

MAKING AN INFERENCE

In making an inference, the reader is required to reach a decision based on evidence he thinks to be true. For example, perhaps you pass a man on the street who is wearing overalls covered with black stains. His calloused hands are also covered with grime. You might infer that he is a garage mechanic. Making inferences challenges the mind to work on a high level. It forces the mind to bridge the gaps between the obvious and the suggested, the stated and the unstated.

An inference is not a fact An inference is an educated or informed guess based on an observation. For example, you may walk into a building and say to a friend, "It is sure hot out there today." The statement you have made is an inference, not a fact, for to someone else the weather may not be hot but comfortable. If you say, "The temperature is 90°," then this is a fact--not an inference. A fact is verifiable: you look at a thermometer; the temperature records 90°.

As another example, you can read that the Civil War was fought in 1860-1865. This is a fact based on this fact, you then say, "The Civil War was a long war," a statement that is not a fact but an inference. It's a safe inference, a reasonable inference, but, nonetheless, it is an inference because it is your observation stated in the language of opinion rather than in the language of fact.

An inference requires the reader to move beyond the printed word and understand the author's point Furthermore, an inference involves the discovery of the author's main thought which has been suggested but not clearly stated. (It is **not** a wild guess. It is **not stated** in the paragraph. It must be based on the author's actual words, logic and purpose.)

Notice how many inferences can be made in the following sentence. "When the phone finally rang, Joe leaped from the edge of his chair and grabbed for it." The word finally suggests that Joe probably had been waiting for the call for some time. Leaped and grabbed support this inference and imply that he felt nervous and anxious. His position on the edge of the chair indicates uneasiness and expectation. The call was important, as can be inferred by the key words. A reader can make accurate and reasonable inference based on what appears to be true if:

1. he determines the author's point of view and his reasons for writing.
2. he analyzes all the information presented.
3. he reads and thinks beyond the printed words.

EXERCISE

Directions: The following passages were selected to give you practice with "inferences." Select the answer, that in your judgment, is the closest inference that can be made about the passage.

1. THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER Mark Twain

The boys bent their heads together and scarcely breathed. A muffled sound of voices floated up from the far end of the graveyard. "Look! See there!" whispered Tom. "What is it?" "It's devil-fire. Oh, Tom, this is awful." Some vague figures approached through the gloom, swinging an old-fashioned tin lantern that freckled the ground with innumerable little spangles of light. Presently, Huckleberry whispered with a shudder:

"It's the devils, sure enough. Three of 'em! Lordy, Tom, we're goners! Can you pray?"

"I'll try, but don't you be afeard. They ain't going to hurt us. Now I lay me down to sleep, I—"

The fact that they are in a graveyard at night, one might infer that Tom and Huckleberry are

- a. running away from home.
- b. an adventure loving duo.
- c. visiting the grave of a loved one.
- d. the victims of foul play.

2. ROBINSON CRUSOE Daniel Defoe

I was perfectly confounded at the sight, and knew not what the meaning of it should be. Friday called out to me in English as well as he could, "O master! you see English mans eat prisoner as well as savage mans." "Why," says I, "Friday, do you think they are a-going to eat them then?" "Yes," says Friday, "they will eat them:" "No, no," says I, "Friday, I am afraid they will murder them indeed, but you may be sure they will not eat them."

It may be clearly inferred from this paragraph that

- a. Friday was not an Englishman.
- b. Englishmen are superior to savages.
- c. Friday likes to eat human flesh.
- d. Englishmen are absolutely reasonable.

3. CHARLOTTE'S WEB E. B. White

"I'm staying right here," grumbled the rat. "I haven't the slightest interest in fairs." "That's because you've never been to one," remarked the old sheep. "A fair is a rat's paradise. Everyone spills food at a fair. A rat can creep out late at night and have a feast. In the horse barn you will find oats that the trotters and pacers have spilled. In the trampled grass of the infield, you will find old discarded lunch boxes containing the foul remains of peanut butter sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs, cracker crumbs, bits of doughnuts, and particles of cheese. Everywhere is loot for a rat, in tents, in booths, in hay lofts--why, a fair has enough disgusting left-over food to satisfy a whole army of rats."

