Making Inferences

Making Inferences are a reading comprehension strategy that will help you learn, remember and apply what you have read. Another way of thinking about it is learning to “read between the lines.” This is similar to what Holmes does when he sees a tattoo and a pin, and then concludes that the subject has been to China and is a Mason. Holmes is very good at this, while Dr. Watson is not very good at it.

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. Next, that the reason to not 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 kinds of inferences you may be familiar with are when the 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 the situation?

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

2) You are at a corner and see two parked cars at an intersection, and the one in back starts honking his 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, 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. Finally, you could reasonably guess that the dog had done something wrong and was afraid to get punished. You do not know for 100% certainty that these 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**

To make inferences from reading, 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 contained 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, but not reasonably infer that there are groceries, even though both would technically be a “guess.” 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 eaten 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, and that was the ship was destroyed by the storm.

When you are asked an inference question, 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 their 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 attribute, whereas if they were referred to as being slovenly, dull, and selfish, then 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 and vans. Compared to similar gas-fueled options, hybrid cars also cost more money up front. A new hybrid car 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 then 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 is implied, if the car cost $3,500 more than other cars, then Toyota would be making a lot of money by selling the car. 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, that is why people want to make hybrid cars, because they believe that emissions are contributing the carbon gases and environmental damage, but this is not mentioned in the paragraph. Even if you think it is true, the answer has to be supported somehow from the text to be the correct answer to the problem.

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**. Now you are thinking **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** has to be the correct answer.

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

Redwood trees, or *Sequoias*, 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 loss of habitat, logging, pollution, and global warming which is reducing the amount of fog on the coast, which is how Redwoods take in water.

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
Shannelle is a very good baker. Whenever there is a bake-sale to raise money for something, 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. Because she is so talented, she is asked to bake things often 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. She 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.

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