

Critical Thinking Skills Tutorial

Drawing Inferences

From Literature

This Tutorial includes two files:

- **Lesson (34a_Drawing_Inferences_From_Lit_Lesson)**

In order to learn the material presented in this tutorial more effectively, as you read you should take notes in a place that you can reference later. If it is convenient, you could print the tutorial and annotate it so you can keep it for future reference.

- **Exercises (34b_Drawing_Inferences_From_Lit_Exercises –**
located in the same area as the lesson)

- It has highlighted areas for you to take notes and answer the exercises using an application such as Adobe Acrobat Reader.
- Download and save this file as your own; you will share it with an instructor after you complete the lesson and exercises.

Please contact the Writing Center with any questions or difficulties:
csmtwc@smccd.edu or 650-574-6436.

Drawing Inferences From Literature

Introduction: Literature & Critical Thinking

Written ideas come in many forms: as persuasive or logical arguments, as explanations, or as literary fiction. No matter how written ideas are presented, we need to think critically to understand and evaluate them.

NOTE: The skills involved in understanding and evaluating logical or persuasive arguments are covered in the *Understanding Argument: Logic* and *Understanding Argument: Rhetoric* tutorials.

This tutorial focuses on the critical thinking skills that permit us to understand and learn from literature — novels, plays, poems or short stories — by helping us draw inferences from literature — to "read between the lines" — and to distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable inferences.

- We must be able to read closely to understand and enjoy literature. This means we need to pick up ideas implied in the words, imagery, plot or dialogue to get the full impact of the work.
- We must also read carefully. Readers shouldn't make unfounded guesses, or read things into texts that just aren't there because we expect them to be.

Critical Thinking: A Definition

No single definition can adequately describe all aspects of critical thinking. But here are some important elements:

- **Critical thinking consists of asking ourselves what we mean.** Chances are that at some point, you've said to another person -- your best friend, your mom, your youngest son -- "I love you." What did you mean by that? It's not clear. You might mean that you admire the person's character more than anyone else, or that you have more fun with that person than anyone else, or that you feel most at home with that person, or that this person provided you with the life you wanted and you're grateful, or that you feel this person accepts you. In short, the statement "I love you" tells us almost nothing about what's in your heart. The critical thinker looks beneath the words "I love you" and tries to understand, and explain, what he or she really needs, expects and gets from the other person.
- **Critical thinking consists in never taking for granted that we know what other people mean.** Everyone summarizes complex needs and beliefs with broad-brush statements like "I love you," or "He's a total jerk!" So just as we need to keep asking ourselves what we mean by these generalizations, we need to be clear about what other people mean. When your friend tells you that he's "there for you," you may both understand this quite differently. To him, this might mean that he is generally on your side in life, and will listen sympathetically to your problems. To you, it might mean that he's going to come over next Tuesday to help you work on your car. Often, our frustrations and disappointments with other people lie in our assuming that others use words in the same way that we do.
- **Critical thinking consists in not imposing our assumptions on what we read and hear.** We don't read or listen with an empty head: we have expectations and assumptions that we impose

on what we're hearing or reading. So, unless we listen carefully, we may misunderstand them. Imagine you are introduced to someone called Bark--because his name sounds like the much commoner name "Mark," you'll probably assume he's called Mark. We do the same thing with ideas. We bring many assumptions to our reading -- about morals, tastes, values, the way people live -- and we need to be careful not to read them into the text, simply because we expect them to be there. For one thing, the writer may not share these assumptions, if he or she is from a different culture or era. For another, the writer may indeed want to challenge these assumptions!

Literature And Critical Thinking

How can literature help us become better critical thinkers? Let us count the ways:

