Chapter 3

Inference Questions and Reference Questions

In each reading passage, you can expect at least one inference question per passage. Sometimes there is more than one. This chapter will help you to understand them.

First of all, what is an inference?

An inference is a conclusion you draw based on evidence. It's not a blind guess; it is using the information you read to draw a logical conclusion.

If you read:

The woman rushed around looking frantically for her passport.

You can infer that she is taking a trip outside of the country.

If you read:

The boy used sign language to communicate with his teachers.

You can infer that the boy is deaf.

Inference questions in the TOEFL look like this:

Which of the following can be inferred about (x)?

What can be inferred about (x)?

The author implies that (x)…

Which of the following can be inferred from paragraph 1 about (x)?

It can be inferred that (x) affects (y) by…

What does the author suggest about (x)?

Inference questions can be identified by the fact they use the word "infer," "imply," or "suggest." The author *implies***;** you, as the reader, *infer***.** This means you must look beyond the words that are given in the passage and make a conclusion about what is true based on the information you read.

Your strategy will look like this:

1. **Read the question carefully.** Understand what it is asking you to do. You will know it is an inference question because it will contain a word like "imply" or "infer," "suggest," or "inference." Identify the key words in the question.
2. **Look back at the paragraph indicated by the question.** Starting at the beginning of the paragraph, skim and look for keywords from the question or synonyms to the keywords. Slow down and read those sentences carefully as well as several sentences after the keywords. **It's important to note that you must read further than you do for factual information questions.**
3. **Look at your answer choices and read them carefully.** Choose the one that can be inferred from the paragraph while aggressively eliminating TOEFL traps which I will list below.

Note: Unlike factual information questions, *you can't answer inference questions* by looking for facts in the paragraph and then checking the answer choices for similar information. Inference questions require you to "read between the lines" to come to a conclusion. You will have to rely more on the process of elimination, avoiding the traps that are mentioned below. *Answers to inference questions are not directly stated.* They require careful thought and analysis.

TRAPS

The answer contains information beyond what is given in the passage. Do not pick an answer that contains information beyond what

appears in the passage. Answers that require you to take a guess at what is possible if you assume a few other things to be true are not correct.

The answer "could be true." You may be tempted to use your common sense on these questions, but you should pick an answer that is based on evidence in the passage. A good habit is to ask yourself, "Can I show someone else where I got the information I used to answer this question?"

The answer looks very appealing but is not correct. This is a common TOEFL trap. These trap answers repeat words you saw in the passage. But remember, the correct answer *must* reflect an inference, not just repeat words. Avoid these "word soup" style of answers. Other incorrect answers may *contradict* information in the passage. They also may *combine* information that does not belong together. Incorrect answer choices may also *add* information.

The answer contains extreme language. Words like *never, forever, always, all, impossible, completely, totally, none, the best, the worst, entirely,* and so on, are extreme. There is also extreme wording, such as "it has reached its limit, "it is certain," and so on. In general, be careful if you see a "bold statement." A statement such as "This type of plant has used up all its energy to produce seeds" is bold, because plants need to do many other things such as reproduce, grow, perform photosynthesis, and so on. If you see choices like these, be cautious. The answer may be correct, but it's less likely to be correct unless it is clear from the reading.

The answer has the wrong tone. When an answer choice has a different tone or attitude than the passage, it is incorrect. For instance, the passage may be describing the negative impact of something, but an answer may include positive information, or vice versa.

The answer is not likely to be true. Some answers will be unlikely according to common sense and logic. For instance, if the passage says "A worldwide layer of sediment enriched in iridium has indicated to geologists that it is conceivable that a meteor hit the Earth," and one of the answer choices states "A worldwide layer of sediment was kept secret from geologists" then this is probably not true. *Why would a layer of sediment be kept secret from geologists?* This is very unlikely and doesn't make sense. Obviously, this is just an example, but eliminate these types of answers.

The answer makes a false comparison. As in other question types on the TOEFL, beware of answers that make comparisons between two things that are not compared in the text. For instance, the text may say, “Because they have a biologically driven need for nitrogen, lemurs consume flowers, bark, and sap. Although their diet is mostly vegetarian, they occasionally consume insects. Their cousin, the galagos, eats a great deal of fallen fruit along with any insects they find in them.” A false comparison would be: “The galagos consumes more insects than the lemur.” The text doesn’t actually make this comparison. This is a VERY common TOEFL trap.

The answer choice is the opposite of what is true. As in other question types, the TOEFL test often uses “opposite answer” choices to try to trick you.

Take a look at this simple example:

Temperatures in the desert can soar to over 40 degrees Celsius, making survival a challenge for the animals that live there. Many animals migrate, but those that remain in the desert during the hottest part of the summer must take refuge when the sun is at its peak. A cactus wren may rest quietly in the shade of a mesquite tree; a prairie falcon will nest on a ledge of a cool north-facing cliff and avoid the hot south face. The pack rat builds its own microclimate by digging a burrow and covering it in sticks and dried leaves. When temperatures are particularly high, the kangaroo rat will dig a tunnel and plug its entrance with soil, leaving only at night to seek out food.

It can be inferred from the paragraph that all of the places desert animals take refuge in

- are not used after sunset
- are out of direct sunlight
- provide a hiding place from predators
- give the animals a place to store food

In this example, the second answer is correct. The other answers “could be true,” in other words, they are believable. However, we cannot be sure if they are true because they are not mentioned in the passage. Notice that you have to read a little further than you do in detail questions. **Simply focusing**

on the sentence with the keywords may not be enough to get the correct answer with inference questions.

Try this example:

Coastal waters are the most biologically productive parts of the ocean. This is not necessarily surprising since sunlight can penetrate such shallow waters. Sunlight allows phytoplankton, small marine plants, to perform photosynthesis and thrive. Zooplankton, tiny marine organisms which consume phytoplankton, are abundant in these areas as a result. With the tremendous amount of zooplankton available along the coasts, energy conservation in predatory fish is not an issue. Bass, perch, sunfish and sardines are attracted to the coasts to consume this zooplankton and are in turn eaten by larger predatory fish such as sharks and whales. In the deep sea, where light cannot penetrate and meals may be few and far between, energy conservation is a top priority. Deep sea fish have adaptations to help them expend as little energy as possible. The viperfish, for instance, has a modified dorsal fin on its head with a bioluminescent tip so that prey will be attracted to this light, and the viperfish does not have to go in search of prey. Rather, it can wait and ambush prey that swim toward it.

What can be inferred about why energy conservation is more important in the deep sea than it is on the coasts?

- Deep sea fish have to preserve their energy in order to evade predators
- The lack of light in the deep sea makes it difficult to find prey
- There is less food available in the deep sea than on the coasts
- Fish near the coasts can conserve their energy for times when food is scarce

The third answer is correct. The passage says, *"With the tremendous amount of zooplankton available along the coasts, energy conservation in predatory fish is not an issue."* It also says, *"In the deep sea, where light cannot penetrate and meals may be few and far between, energy conservation is a top priority."* The other answers are not correct because they go beyond information given in the paragraph.

Here is another example:

Travel in the 19th century in the United States was an uncomfortable experience. Most people in the middle class traveled by train or by coach. Coaches didn't have springs for shock absorption, making travel an incredibly bumpy and unpleasant endeavor. All that changed in 1914, when Henry Ford introduced the assembly line for automobile production. Suddenly, owning a car went from being a luxury of the rich to an affordable means of transportation for the average family. An assembly line is a manufacturing process in which parts are added as the semi-finished product moves from work station to work station. Such parts are added in sequence until the project is complete. The assembly line had a revolutionary impact on society. It allowed for a fast and continuous flow of work that cut production time for an entire automobile from twelve hours to 93 minutes. This change allowed Ford to increase his profit margin and lower the cost of the vehicle to consumers. The cost of the Model T, Ford's innovative automobile, would eventually drop to $260, the equivalent of approximately $3,500 in today's dollars.

It can be inferred from the passage that before 1914

- nobody owned an automobile
- trains were a more popular method of transportation than coaches
- automobiles were mostly owned by the wealthy
- the assembly line was developed in order to speed up the process of automobile production

The third answer is correct. We can infer this because the passage says, "*Suddenly, owning a car went from being a luxury of the rich to an affordable means of transportation for the average family.*" The first answer is "too extreme" because of the word *nobody* which is not supported by the reading. The second answer is a "false comparison." The last answer looks appealing. It repeats information from the passage. However, it's not correct because this happened *after* 1914. ***Note** how important it is to read the question carefully. If you miss the word "before" you will not get the correct answer.

Let's try an example about comics:

The origin of comics can be traced to 11th century Japan. These works of

art were done on scrolls by the artist and monk Toba Sojo. Sojo satirized life in the Buddhist priesthood by drawing priests as rabbits or monkeys engaging in mischievous behavior. It wasn't until much later that comics gained a following in the United States. What collectors now refer to as "The Golden Age of Comics" occurred between 1930 and 1959. The original intention of comic publishers was to circulate the comics as widely as possible to advertise various household wares, similar to flyers that promote items in a modern grocery store. However, comic books grew so popular that many distributors decided to start charging a dime for them. Popular superhero comic books got their start in 1938 with the introduction of "Superman." Superman was the first character with super-human powers: on the cover, he is lifting a car over his head. Batman, a superhero vigilante, followed a year later. By 1945, over 160 different comic books were released each month in the United States.

What can be inferred about the earliest comic books in the United States?

- They were given out free of charge
- They featured a superhero as the main character
- They focused on moral tales rather than the behavior of priests and animals
- Adults were more interested in them than children

The correct answer is the first answer. We can infer they were given out free of charge because the passage says, "*….comic books grew so popular that many distributers decided <u>to start</u> charging a dime for them.*" Thus, we can infer that at first they were given out for free. The second cannot be inferred because Superman wasn't introduced until 1938. The third is not correct because morals were not mentioned. The fourth answer is "not likely to be true."

Here is another example:

Charles Darwin developed the theory of evolution by natural selection. According to this theory, the ability to pass on genetic material despite fluctuating conditions in the animal's habitat make a species successful. Habitats are subject to frequent vicissitudes. For instance, the amount of rainfall might be higher from one year to the next. The availability and

quality of food may differ over time. The climate may become colder or warmer. Humans have certainly interfered with the environment, in particular with the development of agriculture. There is no question that human activity has put tremendous pressure on species to adapt to altered circumstances. The ability to pass on genes, despite these shifts in the environment, makes a species successful under Darwin's theory. However, a species must be able to adapt not only to slow changes but also to catastrophic events. The Earth has been subject to sudden dramatic changes during the course of its 4.5 billion year history, such as abrupt climate changes and even meteor impacts.

What can be inferred about the factors that make a species successful?

- The ability to adapt to human interference is the most important ability for a species to be successful
- The factors which make a species successful do not change very much over time
- The ability to survive gradual change is not the only factor that makes a species successful
- The ability to survive catastrophic events, such as meteor impacts and sudden climate changes, is more important than any other ability

The third answer is correct. The first answer is "too extreme." We can't tell from the text if this is *the most important ability*. The second answer is not mentioned. The fourth answer is a "false comparison" because it says *more important than any other ability*, which is not reflected in the passage. The third answer is correct because it is supported by the words *"However, a species must be able to adapt not only to slow changes, <u>but also</u>…"*

Quick Tip: Sometimes the correct answer to an inference question is a clever paraphrase of a sentence you saw in the reading.

