from the text.

You will notice right away that there is nothing about car safety in the passage at all, so you can eliminate choice 1.

Choice 2 is implied: if the car cost $3,500 more than other cars, then Toyota would be making a lot of money by selling the car. But is it the most reasonable conclusion? To be sure, you need to go through all of the answers—don't just stop when you find one that looks okay.

You may think that choice 3 is true. After all, people want to make hybrid cars because they believe that emissions are contributing to environmental damage, but this is not mentioned in the paragraph. Even if you think it is true, the answer has to be supported by the text to be the correct answer to the problem.

Choice 4 could be inferred from the text. If a person had a large family, was short on money, or needed a car that could accelerate quickly, then a hybrid might not be the best choice for them.

Now compare choice d with the other possible answer, choice 2. Now you are thinking choice 2 might not be as good an answer because you don't know how much it costs Toyota to make the cars, and you don't know how many they sell, so you can't reasonably infer that they are making a lot of money!

Choice 4 has to be the correct answer.

Good readers make inferences as they read. That is, in addition to reading the words, they use their imagination and their knowledge about the world to fill in facts and ideas that are not stated in the text. This is sometimes called "reading between the lines." It is often necessary to read between the lines because a writer cannot include all the possible information about a topic or situation. Writers leave out information that they think readers will know already or will be able to guess.

Separating Fact from Inference

In many kinds of writing, the author presents facts about a situation or topic and also makes inferences from those facts.

Facts are statements of information that can be verified.

For example:

- Chile is considered one of the most conservative Catholic countries in South America.

- On January 15, 2006, Chileans elected their first woman president, the Socialist Michelle Bachelet, with 53.5 percent of their votes.

- She is a former defense minister, a doctor, a single mother and a non-Catholic.

- Her father, a general in the army, was killed in 1973 under the military dictatorship of Pinochet.

- Her election campaign was based on promises of social and economic reform aimed at more equality.

Inferences are educated guesses that are based on facts.

For example:

- People in Chile are not as conservative as generally thought.

- People in Chile want changes in their society and economy.

- President Bachelet's background and experience should help her understand the problems in Chile.

- The fact that she served as defense minister may have reassured conservatives afraid of radical change.

- The fact that her father was killed under Pinochet probably raised her standing among leftists.

Why Making inferences is Important?

Researchers have confirmed that thoughtful, active, proficient readers are metacognitive; they think about their own thinking during reading. They can identify when and why the meaning of the text is unclear to them and can use a variety of strategies to solve comprehension problems or deepen their understanding of a text (Duffy et al. 1987).

Proficient readers use their prior knowledge and textual information to draw conclusions, make critical judgments, and form unique interpretations from text. Inferences may occur in the form of conclusions, predictions, or new ideas (Anderson and Pearson, 1984).

How Can You Make It Happen?

Introduce this strategy by modeling it for students, starting with everyday examples, moving to listening activities, and then to text examples. Tell students that good readers make inferences to understand what they are reading. Emphasize that they will bring their own knowledge of events to the text, so each inference may be unique. For example, you may want to introduce making inferences with an example such as the following.

You got to school this morning and you couldn't find a lesson plan. You were reading it over while having breakfast, so you probably left it on your kitchen table. Point out that you are making an inference based upon the fact that you know you were working on your lesson plan at home. Discuss situations in which students don't have all of the information and have to make logical guesses, such as figuring out what someone is trying to say, figuring out what is happening in a movie, or figuring who the singer is on the radio. They may need practice identifying the inferences they make in every day life.

Another way to introduce this strategy is to use pictures from a magazine or book cover, and cover a part of the picture. Ask about what is happening in the picture, what the picture is advertising, or what the story will be about. Think aloud as you make connections between the facts and your prior knowledge, using phrases such as, "The picture looks like...I know that..." Next, have students respond to

questions about new pictures, citing their reasons for their inferences. Have them cite reasons that are facts along with reason that come from their prior knowledge.

Then, model how good readers make inferences while reading. They use ideas from the book and add their own ideas to them. Read this short passage to students:

The young woman walked a bit hesitantly towards the famous cozy Italian restaurant. She did not believe the excuse her parents gave her for having to meet her at the restaurant instead of at their house. To make matters worse, she was a bit grumpy because she was still catching up on the sleep that she lost during exam time. She noticed some cars that looked familiar in the parking lot. As soon as she walked through the door, she heard, "Surprise!"