1. **Literature gives us the chance to experience life from another point of view.** Our individual experience is limited; but literature permits us to see the world through the eyes of others very different from ourselves. As we participate in these other lives, we expand our experience.
2. **Literature can challenge our values and perceptions.** The more we understand other points of view, the better we can understand and evaluate our own.
3. **Studying literature trains us to listen and read closely.** Too often, we miss a lot of what we see and hear because we don't have the time or the skill to process it. But studying literature trains us to look for details, subtleties and other complexities.
4. **Studying literature sharpens our ear for language.** Language can deceive and reveal, so critical readers pay close attention to language choices -- tell-tale slips of the tongue, interesting imagery, suggestive phrases. This greatly improves their ability to make sense of how people use language, and thus to evaluate and understand what people are saying.
5. **Literature gives us the means of self-knowledge.** We like basic summaries and big-picture generalizations; we often wave away the fiddly details. "The guy's basically a big jerk," we say of someone who has annoyed us. Studying literature teaches us that these statements mean nothing. What kind of "jerk?" What specifically annoys us about his behavior? Why does this annoy us in particular? Why does he act this way? How do we expect him to act, and why? How does he see himself? Does he think we're jerks, and might he be right? When we write about characters or values as presented in fiction, we must be detailed; and in searching out these details, we find ourselves challenging our own values and expectations.

Finally:

As you study literature, in this tutorial or in class, you may find yourself getting a bit resentful. Here are some common reactions we've heard in class:

"How can we infer all this into one little sentence?"

"C'mon -- how do we know the author meant all this stuff, anyway?"

"I just want to enjoy the story, not analyze it to death."

If you find yourself thinking these things, remember this:

Literature does not make simple things complicated. On the contrary: life really IS complicated -- good literature just trains us to see its complexities!

Please open your Drawing Inferences from Lit exercises file and complete notes 1 and 2.

Drawing Inferences: Active Reading

A good story or poem contains lots of details, more than readers can usually take in all at once. So the more closely we read a rich piece of writing, the more details we find. The more details we find, the more colorful and vivid the story becomes, the more strongly we respond to it, and the more it tells us about our lives.

Here are three golden rules for discerning these details:

1. Read Carefully – Look at what’s on the page.

- Pay attention to what characters actually say or do.
- Pay attention to the choice of imagery or words.

2. Read Inquisitively – Ask yourself questions!

- Ask what we can infer from the dialogue or plot.
- Ask what the imagery or choice of language suggests.

3. Read Reasonably – Don’t project ideas onto the text.

- Don't force insights: let them emerge.
- Make sure you can tie your insights directly to the text.
- Make sure you are not projecting your own concerns onto the text.

To explore how to put those rules into practice, let's look at some very brief examples of making inferences from literature.

Five Examples of Active Reading

Here are five examples of how much you can reasonably infer from just a few lines. Each example offers an analysis of

- careful reading that closely recaps the content, looks for words or phrases that need to be looked up, and notes the phrasing;
- inquisitive reading, where the reader asks questions and draws inferences;
- reasonable reading, where the reader draws boundaries about what can and cannot be inferred.

Each example concludes with journal questions to help strengthen your understanding.

Example 1. *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, by Eugene O'Neill

This play describes a very unhappy family, whose love for each other is complicated by deeply held resentments and jealousies. In one scene, elder son Jamie--in a moment of drunken sentimentality--tells his younger brother:

"I love your guts, kid."

- **Reading carefully:** Look closely at the cliché Jamie has used to tell his brother he loves him. Is this turn of phrase quite right? There are clichés to express love -- "I love you to pieces," "I love you to death," etc. But this phrase is usually, "I *hate* your guts."
- **Reading inquisitively:** Why should Jamie use a cliché that usually expresses hate? Does he even realize what he's said? He's drunk -- being drunk often lowers our inhibitions, so we say or do things that we normally won't acknowledge. Maybe he resents his brother, but won't admit it.
- **Reading reasonably:** You might read this and say, "Oh, it doesn't matter that Jamie says "love your guts;" my brother makes slips of the tongue all the time, but that doesn't mean that he hates me." Fine! But you're discussing O'Neill's play, not your own life. You're trying to infer what O'Neill sees in human relationships. You may get along well with your family, but many people don't -- the world is full of tortured relationships where love and hate coexist in equal force, and this play offers an insight into them. (Discussing the play generates ideas, which will enrich your understanding of your own life, however remote it seems from the world of the play--and in the case of *Long Day's Journey*, we hope it is!)

Please open your Drawing Inferences from Lit exercises file and complete notes 3 and 4.

Example 2. *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen

This novel describes a much stabler family: Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and their five adult daughters, living in a small English town. But this family has its dynamics too, as we can see from a snippet of dialogue between the parents:

"Mr. Bennet... You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion for my poor nerves."

