

MAKING INFERENCES BEGINNING LEVEL

Drawing Inferences

You have been drawing inferences all your life. You began to make many kinds of inferences when you were a baby. You have been getting better at the skill all the time. Yet, many students panic when they are asked to draw inferences on a reading test. They don't know how to go about the task. This handout will show you how to draw inferences from what you read.

What Are Inferences?

When did you first learn to draw inferences? You learned long ago—even before you can remember. Your first inferences were probably about food. When you saw an adult coming toward you with a jar of baby food, you knew it was time to eat. No words had to be spoken. You knew you were hungry. You recognized the jar and the label and thought, "Dinner!" You had learned how to draw the right inference.

Today, you use this skill on many occasions. If you see smoke, you may infer that there is a fire. If you hear an ambulance siren wailing on the highway, you may infer that there has been an accident. If you see a black cloud approaching from the west, you may infer that there will be a storm. You don't think about the process each time. You don't say, "Wow! I'm drawing an inference!" But that's what you're doing.

An *INFERENCE* is a conclusion reached *WITHOUT A DIRECT STATEMENT OR EXPLANATION*. If your friend says, "The Red Sox lost 11-2 last night," she has made a direct statement. But suppose that, rather than making a direct statement, she says, "Those poor Red Sox. Weak pitching. Three errors. Will they ever start winning again?" You may *INFER* that the Red Sox lost last night, even though she hasn't said it.

Inferences need to be checked for accuracy. For example, the wailing ambulance siren on the highway may not mean an accident. The ambulance might be answering a false alarm. Or perhaps someone who is ill is being rushed to a hospital. All you can do is try to draw correct, accurate inferences and then check them later if you can.

Strong and Weak Inferences

Inferences can be either strong or weak. Let's look at both kinds.

- Statement:* When the game was over, the home fans loudly cheered the players.

Inference: The home team won.
- Statement:* Joe didn't arrive at our house on time.

Inference: Joe dislikes our family.

- Inference:* There must be poison ivy in the woods. 8. _____
9. *Statement:* I can't find my science textbook.
- Inference:* It was stolen on the bus. 9. _____
10. *Statement:* Marie isn't coming to the dance.
- Inference:* She has no friends at school. 10. _____

Choosing the Strongest Inference

You have now worked with strong and weak inferences. Sometimes on a test, you will be asked to pick out the *STRONGEST* of a number of inferences. You can use clues from your reading to make this choice.

The following type of slot-completion passage is called a *cloze exercise*. In the blank space, write the letter of the phrase that makes the best sense in the paragraph's context.

There were no cars in the parking lot. The restaurant shades were drawn. An automobile with two couples drove into the parking area, paused a moment, and then _____.

- (a) put on the lights.
- (b) honked the horn.
- (c) dropped off three passengers.
- (d) drove off.
- (e) blocked the restaurant door.

Answer

The people in the car probably intended to eat at the restaurant. When they got to the parking lot, they found no cars there. Then they saw that the shades were drawn. They inferred that the restaurant was closed. You can probably infer that they left. The best answer is (d) *drove off*.

Answers

Exercise I

1. **A** *Strong* These are good reasons for potatoes tasting burnt.
2. **B** *Weak* Beth may have other reasons: lack of time, family responsibilities, desire for another activity.
3. **A** *Strong* Since all the lights have gone out, there is probably a general outage.

4. **B** *Weak* There are many possible reasons for not getting the paper: the delivery person didn't get up in time; the delivery person quit; the papers didn't reach the delivery person.
5. **A** *Strong* Failing to study is a common cause for failing a test.
6. **B** *Weak* There is no connection between failing a test and walking under a ladder.
7. **A** *Strong* If the factory is closed at 3:00 A.M., it seems clear that it does not operate around the clock.
8. **A** *Strong* Getting poison ivy five times in a row strongly suggests that there is poison ivy in the woods.
9. **B** *Weak* There are many other possible explanations: the person was careless, left the book at home or at school, or loaned it to someone else.
10. **B** *Weak* Maria may not be coming because she is ill, has something else planned, doesn't like dancing, or has other reasons.