Making Inferences: Learning to Read Between the Lines

Written material contains both stated and implied information. Stated information is clearly expressed in words. Implied information is found in the way a writer states messages. The reader’s inferences should be attempts to understand a writer’s implications through sound reasoning. A reader infers; a writer implies. Some people refer to making inferences as “reading between the lines.” The following sentence from Woody Allen’s “A Brief, Yet Helpful, Guide to Civil Disobedience” illustrates how we make inferences.

_In perpetrating a revolution, there are two requirements: someone or something to revolt against and someone to actually show up and do the revolt._

Based on this statement, you might infer that while the two factors mentioned are essential for any act of civil disobedience, this statement is a simplification of a very complicated process, and that there are many other “requirements” for “perpetrating a revolution.” Such an inference would be valid because it is based on historical experience.

On the other hand, if you were reading this sentence very literally, you might infer that the author is sincerely interested in instructing potential civil disobedients, or even that he is promoting revolutionary acts. This would be an invalid inference for a number of reasons. First, notice the colloquial word choice (“someone to actually show up”) and the play on the word “revolt.” This should lead us to believe that there may be some irony embedded in his writing; the wording acts as a warning sign to the reader to be wary of a too-literal interpretation. Also, we know that Woody Allen’s writing is characteristically irreverent, humorous, and satirical, and that, therefore, taking him too literally would jeopardize our ability to read accurately or critically. Reading “between the lines,” in addition to considering what we know about the author, helps us to discover the attitude the author takes toward his subject and his audience which, in turn, indicates implied meanings in the text.

Valid and Invalid Inferences

A valid inference is one based on clear evidence and logical reasoning about that evidence. An invalid inference is an assumption (a statement accepted as true without proof) that results from inadequate evidence or faulty logic. Usually an invalid inference results when a reader’s thinking either goes beyond what the writer has implied or not far enough. The following strategies can be helpful in making valid inferences and drawing sound conclusions:

1. Be sure you understand the literal meaning first. Before you can make any form of interpretation, including inference, you must be sure that you have a clear grasp of the stated facts and ideas.
2. Ask yourself, “What is the author trying to suggest from the stated information?” or “what do all the facts and ideas point toward?”
3. Use clues provided by the writer. Writers’ choices of words and word orders hint at their attitudes toward their subject, audience, and themselves. Look at how the writer presents his or her stated message: order of presentation, appearance, logic, kinds of evidence, kinds of emotional appeals, what is left out or unsaid, the writer’s directness or indirectness, etc.

4. Consider the author’s purposes (both stated and unstated). If you are aware of the author’s purposes, you may get a clearer idea of the types of inferences the writer hopes you will make.

5. Verify your inference. Once you have made an inference, look back at the behavioral information in the text to see that there is sufficient evidence to support the inference.

Example

Implicit information is common in all kinds of writing, including textbooks. Using these strategies, answer the four multiple-choice questions about the following passage from a linguistics textbook. Infer the answers to the third and fourth questions; their answers are implied rather than directly stated.

**Phonemes**

Phonemes are the sounds that are heard when a word is spoken. For example, the word “can” has three phonemes (k, a, and n), and “scan” has four phonemes (s, k, a, and n). Many words have more letters than phonemes. For instance “wreck” has five letters but only three phonemes (r, e, and k). There are 46 phonemes in English, but some languages have nearly twice as many.

1. How many phonemes are there in English?
   - A. 26
   - B. 36
   - C. 46
   - D. 56

2. How many phonemes are in the word *wreck*?
   - A. Two
   - B. Three
   - C. Four
   - D. Five

3. Which of the following is not a phoneme?
   - A. n
   - B. r
   - C. c
   - D. s

4. How many phonemes are there in the word *blow*?
   - A. One
   - B. Two
   - C. Three
   - D. Four

The answers are: 1) C, 2) B, 3) C, and 4) C. The answers to questions 1 and 2 are stated in the passage. There are forty-six phonemes in English, and the word *wreck* has three phonemes. However, the answers to questions 3 and 4 must be inferred. The passage does not state whether c is a phoneme; however, since c is not a phoneme in the words *can* and *scan*, we may infer that c is probably not a phoneme. Similarly, the passage does not state the number of phonemes in the word *blow*. However, since it does state that phonemes are sounds heard when a word is spoken, and since three sounds are heard when the word *blow* is spoken, (b-l-o), we may infer that there are three phonemes in the word (McWhorter 84).
A Word of Caution
When we read, it is natural to call upon our past experiences and knowledge to help us make inferences or uncover indirectly-stated meanings. But since we all have different experiences, it follows that we are in danger of interpreting the words in a way which is inconsistent with the author's intentions. If we do not use careful reasoning, we may make invalid inferences. It is one thing to decide what an author means and to know we might be mistaken; it is an entirely different thing—a stumbling block to critical reading—to take for granted that the author thinks just as we do. It is necessary, of course, to be able to recognize an author's implications, but unless we can conscientiously distinguish between what authors say and what we infer from their words, we can never hope to read critically.