"You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least."

- **Reading carefully:** We learn that they've been married twenty years. Mrs. B thinks that Mr. B "takes delight in vexing her." Mr. B. replies sarcastically, or teasingly -- he doesn't say directly, "Stop whining!" but suggests that he's heard her complain for a long time.
- **Reading inquisitively:** Does Mr. B really take a delight in vexing her? Has he been provoking her for 20 years? Well, he's teasing her right now (saying her nerves are his "old friends"). Why should he tease her? Perhaps he is a naturally teasing person. Perhaps this is how he copes with having a whiney wife. But would she be whiney if her husband teased her less? Maybe he's using teasing as a way of not taking her seriously. (Note how he doesn't really answer her question here.)
- **Reading reasonably:** It seems odd for a wife to call her husband by his last name, and readers might infer that this indicates something is deeply wrong with their relationship. But in fact, this novel was written in the early nineteenth century, when it was quite common for middle-class

married couples to address each other by their last names. The use of "Mr." and "Mrs." doesn't signify anything wrong with their relationship, so we shouldn't project that into the text. (But it is worth noting that in the early nineteenth century, this usage was already perceived as rather old-fashioned--this does add a detail to their characters.)

Please open your Drawing Inferences from Lit exercises file and complete notes 5 and 6.

Example 3: from *The Rape of the Lock*, Alexander Pope

This poem, written in 1714, describes how a young man cuts a lock of hair from a girl he admires, without her permission. The poem begins with a description of the heroine, Belinda, waking up in her bedroom and getting ready for the day. These lines come from a description of her make-up table:

The tortoise and the elephant unite,
Transformed to combs, the speckled and the white.
Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
Puffs, powders, patches, Bibles, *billet-doux*.

- **Reading carefully:** First of all, make sure you understand the content. As you read, you will certainly come across words and phrases you don't know; we all do. You must look up or be ready to ask about references or words you don't understand. For instance, if you don't know what a *billet-doux* is, look it up! OK: A *billet-doux* is a love letter. It's not a very serious word for a love-letter -- it's a bit coy, like the term "sweet nothings" or "special friend." One wouldn't use this term for something serious and passionate; these would probably be notes from admirers. So her table is covered with make-up (puffs, powders etc.); *billet-doux*; Bibles. The pins are probably hairpins, not just regular straight pins, and very expensive and ornamental. She has a lot of them (they extend their shining rows -- it takes several pins to form one row, let alone several). There are two combs too. The white one is a transformed elephant, and the speckled one a transformed tortoise. So... the white one is ivory, and the other tortoiseshell.
- **Reading inquisitively:** What does this list tell us about her? She has a lot of make-up and hairpins. She's probably quite vain. What about other items on her table, like the Bible? Does this mean she is really religious? Hmmmm... Something about the way it's tucked into that list, as if it were just another bit of decoration, suggests that she probably ISN'T. It sounds more like Belinda is pretty superficial, and doesn't make much distinction between important and trivial things. What about the "elephant" and "tortoise?" The idea that the mighty elephant exists merely as an ivory comb somehow underlines her silliness. Do we think these *billet-doux* are from the great passionate love of her life? Somehow, it doesn't seem likely. Belinda seems to be all about surfaces (primarily, her own). Also, the line doesn't say "a *billet-doux*," but just "*billet-doux*" -- meaning there are more than one. So this isn't a love letter from her one true love, but a pile (or at least, a few) letters.
- **Reading reasonably:** Pope seems to suggest that Belinda is quite superficial, and perhaps vain. What about selfish? Uncaring? Stupid? That's going too far. We tend to assume that vain people are also selfish, but this may be one of those assumptions that we need to watch out for. Vanity and selfishness are, after all, quite distinct qualities. We also need to be careful not to impose on fictional Belinda any resemblance to someone we may know, or we'll miss Pope's point. Belinda

may remind you of a friend who is vain, superficial, selfish and deceitful; or she may remind you of a friend who is vain and superficial, yet charming and decent at heart. Either way, don't let the resemblances tempt you to read things into the poem that aren't there.

Please open your Drawing Inferences from Lit exercises file and complete notes 7 and 8.