Try this example:

At the turn of the 19th Century, most of the United States west of the

Appalachian Mountains remained a mystery to all but a few tribes of Native Americans. President Thomas Jefferson signed a land deal with France to buy over two million square kilometers of land west of the Mississippi River for $15 million from France, but he was not certain what he had bought. Jefferson hoped that there was a water route from the mainland of the United States into Asia which could open a trade route between the two continents. Jefferson hired Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, along with 31 others, to explore this new land and report their findings. Lewis, Clark, and the rest of the expedition began their journey near St. Louis, Missouri, in May 1804. In the spring of the following year, they reached the Rocky Mountains. By November, they arrived at the Pacific Ocean. The Lewis and Clark expedition returned with its findings two years after it had left. Although in the end, they did not find the expected passage, the information from their journey paved the way for westward expansion. They had not only collected over 300 species of plants and animals for examination but had also provided the President with the first reliable maps of the area.

What can be inferred about the results of the Lewis and Clark expedition?

- It failed to provide Jefferson with useful information
- It opened up trade routes across the country
- It expanded the land deal with France to include the territory between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean
- It increased migration to the west

The correct answer is the fourth answer. The passage says, *"…the information from their journey paved the way for westward expansion."* The fourth answer is a simple paraphrase of this information. The first answer is not true, in fact it is an "opposite answer" choice as the expedition gave Jefferson a lot of useful information. The second answer goes beyond the information in the passage. The third answer is "word soup."

You can sometimes use the tone or attitude the author takes to help you find the correct answer. Here is an example:

Organic food is agricultural produce which is grown without the use of synthetic pesticides or chemicals and sold to the consumer without adding

preservatives. Organic food is a $30 billion dollar a year industry in the United States, despite the fact that purchasing organically grown produce costs approximately 20% more than traditionally grown produce. Is the extra cost worth it? There is a common belief spread widely online and in health food magazines that organic food is safer to consume and puts fewer chemicals into the groundwater. There are certainly restrictions on the types of pesticides that can be used on foods labeled “Organic.” However, organic farmers are still permitted to use natural chemicals, and some have dangerous side effects. For instance, a natural chemical called Rotenone is an odorless, colorless, chemical compound used as a broad-spectrum insecticide and pesticide. It occurs naturally in the seeds and stems of several plants and is therefore approved for organic farming. Recent studies have linked Rotenone to Parkinson’s disease. Although the evidence is not yet robust enough to prove a definitive link, it is enough to question the merits of the “organic food is safer” argument.

It can be inferred from the passage that

- Organic food is too expensive for most families
- Organic food should be labeled more clearly
- Organic food may help reduce pollution
- Organic food may not be worth the extra cost

The fourth answer is correct. The first answer is not correct because although the author points out that there are extra costs associated with organic food, it isn’t stated that it is *too expensive* for most families. This is “too extreme.” The second is a “could be true” answer- the author mentions labeling but nothing more can be inferred. The third answer isn’t true because it has the “wrong tone.” The passage is critical of organic food, and this answer has a positive tone.

These questions simply take practice. Let’s try another example.

Cats have extraordinary visual perception. Cats only need one-sixth the illumination that humans require to see well. Muscles surround the pupil of the eye which narrows in bright light and opens fully in dim light, allowing the greatest amount of light possible to enter the eye. Cats have a reflective layer called a tapetum lucidum behind their retinas, which reflects incoming

light back into the eye. This gives cats a second chance to use any available light. However, despite all these advantages, a cat requires at least a small amount of light to be able to discern its surroundings. In complete darkness, cats rely on the dozens of whiskers they have all over their bodies. These whiskers are very sensitive and provide information about the location of objects in the dark through either direct touch or by sensing the movement of air.

What can be inferred about the vision of cats?