Now read it again and when you make an inference, tell students about it and describe how you make the inferences. You may say something such as:

The text says:

She did not believe the excuse her parents gave her.

I know: Sometimes if people play practical jokes, others don't believe everything they say. Maybe her parents played practical jokes.

The text says:

She was a bit grumpy because she was still catching up on the sleep that she lost during exam time.

I know: I know exams are usually given in school, so she is probably in high school or college.

The text says:

She noticed some cars that looked familiar in the parking lot. As soon as she walked through the door, she heard, "Surprise!"

I know: If the cars are familiar, that means people she knows are in the restaurant. This makes me change my inference. If her parents wanted to meet her at the restaurant, and other people she knows are there, maybe it's a surprise party.

By modeling your thought process, students can see how you took the information from the text, along with what you knew already and your own ideas, to make inferences. Point out which facts came from the text and which came from your background knowledge. Then put them all together to make the inference that it might be a surprise party.

To make the process more explicit, use a graphic organizer to record students' answers. Ask students to record the facts that are stated in the text, along with their background knowledge. Have students keep in mind that they can change or modify their inferences as they read. Point out that they were able to make an inference based on their knowledge of surprise parties. Have students practice this strategy and use a graphic organizer while reading text.

How Can You Stretch Students' Thinking?

Allow students to share a wide range of interpretations when reading fiction. Make sure the classroom is a safe and non-critical place for students to share their background knowledge, keeping in mind that there may be as many different interpretations as there are students.

Use a variety of genres to practice making inferences. When students read non-fiction, there are fewer inferences or interpretations that are usually made from

the text. Discuss how the inferences and conclusions are different when reading science articles, poetry, novels, or historical documents. Have students practice justifying their interpretations, being explicit about which parts of the text they used to gain facts, and the background knowledge they used to make the inference.

Challenge students by having them write a paragraph including facts and inferred facts. Have them exchange their paragraphs and make inferences based on the information in the paragraphs. Ask each student to complete a graphic organizer for their peer's story, and have them discuss their inferences and how they arrived at them.

For younger students, you may generate some questions about a text as a group, place students in pairs, and have pairs work together to fill out the graphic organizer.

When Can You Use It?

Reading:

Have students read a newspaper editorial. Have them infer at least two things that were not explicitly stated by the author. Then have students draw a conclusion about the topic. Ask students to make inferences and draw conclusions from a particular novel you are reading in class.

Have students make inferences about where or when a photograph was taken. Provide photographs of unfamiliar geographic areas, buildings, or landscapes.

Writing:

Have students write a paragraph that describes something they are familiar with — an object, a situation, a place — without explicitly stating what it is. Pair students and have them exchange their papers and infer what their partner's paragraph is describing. Have them list the inferences that led them to their conclusion.

Lesson Plans

Animals Should Definitely Not Wear Clothing

This lesson is designed to teach primary students to make inferences as a reading comprehension strategy. In this lesson, students will draw on their prior knowledge and use the information from the pictures in the book to articulate (verbalize) the inference the author is making in the text. This is the first of a set of lessons designed to teach students how to make inferences.

Too Many Tamales

This lesson is designed to help primary students establish the skill of making inferences. In this lesson, students draw on their prior knowledge and use the information from the text to make inferences. This is the second of a set of lessons designed to teach students how to make inferences.

Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears

This lesson is designed to expand primary students' skill of making inferences. In this lesson, students will draw on their prior knowledge and use the information from the text to make inferences. This is the third of a set of lessons designed to teach students how to make inferences.

We all have to take those standardized tests where you're presented with a large passage of text and must work your way through the multiple-choice problems that follow. Most of the time, you'll get questions asking you to find the main idea, determine the author's purpose, understand vocabulary in context, figure out the author's tone, and, the topic at hand, make inferences. For many people, understanding how to make an inference is the toughest part of the reading passage, because an inference in real life requires a bit of guessing.

On a multiple-choice test, however, making an inference comes down to honing a few reading skills like these listed below. Read them, then practice your new skills with the inference practice problems listed below.

What exactly is an inference?

Step 1: Identify an Inference Question

First, you'll need to determine whether or not you're actually being asked to make an inference on a reading test. The most obvious questions will have the words "suggest," "imply" or "infer" right in the tag like these:

- "According to the passage, we can reasonably infer..."

- "Based on the passage, it could be suggested that..."

- "Which of the following statements is best supported by the passage?"

- "The passage suggests that this primary problem..."