Example 4: from *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville

This nineteenth century novel describes the obsessive pursuit of a great white whale. It is narrated by one of the participants, who opens with the (very famous) line:

“Call me Ishmael.”

- **Reading carefully.** The narrator is speaking directly to the readers, telling us the story. He instructs us to call him "Ishmael."
- **Reading inquisitively:** Is Ishmael really his name? Probably not -- he doesn't say "I am Ishmael," but "Call me Ishmael." So: there's something mysterious about this narrator. Does this pseudonym have any significance? Who was "Ishmael?" After investigating, you'd find out that Ishmael is a Biblical character, the son of Abraham by his wife's maid Hagar. In Genesis 16:12, Ishmael is described as "a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him." So the narrator is using an Old Testament name which makes us think of a loner, a man who doesn't fit in with others. With only three words, then, we are thrown into the company of this mysterious person, a kind of loner or misfit, who has sat us down and is about to tell us the story of his life.
- **Reading reasonably:** We've read quite a lot into the name "Ishmael," mostly because the narrator deliberately adopts it. However, we shouldn't forget that we're only three words into the novel. Maybe we are supposed to feel the Old Testament associations of "Ishmael" and use them, as we have done here, to enrich our understanding of the character. But if Ishmael and the novel as a whole turn out to be quite different from what this suggests, we shouldn't force the issue.

Please open your Drawing Inferences from Lit exercises file and complete notes 9 and 10.

Example 5: from "The Enormous Radio," by John Cheever

This short story describes how a new radio gives a respectable married couple an unwelcome insight into their neighbors' lives. The husband, Jim Westcott, is described thus:

He wore his graying hair cut very short, he was dressed in the kind of clothes his class had worn at Andover, and his manner was earnest, vehement, and intentionally naive.

- **Reading carefully:** What's Andover? Cheever includes this detail to give us background, so readers need to know what it is. In fact, Andover is an exclusive private high school on the East

Coast. Jim's probably not a recent high school graduate, since his hair is graying. His manner is earnest, vehement and intentionally naive. (Make sure you know what all these terms mean!)

- **Reading inquisitively:** How can one be intentionally naive? It's impossible: naivety implies a kind of innocence, so being intentionally naive just means you're being childish or perhaps a bit phony. Of course, Cheever says that Jim's manner is intentionally naive. So Jim may or may not be naive, but he tries to come across that way. Perhaps he is "vehement" because he works hard to project these qualities. Interesting what qualities he chooses: not worldly, or street-wise, or funny or brainy. Sounds like he's trying to be a kind of Jimmy Stewart-type (Jimmy Stewart was a famous movie star who portrayed decent, straightforward, ordinary folk). We know that he went to a famously exclusive high school, so he's probably from a wealthy family. Given that his hair is graying, why is he still dressing like his high school classmates? Maybe he's stuck in the "good old days" and still thinks of himself as, above all, an Andover graduate. That suggests that he hasn't seen much of the world, nor that he's grown up much. Note too that he dresses in the kind of clothes that his whole class wore. Perhaps, he's not an original thinker. He's conservative; note the short haircut.
- **Reading reasonably:** Is Jim Westcott a particularly bad person? Deceitful? Disguised? We can't infer that much from these lines. We know he's making some kind of effort to present himself a certain way, but then again, perhaps we all do.

Please open your Drawing Inferences from Lit exercises file and complete note 11.

Conclusion

Before moving to the exercises, here are some more questions for your notes:

Please open your Drawing Inferences from Lit exercises file and complete notes 12 through 15.

Please open your Drawing Inferences from Lit exercises file and complete Exercises 1 through 5.

Final Activity

Instructions:

1. Now that you have completed the lesson, notes and exercises for this tutorial, please share your tutorial notes and exercise answers with the Writing Center, either by emailing them to csmtwc@smccd.edu or by stopping by room 18- 104. Once you do this, the Instructional Aide will give you the Exit Quiz to complete.
2. After you have completed the Exit Quiz, make an appointment for a conference with an instructor working in the Writing Center. To make this appointment, sign up using the same method you use to make essay conference appointments. Be sure to include a comment or note that you are meeting about a tutorial.
3. During this appointment, the instructor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to the exercises, and check the Exit Quiz you completed.