

SECOND EDITION

Kylene Beers

When Kids Can't Read

What Teachers Can Do

A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS • GRADES 4–12

HEINEMANN Portsmouth, NH



Heinemann
145 Maplewood Avenue, Suite 300
Portsmouth, NH 03801
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
is on file with the Library of Congress.
ISBN 978-0-325-14459-7

Editor: Anita Gildea
Production: Patty Adams, Melissa L. Inglis
Cover and interior designs: Suzanne Heiser
Composition: Gina Poirier Design
Manufacturing: Val Cooper

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
1 2 3 4 5 MP 27 26 25 24 23
PO 4500866927

*“Be an opener of doors,” wrote poet and abolitionist
Ralph Waldo Emerson.
That’s what books are—openers of doors.
And that’s what teachers are.
This book, therefore, is for teachers everywhere
who open doors for their students.
Fling them wide open!
Secure them wide against the censors!
Then know you have done your job and done it well.*

—KB

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PROLOGUE

Twenty Years Later

BEGINNING TO WRITE A BOOK THAT I'VE ALREADY WRITTEN

has been an odd experience. I had to return to where I was in 2002, to where the world was in 2002, before I could move on. I had to be there, so I could later be here.

Twenty years ago, I watched as *When Kids Can't Read—What Teachers Can Do* made its way into teachers' hands. I wrote that first edition in the shadow of the 9/11 attack. Nearly three thousand people were killed that day. The horror of that day was felt by all. Race, gender, age, political affiliation—all were cast aside as people mourned all those who had been lost.

Within months, our American military was soon involved in two wars: more immediate was the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan; later, the US invaded Iraq.

While these events dominated thoughts on an international level, other events caused changes at the national level. The National Reading Panel released its report on teaching reading in 2001. This report caused a new flurry of direct and systematic phonics instruction in primary grades. No Child Left Behind legislation was passed. That legislation demanded stronger accountability of schools, which meant state-mandated tests became high-stakes tests.

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The Department of Homeland Security was created, and some wondered how effective this department would be; two snipers in Washington, DC, killed ten people, and we all wondered when the gun killings would stop. The Nokia cell phone entered lives, offering a calculator, a stopwatch, and four games. Colin Powell became secretary of state. Tom Brady quarterbacked his first Super Bowl. Janet Jackson was honored with the first ever MTV Icon award. Less than 3 percent of books published for children featured characters of color (Cooperative Children’s Book Center 2022), and I did not notice or wonder about that.

And Now

I’m writing this new edition in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, a pandemic we suspected would someday arrive and yet were surprised when it did. As of November 4, 2022, more than one million US lives (1,068,667) have been lost to this virus (CDC 2022). For a while, this nation pulled together, reminding me of the spirit, determination, and love for one another I saw after 9/11.

As the world battles this new virus, there’s another war that has moved to center stage. In early 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Our nation, along with the rest of the world, watches to see what will happen next.

Between February and August of 2021, American troops were finally withdrawn from Afghanistan.

A movement advocating the “science of reading” has recently emerged on the educational—and political—landscape. It encourages teaching early-grade reading with a phonics-forward philosophy, and I feel as if I have returned to 2001 and the National Reading Panel’s report. The No Child Left Behind Act is now called the Every Student Succeeds Act, and high-stakes tests are still directing far too much of what we teach.

In 2021, our nation elected Kamala Harris, the first Black vice president and the first female vice president, and Congress recently affirmed our nation’s first Black female associate justice of the Supreme Court. We still applaud the election of our first Black president, Barack Obama.

Twenty years later, Homeland Security is still here; gun killings have not diminished; the iPhone replaced the Nokia with 2.2 million apps to consider downloading. Android users can choose from among 3.48 million

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apps. Former secretary of state Colin Powell died in 2021. Tom Brady is still quarterbacking the Super Bowl. The Foo Fighters won the MTV Global Icon award, but I have no idea who they are. Now, approximately 23 percent of children’s fiction features characters of color, 50 percent features white characters, and 27 percent features talking animals (CCBC 2022; Stechyson 2019), and, unlike my earlier ignorance of who was represented in literature and who was not, I now analyze this carefully. Furthermore, I study my own interactions with literature and academic texts. Whom am I reading? Whom else should I be reading? What do my selections say about me? What else do I need to learn? Those questions were barely forming in me twenty years ago.

In 2001 and 2002, we were in two wars; in 2022, we stand at the precipice of another war. In 2002, schools faced public criticism and new demands regarding phonics instruction with the publication of the National Reading Panel’s report; today they face similar criticisms and demands as a result of reports, blog posts, news articles, and social media campaigns from science-of-reading advocates.

Twenty years later, I turn to writing this book, again.

Why I Wrote a New Edition

“After twenty years, why revisit this text?” I asked myself. In part, it was because I had learned so much and that learning had changed my understanding of many issues. To let the original edition sit, undisturbed, suggested my thinking had sat, undisturbed. But that was not right. In fact, this is more a new edition than a second edition. Timely second editions update titles, share some newer research, perhaps change cultural references. This edition needed to do far more than update the overhead projector to an interactive whiteboard or the book on tape to an audio file (though those 2002 references did need to be updated). This revision reflects more definitive thoughts about the teaching of reading and why reading is necessary to the preservation of our democracy.

Throughout this edition, you’ll find references to Dr. Robert E. Probst, my colleague and coauthor of several texts. Bob and I have worked together for over twenty years. He has challenged my thinking, and, at times, I’m sure he would say I have challenged if not his thinking, then certainly his patience. Bob is coauthor with me of four books: *Notice and Note*, *Reading*

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Nonfiction, Disrupting Thinking, and Forged by Reading. I refer to him throughout this book as Bob. In large measure, Bob has pushed me to consider what it means to be a responsible and responsive reader.

