Making Inferences

An inference is a conclusion you reach by applying logic to the evidence you are given. Making inferences while reading is a strategy that will help you learn, remember, and apply what you have read. When you make inferences you are “reading between the lines.” This tactic is similar to what Sherlock Holmes does when he sees that Dr. Watson has a tan and makes a conclusion about where Watson has recently traveled. You already make inferences all of the time. For example, if you go over to a friend’s house and they point at the sofa and say, “Don’t sit there; Candy 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. Further, you know that 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 infer enough and don’t need to ask any more questions to know that you do not want to sit there.

Other examples of inferences are when a doctor makes a diagnosis about why you are sick or when a mechanic figures out what is wrong with your car. Try some yourself. Imagine you witness each of the following—what can you infer about each situation?

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

2) You are at a corner and see two cars stopped at an intersection. The rear car starts honking its horn.

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

For the first example, you probably came up with something simple, such as that there was a baby in the stroller. For the second, you could infer 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 of being punished. You do not know for certain that these inferences are true. Just like Sherlock Holmes, you would have to test your theories. If you checked 100 strollers, 99 times you would find a baby, but maybe one time you would find something else, like groceries.

Practice 1: Write a conclusion you could infer from the following:

1) You see a man running and frantically waving at a bus that is pulling away from a bus stop.
2) You are giving a speech in front of an audience and notice several people laughing and pointing at something on your pants.

3) Your sister comes home from spending the evening with her friends, slams the front door and runs to her room while crying.

Making Inferences from Reading Material

To make inferences from reading material, 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 guess, even though the answer is not stated in the reading passage. You need to make a judgment that can be supported, just as you could reasonably infer there is a baby in a stroller, because even though you do not know for certain, it is the most likely possibility. For example, at the end of the story “The Five Orange Pips,” you are not told what exactly happened to the Lone Star, but you can infer that it was wrecked in a storm based on the other details provided:

- There was a storm
- The ship did not arrive at its next destination
- Wreckage with the initials L.S. were seen by other sailors

You could claim that the ship was taken by pirates, was sunk by a whale, or even that it landed on a deserted island; however, the only reasonable explanation from the facts is the same one implied by Dr. Watson: the ship was destroyed by the storm.

When you are asked to make an inference, go back over the reading and look for hints within the text, such as words that are directly related to the question. Also check for tone: are there words or phrases that indicate whether something is positive or negative? For example, if someone is referred to as being sharp, friendly, and loyal, you would know that those are positive attributes; whereas, if they were referred to as being slovenly, dull, and selfish, those are negative attributes. 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. Although they save money on fuel, hybrid cars cost more up front than gas-
fueled cars. A new hybrid car can cost almost $3,500 more than the same car configured to run just on gasoline.

Which of the following can you infer from the passage?

a) Hybrid cars are more dangerous than other options.

b) Toyota is making a lot of money from the Prius.

c) Cars that use gasoline are going to destroy the environment.

d) 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 a. Choice b could be the answer, since the passage mentions that hybrids cost more to purchase. 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 c is true; after all, many people want hybrid cars because emissions are harmful to the environment. Although this choice seems accurate, it does not follow from anything in the passage. Choice d 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 b. Choice b 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 d is the correct answer.

Practice 2: Read the following paragraphs, and answer the questions that follow.

A. Redwood trees are rare. They are found only on the coastal slopes of Northern California and Oregon, and in China. Redwoods were thought to be extinct in China, but they were rediscovered by a Chinese forester in 1948. These trees can grow hundreds of feet high and live to be thousands of years old. They are endangered due to logging, pollution, and global warming, which is reducing the amount of fog on the coast. Redwoods get their water from the fog.

Which of the following can you infer from the passage:
a) The Chinese logged the Redwoods almost into extinction.

b) Redwood trees will continue to grow taller throughout their whole lives.

c) Using non-recyclable products will kill Redwood trees.

d) Redwoods can only grow in places that get a lot of fog.

B. Shannelle is a very good baker. Whenever there is a bake sale to raise money for a cause, Shannelle is always asked to make cupcakes or a pie. People say that they only come to the bake sales if they know that Shannelle is making something. She always agreed to bake things because she hated to say no to anyone. One week, her oven broke and she could not bake, so she decided to go for a hike instead. Shannelle enjoyed it so much that she realized she needed to learn to make time for herself, and not just donate all of her free time to charity.

Which of the following can you infer from the passage:

a) Shannelle is a generous person.

b) Shannelle’s mother did a good job teaching her how to bake.

c) The people in the community were taking advantage of Shannelle.

d) Shannelle’s brother broke her oven so she would get a day off.