

Making Inferences

Reading is more than just understanding the words an author writes. It also involves discovering what the author hints at or suggests indirectly.

An *inference* is a logical conclusion or educated guess you make about something that isn't stated directly, based on the information you already have.

Here are a few examples:

- A man wearing a suit walks to the front of your classroom on the first day of the semester.
- A young woman at the mall, wearing a wedding ring, is pushing a stroller with a baby inside while two small children follow her.

In the first example, you might assume the man is the instructor because his clothing sets him apart from the typical student. However, he could also be a student who has an important meeting after class. In the second example, you might guess that the woman married young and has three children close in age—but she could also just be babysitting them.

When you draw inferences while reading, you move beyond what the author explicitly says and focus on what is implied. Writers often state some ideas clearly but leave others for readers to uncover. It's your job as the reader to recognize the hints and figure out the author's unstated message.

Tips for Making Inferences

1. **Grasp the literal meaning first.** Before making any inferences, ensure you fully understand the main ideas, supporting details, and facts in the text.
2. **Pay attention to details.** Specific details often provide important clues. When something stands out, ask yourself why the writer chose to include it. Remember that details can appear in descriptions, actions, or dialogue.
3. **Combine the facts.** Look at all the information together. Ask: What is the writer trying to suggest? What message do these facts point toward?
4. **Observe word choice.** The language an author uses can reveal their feelings or attitude toward the topic. Pay close attention to emotional, descriptive, or strongly positive or negative words.

5. **Know the author's purpose.** Think about why the writer created the text. The purpose influences the tone, structure, and meaning of the writing.
6. **Support your inference with evidence.** Every inference should be based on facts. Make sure there's enough proof in the text to justify your conclusion.

Practice

Find the implied main idea in the following passages:

1. One of my summer reading books was The Windows of Time. Though it's more than 100 pages long, I read it in one afternoon. I couldn't wait to see what happened to Evelyn, the main character. But by the time I got to the end, I wondered if I should have spent my afternoon doing something else. The ending was so awful that I completely forgot I'd enjoyed most of the book.
 - a. The Windows of Time is a terrific novel.
 - b. The Windows of Time is disappointing.
 - c. The Windows of Time is full of suspense.
 - d. The Windows of Time is a lousy novel.
2. Fortunately, none of Toby's friends had ever seen the apartment where Toby lived with his mother and sister. Sandwiched between two burnt-out buildings, his two-story apartment building was by far the ugliest one on the block. It was a real eyesore: peeling orange paint (orange!), broken windows, crooked steps, crooked everything. He could just imagine what his friends would say if they ever saw this poor excuse for a building.
 - a. Toby wishes he could move to a nicer building.
 - b. Toby wishes his dad still lived with them.
 - c. Toby is glad none of his friends know where he lives.
 - d. Toby is sad because he doesn't have any friends.
3. Day after day, Johnny chooses to sit at his computer instead of going outside with his friends. A few months ago, he'd get half a dozen phone calls from his friends every night. Now, he might get one or two a week. He used to have his friends come over two or three days a week after school. Now, he spends his afternoons alone with his computer.
 - a. Johnny and his friends are all spending time with their computers instead of one another.
 - b. Johnny's friends aren't very good friends.
 - c. Johnny has alienated his friends by spending so much time on the computer.
 - d. Johnny and his friends prefer to communicate by computer.

4. We've had Ginger since I was two years old. Every morning, she wakes me up by licking my cheek. That's her way of telling me she's hungry. When she wants attention, she'll weave in and out of my legs and meow until I pick her up and hold her. And I can always tell when Ginger wants to play. She'll bring me her toys and will keep dropping them (usually right on my homework!) until I stop what I'm doing and play with her for a while.

- a. I take excellent care of Ginger.
- b. Ginger is a demanding pet.
- c. Ginger and I have grown up together.
- d. Ginger is good at telling me what she wants.

5. A healthy diet with proper nutrition is essential for maintaining good overall health. Since vitamins were discovered early in the twentieth century, people have routinely been taking vitamin supplements for this purpose. The Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) is a frequently used nutritional standard for maintaining optimal health.

The RDA specifies the recommended amount of a number of nutrients for people in many different age and gender groups. With RDA, consumers can see how much of those nutrients are offered in the products they buy and can better plan for a nutritious meal. But RDA values are based on the assumption that it is possible to accurately define nutritional requirements for a given group. In reality, individual nutritional requirements can vary widely within each group.

The efficiency with which a person converts food into nutrients can also vary widely. Certain foods, when eaten in combination, actually prevent the absorption of nutrients. For example, spinach combined with milk reduces the amount of calcium available to the body from the milk, but this is not reflected in RDA values. The RDA approach also specifies a different dietary requirement for each age and gender. However, it is clearly unrealistic to expect a homemaker to prepare a different menu for each family member.

Which of the following sentences best expresses the overall main idea of this passage?

- a. Still, although we cannot rely solely upon RDA to ensure our overall long-term health, it can be a useful guide.
- b. The RDA approach is problematic and should be avoided.
- c. It's important for consumers to monitor RDA levels carefully.
- d. After all, vitamins are the most important part of a healthy diet.

Where would this overall main idea make the most sense in the passage?

- a. At the beginning of the first paragraph
- b. At the end of the first paragraph
- c. At the beginning of the last paragraph
- d. At the end of the last paragraph

The Reading “A brother Lost”

1. Preview the reading, using the steps discussed in Chapter 1.
2. Connect the reading to your own experience by answering the following questions: How would you describe the homeless people you have seen in your city?
3. Mark and annotate as you read.

Based on your reading of “A Brother Lost”, answer the following questions:

1. What might the author be implying about her brother’s condition when she describes him as “wearing a hoodie and a Modest Mouse T-shirt, a can of beer in his hand, and a deer-in-headlights expression on his face”?
2. What does working in a “shiny glass tower … for a glossy women’s magazine” suggest about the author’s status in life?
3. The author writes, “Dirty clothes and dishes piled up at home, I missed deadlines at work, and I got out of bed only if it was absolutely necessary.” From this statement, what can you infer about her emotional condition?
4. When the author took her brother to dinner, they “sat in a booth near the back.” What might the location of the booth suggest about the author’s feelings about her brother?
5. Does the title of this piece, “A Brother Lost,” have more than one meaning? Make inferences about what the title means and what it suggests about the author’s attitude toward her subject.

References:

McWhorter, K. T. (2016). In Concert: Reading and Writing (2nd ed.). Pearson