My thinking has also been changed by other educators who have encouraged me to consider how I, as a white educator, can become a more inclusive educator. Early on it was Dr. Beverly Tatum’s *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the School Cafeteria?* that directed my thinking. Later, Lisa Delpit’s *Other People’s Children* influenced my thinking. When I had the opportunity to work with the James Comer School Development Program at Yale University School of Medicine, I read *Maggie’s American Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family*, by Dr. Comer. I still have the copy he gave me. After meeting Melba Pattillo Beals, one of the nine students who integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, I rushed to read her autobiography, *Warriors Don’t Cry*. This book caused me to reach out to my parents asking them what

“We can have a single goal in mind—helping students become skilled, engaged, and curious readers—and recognize the unique path each student might travel in getting there.”

they did as they watched nightly news stories from Walter Cronkite about the events surrounding this horrific time.

Other books have helped shape who I am now: *The Fire Next Time* (James Baldwin), *Ain’t I a Woman* (bell hooks), *The Warmth of Other Suns* (Isabel Wilkerson), *The New Jim Crow* (Michelle Alexander), and more recently, *Between the World and Me* (Ta-Nehisi Coates), *White Fragility* (Robin DiAngelo), *Stamped from the Beginning* (Ibram X. Kendi), *How to Be an Antiracist* (Ibram X. Kendi), *Moving to Higher Ground* (Wynton Marsalis), *The Word: Black Writers Talk About the Transformative Power of Reading and Writing* (edited by Marita Golden), and *Black Ink: Literary Legends on the Peril, Power* (edited by Stephanie Stokes Oliver).

To those I now add very recent books that help us all think about classroom practices: *Cultivating Genius* (Gholdy Muhammad), *Textured Teaching* (Lorena Escoto Germán), *We Want to Do More Than Survive* (Bettina L. Love), *Open Windows, Open Minds* (Afrika Afeni Mills), *Coaching for Equity* (Elena Aguilar), *We Got This.* (Cornelius Minor), and *Teaching for Racial Equity* (Tonya Perry and Steven Zemelman with Katy Smith). These authors and their books have helped me grow as an educator and an individual.

Though revising this book offered me a chance to revisit earlier thinking, what it mostly did was allow me to continue to share my ongoing commitment to help those of you who teach students who struggle with reading.

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There is no one answer to understanding why an adolescent has difficulties with reading. For there to be only one answer, there would have to be only one cause, and for there to be one cause, all students would have to be alike, learn alike, and have had the same experiences. Indeed, there is no single template for the struggling reader; therefore, there is no single answer. But there *are* answers, and I wrote this book to help you with those answers. If we want classes grounded in equity, then it is critical that we understand that different students will require different types of help. We can have a single goal in mind—helping students become skilled, engaged, and curious readers—and recognize the unique path each student might travel in getting there.

When our nation shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the first things teachers did was figure out how to get books into kids' hands. You arranged times where students could come by their school and leave with armloads of books. School buses drove into neighborhoods, becoming mobile libraries. Schools and businesses provided needed laptops and tablets, and online groups made digital books free to all. You wanted kids to be able to read. As much as you worried about where some would get food—and schools helped provide that, too—you were also concerned about children and teens having books to read. You understood that as food nourishes the body, books nourish the mind.

In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, the racial ouroboros of this nation was recognized, finally, by more, though still not enough, white people. As a result, thousands of (mostly) white people reached for books to better understand what we should have already realized, books such as *Stamped from the Beginning* or *White Fragility*. And while reading and discussing is not enough, it is a beginning.

Reading offers us that chance to revise our lives. Such change often begins with a book. A simple thing called a book. I am excited, now, to hand this one over to you.

“There is no one answer to understanding why an adolescent has difficulties with reading. For there to be only one answer, there would have to be only one cause, and for there to be one cause, all students would have to be alike, learn alike, and have had the same experiences.”

Dear George,

I read "Top Man" to your class, and you, along with your classmates, seemed to enjoy this story of two men climbing K6. I asked you who you thought the top man was. You shrugged. I asked you what the shrug meant.

"I don't know," you replied.

"You don't know the answer to the question, or you don't know why you shrugged?" I pressed.

"The question. It didn't say who was the top man."

"You're supposed to make an inference, George. That's how you answer the question. Make an inference."

You stared at me for a moment, then said, "No, I guess I don't know. Don't you think if I did know, I'd just do it and get you off my back? Jeez."

I heard anger. I should have heard embarrassment and hurt.

CHAPTER 6

Making an Inference

MAKING AN INFERENCE IS THE CORNERSTONE OF comprehension.

Inferential thinking requires that readers be able to hold in short-term memory the explicit information they read and place it alongside information not explicitly presented in the text or the information they have stored in their long-term memory. While skilled readers readily search for any information that will create coherence in what they are reading, less skilled readers won't do that. Sometimes, they don't have the cognitive energy; other times, they don't understand they are expected to bring their experiences to the text. Too many times, students lack world knowledge, and that has a direct effect on their ability to make an inference. You've experienced this, perhaps, when you have read an editorial joke and haven't understood why it was supposed to be funny.

“While skilled readers readily search for any information that will create coherence in what they are reading, less skilled readers won't do that.”

I remember a day about five years into my teaching career when Anne had been promoted from assistant principal to principal. I had progressed from the generalized complaint that “these kids can't read” to a more specific comment: “They can't make an inference.”

One day, after repeating that complaint yet again, Anne replied, “How do you know?”

“Because I ask them questions that require them to make an inference, and they can't do it,” I replied.

“Maybe you are asking the wrong questions,” she said, peering, as always, over her half-rim glasses. I left her office.

I knew she was right. I knew it. But what were the right questions? Part of my problem (all of it?) was that I had not taken the time to notice the types of inferences I made as I read. I’m not sure I had considered if there were various types of inferences. In this chapter, we’ll begin with that task: noticing some of the types of inferences we make.

When we infer, we visualize; we make connections; we predict; we monitor our understanding; we summarize. If you hear, “That short but fierce thunderstorm resulted in five inches of rain,” in addition to understanding how much rain fell, you might have imagined rain slamming against windows, lightning bolts flashing across the sky, flowers bending to the pelting rain, puddles forming everywhere. You inferred all those images of the thunderstorm and saw them in your mind’s eye. You might have remembered the time you were in a thunderstorm that was what your grandmother called a gully washer. That connection was an inference. You might have predicted that following the thunderstorm, there could have been flash floods and mudslides. And those were inferences. You might have reminded yourself that you needed to read some more to see where this storm occurred to check that prediction. All those comprehension processes are related to making an inference.