The speaker knew that the

- a. rat really wanted to go to the fair.
- b. way to a rat's heart is through his stomach.
- c. fair grounds would be in tidy condition.
- d. fair-goers would welcome a rat's presence.

4. THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER Mark Twain

Tom appeared on the sidewalk with a bucket of whitewash and a long-handled brush. He surveyed the fence, and all gladness left him and a deep melancholy settled down upon his spirit. Thirty yards of board fence nine feet high. Life to him seemed hollow, and existence but a burden. Sighing, he dipped his brush and passed it along the topmost plank; repeated the operation; did it again; compared the insignificant whitewashed streak with the far-reaching continent of unwhitewashed fence, and sat down on a tree-box discouraged.

Tom sat down discouraged because he

- a. had the wrong color paint.
- b. didn't know how to paint.
- c. didn't want to do the job.
- d. was afraid of heights.

5. UP FROM SLAVERY Booker T. Washington

In order to be successful in any kind of undertaking, I think the main thing is for one to grow to the point where he completely forgets himself; that is, to lose himself in a great cause. In proportion as one loses himself in this way, in the same degree does he get the highest happiness out of his work.

From this passage, one can infer that the author is:

- a. ambitious.
- b. foolhardy.
- c. dedicated.
- d. lazy.

6. THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS Kenneth Grahame

. . . "Ho, ho!" he said to himself as he marched along with his chin in the air, "What a clever Toad I am! There is surely no animal equal to me for cleverness in the whole world! My enemies shut me up in prison, encircled by sentries, watched night and day by warders; I walk out through them all, by sheer ability coupled with courage. They pursue me with engines, and policemen, and revolvers; I snap my fingers at them, and vanish, laughing, into space. I am, unfortunately, thrown into a canal by a woman fat of body and very evil-minded. What of it? I swim ashore, I seize her horse, I ride off in triumph, and I sell the horse for a whole pocketful of money and an excellent breakfast! Ho, ho! I am The Toad, the handsome, the popular, the successful Toad!"

An obvious conclusion is that the Toad is

- a. contemptuous of himself.
- b. ashamed of himself.
- c. pleased with himself.
- d. worried about himself.

7. SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT George Orwell

. . . I marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people jostling at my heels. At the bottom, when you got away from the huts, there was a metalled road and beyond that a miry waste of paddy fields a thousand yards across, not yet ploughed but soggy from the first rains and dotted with coarse grass. The elephant was standing eight yards from the road, his left side towards us.

He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach. He was tearing up bunches of grass, beating them against his knees to clean them and stuffing them into his mouth.

The passage leads one to surmise that

- a. the crowd is excited.
- b. the speaker is uncomfortable.
- c. the elephant will charge.
- d. the area is unsafe.

8. BAKER'S BLUEJAY YARN Mark Twain

A jay hasn't got any more principle than a Congressman. A jay will lie, a jay will steal, a jay will deceive, a jay will betray; and four times out of five, a jay will go back on his solemnest promise. The sacredness of an obligation is a thing which you can't cram into no bluejay's head. Now, on top of all this, there's another thing; a jay can outswear any gentleman in the mines. Yes sir, a jay is everything a man is!

From this description, we may infer that the author is

- a. bitter, to an extreme.
- b. critically humorous.
- c. informed about birds in general.
- d. an unhappy person.

9. VICTORY Joseph Conrad

Ricardo nodded, satisfied. Both these white men looked on native life as a mere play of shadows. A play of shadows the dominant race could walk through unaffected and disregarded in the pursuit of its incomprehensible aims and needs. No. Native craft did not count of course. It was an empty, solitary part of the sea, Schomberg expounded further.

