

Inferences in Literature

Inferences are very important in reading literature. While writers of factual material usually state directly much of what they mean, creative writers often provide verbal pictures that *show* us what they mean. It is up to the reader to infer the point of what the creative writer has said. For instance, a nonfiction author might write the following:

A man got angry at the person using a cell phone in the theater.

But a novelist might write this:

Thomas turned to face the laughing red-haired girl sitting behind him in the theater. A vein on his forehead was throbbing. "Would you mind very much turning off that cell phone?" he hissed. "A few of us are here to actually see the movie."

Rather than merely stating that Thomas was angry, the author shows the anger with vivid details. To get the most out of literature, you must often infer meanings—just as you do in everyday life. You may have inferred, for example, that the laughing girl is insensitive to the rights of others in the theater. You could also have concluded that Thomas has probably been waiting a while for her to quiet down, but she has not, and his temper is now boiling.

Now look at the following statement that a nonfiction writer might produce:

A farmer is about to kill a small pig, but his daughter objects, so the farmer decides to let his daughter learn for herself that a small pig can be a problem.

Compare the above line with the following scene from *Charlotte's Web*, a literary classic that is beloved by young and old alike:

¹"Fern," said Mr. Arable, "I know more about raising a litter of pigs than you do. ²A weakling makes trouble. ³Now run along!"

⁴"But it's unfair," cried Fern. ⁵"The pig couldn't help being born small, could it? ⁶If I had been very small at birth, would you have killed me?"

⁷Mr. Arable smiled. ⁸"Certainly not," he said, looking down at his daughter with love. ⁹"But this is different. ¹⁰A little girl is one thing, a little runty pig is another."

¹¹"I see no difference," replied Fern, still hanging on to the ax. ¹²"This is the most terrible case of injustice I ever heard of."

¹³A queer look came over John Arable's face. ¹⁴He seemed almost ready to cry himself.

¹⁵"All right," he said. ¹⁶"You go back to the house and I will bring the runt when I come in. ¹⁷I'll let you start it on a bottle, like a baby. ¹⁸Then you'll see what trouble a pig can be."



Check Your Understanding

See if you can answer the following inference questions about the excerpt.

- _____ 1. Fern and Mr. Arable probably live
 - A. in a city.
 - B. in a small town.
 - C. on a farm.
- _____ 2. We can infer from the excerpt that Mr. Arable
 - A. has probably raised many pigs in his lifetime.
 - B. has had little experience raising pigs.
 - C. does not like pigs.
- _____ 3. Mr. Arable appears almost ready to cry because he
 - A. gets worried about how difficult it would be to raise the pig.
 - B. does not like to lose an argument with his daughter.
 - C. is touched by his daughter's willingness to stand up for the small pig.
- _____ 4. We can conclude that Mr. Arable agrees to spare the pig because
 - A. Fern has convinced him that it is unfair to kill pigs, no matter what their size.
 - B. he believes that raising a pig will teach Fern some lessons.
 - C. he realizes that taking care of a runt pig is not that difficult.

- _____ 5. By the end of this passage, we can infer that Mr. Arable is
- A. a cruel man.
 - B. a reasonable man.
 - C. not a very patient man.

Explanation

1. Fern and Mr. Arable live in a place where pigs are born and raised. That strongly suggests that they live on a farm. The correct answer, then, is C.
2. Mr. Arable mentions that he knows about “raising a litter of pigs.” He also tells Fern how to begin feeding the pig. These details suggest that he has raised pigs before. Therefore, the answer is A.
3. Mr. Arable seems near crying after Fern insists there’s no difference between killing a runt pig and killing a small daughter. And the passage has already described Mr. Arable looking at his daughter with love. So we can conclude that the plea for justice from the young daughter he adores is what touched him so. Thus the answer is C.
4. When Mr. Arable agrees to let his daughter raise the pig, he says “you’ll see what trouble a pig can be.” His words suggest that he expects Fern to learn a lesson. Therefore B is the answer.
5. Mr. Arable talks to Fern, listens to her opinions, and agrees to allow her to do something he does not fully support. These actions suggest he is a fair and reasonable man. So answer B is correct.

The excerpt from *Charlotte’s Web* is a small example of how inference skills can increase your appreciation of literary forms—fiction, poetry, autobiographies, and other imaginative literature.