- It is superior to the vision of humans
- It is not effective in total darkness
- It is more accurate in dim light than in bright light
- It allows cats to see objects that are very far away

The second answer is correct because the passage says, *"…a cat requires at least a small amount of light to be able to discern its surroundings."* Here we can see the TOEFL traps. The first answer contains information beyond what is found in the passage. While the passage states cats can see better with less illumination than humans, that doesn't mean their vision is *superior* to humans. The third answer is a "false comparison." The fourth answer is not mentioned.

Let's try another example!

The ostrich is a species of bird native to Africa. It weighs between 63 and 145 kilograms. The feathers of an ostrich lack the small hooks that lock together the smooth external feathers of flying birds. Their feathers are soft and fluffy, and insulate them when the temperature drops. Their wings are used as stabilizers to give them better maneuverability when running. Scientists have observed that an ostrich uses them in braking, turning and making zigzag maneuvers. Essentially, they use their wings like the rudders on a boat. The ostrich has powerful legs to run away from predators and can run up to 50 kilometers per hour. Their legs serve as formidable weapons. A single kick can kill a human or other predator such as a lion. They have long, sharp claws on their two-toed feet. Ostriches typically eat plants, in addition to roots and seeds, but will also consume insects and lizards if they are available.

What can be inferred about ostriches?

- They are unable to fly
- They are not found outside of Africa
- They use their claws to capture prey
- They are herbivores

The correct answer is the first answer. The passage states that *"The feathers of an ostrich lack the small hooks that lock together the smooth external feathers of flying birds."* We can therefore infer that ostriches are unable to fly. The second answer is "too extreme." The third answer is not mentioned. The fourth answer is not true (they eat insects and lizards, so they are not herbivores.)

Here is another example:

Motorola's prototype cellular phone was nicknamed "The Brick." It was used to make the first cellular phone call in 1973. This prototype gave the user only thirty minutes of talk time before it ran out of power and had to be charged for ten hours. It took another decade for Motorola to launch the phone publicly in the 1980's, but it had not lost its size or antennae and was so difficult to use that Motorola put a sticker with instructions on the back explaining how to make a phone call. These cell phones cost $3,995, and could only store thirty phone numbers. It cost a whopping $49 to make a thirty-minute phone call. Thus, the user had to be prudent when making calls from the device to avoid incurring astronomical fees. In the mid-1980's, a Finnish company called Nokia launched GSM handsets that could send data along with voice. The antennae shrunk along with the battery, and the ability to choose a personal ringtone and send text messages were thought to be the cutting edge of technology. When Apple entered the market, the iPhone changed everything. Cell phones are now sleek and portable. In terms of functionality and features, they rival modern computers and, in some ways, exceed them.

It can be inferred that early cell phones

- were only used in case of emergency
- could not be used to make international calls

- were bulky and cumbersome
- did not have memory storage capabilities

The third answer is correct. We can infer this because these phones were nicknamed “The Brick.” Bricks are bulky and cumbersome. The first answer goes beyond the information in the paragraph. The second answer “could be true” but we can’t be sure. The fourth answer is not true.

Here is another example:

While digging a well near Xi’an, China in 1974, workers unearthed a clay figure of a soldier poised for battle. The workers alerted Chinese authorities, who sent archaeologists to investigate. What was uncovered was one of the most astonishing archaeological finds in the world: The Terracotta Army. This enormous collection of underground pottery from the Qin dynasty includes 8,000 warriors, 130 chariots, and 150 horses. It even includes several figures of entertainment such as acrobats and musicians. Incredibly, many of the warriors stand at a life-like six feet tall. While workers continue the process of excavation, a lot of information has been collected about this remarkable discovery. The Army was commissioned by the Emperor Qin Shi Huang for his mausoleum in approximately 210 BC. It took 700,000 workers over 38 years to create the figures that were ultimately buried with the Emperor. The purpose of this Army was to protect and entertain the Emperor in the afterlife. The soldiers face east, the direction of China’s enemies at the time.

