Reading Informational Text: Inferring

Common Core Standards: Reading Standards for Informational Text, Key Ideas and Details—RI.4.1–RI.12.1

Use Clues to Infer

Ask your class to think about what's going on as you put the following clues on the board. Pause after each clue to let students guess what is going on in the scenario.

- It is a sunny day.
- The teacher gives back a big stack of artwork and papers to each student.
- The teacher says she is going to go camping at Cumberland Mountain State Park next week.
- James says he is going to drive to Tennessee to see his grandma.
- The students are cleaning out their desks.
- What is happening? It's the last day of school, and summer vacation starts tomorrow!

Inferring is sometimes called "reading between the lines" because when we infer, we figure out ideas that aren't stated directly in the text. It's as if the ideas are invisible, floating there between the lines of writing we do have. By putting the ideas we are given together, we can come up with new information. One way we do that is by using what we already know about how people act and how events often happen. This knowledge helps us to infer successfully. Here is another example:

- Cammy is frowning.
- It's time for the math test.

What are some reasons Cammy might not be smiling? Students may guess that she doesn't like math tests or didn't study for the test, but what are some other reasons? Maybe she got in a fight with her brother this morning. Maybe she isn't feeling good. Maybe she's moving away soon and feels sad about it. What do all these different inferences tell us about our clues? They tell us we don't have enough clues to make a good inference, or that the clues are too general to be useful! Put these two terms on the board:

Drawing conclusions

Jumping to conclusions

Can anyone in the class explain the difference between these two expressions? When we draw conclusions, we have enough clues to infer well and we are often right. When we jump to conclusions, we don't have enough information to infer well and we are often wrong. Ask students if they can think of times when they or someone they know has jumped to conclusions. For example, did anyone ever get in trouble for something they didn't do?

Put the following list of clues on the board, stopping after each one to ask your class to infer what's going on.

- Sam walks down the hall of the school.
- The principal walks beside him.
- Sam looks unhappy.
- So does the principal.
- Sam's mother is waiting in the school office.
- She doesn't look happy either.
- It's a bad day.

Students may guess that Sam is in trouble, but that is not the case. Sam just found out that his grandfather had a heart attack and is in the hospital. Sam and his mother are sad, and the principal feels sad for them.

Discuss why inferring is useful even though we sometimes get it wrong. Point out that a lot of people think inferring is hard, but we actually use inferring every day of our lives as we try to understand the people, situations, and information we come across. Ask students to think of recent examples of inferring in their lives. For example, if there's a thunderstorm today, students might guess that a planned soccer game could be cancelled.

Now your class will practice inferring about what they have read in the textbook. Practice by reading a section from the current lesson as a class and having students help you list clues on the board. Then ask students what inferences they can make about the section. What do the clues tell them that might not be spelled out? Discuss why authors don't give us every single bit of information, but sometimes provide clues that allow us to understand additional ideas.

Have students work in pairs to select 3–4 paragraphs from the lesson and write a list of clues and inferences for each one. Remind them to combine some of the clues and come up with ideas about what they mean. When students are finished, discuss their inferences as a class.