Poetry, especially, by its nature implies much of its meaning. Poets often imply their meanings through comparisons. For example, Emily Dickinson begins one of her poems with the following lines:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all

Here, Dickinson uses a figure of speech known as a metaphor, comparing hope to a singing bird. The comparison implies, among other things, that hope is a sweet and welcome thing. (More about metaphors appears on the next page.)

A Note on Figures of Speech

Creative writers often use **figures of speech** to give us a fresh way of looking at something. The two most common figures of speech are similes and metaphors.

Simile—a comparison introduced with *like*, *as*, or *as if*.



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In the cartoon, the boy, Linus, says that getting back his lost security blanket is “like seeing the flood waters recede . . . like a reunion with old friends . . . like a drop of water to a man lost in the desert . . . like coming out of a dark cave into the wonderful sunlight.” (The joke, of course, is that he overdoes the similes, which is why Lucy ties the blanket around his mouth.)

Here is another example. Instead of saying, “The window shade snapped up,” you could express it more vividly by saying, “The window shade snapped up like a gunshot.” The simile shows that the noise of the window shade was loud and startling.

Here are some other similes:

- That Halloween night was *as dark as the inside of a witch’s hat*.
- After you’ve broken up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, every day feels *like a cloudy, cold Monday morning*.
- If he senses you don’t know the material, our math teacher attacks *like a shark*.
- That runner moves *as gracefully as a gazelle*.

Metaphor—an implied comparison, with *like*, *as*, or *as if* omitted.

The thought “No person can be self-sufficient” was expressed vividly in a metaphor by the poet John Donne, who wrote: “No man is an island.” His comparison says no one can be completely disconnected from the mainland—the rest of humanity.

Here are some other metaphors:

- The grade on the paper was *a dash of ice water in my face*.
- When Nate got up to speak, he was *a mass of quivering Jell-O*.
- *The warm honey* of her voice melted my anger.
- Watching TV for hours, the children were *glassy-eyed statues*.
- The dancer's head was *a rose on the slender stem* of her neck.



PRACTICE 3

Use a check (✓) to identify each figure of speech as a simile or a metaphor. Then, in the space provided, answer each inference question that follows.

_____ 1. His friendship is as genuine as a plastic Christmas tree.

___ simile ___ metaphor

You can infer that the friendship is

- A. easy to maintain.
- B. fake and cheap.
- C. seasonal and glittery.

_____ 2. A gang of teenaged boys moved through the mall like a pack of wild dogs.

___ simile ___ metaphor

You can infer that the boys were

- A. polite and friendly.
- B. sneaky and quiet.
- C. loud and disruptive.

_____ 3. The executives did not admit that the company was a sinking ship until after they had taken millions of dollars for themselves.

___ simile ___ metaphor

You can infer that the company

- A. was well-managed.
- B. was failing.
- C. was going in more than one direction.

_____ 4. Everyone at work thinks that Jasmine is a real gem.

___ simile ___ metaphor

You can infer that Jasmine is

- A. disliked and unfriendly.
- B. shy and quiet.
- C. admired and valued.

_____ 5. I'm writing a family history so that my grandparents' stories do not go up in smoke and ashes.

___ simile ___ metaphor

You can infer that the grandparents' stories are

- A. full of fire and passion.
- B. uneventful and unimportant.
- C. in danger of being lost forever.



PRACTICE 4

George Orwell is famous for his novels *Animal Farm* and *1984* as well as his classic literary essays. Following is an excerpt from "A Hanging," an essay Orwell wrote about an execution he witnessed while he was an English police officer stationed in Burma. Read the excerpt, and then answer the inference questions that follow.

Note that the meanings of a few words in the excerpt are given below.

reiterated: repeated

Ram: Hindu god

abominable: hateful

timorously: timidly

oscillated: swung back and forth

¹We stood waiting, five yards away. ²The warders had formed in a rough circle round the gallows. ³And then, when the noose was fixed, the prisoner began crying out to his god. ⁴It was a high, reiterated^o cry of "Ram^o! Ram! Ram! Ram!" not urgent and fearful like a prayer or a cry for help, but steady, rhythmical, almost like the tolling of a bell. ⁵The dog answered the sound with a whine. ⁶The hangman, still standing on the gallows, produced a small cotton bag like a flour bag and drew it down over the prisoner's face. ⁷But the sound, muffled by the cloth, still persisted, over and over again: "Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!"