Another Fun-filled Exercise
Below is a nursery rhyme followed by several statements. Based on the evidence in the story, mark each statement “true,” “false,” or “can’t tell.” (Mark “can’t tell” if there is not sufficient evidence to support a valid inference.) In deciding how to mark the statements, you are to accept the story as true and assume good usage of English, but you may not assume any past knowledge of the story nor add any of your own details. You may, however, use your knowledge of the world in determining the meanings of common words.

_There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. She had so many children she didn't know what to do._

1. The woman was old.
2. The woman must have been very small in order be able to live in a shoe.
3. The woman’s children lived in the shoe with her.
4. The woman didn’t _really_ live in a shoe, but her house was so small that she _called_ it a shoe.
5. The old woman had a pet cat.

Answers:
1. True. The story says “old woman.”
2. False. If you marked “True” you would have made an invalid inference, because she didn’t have to be small in order to be able to live in a shoe—it could have been a big shoe. If the statement had read, “The old woman was small,” then we would mark it “can’t tell,” because we don’t know whether she was small or the shoe was big.
3. Can’t tell. The story says the old woman had children, but it doesn’t tell us where the children lived. This would be an invalid inference since we would arrive at this conclusion through our own preconceived ideas about family life.
4. False. We are told to accept the story as true, and the story says she lived in a shoe. This would be an invalid inference because we would be going beyond what the writer has implied.
5. Can’t tell. The story doesn’t mention a cat, so we can’t tell whether she had one or not. This would also be an invalid inference since we don’t have sufficient evidence to support this conclusion.

One more example:
Consider the implied meanings in the following passage. First think about the literal meaning of the passage, then look for clues in the word choice and word order that hint at implicit messages about meaning, purpose, and attitudes towards the subject, audience, or the writer herself.

Consider how the message is presented (see reading strategy #3 above), and make inferences that not only enhance your reading, but are also accurate, based on the evidence in the text.
How to tell the difference between modern art and junk puzzles many people although few are willing to admit it. The owner of a gallery in Chicago had a prospective buyer for two sculptures made of discarded metal and put them outside his warehouse to clean them up. Unfortunately, some junk dealers, who apparently didn't recognize abstract expressionism when they saw it, hauled the two 300-pound pieces away.

—Ora Gygi, “Things Are Seldom What They Seem”

The literal meaning of this passage is that many people cannot tell the difference between art and junk. Two abstract metal sculptures were carted away as junk when an art dealer left them outside a warehouse to clean them.

Now read inferentially. The author’s word choice in this passage reveals her attitudes toward her subject, which allows us to make inferences about her message. We can begin with the unexplained statement: “few are willing to admit” that they do not know the difference between junk and art. Reading between the lines, you realize that people feel embarrassed not to know; they feel uneducated, without good taste, or perhaps left out. With this inference in mind, you can move to the last two sentences, in which the author offers not only the literal irony of the art’s being carted away as junk, but also the implied irony that the people who carted it away are not among those who feel embarrassed. This implied irony suggests that the people either do not care if they know the difference between art and junk (after all, they assumed it was junk and went on their way) or they “apparently” (a good word for inference making) want to give the impression that they do not know the difference. Thus it is the art dealer who ends up being embarrassed, for it is he who created the problem by leaving the sculptures outdoors unattended (Troyka 119-20).

The word choice and word order also give clues about the author’s attitude towards the audience and herself. The construction of the first sentence indicates a lighthearted tone, which tells readers that while the author includes most of us in the category of those who are unwilling to admit they don’t know the difference between junk and art, she is not speaking disparagingly. In fact, the irony in the last sentence (the junk dealers “apparently didn’t recognize abstract expressionism when they saw it”) may indicate that she includes herself in the same category.

Works Cited

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