- "The author seems to imply that…"

Some questions, however, will not come right out and ask you to infer. You'll have to actually infer that you need to make an inference about the passage. Sneaky, huh? Here are a few that require inferencing skills, but don't use those words exactly.

- "With which of the following statements would the author most likely agree?"

• "Which of the following sentences would the author most likely use to add additional support to paragraph three?"

Step 2: Trust the Passage

Now that you're certain you have an inference question on your hands, and you know exactly what an inference is, you'll need to let go of your prejudices and prior knowledge and use the passage to prove that the inference you select is the correct one. Inferences on a multiple-choice exam are different from those in real life. Out in the real world, if you make an educated guess, your inference could still be incorrect. But on a multiple-choice exam, your inference will be correct because you'll use the details in the passage to prove it. You have to trust that the passage offers you the truth in the setting of the test and that one of the answer choices provided is correct without stepping too far outside the realm of the passage.

Step 3: Hunt for Clues

Your third step is to start hunting for clues – supporting details, vocabulary, character's actions, descriptions, dialogue, and more – to prove one of the inferences listed below the question. Take this question and text, for example:

Reading Passage:

The widow Elsa was as complete a contrast to her third bridegroom, in everything but age, as can be conceived. Compelled to relinquish her first marriage after her husband died in the war, she married a man twice her years to whom she became an exemplary wife despite their having nothing in common, and by whose death she was left in possession of a splendid fortune, though she gave it away to the church. Next, a southern gentleman, considerably younger than herself, succeeded to her hand, and carried her to Charleston, where, after many

uncomfortable years, she found herself again a widow. It would have been remarkable if any feeling had survived through such a life as Elsa's; it could not but be crushed and killed by the early disappointment of her first groom's demise, the icy duty of her second marriage, and the unkindness of her third husband, which had inevitably driven her to connect the idea of his death with that of her comfort.

Based on the information in the passage, it could be suggested that the narrator believes Elsa's prior marriages to be:

A. uncomfortable, but well-suited to Elsa

B. satisfactory and dull to Elsa

C. cold and damaging to Elsa

D. awful, but worth it to Elsa

To find clues that point to the correct answer, look for descriptions that would support those first adjectives in the answer choices. Here are some of the descriptions of her marriages in the passage:

•   "…she became an exemplary wife despite their having nothing in common…"

•   "…after many uncomfortable years, she found herself again a widow."

•   "…the icy duty of her second marriage and the unkindness of her third husband which had inevitably driven her to connect the idea of his death with that of her comfort."

Step 4: Narrow Down the Choices

The next step to making a correct inference on a multiple-choice test is to narrow down the answer choices. Using the clues from the passage, we can infer

that nothing much was "satisfactory" to Elsa about her marriages, which gets rid of Choice B.

Choice A is also incorrect because although the marriages certainly seem uncomfortable based on the clues, they were not well-suited to her as she had nothing in common with her second husband and wanted her third husband to die. Choice D is also incorrect because nothing is stated or implied in the passage to prove that Elsa believed her marriages to be worth it in some way; in fact, we can infer that it wasn't worth it to her at all because she gave away the money from her second husband.

So, we have to believe that Choice C is the best – the marriages were cold and damaging. The passage states explicitly that her marriage was an "icy duty" and her third husband was "unkind." We also know that they were damaging because her feelings had been "crushed and killed" by her marriages.

Step 5: Practice Inference-Making With Images

Doing what you did with the photo at the top of this post is a great way to practice the skill and become aware of how often, and in how many ways, you employ it. Conveniently, we have a weekly feature in which students are invited to do just that.

Each Monday we post a mystery photo in our What's Going On in This Picture feature and invite students to weigh in on what they see and why. The feature is live-moderated by experts at Visual Thinking Strategies, and students are encouraged to make inferences throughout.

Step 6: Make Inferences as a Pre-Reading Strategy

The last step to making a correct inference on a multiple-choice test is by skimming through the paper and looking just at headlines, photographs and opening, or "lede," paragraphs, students can practice making inferences about what articles will be about.

For example, let's say you're a hip-hop fan, and, scrolling through The Times, you find the headline "Notes on the Hip-Hop Messiah."

What can you guess about the piece just from that headline? You know the term "messiah" is often used in a religious context (as Merriam-Webster defines it, "the expected king and deliverer of the Jews; Jesus"), but this doesn't seem to be implying exactly that kind of messiah. The second, more metaphorical definition — "a person who is expected to save people from a very bad situation" — seems to fit better.

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