⁸The hangman climbed down and stood ready, holding the lever. ⁹Minutes seemed to pass. ¹⁰The steady, muffled crying from the prisoner went on and on, "Ram! Ram! Ram!" never faltering for an instant. ¹¹The superintendent, his head on his chest, was slowly poking the ground with his stick; perhaps he was counting the cries, allowing the prisoner a fixed number—fifty, perhaps, or a hundred. ¹²Everyone had changed color. ¹³The Indians had gone grey like bad coffee, and one or two of the bayonets were wavering. ¹⁴We looked at the lashed, hooded man on the drop, and listened to his cries—each cry another second of life; the same thought was in all our minds: oh, kill him quickly, get it over, stop that abominable^o noise!

¹⁵Suddenly the superintendent made up his mind. ¹⁶Throwing up his head, he made a swift motion with his stick. ¹⁷"Chalo!" he shouted almost fiercely.

18There was a clanking noise, and then dead silence. 19The prisoner had vanished, and the rope was twisting on itself. 20I let go of the dog, and it galloped immediately to the back of the gallows; but when it got there, it stopped short, barked, and then retreated into a corner of the yard, where it stood among the weeds, looking timorously° out at us. 21We went round the gallows to inspect the prisoner's body. 22He was dangling with his toes pointed straight downward, very slowly revolving, as dead as a stone.

23The superintendent reached out with his stick and poked the bare body; it oscillated°, slightly. 24"He's all right," said the superintendent. 25He backed out from under the gallows, and blew out a deep breath. 26The moody look had gone out of his face quite suddenly. 27He glanced at his wristwatch. 28"Eight minutes past eight. 29Well, that's all for this morning, thank God."

- _____ 1. We can infer from the simile below that the prisoner's cry was like
- A. wedding bells.
 - B. a funeral bell.
 - C. a doorbell.
- "It was a high ... cry ... steady, rhythmical, ... like the tolling of a bell."
- _____ 2. The reaction of the Indian spectators, described in the simile below, suggests they are
- A. sympathetic to the superintendent's duty.
 - B. disturbed by the prisoner's hanging.
 - C. relieved that the prisoner was about to die.
- "Everyone had changed color. The Indians had gone grey like bad coffee ..."
- _____ 3. In the second paragraph, we can conclude that the superintendent waited for the prisoner to say his prayers because he
- A. had the same religious beliefs as the prisoner.
 - B. was distracted by something on the ground.
 - C. understood the prisoner's fear and showed him respect.
- _____ 4. We can infer from the passage that the word *chalo* was a
- A. word of protest against the hanging.
 - B. cheer in support of the hanging.
 - C. command used to begin the hanging.
- _____ 5. Orwell's description of the prisoner being as "dead as a stone" is a simile that suggests the prisoner was
- A. still and lifeless.
 - B. dirty and round.
 - C. solid and strong.

- _____ 6. The author implies that the dog
- A. belonged to the superintendent.
 - B. sensed that something terrible had happened.
 - C. had no understanding of what was going on around him.
- _____ 7. When the superintendent says, "Well, that's all for this morning," he implies that
- A. there may be more executions in the afternoon.
 - B. there has been only one execution that morning.
 - C. there will be no other work to do in the morning.
- _____ 8. When the superintendent says, "*He's* all right," he means that
- A. while the prisoner is at peace, everyone else is still shaken.
 - B. the prisoner got the punishment that he deserved.
 - C. the prisoner had wanted to die and got his wish.
- _____ 9. We can infer from the superintendent's behavior that he
- A. was a cruel man who enjoyed seeing others executed.
 - B. refused to attend any more executions after this one.
 - C. considered executions an unpleasant part of his duty.
- _____ 10. We can infer from the details in this passage and another excerpt from the essay, shown below, that the author probably was
- A. in favor of capital punishment.
 - B. troubled by capital punishment.
 - C. not interested in the issue of capital punishment.

"He [the prisoner] and we were a party of men, walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone—one mind less, one world less."