



The Reading Room: Tips and Tricks

Inferencing: A Key Skill for Reading Comprehension and Critical Thinking

Inferencing skills are one of the key skills required for reading comprehension. In fact, according to Marzano (2010), Inference is a “foundational skill” and is considered a prerequisite for higher-order thinking. Good comprehension simply cannot happen without inferencing, and inference is just a big word that means conclusion or judgement. If you infer that something has happened, you do not see, hear, feel, smell, or taste the actual event. However, considering what you know, it makes sense to think that the event has happened. Making inferences means choosing the most likely explanation from the facts at hand. This is a skill that we develop from a young age. Children as young as six years old start to use inference when reading. This is because making inferences is one of the most enjoyable parts of reading. We take the events of a text and use them to predict what comes next. If we didn’t infer, how could we enjoy mysteries, detective novels, or even romances?

Inferencing is a cognitive process that involves drawing conclusions or making predictions based on available information and prior knowledge, even when explicit details are not provided. It’s a fundamental skill used in everyday life, reading comprehension, and critical thinking, allowing us to “read between the lines” or understand what’s implied rather than directly stated.

So, What is Inferencing, Anyway?

In essence, inferencing refers to the act of making educated guesses about information that isn’t directly expressed through words but instead is suggested through context, tone, and other cues. Especially when understanding language and communication, it is very important that children get the experience of high-quality discussion, along with exposure to a range of texts also helps to develop comprehension skills. Therefore, these skills are a crucial part of a developing reader’s comprehension. The ability to infer also helps readers to think critically about a text and engage with it academically.

For example, imagine someone says, “It’s really quiet in here,” while looking around at a room full of people. The inference might be that the speaker thinks something is wrong, or that the room is too tense. While this isn’t explicitly said, it’s a reasonable conclusion based on the tone and context of the conversation.

There are Two Primary Types of Inferences

Logical Inferences: These involve conclusions that follow from facts or statements. They're based on reasoning and are typically deducible. Logical inferences are supported by facts or clues in the text or situation.

- Example: If someone is wearing a heavy coat and gloves in the middle of winter, we can infer that the weather is cold.

Personal Inferences: These involve using prior knowledge and personal experiences to interpret or predict something. Personal inferences tend to be more subjective.

- Example: If a person walks into a room and immediately looks disappointed, we might infer they didn't find what they were hoping for, based on similar experiences or general understanding of human behavior.

The Importance of Inferencing

Inferencing is vital in various aspects of life, particularly in language processing, reading comprehension, and problem-solving. This is why it matters...

- **Enhances Reading Comprehension:** Inferences allow readers to go beyond the literal meaning of a text and uncover deeper meanings. For example, readers can infer a character's motivations, emotions, or future actions, even if the text does not explicitly state these details.
- **Fosters Critical Thinking:** Being able to make inferences is a key part of critical thinking because it requires individuals to look at the evidence, evaluate context, and draw conclusions. This skill is essential for problem-solving and decision-making.
- **Supports Communication:** In verbal communication, much of what is conveyed is implied rather than stated directly. Being able to understand these implicit messages helps people navigate social interactions more effectively.
- **Encourages Empathy:** Inferences allow people to understand other people's perspectives, especially in ambiguous situations. For example, by inferring how someone feels based on their body language or tone, we can respond with greater sensitivity.

How Inferencing Works

Inferencing operates in several steps, often subconsciously, and it often happens through a process.

- **Observation of Information:** The first step is the collection of information—whether through text, conversation, body language, or other cues.
- **Contextual Analysis:** The next step involves considering the context in which the information appears. This could involve factors like the situation, surrounding details, or past experiences.
- **Application of Prior Knowledge:** Using prior knowledge, experiences, and common sense, students can draw conclusions or fill in gaps where information is missing.
- **Conclusion:** Finally, a conclusion is reached based on the available information, context, and personal understanding. This is often the inferred message or meaning.

For example, in a sentence like "Jane put on her raincoat and grabbed an umbrella before leaving," a reader might infer that it's going to rain or that the weather forecast predicts rain.

Teaching and Developing Inferencing Skills

While inferencing is a natural cognitive process, there are many ways you could teach inference skills. You must, however, consider the age of the students and if they have had prior difficulties in comprehension. Some teaching methods could include showing visual clues or pictures, creating mystery games, using picture book, and encouraging an inference journal. Inferencing can also be developed and refined. Here are some tips for improving inferencing abilities:

- **Practice with Texts:** Engaging with texts that require interpretation like poetry, fiction, and even news articles can help improve inferencing skills. Readers can practice identifying implied meanings, motivations, and themes.
- **Ask Questions:** After reading a passage or having a conversation, asking questions like "What might this imply?" or "What can I infer from the character's actions?" can deepen understanding and improve the ability to infer what is happening in the text.
- **Use Visual Cues:** In addition to text, body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions are all strong clues for making inferences. Paying attention to these signals helps sharpen inferencing, especially in social interactions.
- **Engage in Discussions:** Participating in discussions about complex topics encourages critical thinking. It also exposes individuals to different perspectives, which can help with inferencing.
- **Consider Multiple Perspectives:** When making inferences, it's helpful to consider multiple interpretations before drawing a conclusion. This approach encourages more thoughtful thinking.

Challenges in Inferencing

While inferencing is an essential skill, it also presents some challenges:

- **Over-reliance on Assumptions:** Making an inference based on incomplete or incorrect information can lead to inaccurate conclusions. It's important to be aware of biases and verify information before drawing conclusions.
- **Cultural Differences:** Different cultures may interpret certain cues, symbols, or expressions differently. Misunderstanding context or norms can result in flawed inferences.
- **Difficulty with Ambiguous Information:** In some cases, the information available may be too vague, or the context may be insufficient to make a reasonable inference.

Inferencing is a vital skill in communication, reading comprehension, and everyday life. By understanding its processes and practicing the art of making educated guesses based on context and prior knowledge, students can enhance their ability to interpret both written and spoken information. Whether you're interpreting a story, engaging in a conversation, or solving a problem, inferencing empowers our students to make connections, fill in the gaps, and understand what is being communicated.

Resources

Marzano, R. (2010). Teaching inference. Educational Leadership
<https://www.ascd.org/.publications/educational-leadership>

Happy Frog: Why You Need to Teach Inference Skills to Struggling Readers
<https://shop.happyfroglearning.com/blog/why-you-need-to-teach-inference-skills-to-struggling-readers#:~:text=Inference%20skills%20are%20one%20of,prerequisite%20for%20higher%20order%20thinking.>

Bedrock Learning: Inference in Reading Comprehension
<https://bedrocklearning.org/literacy-blogs/inference-in-reading-comprehension/>

EDVIEW360: Reading Between the Lines: What Does Inference Mean in Reading
<https://www.voyagersopris.com/vsl/blog/what-does-inference-mean-in-reading>

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