What can be inferred about the Terracotta Army?

- The intention behind its creation remains unclear
- There were more figures of entertainment than warriors
- It was built to be the same size as China’s Army
- Many of the figures are still buried underground

The correct answer is the fourth answer. The passage states that *“workers continue the process of excavation...”* No other answer can be inferred *based only* on the passage. The first answer is not true because the passage states *“The purpose of this Army was to protect and entertain the Emperor in the*

afterlife." The second answer is a "false comparison." The third answer does not reflect any information in the passage- it is "not mentioned."

Here is another example to try:

The Earth's core is the extremely hot, dense center of the planet. Shaped like a ball, it is about 2,900 kilometers below the Earth's surface, with a radius of about 1,220 kilometers. This inner core is made of a nickel-iron alloy and some light elements. The core also contains a markedly high amount of sulfur; in fact, 90% of the Earth's sulfur is found in its core. In 1936, the scientist Inge Lehmann determined that this inner core was solid, unlike its liquid outer core, by studying earthquake activity in New Zealand. She noted that earthquake waves called P-waves which traveled toward the inner earth could later be felt on the other side of the planet. This theory was confirmed in 1970 when more sensitive instruments were used to ascertain that waves from earthquakes deflected off the core at unexpected angles. Although the core is the hottest part of the Earth, its temperature is difficult to determine precisely. The fluctuating temperature depends on pressure, the rotation of the Earth, and the composition of the elements within. The fact that it is solid metal makes the Earth magnetic, and this magnetic field offers protection from charged particles in the solar system.

What can be inferred about the temperature of the Earth's core?

- When the temperature is at a low point, more charged particles are deflected from the Earth
- The temperature fluctuates markedly because of the high sulfur content
- It becomes much hotter when the Earth's orbit brings it closer to the Sun
- There are several variables which cause the temperature of the core to vary

The correct answer is the fourth answer. The passage says, "*The fluctuating temperature depends on pressure, the rotation of the Earth, and the composition of the elements within."* None of the other answers were mentioned, although they contain vocabulary that was used in the passage.

Here is another example:

Gold ranks high in the physical properties that make it ideal for jewelry. It does not tarnish or rust, and it is a corrosion-proof and oxidation-resistant metal. Some of our most significant cultural items are made from gold, from Olympic medals to wedding bands. Pure gold, also known as 24 karat gold, is an attractive golden yellow. Because of the softness of pure gold, it must be alloyed-- in other words, mixed-- with base metals for use in jewelry. Alloyed gold is durable and has a very high melting point. Another benefit of alloying gold with certain metals is that gold can be given a range of hues depending on the metal with which it is alloyed. Alloyed gold can be red, blue, green, or purple. Blue gold can be made by alloying pure gold with iron, and purple gold can be made by alloying it with aluminum. Such hued forms of gold are rare in jewelry. White gold, on the other hand, has become very popular in recent years, especially for wedding and engagement rings. White gold is made by alloying gold with silver, palladium, or other white metals.

What can be inferred about 24 karat gold?

- It is the most valuable type of gold
- It has more practical uses than alloyed gold
- It is too soft to be made into lasting pieces of jewelry
- It has a low melting point

The third answer is correct. The passage says, *"Because of the softness of pure gold, it must be alloyed—in other words, mixed—with base metals for use in jewelry."* Therefore, we can infer that 24 karat gold is too soft to be used in jewelry. None of the other choices can be inferred, although they look believable.

Try this example next:

Northern leopard frogs are green, medium-sized frogs approximately three to five inches long. They are identified by the dark spots that adorn their backs and legs. The range of the leopard frog spans most of North America and Mexico. The preferred habitat of the leopard frog is ponds and marshes,

but they will occasionally venture out into grasslands in search of food or mates. The leopard frog has powerful back legs which it uses to leap into the air and capture its prey. It eats flies, ants, beetles, and even smaller leopard frogs. Leopard frogs hibernate during the winter, as they cannot tolerate freezing temperatures as some frogs can. They spend the winter buried in mud in well-oxygenated spaces.

