Inferences and Conclusions

Making Inferences and Drawing Conclusions

Read with Purpose and Meaning
Drawing conclusions refers to information that is implied or inferred. This means that the information is never clearly stated.

Writers often *tell* you more than they say directly. They give you hints or clues that help you "read between the lines." Using these clues to give you a deeper understanding of your reading is called *inferring*. When you **infer**, you go beyond the surface details to see other meanings that the details suggest or *imply* (not stated). When the meanings of words are not stated clearly in the context of the text, they may be *implied* – that is, suggested or hinted at. When meanings are implied, you may *infer* them.

Inference is just a big word that means a **conclusion** or **judgement**. If you infer that something has happened, you do not see, hear, feel, smell, or taste the actual event. But from what you know, it makes sense to think that it has happened. You make inferences everyday. Most of the time you do so without thinking about it. Suppose you are sitting in your car stopped at a red signal light. You hear screeching tires, then a loud crash and breaking glass. You *see nothing*, but you *infer* that there has been a car accident. We all know the sounds of screeching tires and a crash. We know that these sounds *almost always* mean a car accident. But there could be some other reason, and therefore another explanation, for the sounds. Perhaps it was not an accident involving two moving vehicles. Maybe an angry driver rammed a parked car. Or maybe someone played the sound of a car crash from a recording. Making *inferences* means choosing the most likely explanation from the facts at hand. There are several ways to help you draw conclusions from what an author may be implying. The following are descriptions of the various ways to aid you in reaching a conclusion.

General Sense
The meaning of a word may be implied by the general sense of its context, as the meaning of the word *incarcerated* is implied in the following sentence:

> Murderers are usually *incarcerated* for longer periods of time than robbers.

You may infer the meaning of *incarcerated* by answering the question "What usually happens to those found guilty of murder or robbery?" What have you inferred as the meaning of the word *incarcerated*?

If you answered that they are locked up in jail, prison, or a penitentiary, you correctly inferred the meaning of *incarcerated*.

Examples

When the meaning of the word is not implied by the general sense of its context, it may be implied by examples.
For instance,

> Those who enjoy belonging to clubs, going to parties, and inviting friends often to their homes for dinner are *gregarious*.

You may infer the meaning of *gregarious* by answering the question, "What word or words describe people who belong to clubs, go to parties a lot, and often invite friends over to their homes for dinner?" What have you inferred as the meaning of the word *gregarious*?

If you answered *social* or something like: "people who enjoy the company of others", you correctly inferred the meaning of *gregarious*.

Antonyms and Contrasts
When the meaning of a word is not implied by the general sense of its context or by examples, it may be implied by an antonym or by a contrasting thought in a context. **Antonyms** are words that have opposite meanings, such as happy and sad. For instance,

> Ben is fearless, but his brother is *timorous*.

You may infer the meaning of *timorous* by answering the question, "If Ben is fearless and Jim is very different from Ben with regard to fear, then what word describes Jim?"

If you answered a word such as *timid*, or *afraid*, or *fearful*, you inferred the meaning of *timorous*.

A **contrast** in the following sentence implies the meaning of *credence*:

> Dad gave *credence* to my story, but Mom's reaction was one of total disbelief.

You may infer the meaning of *credence* by answering the question, "If Mom's reaction was disbelief and Dad's reaction was very different from Mom's, what was Dad's reaction?"

If you answered that Dad believed the story, you correctly inferred the meaning of credence; it means *belief*.

Be Careful of the Meaning You Infer!
When a sentence contains an unfamiliar word, it is sometimes possible to infer the general meaning of the sentence without inferring the exact meaning of the unknown word. For instance,

> When we invite the Paulsons for dinner, they never invite us to their home for a meal; however, when we have the Browns to dinner, they always *reciprocate*.

In reading this sentence, some students infer that the Browns are more desirable dinner guests than the Paulsons without inferring the exact meaning of *reciprocate*. Other students conclude that the Browns differ from the Paulsons in that they do something in return when they are invited for dinner; these students conclude correctly that *reciprocate* means "to do something in return."

In drawing conclusions (making inferences), you are really getting at the ultimate meaning of things – what is important, why it is important, how one event influences another, how one happening leads to another.

Simply getting the facts in reading is not enough.
You must think about what those facts mean to you.