

Recognizing Inference in Action

Editor's Note

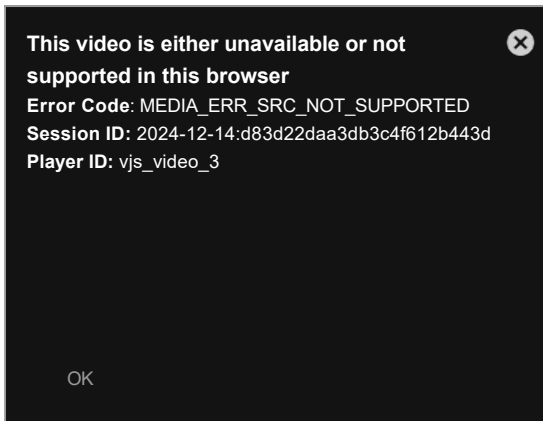
"Eliminate all other factors, and the one which remains must be the truth."

—Sherlock Holmes in *The Sign of Four*

I've always loved this Holmesian quote. It makes the act of inquiry and drawing big dramatic conclusions sound so clear and simple. But if Sherlock had spent much time working with students, he'd discover that the concept is a bit easier to consider in theory than in practice.

Rather than teach students astute investigation skills rivaling that of the world's greatest detective, we can distill brilliant reasoning down to the fundamental concept at its center: making an inference.

Teaching inference can seem pretty straightforward: "Hey class, look at this picture of a man standing in his doorway, dripping wet and looking miserable, and the rain falling outside behind him. How in the world did he get so soaked?" Students may look at us with their best *Duh!* expression when they tell us that the guy obviously got wet from being out in the rain.



Duh, indeed. But even this clear example requires students to engage in the fundamental act of inference: **drawing a conclusion based on both evidence and reasoning**. They use this skill every day, of course, but recognizing inference in action is a vital step towards strengthening the key critical thinking skills that can serve them both in and out of the classroom.

Not only can students use awareness of inference to help become more savvy readers, it also enables them to become more effective and persuasive writers. When writers *understand* their readers, and know what those readers will infer from certain statements and ideas, they can craft a text that will provoke the response they want.

Classroom teachers and librarians can work together to help students strengthen their awareness of inference, both when they use it, and when they create it. Start with showing students the introductory video below, "Making and Using Inference," to set the stage. Then try the three-part activity, "[Using Inference](#)," that gives student the opportunity to employ inference as they read a text, analyze an image, and then write their own persuasive paragraph.

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