



Literacy at Hartford Public High School

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Making Valid Inferences

From Helping Middle and High School Readers

Inferences take a simple sentence beyond the literal meaning of the text; as a result, a sentence may have different meanings for different readers. Each reader uses a mental model and process to figure out meaning. He/she mentally reconstructs the scenario by putting together the words of the text with prior knowledge in order to make inferences.

Some common definitions of inferencing include:

- The process of judging, concluding, or reasoning from some given information;
- Using reasoning skills to formulate conclusions from something that is known or assumed to be true;
- The relationship between two terms, concepts, or ideas;
- Bringing more to the reading activity than what is encountered on the printed page.

The following strategies are critical to learning how to make accurate inferences:

- **Contrast:** relationships among antonyms. For example, a warm morning as contrasted with a cold one.
- **Predication:** terms are connected by a verb or verbal relationship. For example, oil is a source of energy.
- **Similarity:** relationships between terms with similar meanings. For example, a delectable evening is similar to an enjoyable evening.
- **Completion:** a complete expression is given by two or three words. For example, St. Patrick's Church, Lake Michigan, school principal.
- **Coordination:** terms that belong to the same category. For example, fruits and vegetables.
- **Subordination:** terms that are components of another term. For example, the dolphin is a mammal.

- **Equality:** relations involving logical equivalence. For example, 50% is the same as half of 100.
- **Whole-Part:** a relations which indicates that a whole contains parts. For example, a pizza is a whole, of which a slice is a part.
- **Part-Whole:** a relation that implies a piece as a part of a whole. For example, a month is a part of a year.
- **Word Relations:** imply grammatical relationships between words. For example, the present and past tenses of verbs.
- **Nonsemantic Relationships:** words related to each other, which involve additional properties of the words. For example, the verb SEE and the noun SEA.

Inferences are not randomly selected. Their development relies almost completely on prior knowledge. They follow orderly rules based on background experiences and social relations. The text provides clues to meaning, which, when used in conjunction with the reader's prior knowledge of the topic and the text, results in inferences.

Teachers can help students develop more effective inferencing skills—skills that enable them to make reading more than a mechanical, word-by-word process—by modeling and providing opportunities for students to practice approaches such as associating, relating, and describing.

Asking students to develop and answer analysis and synthesis questions is a good technique for developing inference skills (e.g., What evidence can you find to support that Gandhi was a pioneer in the realm of consciousness?). Discuss the students' questions and answers, asking students why they made particular decisions about the meaning contained in the text.

Encourage students to use these words in the questions they create: apply, classify, compute, demonstrate, manage, illustrate, employ.