It can be inferred that the leopard frog got its name from

- its color
- its behavior
- its habitat
- its spots

The correct answer is the fourth answer. The reading says, *"They are identified by the dark spots that adorn their backs and legs."* Since leopards are famous for their spots, this is the logical inference.

I know I keep mentioning this, but it's so important to have a good vocabulary. Some inference questions may have words in them that aren't even in the passage. You have to use your vocabulary *and* "read between the lines" to get the right answer. Here is an example:

In favorable feeding conditions, the diet of the mule deer consists primarily of woody twigs, leaves, huckleberry, and flowering plants. But this is fair-weather feeding. What keeps the mule deer alive during the harsh, severe seasons of plant decay and dormancy? Because food for forage is in poor supply for long stretches of the year, the mule deer has a built- in urge to migrate rather than hibernate. Mule deer will move from high-elevation areas to lower elevation areas where there is much less snow on the ground and edible foliage is exposed. But migration is not without its risks: mule deer are threatened by electric fences, roads, human development, and predation.

It can be inferred that during the winter, the mule deer

- must hibernate to survive

- migrates in order to avoid predation
- is not able to find food in high-elevation areas
- changes its diet in order to survive

Notice the word “winter” is not even in the passage! You must use your vocabulary and your ability to make inferences. If it’s a *“harsh, severe season”* it is the winter. The third answer is correct. The first answer is not true; it is mentioned that deer “*migrate rather than hibernate*.” The second is not true as they are still at risk of predation. The fourth answer “could be true” but there is no mention of a change in the diet, just the location where they look for food.

Reference Questions

Reference questions ask you to identify the relationship between a referent (usually a pronoun or demonstrative such as *it, he, she, they, them, this, these, that,* etc.) or a phrase such as “these insects,” and the antecedent that it is referring to. In the TOEFL, the referents will be highlighted in gray, and you will choose the antecedent that it refers to.

Here’s a simple example to show you what I mean by referents and antecedents:

John has a cat. He brushes its fur every night.

Its is a referent which refers to the antecedent, “a cat.”

Here is another simple example:

Tom and Mary like to swim, but they are not confident in the water. They always wear lifejackets. They put them on every time they swim in the lake near their house.

Them is a referent which refers to the antecedent “lifejackets.”

Here is an example with a phrase:

Seth Macfarlane is an American actor, animator, filmmaker, comedian, and singer. He has performed at Carnegie Hall in New York and the Royal Albert Hall in London, both of which host both classical and popular music.

These venues are reserved for the most renowned performers.

These venues refer to “Carnegie Hall and the Royal Albert Hall.”

Steps for answering referent questions:

1. **Make sure your answer is the same in *number*** (singular or plural) **and *case*** (first person, second person, third person) **as the highlighted antecedent.**
2. **In your mind, substitute your choice with the highlighted word or words.** Make sure it makes sense, and that it does not break any grammar rules.

Note that the answer to reference questions is *almost always before* the highlighted word or words in the question. There can be exceptions, and below we will look at *both* possibilities.

Try this example:

As much as highways make life convenient for those living in urban areas, people sometimes find it easy to overlook the negative impact they can have on plant life. One unfortunate effect of highways is that the seeds of plants can get caught in the treads of the tires of passing cars, which can then carry these seeds to new environments. Once moved to these new locations, they can fall out of the tires and take root, becoming what is called an invasive species. If this invasive species reproduces quickly and competes with native plants for resources, it can cause death to native species.

The word those refers to

- plants
- highways
- areas
- people

The word they refers to

- seeds
- locations
- plants
- invasive species

For the first question, the fourth answer, “people” is correct. Note this word is AFTER the highlighted word. For the second question, the first answer, “seeds” is correct, and it is BEFORE the highlighted word.