When someone tells you that you need to help students make an inference *and* you need to teach them to predict, or you need to help students make an inference *and* you need to focus on cause-and-effect connections, then you know that person doesn’t understand that helping students make stronger inferences means helping them do those other things. What follows are the various types of inferences that any reader might need to make (see Figure 6.1). I do not suggest that you set about teaching these types of inferences. I do hope you’ll listen to the logic your students offer (or fail to offer) and notice what types of inferences they are making (or failing to make). As you note their confusions, think about these various types of inferences and then decide what you need to teach your students.

A tenth grader came into class one day and immediately put his head on a desk. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“My inference with my girlfriend has been severed,” he responded.

“Hmm?” I said.

“You know—you said an inference was a connection. She said we were done. My inference has been severed.”

SUMMARY OF TYPES OF INFERENCES AND HOW TO HELP STUDENTS		
If we need students to make an inference based on . . .	Then we can help by teaching students to . . .	Examples
Pronouns	Find what anaphoric and cataphoric pronouns refer to	<p>The <u>students</u> got permission to go on the field trip. <u>They</u> were excited.</p> <p><u>She</u> stood there, shocked. <u>It</u> was clean!</p> <p>His mom looked at his room and marveled at the floor!</p>
Transition words	Understand categories of signal words and what they mean	<p>Words that emphasize a point: <i>for that reason, in fact, with this in mind</i></p> <p>Words that indicate a conclusion: <i>in summary, finally, in brief</i></p>
Omissions	Read aloud to “hear” what is missing, using punctuation as a clue	<p>There were many breeds of dogs such as to consider: collies, labs, poodles, retrievers. So many! <i>excited to make a choice</i></p> <p><i>breeds</i></p>
Punctuation	Read aloud what’s confusing and discuss what the punctuation helps them infer	<p>The doctor—<u>a young person</u>, probably barely <u>twenty-five</u>—was going to do the surgery? <i>really?</i></p>
Substitutions	Make synonym links with terms used in texts	<p>On March 28, Venus, Saturn, and Mars were aligned. This <u>triplet</u> of planets <u>clustered</u> in the early dawn. A similar <u>conjunction</u> of the <u>trio</u> will be visible in 2024.</p>

Figure 6.1 Summary of Types of Inferences and How to Help Students

continues

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SUMMARY OF TYPES OF INFERENCES AND HOW TO HELP STUDENTS

<p>If we need students to make an inference based on . . .</p>	<p>Then we can help by teaching students to . . .</p>	<p>Examples</p>
<p>Knowing multiple meanings of words</p>	<p>Note and discuss common words that have multiple meanings</p>	<p>What word means “to not eat” and “to run quickly”? (<i>fast</i>)</p> <p>What word means “a place to play” and “what you do with your car when you arrive someplace”? (<i>park</i>)</p>
<p>Close causal connections</p>	<p>Combine sentences and add the needed transition words and explanations</p>	<p>Her feet hurt. The soles of those shoes just didn’t support her arches. <i>because of her feet.</i></p>
<p>Distant causal relationships</p>	<p>Look for transition words and vocabulary that signals the need to make an inference</p> <p>Make synonym links, even if that means going back several pages or passages</p>	<p>Her appointment was made on Friday. <i>meeting?</i></p> <p>It would be a lot of work, but she knew <u>she</u> was ready for <u>it</u>. Everyone was very supportive and suggested they celebrate with a party. <u>Chair of the board</u> was a big step. <i>appointment not meeting; a job</i></p>
<p>World knowledge</p>	<p>Read widely and ask questions about events</p>	<p>Use sites such as Newsela and Wonderopolis to share daily information about the world with students. Remind students to discuss how one text reminded them of something they read in another text.</p>

Figure 6.1 Summary of Types of Inferences and How to Help Students, *continued*

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Inferences Based on Pronouns

Quite often, we make inferences based on the pronouns the author uses. These are common inferences and could be classified as substitutions (discussed later). Usually, pronouns refer to a noun that has previously appeared in the text. When a pronoun has an antecedent in the text, it is called an anaphoric pronoun. Sometimes, though, the pronoun appears first and then the referent appears. Then, the pronoun is a cataphoric pronoun. Let's look at some examples:

1. The children were talking loudly when their teacher walked in the room. She told them they could continue talking with one another, but they needed to lower their voices.
2. Sandra was interested in what they were saying. Her friends were discussing where all would be heading to lunch.
3. That small group could not believe what he said. Ben explained to all that he had heard the Friday test had been postponed.

In the first example, *children* is subsequently replaced by *them* and *they*. *Teacher* is replaced by *she*. Most students do not have difficulty with these substitutions. In the second and third examples, the pronouns appear prior to the noun referents. In those two examples, readers need only to look to the next sentence to discover who *they* and *he* are. Cataphoric pronouns cause more difficulty for readers when the pronoun appears several sentences before the referent. Look at this sentence as an example:

Dr. Smith was surprised by them. She had arrived at the hospital expecting a normal day. No one had told her that anything out of the ordinary would happen. There they were, though, all the babies she had delivered that past year, in their parents' arms, ready to celebrate her birthday.

Students must hold on to *them* in the first sentence until they get to the fourth sentence to discover whom *them* refers to. This stretches the short-term memory of some readers, especially those expending limited cognitive energy on decoding or fluency.

Only in the rarest of situations do I use the words *anaphoric* and *cataphoric* with kids. I learned that the hard way when one ninth grader told me that he was sure he was catatonic after that boring lesson. I do, however, think we need to understand the terms. It helps us understand the specific problems kids might have.

Inferences Based on Signal Words

Another common type of inference is supported by signal words such as *first*, *later*, *after*, *before*, *notwithstanding*, *in conclusion*, *by contrast*, and *likewise*. A list of many signal words is provided in Appendix B.

Signal words provide important clues that help readers when they are not sure about word meaning. Too often, though, we assume students recognize the importance of these words or phrases. Struggling readers, however, need help identifying their function. Consider the following example:

He is a perspicacious reader. That is to say, he is a skilled reader who makes keen connections and inferences.