These words imply a feeling of white

- a. compassion.
- b. understanding.
- c. superiority.
- d. appreciation.

10. THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE Edgar Allan Poe

Oh, no; we had no conveniences for keeping him here. He is at a livery stable in the Rue Dubourg, just by. You can get him in the morning. Of course, you are prepared to identify the property?

We may infer that the speaker is one who is

- a. unhappy about the situation.
- b. a thoughtless individual.
- c. not careful about his work.
- d. just doing his job.

11. THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA Ernest Hemingway

He is a great fish, and I must convince him, he thought. I must never let him learn his strength nor what he could do if he made his run. If I were him, I would put in everything now and go until something broke. But, thank God, they are not as intelligent as we who kill them; although they are more noble and more able....

It will uncramp though, he thought. Surely, it will uncramp to help my right hand. There are three things that are brothers: the fish and my two hands. It must uncramp. It is unworthy of it to be cramped. The fish had slowed again and was going at his usual pace.

The old man's thoughts indicate that he and the fish are

- a. arch enemies.
- b. wise, strong, and noble.
- c. old and failing.
- d. doomed to kill one another.

12. THE GRAPES OF WRATH John Steinbeck

And it came about that owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it, and remembered only that they owned it, remembered only what they gained and lost by it. And some of the farms grew so large that one man could not even conceive of them any more, so large that it took bookkeepers to keep track of interest and gain and loss; chemists to test the soil, to replenish; straw bosses to see that the stooping men were moving along the rows swiftly as the material of their bodies could stand.

The author most strongly implies that

- a. life on a farm is hard.
- b. terms have changed greatly.
- c. the changes on farms are for the worse.
- d. farms provide work for many people.

13. MEN'S WIVES William M. Thackeray

Well, Mrs. Crump's little grandchild was born, entirely to the dissatisfaction, I must say, of his father; who, when the infant was brought to him in the Fleet, had him abruptly covered up in his cloak again, from which he had been removed by the jealous prison door-keepers; why, do you think? Walter had a quarrel with one of them, and the wretch persisted in believing that the bundle Mrs. Crump was bringing to her son-in-law was a bundle of disguised brandy!

We can assume from this passage that

- a. the small infant was premature.
- b. the father disliked Mrs. Crump.
- c. the brandy bottles, at that time, were large.
- d. there was hostility between the father and mother.

14. SISTER CARRIE Theodore Dreiser

Carrie was certainly better than this man, as she was superior, mentally, to Drouet. She came fresh from the air of the village, the light of the country still in her eye. Here was neither guile nor rapacity. There was slight inherited traits of both in her, but they were rudimentary. She was too full of wonder and desire to be greedy. She still looked about her upon the great maze of the city without understanding. Hurstwood felt the bloom and the youth. He picked her as he would the fresh fruit of a tree. He felt as fresh in her presence as one who is taken out of the flash of summer to the first cool breath of spring.

One is led to believe that Carrie's most desirable trait is

- a. intelligence.
- b. innocence.
- c. ambition.
- d. beauty.

15. JANE EYRE Charlotte Bronte

While arranging my hair, I looked at my face in the glass, and felt it was no longer plain: there was hope in its aspect, and life in its colour: and my eyes seemed as if they had beheld the fount of fruition, and borrowed beams from the lustrous ripple. I had often been unwilling to look at my master, because I feared he could not be pleased at my looks; but I was sure I might lift my face to his now, and not cool his affection by its expression. I took a plain but clean and light summer dress from my drawer and put it on: it seemed no attire had ever so well become me; because none had I ever worn in so blissful a mood.

The speaker's words lead one to surmise that

- a. she is vain.
- b. she cannot face the truth about herself.
- c. she feels happiness makes one look pretty.
- d. she hates her master.

ANSWER KEY

1. b

6. c

11. b

2. a

7. b

12. c

3. b

8. b

13. c

4. c

9. c

14. b

5. c

10. d

15. c