Try this example:

Levi Strauss left Bavaria to escape persecution and began a new life in the United States in 1853. He started a business selling canvas, a durable fabric, to the miners to build their tents. When he observed that the miners did not have pants strong enough to last for months in the mines, he was inspired to make pants from the canvas he had been selling. Almost immediately, the demand for these pants, which he dubbed “Levi’s,” was so enormous he could hardly keep up with it. When he sold out of the brown canvas, he switched to a sturdy fabric from France, an indigo-blue cloth. This is how the first pair of jeans was invented.

The word it refers to

- the demand
- the cloth
- the canvas
- the pants

The first answer is correct.

Here is another example:

Over the past decade, the importance of cell phones has turned them into a necessity, rather than a luxury, for most people. The selections available when purchasing a modern cell phone gives consumers the choice of a basic mobile phone that is only capable of making calls to sophisticated, cutting-edge Smartphones with exceptional memory capabilities. In terms of functionality and features, they rival modern computers and, in some ways, exceed them.

The word they in the passage refers to

- modern computers
- functionality and features
- cell phones
- memory capabilities

The third answer is correct.

More practice:

Organic farmers are permitted to use natural chemicals, and some have dangerous side effects. For instance, a natural chemical called Rotenone is an odorless, colorless, chemical compound used as a broad-spectrum insecticide and pesticide. It occurs naturally in the seeds and stems of several plants and is therefore approved for organic farming. Recent studies have linked Rotenone to Parkinson's disease. Although the evidence is not yet robust enough to prove a definitive link, it is enough to question the merits of the "organic food is safer" argument.

The word it in the passage refers to

- a chemical compound
- the evidence
- a definitive link
- Parkinson's disease

The second answer is correct.

Here is another example:

More than three hundred caves have been found in France and Spain that contain art from prehistoric times. It has been difficult for researchers to determine the age of the paintings, since methods like radiocarbon dating can produce unreliable results if the caves are contaminated by new material. Caves tend to be littered with debris and sediments from many time periods; yet, modern technology has made it possible to test the pigment on the wall, which is a more reliable indicator of age.

The word which in the passage refers to

- the wall
- modern technology
- the pigment
- the test

The third answer is correct.

Here is a final example with two questions:

The ostrich is a species of bird native to Africa. It weighs between 63 to 145 kilograms. The feathers of an ostrich lack the small hooks that lock together the smooth external feathers of flying birds. Their feathers are soft and fluffy, and insulate them when the temperature drops. Their wings are used as stabilizers to give better maneuverability when running. Scientists have observed that an ostrich uses them in braking, turning and zigzag maneuvers. Essentially, they use their wings like the rudders on a boat. The ostrich has powerful legs to run away from predators and can run up to 50 kilometers per hour. Their legs serve as formidable weapons. A single kick can kill a human or other predator such as a lion. They have long, sharp claws on their two-toed feet. Ostriches typically eat plants, in addition to roots and

seeds, but will also dine on insects and lizards if they are available.

The word them in the passage refers to

- wings
- feathers
- legs
- claws

The word they in the passage refers to

- ostriches
- plants
- insects and lizards
- roots and seeds

For the first question, the first answer is correct. For the second question, the third answer is correct.

A recap of the key points you need to know:

- Inference questions take a little longer and may require more reading than detail questions.
- The answer to an inference question will not be directly stated. You must “read between the lines.”
- Use the process of elimination.
- Inference questions are sometimes a clever paraphrase of a sentence you read in the reading.
- Beware of common traps: Answers that contain information beyond what is presented in the passage, answers that could be true, answers that look appealing but are not correct, and answers that use extreme language. Do not choose an answer that is untrue or not mentioned.
- For referent questions, make sure the referent agrees in number and case with your choice. Make sure your answer does not break any grammatical rules.