If you recognize that “that is to say” means “here’s an easier way of understanding something you just read,” then you know that what follows will explain something. In a similar way, if you read, “Allegedly, it is important to teach young children all the rules that govern letters and sounds,” and if you know that *allegedly* means “I’m qualifying this statement,” then you might infer the author does not believe that statement.

Teaching *categories* of signal words is a concrete way of helping students make inferences. As an early-career teacher, I often focused on the more common categories of signal words:

- sequence (*first*, *next*, *last*)
- comparisons (*furthermore*, *as well as*, *related to*)
- contrasts (*however*, *but*, *on the other hand*)
- causes or effects (*because*, *due to*, *consequently*)
- conclusions (*finally*, *therefore*, *in summation*)

It wasn’t until later in my career that I realized the importance of focusing on other categories of signal words, including these:

- emphasis (*a key idea*, *most of all*, *above all*)
- examples (*to illustrate*, *specifically*, *for example*)
- spatial proximity (*between*, *closest*, *neighboring*, *bordering*)
- qualification, that is, when the author is qualifying her thinking (*allegedly*, *purported*, *seems like*, *supposedly*, *was reported*, *some would say*, *it has been suggested*)

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A list of signal words arranged by categories is provided in Appendix B.

The more work you can do with categories of transition words, the more likely students will be to use them to make an inference.

Inferences Based on Omissions

Often, authors omit words, expecting readers to complete the thought:

When scientists first hypothesized atoms centuries ago, they despaired of ever observing anything so small, and many questioned whether the concept of atoms could even be called scientific. (Bojowald 2008)

Did you notice the omitted word? Sometimes skilled readers are so skilled, their mind reinserts the missing word at a subconscious level. In the phrase “and many questioned” the word *scientists* has been omitted. The author, if being more helpful, would have written “and many *scientists* questioned.”

I’ve now paraphrased a passage that occurs later in the same article about atoms. Read it slowly and see if you notice what I’ve omitted:

Material atoms are the smallest indivisible units of chemical compounds; similarly, putative space atoms are the smallest indivisible units of distance. These are generally thought to be about 10^{-35} meter in size, far too tiny to be seen by today’s most powerful instruments, which probe distances as short as 10^{-18} meter. Consequently, many scientists question whether the concept of atomic space-time can even be called scientific. Undeterred, more are coming up with other ways of detection.

Here’s what I noticed:

Material atoms are the smallest indivisible units of chemical compounds; similarly, putative space atoms are the smallest indivisible units of distance. These ^{putative space atoms} are generally thought to be about 10^{-35} meter in size, far too tiny to be seen by today’s most powerful instruments, which probe distances as short as

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I asked a seventh grader if she had her project ready to discuss. “Nope,” she replied.

“Want to tell me more about that?” I asked.

“Nope. I’m omitting words,” she explained.

10⁻¹⁸ meter. Consequently, many scientists question whether the concept of atomic space-time can even be called scientific. Undeterred, more ^{scientists} are coming up with other ways of ^{of atomic space-time} detection.

Lest you think this conversation engaged the entire class, with all working to understand the passage, consider the group that sat toward the side of the room and eventually asked, “What if you omitted the questions and just told us what it meant?”

In an eleventh-grade science class, students reading this article understood the referent for *these* and most did not even notice that *scientists* had been omitted as they automatically inferred that word. The final omission, though, caused problems. Some thought scientists were looking to detect the putative space atoms. Others inferred “detection of anything to do with atoms.” To encourage the correct inference, we first looked at the word *undeterred* and discussed what that one word meant. Then students decided that the undeterred scientists were the ones who would not stop thinking about way to detect atomic space-time. Once they understood the signal word, they were able to make the correct inference. When authors omit words, they often expect signal words or punctuation to help provide meaning.

When students have trouble with making the inferences that omitted words require they make, we often have to slow our own thinking to identify those omissions. Becoming aware of the inference we made is the first step in helping students make the same inference.

Inferences Based on Punctuation

At one point in the history of writing, no one used punctuation. It was an extra step for those monks sitting at a dimly lit table, laboriously copying one scroll at a time. Plus, almost all reading was done orally. The masses did not have access to printed texts, and if they did, they probably had not learned to read. The orators—those charged to read texts aloud—were taught how to read aloud a particular text, and once they were ready, they performed the text more than read it. It was Aristophanes who first suggested that authors could annotate the text by adding some dots to the text—a dot near the top suggested a slight pause; one in the middle meant a longer pause; one at the bottom meant a full stop.

“Becoming aware of the inference we made is the first step in helping students make the same inference.”

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But his idea didn't gain traction. In particular, Cicero (an important Roman orator) believed that punctuation should be dictated by the rhythm of the prose and not something a copyist put into the text. So, for hundreds of years, *words continued to be put to print without spacing or punctuation that was confusing for many to say the least.*

This began to change, though, with the rise of Christianity. While pagan religions had explained their rituals by word of mouth, the new group called Christians preferred to write their letters, psalms, rules to live by, origin stories, and gospels. They thought the written word would make it faster and easier to spread their beliefs. Early Christian writers, therefore, wanted to add their own punctuation before the masses could decide how phrases and sentences should be punctuated. These early Christian writers realized that a pause here or there could change the meaning they intended the Bible to have.

By about 1450, when a Bible rolled (slowly) off Gutenberg's press, almost all punctuation that we still use appeared: periods, question marks, colons, and semicolons. Not too long afterward came the comma, exclamation point, ellipsis, dash, and parenthesis. Much later, as technology advanced, we added a cousin of punctuation to the myriad of ways authors convey meaning: formatting, such as italics and boldface. Now, even newer technology has added another means for authors to imply meaning: emoticons and emojis.

Reading words includes hearing them as you decode them. Try to read this sentence without hearing the words in your mind. You probably couldn't avoid hearing the words. We hear the words we read. But we do not *hear* punctuation marks; we respond to them. We *see* a semicolon and pause; we *see* a question mark and our voices reveal inflection. We see parentheses and take on a conspiratorial whisper. We see a dash and we pause a bit before rushing on as we recognize that those words—the ones between the dashes—explain something previously written. We follow the directions of punctuation; we don't hear the punctuation itself.

Struggling readers, by contrast, often do not follow the directions punctuation tries to impose. They read past periods, never bothering to slow between two sentences. They read what's between parentheses with the same expression as what is not. They don't understand how their voice, that internal voice of silent reading or external voice of oral reading, might

“We hear the words we read. But we do not hear punctuation marks; we respond to them. We see a semicolon and pause; we see a question mark and our voices reveal inflection.”

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I often think the most required trait for teaching adolescents is a sense of humor. In a ninth-grade class, I noted one student had written in the margin of his paper, “I f---ing! hate! school!” He saw me looking at what he had written and asked, “Did the exclamation points help you make an inference?” Yup.

“Punctuation, as silent as it is, proclaims loudly how we are to read the text.”

sound when reading a list or a statement that follows a colon. They do not know all that punctuation might help them infer.

I like to give students a chance to tell me what the punctuation suggests and what they, consequently, infer. For instance, I ask students how “He ate the cake?” differs from “*He* ate the cake?” I want them to explain how “He wants to go!” contrasts with “He *wants* to go?” I want them to recognize that parentheses provide insight into a character such as in one of the most famous uses of parentheses in literature: “My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three . . .” (Nabokov 1997, 10). Such a terse explanation must mean something. Has the character spent his lifetime explaining her sudden death so that now, as an adult, he has reduced this tragic story to two words? Does the tragedy continue to haunt him so much that he can utter only these two words?

I want them to see that the well-placed exclamation point can bring the reader’s attention to something important. In *No Name in the Street*, James Baldwin wrote, “If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected—those, precisely, who need the law’s protection most!—and listens to their testimony” (2007, 149). That exclamation point underscores the point Baldwin is making, and without it, the lesson is not as powerful.

Punctuation, as silent as it is, proclaims loudly how we are to read the text.

Inferences Based on Substitutions

The most basic substitution is a pronoun for a noun. We’ve already looked at that. Now let’s focus on a different type of substitution, nouns for other nouns. Authors use synonyms to eliminate redundancy, and usually, these substitutions cause little trouble. But, if readers are learning new content that uses content-specific words, recognizing synonyms is critical. Take a look at this passage:

The Americans who remained loyal to the British Crown were often called Tories. These loyalists stood in opposition to those
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who wanted independence from England. Seen as “royalists,” the King’s Men fought again the Patriots, even though they lived alongside them. (Beers and Probst 2016, 211)

This passage requires that students recognize all the substitutions. *Loyalists*, *royalists*, and *King’s Men* were substituted for *Tories*. If students can’t follow those substitutions, this passage won’t help them understand anything and if they can’t remember that *Tories* were the Americans who were loyal to the king of England, then they will be confused. We must remember to help students link synonyms together.

Look at the synonyms that we can link in the short story “Thank You, M’am” by Langston Hughes (1958/1986). A woman, Mrs. Louella Bates Washington Jones, stops a young boy as he attempts to steal her purse. She keeps him from stealing her pocketbook and says angrily to him: “Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here.”

The woman doesn’t take the boy to the police station, but she takes him to her home. As she drags him to her apartment, she tells him, “You ought to be my son.”

Once in her apartment, she finally says, “What is your name?”

He answers, “Roger.”

“Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face,” she says.

After feeding him, telling him about her life, and giving him ten dollars, she is ready to send him on his way. She explains: “I got to get my rest now. But from here on in, son, I hope you will behave yourself.”

She walks him to the door of her apartment building and sends him on his way, saying: “Good night! Behave yourself, boy!”

If students have learned to link synonyms, they’ll see that the woman begins by calling the would-be thief *boy*; then she says he ought to be her *son*; next she calls him his given name, *Roger*. A few sentences later, she directly calls him *son*. Finally, as she is sending him back into the world, she distances herself from him and returns to calling him *boy*.

Noticing this progression allows students to infer how the woman’s feelings have changed throughout the story. In this case, these substitutions offer insight into character development.

Other times, the substitutions serve as a way of helping students learn a new term or concept. Here, linking the synonyms helps students understand *Grand Alliance* and *Axis powers*.

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A group of countries worked together during World War II to fight against the aggressors. This bloc of nations helped each other. These three major powers included Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. This Grand Alliance had a common goal of defeating Germany, Italy, and Japan, but they had varying thoughts on how to fight against the Axis powers.

Inferences Based on Knowing Multiple Meanings of Words

Not only do some readers struggle with academic vocabulary, but often, they do not know the many meanings of common words. Think about the multiple meanings of *run*, *volume*, *fast*, *bolt*, and *down*. If you know only that *bolt* means to run suddenly and quickly, then when someone says, “Hand me that bolt of material,” you might be confused. The following offers another example:

If there’s a will, I want to be in it.

That sentence probably surprised you because you expected it to say, “If there’s a will, there’s a way.” If the sentence had progressed as you had expected, you might have explained it by saying, “If you are determined, you will find a way to accomplish what you want to accomplish.” In this

case, *will* means “commitment to something or determination.” But the sentence did not progress as expected and you revised your understanding.

The context offers very little about what the word *will* means. The sentence does tell us that it is something the speaker wants to be in. If you know that a will is a legal

“As we make an inference, often our knowledge of word meanings stored in our minds is more valuable than any clues in the text.”

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document that designates heirs of an estate and if you understand that being *in it* means being listed an heir, then you understand why you might have smiled as you read it.

If you don't know that definition of *will*, then you are left wondering what this means. There are no explicit clues to the meaning. As we make an inference, often our knowledge of word meanings stored in our minds is more valuable than any clues in the text.

Remember, our knowledge of words is affected by our experiences. In one ninth-grade class in a small east Texas town, students saw the sentence "The jersey was left in the field." The students in that class who were active members of the Future Farmers of America club wanted to know if there were other cows in that field. The football players in the class said the coach would be angry if they left any football gear or uniforms on the field. As students talked, each realized that their own experiences shaped how they inferred the meaning. As they looked closely at the sentence, one football player said, "You leave a cow *in* a field but a shirt *on* the field." He then proudly added, "That was some good close reading I was doing."

In a fifth-grade class, the students read, "Lava will cascade down a mountain as nothing can stop it." One student asked, "Why would you put Cascade into a volcano?" In a seventh-grade class, a student read, "How could he get his work done with all that racket from outside?" An avid tennis player, he asked, "So, does this mean a lot of people are playing tennis outside?"

I gave a group of eleventh graders a sentence that stumped them all for a while: "The old man the boat." When they all announced that sentence didn't make sense, I asked them if they knew what all the words meant. They were positive they did. Finally, someone looked up *man* and discovered it could be a verb and mean "to equip or to occupy." Someone else decided to look up *old*. They discovered it could be a noun and mean a group of elderly people. Someone else finally explained, "You have to know those other meanings and you must read it with a pause between *old* and *man* for it to make sense: The *old* [pause] man the boat.

We must teach students the less common academic vocabulary of their textbooks, but we can solve many inference problems by making sure they know the multiple meanings of many common words. I've included a list of common words with multiple meanings I like to share in Appendix C.

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And a few still said, "I don't get it." This shift of words—grammatically and semantically—was something these literal-level thinkers were not ready for. When we made synonym links (wrote the word *elderly* above *old* and *occupied* above *man*), then they could see it. Then they said, "Oh! I do get it!"

Can offers an example of a common word with multiple meanings. Let students look through a text together, discussing words that have multiple meanings.

Inferences Based on Close Causal Relationships

With some inferences, you know the meaning of all the words and easily recognize how ideas are related:

Jason’s arms were covered in minor scratches. The new kitten loved to run up and down Jason’s arms.

“When ideas are linked causally, but that relationship is not quickly apparent, more inferences are required to understand the author’s intent.”

All you have to do is infer that while the kitten was running up and down Jason’s arms, the kitten’s sharp nails scratched Jason. The two sentences have a close causal relationship; thus, the inference is easier to make. Passages that offer close causal relationships generally do not cause much confusion. If you see that there is a problem, ask students to combine the two sentences into one sentence and add any explanations that have been omitted.

Jason’s arms were covered in minor scratches because the new kitten loved to run up and down Jason’s arms, and the kitten’s sharp claws scratched his arm.

Inferences Based on Distant Causal Relationships

When ideas are linked causally, but that relationship is not quickly apparent, more inferences are required to understand the author’s intent. That takes more cognitive energy. This is where we begin to lose some readers, especially if they don’t value the reward for staying with the task. Try this:

Jason went to his neighbor’s house. He returned with his arms full of scratches.

The author intends a causal link between Jason going to his neighbor’s house and his arms being filled with scratches, but what is it?

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Did Jason walk through thorny bushes to get there?

Did he get mosquito bites and start scratching his arms?

Did he fall while playing?

Does Jason's neighbor have a cat and did Jason play with the cat?

By this time, do you care?

Distant causal links demand attention, and attention takes energy. They require readers know when to read on, reread, look to graphics, look to titles, and perhaps focus on unknown vocabulary. In the previous sentences about Jason's scratched-up arms, there's not enough information for the reader to do much more than make a series of predictions and then read on.

The following passage from *George Washington's Secret Six* (Kilmeade and Yeager 2013) requires several types of inferences, but I want you to focus on the move from the first paragraph to the second paragraph. It's at this point that the author omits commentary that would have made this easier to follow:

Even as Robert Townsend was settling into his new role, something happened that highlighted the precarious nature of the world in which he now lived. On July 2, 1779, British raiders had attacked Major Tallmadge's camp at dawn, killing ten men and capturing eight, plus a dozen horses. Those losses were devastating, but in the aftermath, Tallmadge made a discovery that proved unsettling and was potentially threatening to the Patriots' intelligence operations. One of the horses the British had stolen was his own, which still bore its saddlebags and some of Tallmadge's personal papers—including some money earmarked for Woodhull and a letter from Washington that specifically named George Higday, a resident of Manhattan "who I am told hath given signal proofs of his attachment to us, and at the same time stands well with the enemy."

Eleven days later, Higday was arrested at his home and confessed to having met with General Washington to discuss the possibility of spying, but claimed that he never carried out any such activity because the payment had been in fake bills. (2013, 89)

After I discussed this example with a group of eighth graders, one student remarked, "I think this writer needs help." While we all laughed, what often makes students' writing confusing is this very issue: the causal relationships are too distant.

There is no explicit discussion of what caused Higday's arrest. Students must make a distant causal connection.

When I asked the eighth graders reading this book to discuss what led to Higday's arrest, many responded, "He was arrested because he had met

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with Washington to discuss spying.” They avoided the question as I had asked it and instead answered one that had a more direct answer in the text. I then changed my question (Anne was right—it is always about the questions we ask) and said, “Be the author and write some more sentences at the end of the first paragraph that would help readers understand what *caused* him to be arrested.” One group wrote:

The British took the information found in Tallmadge’s personal papers and read them. As they were reading them, they discovered that George Higday was someone George Washington thought would be a good spy for the Patriots. So, the British arrested him.

When the causal relationships are distant, meaning the reader must do more work to get from here to there, give students direction on where missing information might fit and let them write about what is missing.

Inferences Based on World Knowledge

The following passage requires knowledge of your world for it to make sense. As you read it, think about the scene you think is being described and identify all you already had to know to understand what is happening.

He put down \$10.00 at the window. The woman behind the window gave him \$4.00 back. The person next to him gave him \$3.00, but he gave it back to her. So, when they went inside, she bought him a large bag of popcorn. (Weaver, Gillmeister-Krause, and Vento-Zogby 1996, 84)

I liked the idea of the student who said, “I think it’s a young son taking his mom to the afternoon movie. She wants to help him pay, but he is excited to do it on his own.”

Another student said, “This must have happened in the olden days, like when you were a kid. Even matinee movies cost more than three dollars now.”

I see a man and a woman who are going to the movies. Perhaps they are on a date, but it must be a matinee because tickets cost only three dollars per person. I know that amount because after paying with a ten-dollar bill, he got four dollars back. That means the woman “behind the window” kept six dollars. Presuming each person’s ticket cost the same amount, each ticket cost three dollars.

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I also know that you have to stand at the window to get tickets before you can enter. That helps confirm my thought that they are at a movie theatre. Later, I see they buy popcorn. That’s something many people buy when they go see a movie. I think the woman doesn’t want the man to buy her ticket. She tried to give him three dollars, the amount of her ticket. There is something she is not quite comfortable with yet and that’s why she wants to pay her own way. I infer this means a lot to her because when he wouldn’t accept her money, she decided to buy the large popcorn, which must cost about three dollars.

Some of the inferences I made were text-based inferences (such as connecting *person next to him* with *her*), and others were connected to knowledge that I have about the world: we buy movie tickets at a window; we stand in line at the ticket window before going in; when someone buys us things, we can feel beholden to them. I used those inferences to create what Durkin (1993) calls an “internal text”—thoughts about what is happening in the text. Readers construct internal texts as they connect the information in the external text (the printed information) with what they already know.

When students are reading texts with historical references, realize that they sometimes won’t know those references—they’re not in their world of knowledge—and so they may miss making some needed inferences. For instance, a fourth grader asked me why I said, “Dial the phone.” In his world, phones aren’t dialed. After 9/11, one news commentator said that when he saw all the flags hanging from windows in New York City, it was a “tie a yellow ribbon” moment for him. My son, a fifth grader at that time, asked what he meant.

World-knowledge inferences require that students know a lot. As students begin studying any particular topic, we need to help them access their knowledge about that topic before they begin reading; I discuss this more in the next chapter.

And depending on your age, you might also be wondering what that phrase meant, or you will be humming “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree” for the rest of the day.

Inferences Based on Textual and World Knowledge

Let’s try one last passage, a poem by Judith Minty (1980). As you read it, make any marks or draw any pictures or take any notes you need to help you decide what this poem is about.

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Letters to My Daughters

Your great-grandfather dreamed that his son
 would be an engineer, the old man,
 the blacksmith with square hands.
 To the Finns up north in that snow country
 engineer was like doctor today. In the forties
 in Detroit, I learned to play the violin.
 So did my father when he was a boy in Ishpeming.
 He and I never spoke about becoming. Our conversation
 was my bow slipping over the strings, my fingers
 searching for notes to tell him, his foot tapping time.
 That violin cracked ten years ago, it dried out
 from loneliness in the coat closet,
 Your grandfather, the engineer, sometimes plays his
 at night behind a closed kitchen door.
 Your grandmother sews and turns up the television.
 But what of you two? The piano you practiced over
 is still here, a deaf-mute in our living room.
 I strike an imperfect chord now and remember
 we never spoke of what was dreamed for you.

—Judith Minty

This is a tough poem requiring us to make many inferences across confusing syntax and loosely threaded together relationships. I certainly said to myself, “I don’t get it,” when I first read it. This poem, often shared in high school, will confound many readers. That won’t be because they can’t decode it. They can. It will be because the causal links are distant, and the amount of energy needed to predict all the ways relationships might be connected and then confirm or discard predictions might be more than they want to muster. As you look at Figure 6.2 you will see the annotations for this poem from a highly skilled seventh grader (Student A). Compare that student’s thinking with what appears in Figure 6.3, which represents the thinking from a less skilled tenth grader (Student B). Figure 6.4 offers a look at how a highly skilled tenth grader (Student C) made sense of the same poem.

Let’s begin by comparing Students A and B. Student A made several types of inferences. She connected pronouns to nouns, added the word *violin* where it had been omitted, noticed an *Again* and *Again* signpost

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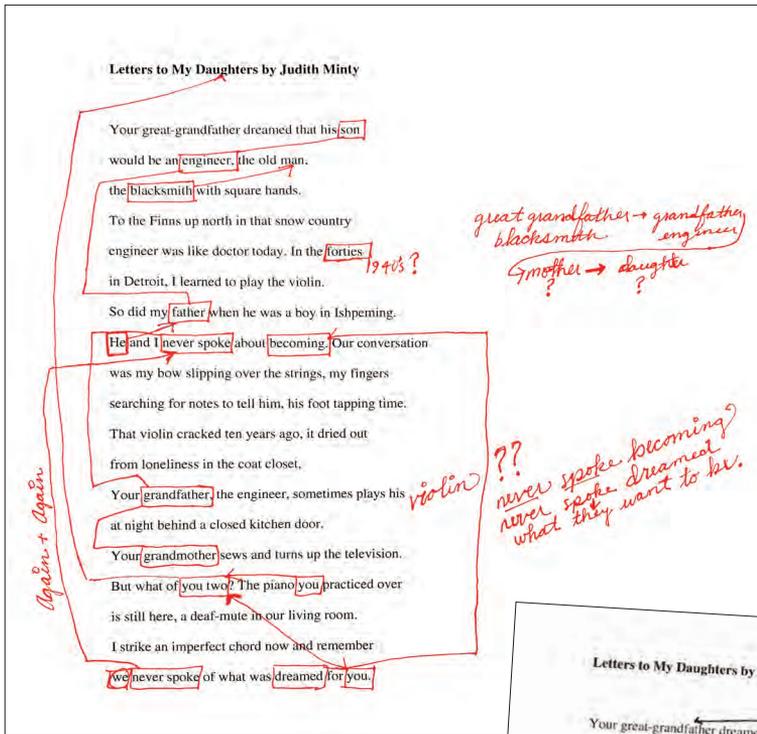


Figure 6.2 Inferences Based on Textual and Word Knowledge, Student A

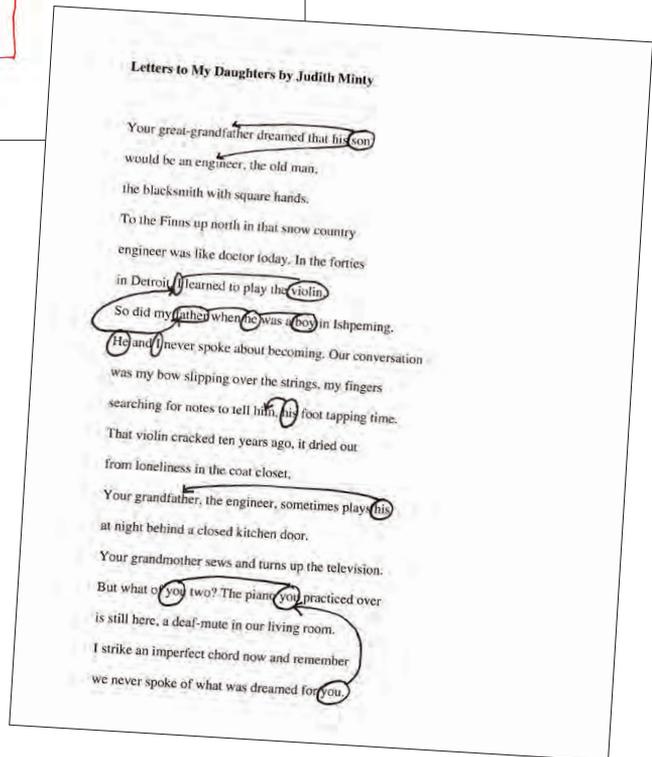


Figure 6.3 Inferences Based on Textual and Word Knowledge, Student B

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Letters to My Daughters by Judith Minty

Your great-grandfather dreamed that his son would be an engineer, the old man, the blacksmith with square hands.

To the Finns up north in that snow country - *hard to get things fixed in winter?*

engineer was like doctor today. In the forties in Detroit, I learned to play the violin. *now in large city*

So did my father when he was a boy in Ishpeming. He and I never spoke about becoming. *Why? Because she wasn't a son?*

was my bow slipping over the strings, my fingers searching for notes to tell him, his foot tapping time. *tell him her dreams?*

That violin cracked ten years ago, it dried out from loneliness in the coat closet. *gave up her dreams*

Your grandfather, the engineer, sometimes plays his at night behind a closed kitchen door. *not the doctor*

Your grandmother *no sound* sews and turns up the television. *doesn't want to hear?*

But what of you two? The piano you practiced over is still here, a deaf-mute in our living room. *no sound*

I strike an imperfect chord now and remember we never spoke of what was dreamed for you her daughters

Handwritten notes on the right side:
 great-grandfather = blacksmith
 grandfather = engineer
 mother (father?) = parent?
 daughters = no talk of what was dreamed because she was female?
 father talks to son
 father does not talk to mother
 Mum did not talk to daughter
 Grandfather became an engineer because his dad shared a dream with him But no sharing of dream with girl. Why?

Figure 6.4 Inferences Based on Textual and Word Knowledge, Student C

(see Chapter 8 for more on signposts), recognized “forties” as a substitution for 1940s, connected “you two” to “daughters,” and saw that the narrator’s father and the narrator never discussed the narrator’s dreams and the narrator never discussed dreams with her daughters. That’s a lot of work. And still, when done, this student said, “I kind of get it, but this whole part about the ‘bow slipping over the strings’ is confusing. I guess it is about how the mother is sad about not asking her daughters what they wanted to be.”

Compare that with Student B. This student, though older, read less, did not like to read, and did not put effort into challenging texts. Notice this student mostly connected some pronouns to nouns, though sometimes he merely connected pronouns to other pronouns. He did show an understanding that the narrator plays the violin.

In that same classroom, Student C made many inferences. The student captured some of those through underlining, arrows, and lines connecting

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things; others are evident in marginal notes, which offered speculations and questions. Furthermore, it is only this student that began adding world knowledge: it's hard to get things fixed in the snow country in the winter; living in Detroit means they now live in a larger city; sewing doesn't make noise.

The more distant the causal relationships are, the more they require readers to bring their background to the text; thus, the more our struggling readers retreat. They stop, declare the text is dumb, and tell us reading is boring. Our first job is to recognize that this is a defense mechanism. *They* feel dumb and are tired of feeling that way.

Step Inside a Classroom

In the tenth-grade class that was reading this poem, two or three students wanted to keep reading the poem. They liked that they had to work hard for it to make sense. Four or five others read through it briefly one time and then started drawing, sleeping, or looking around the room. The majority made some attempt at the syntax surgery, with most offering connections like the ones Student B made.

To encourage those inferences that require the most distant connections (not readily available in the text), I asked, “What surprised you?”

Most said, “Nothing.”

I waited. Then, this conversation emerged:

Student 1: I was surprised that it said the great-grandfather dreamed his son would be an engineer instead of a doctor. Did that mean, like, *dream*? He had a dream?

Student 2: Look, *dream* is in the last line, too. Could it mean, like, he hoped his son would be an engineer? It says, “we never spoke of what was dreamed for you.” Does that mean the great-grandfather did tell his son his dream, but the mother didn't tell her daughters?

That one conversation resulted in several students going back into the text. I didn't ask them to discuss inferences. I asked them to discuss what surprised them. Surprises (remember “Where there's a will, I want to be in it”?) come from inferences we make—or can't make. Start there. You just might be surprised.

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Syntax Surgery is discussed on page 122 and “What Surprised You,” one of the Three Big Questions, is discussed on page 149.

To Infer, or Not to Infer

“I don’t get it” is so much easier to say than “I can’t infer relationships among the words, or the characters, or between the characters and myself,” or “I can’t use the context to help me infer the correct definitions,” or “I think the causal relationships are too distant and that’s causing confusion.” Teaching would be easier if students would use that language. But no. “I don’t get it” is the synonym for all those problems.

That elusive *it*, the beginning of understanding, originates in the text but does not fully reveal itself on the pages. *It* is in that interaction between the reader and the text, between the words on the page and the images and ideas in the mind. *It* sits in the intersection of the author’s words and the reader’s wonderings as the reader navigates what the author has said and has left unsaid. Bridging the two requires that readers make inferences.

Dear George,

*I still like the short story "Top Man" and I enjoy discussing who was the top man. When you had shrugged, I wish we would have discussed how the phrase *top man* could refer to the person who stood atop the mountain and it could refer to the person who did something for another. We could have talked about the sacrifices both Nace and Osborne made, and you could have told me who you thought made the ultimate sacrifice. You then could have decided who you thought was the top man.*

We were both so close, George. With patience on my part, you might have explained what confused you. And with more knowledge on my part, I could have helped you. But no, you shared your honest feelings, I bristled, and then I sent you out of our classroom. I sent you away from learning, though I guess you learned something about me. I am saddened to think of all that exchange must have meant to you.

