

CHAPTER

8

Inference



Inference

What is an inference?
 What is the connotation of a word?
 What is figurative language?
 How do you draw conclusions?

To Quote an Expert

“Higher levels of comprehension are not always more difficult. They simply involve thinking that is greater in abstraction. Higher level comprehension with easier materials, for example, may be less difficult than literal comprehension of more difficult materials. Reading at higher levels of comprehension puts greater demands on the reader to supply images, ideas, and reactions in order to make inferences.”

Thomas N. Turner in Chapter 8 “Higher Levels of Comprehension: Inference, Critical Reading, and Creative Reading,” in *Teaching Reading* 3rd ed. edited by J. Estill Alexander (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1988) p. 185

To Quote a Student

“Making an inference is basically the job of a private eye or a brilliant detective. You have to know the facts, investigate the situation carefully, and use prior knowledge about the subject or related situations. You read between the lines to encounter the clues and then take your magnifying glass and search for the assumptions and conclusions.”

Kymerly Barber

WHAT IS AN INFERENCE?

In categorizing reading skills, the first and most basic level of reading is the literal level, that is, what are the facts? In reacting to a literal question, you can actually point to the words on the page that answer the question. Reading, however, progresses beyond this initial stage. A second and more sophisticated

level of reading deals with motives, feelings, and judgments; this is the inferential level. At this level you no longer can point to the answer, but instead must form opinions from suggestions within the selection. In a manner of speaking, the reader must read between the lines for the implied meaning.

Rather than directly stating, authors often subtly suggest and thus manipulate the reader. Suggestion can be a more effective method of getting the message across than a direct statement. Suggestion requires greater writing skill, and it is also usually more artistic, creative, and entertaining. The responsible reader searches beyond the printed word for insights into what was left unsaid.

For example, in cigarette advertisements the public is enticed through suggestion, not facts, into spending millions of dollars on a product that is presumably unhealthful. According to the choice of a particular brand, smoking offers the refreshment of a mountain stream or the sophisticated elegance of the rich and famous. Never in the ads is smoking directly praised or pleasure promised; the positive aspects are implied. A lawsuit for false advertising is out of the question because nothing tangible has been put into print. The emotionalism of the full-page advertisement is so overwhelming that the consumer hardly notices the warning peeking from the hillside at the bottom of the page—"Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking is Dangerous to Your Health."

■ Exercise 1: Implied Meaning in Advertisements

A. Look at the following cigarette advertisements and answer these questions:

1. What is directly stated about each?

- a. Marlboro _____
- b. Newport _____
- c. Virginia Slims _____

2. What is suggested by the name of each cigarette?

- a. Marlboro _____
- b. Newport _____
- c. Virginia Slims _____

3. What does the advertisement imply about each cigarette?

- a. Marlboro _____
- b. Newport _____
- c. Virginia Slims _____

er

”

g, and
xander
p. 185

or
gate
the
s to
ss

”

ly Barber

l of reading is the
question, you can
question. Reading
more sophisticated



4. Describe the potential consumer for each cigarette.

- a. Marlboro _____
- b. Newport _____
- c. Virginia Slims _____

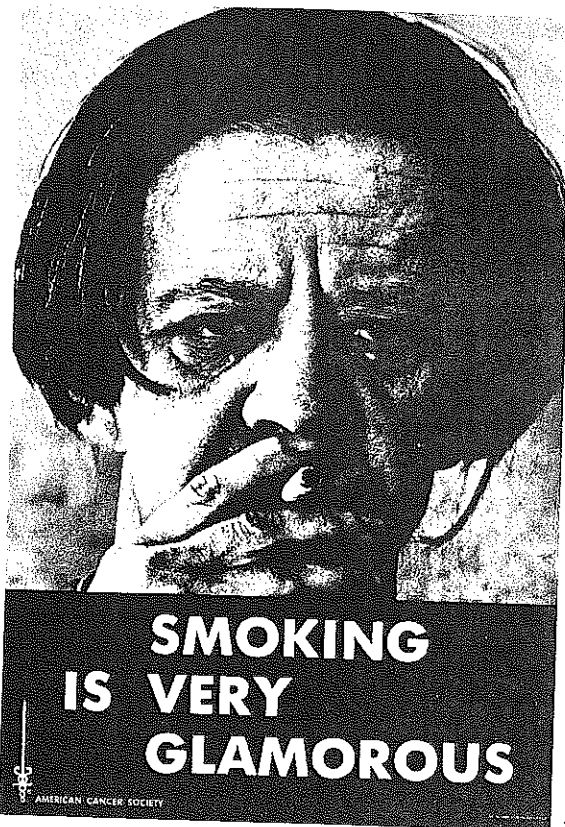
5. What characteristics do all three advertisements have in common?

6. Why do you think a Marlboro smoker would or would not switch to Newport or Virginia Slims?

B. For a different approach, look at the following ad and answer the same kind of questions.

1. What makes this ad particularly eye-catching?

2. To whom is this ad appealing?



3. What is directly stated about smoking?

4. What is implied about smoking?

In this ad, the message is exactly the opposite of the direct statement. Although you can point to the words, the ad is certainly not saying that smoking is glamorous.

Authors and advertisers have not invented a new comprehension skill; they are merely capitalizing on an already highly developed skill of daily life. When asked by a co-worker, "How do you like your boss?" the employee might answer, "I think she wears nice suits," rather than "I don't like my boss." A lack of approval



common?
ould not switch to
ver the same kind of

has been suggested, while the employee has avoided a direct negative statement. In everyday life, we make inferences about people by examining what people say, what they do, and what others say about them. The intuition of everyday life applied to the printed word is the inferential level of reading.

CONNOTATION OF WORDS

Notice the power of suggested meaning in responding to the following questions:

1. Which is the sexiest?
 - a. lingerie
 - b. underwear
 - c. undergarments
2. Which would you find in a small town?
 - a. movies
 - b. flickers
 - c. picture shows
3. Who probably earns the most money?
 - a. a businessperson in a dark suit, white shirt, and tie
 - b. a businessperson in slacks and a sport shirt
 - c. a businessperson in a pale blue uniform

Can you prove your answers? It's not the same as proving when the Declaration of Independence was signed, yet you still have a feeling for how each question should be answered. Even though a right or wrong answer is more difficult to explain in this type of question, certain answers can still be supported as correct—they are *a*, *c*, and *a*. The answers are based on feelings, attitudes, and knowledge commonly shared by society. Perhaps you can't prove lingerie is sexier than underwear, but everyone has a feeling that it must be.

Seemingly an innocent tool, the writer's choice of words is the first indication of implied meaning. For example, if a person is skinny, he is unattractive, but if he is slender or slim he must be attractive. All three words might refer to the same underweight person, but *skinny* communicates a negative feeling while *slender* or *slim* communicates a positive one. This feeling or emotionalism surrounding a word is called *connotation*. *Denotation* is the specific meaning of a word, but the connotative meaning goes beyond this to reflect certain attitudes and prejudices of society. Even though it may not seem premeditated, writers select words, just as advertisers select symbols and models, to manipulate the reader's opinions.

■ Exercise 2: Connotation of Words

In each of the following word pairs, write the letter of the word that connotes a more positive emotional feeling: