



Literacy at Hartford Public High School

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Making Inferences from When Kids Can't Read

We make inferences all the time; we tell kids to make inferences. We might even define making an inference as having the ability to connect what is in the text with what is in the mid to create an educated guess.

Try this exercise with your students. Ask them to read the following paragraph and then write what they think is happening in this text.

He put down \$10.00 at the window. The woman behind the window gave \$4.00. The person next to him gave \$3.00, but he gave it back to her. So, when they went inside, she bought him a large bag of popcorn.

Comparing the students' versions of what happened in the paragraph can be very instructive, for they may differ in small ways or even totally contradict each other. Some students may not be able to draw any inferences from the simple text. Some of the information that helps to make inferences is in stated in the text (text-based inferences). Other information comes from knowledge that the student already possesses about the world (knowledge-based inferences).

Students use inferences to create an "internal text"—his or her personal thoughts about what is happening in the text. Readers construct internal texts as they connect the information in the "external text" (the printed information) with what they already know.

To determine what is happening in the example above, students must

- Figure out to whom or what the pronouns refer
- Give explanations for events
- Decide what is taking place
- Decide why the characters are doing what they are doing
- Figure out the relationship between the characters or the facts
- Use their own knowledge of the world to provide details.

Rather than vaguely telling students to make an inference, a teacher can give students specific types of inferences to make by using comments such as the following:

- Look for pronouns and figure out what to connect them to.
- Figure out explanations for these events.
- Think about the setting and see what details you can add.
- Think about something that you know about this (insert topic) and see how that fits with what's in the text.
- After you read this section, see if you can explain why what happened happened.
- Look at how the author said (insert a specific quote). Why do you think that this was included in the piece?
- Look for words that you don't know and see if there are any words in the sentence and the surrounding sentences that can give you an idea of what those unknown words mean.
- As you read this section, look for clues that would tell you how the author might feel about (insert a topic).

Making inferences is an important, but difficult-to-learn, skill. Make sure to model it for your students frequently.