



## WHAT THEY'LL LEARN

- How to be an active reader
- How to activate background knowledge to help with making inferences
- How to identify emotions and character traits
- How to look for evidence to support inferences

# How do you really know what happened here...?



Discover what reading between the lines means in practice, and develop inference skills through investigation, says **Kate Heap**



A huge tree branch is blocking the road. What happened? Inference occurs when we come to a logical conclusion after combining evidence with our own knowledge and experience.

When reading, this allows children to dig deeper, beyond basic decoding, and really make sense of the author's meaning.

Because authors don't provide us with every detail, using inference pushes children to become active readers. They are a part of the story, bringing as much to it as they receive from the page.



but aren't too obvious. They should create a picture of your mystery person. For example, an archaeologist might carry a messenger bag containing a notebook, pencil, trowel, brush, old coins or fossils, etc.

Present the bag to the children. Examine it from the outside. Who could it belong to? Have they seen a bag like this before?

Reveal items one at a time. Start with more general objects, gradually becoming more specific. Ask: what is it? What is it used for? Who might own it? Why? Provide time for partner talk and jotting down ideas on mini whiteboards. This will help children see how inferences change as more evidence is found. Keep a list of objects and guesses about the owner.

When children think they have worked out who the bag belongs to, ask them to explain their answer: "I think this

## START HERE

Start by sharing a picture book that has plenty of scope for discussion.

Ask children to make connections between the story and themselves.

Have they ever met anyone like these characters? Has something similar happened to them? Have they been to the place where the story is set? Then challenge them to think about the wider world. Is there an issue in the story they've heard of (perhaps plastic pollution or the struggle of refugees)? What do they know about it? Can they use empathy to understand how characters might feel? Finally, ask if they've read any other books that are similar in some way. How are they similar? What's different? How have two authors approached the same idea in different ways?



## MAIN LESSON

### 1 | A MYSTERIOUS SUITCASE

Be detectives by identifying the owner of an unusual suitcase. First, decide who owns the suitcase. Is it an archaeologist looking for fossils or a spy on an undercover mission? Perhaps a link the exercise to a class topic or book – could the bag belong to a one of the characters, or a historical figure? Whoever you choose will determine the type of bag you need: an explorer might have a backpack while an athlete might have a hold-all.

Once you've chosen your bag, fill it with objects. Think about items that give clues



*“Inference allows children to dig deeper, beyond basic decoding, and really make sense of the author’s meaning.”*

key part of fiction. Children can learn to identify this change by thinking about roles at different points in a story.

Choose a short story with a strong character who will go through a definite change. Before you begin, ensure pupils understand the difference between emotions and character traits.

Read the beginning of the story then pause to analyse the character. Make a list of character traits with evidence, e.g. “independent because they like to be alone” or “selfish because they only look out for themselves.”

Continue reading to the midpoint of the story then analyse the character again. Is there still evidence to support the character traits identified at the beginning? Look for new traits. Show change by linking new traits to those already noted. (Go from ‘independent’ to ‘team player’ which are linked rather than ‘independent’ to ‘calm’ which are not related.) Always back up these inferences with evidence from the story.

Finish the story. Go back to the original character traits. Are they still valid? Use inference to identify how and why the character has changed.

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bag belongs to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.”

Repeat the activity with a different bag for each group. Ask them to prepare a report by sketching each object and making notes about what it tells them about the owner.

## 2 | VISUAL CLUES

Using images for inference eliminates the demands of reading, allowing children to focus on the evidence they can see.

Choose an image that has a lot of unknowns but also a lot of clues. The Inference Collection from Once Upon a Picture is a fantastic free resource: [tinyurl.com/tp-OnceUpon](http://tinyurl.com/tp-OnceUpon)

Children should study the image and talk with a partner about what’s happening and, more importantly, why.

Activate background knowledge: what’s familiar? Have they been in a similar

situation? Have they seen this in a book, film, or somewhere else? Sometimes children will have a lot to share; sometimes it will be completely new, which is when looking for clues becomes even more important.

Use magnifying glasses to investigate the image. Ask questions to draw out inferences: what are the characters doing? Why? How is this character feeling? How do you know? Why are they feeling this way? Who are the other people in the image? When or where are they? What happened just before this moment in time?

Children might create speech or thought bubbles, explaining how these words show characters’ feelings without explicitly saying it.

## 3 | HOW CHARACTERS CHANGE

Character transformation is a

## EXTENDING THE LESSON

- You could turn the first suitcase activity around by asking children to create their own mystery bag. They can draw the bag and its contents, providing a mystery for someone else to solve. An empty suitcase template is a great starting point for younger children or those needing a bit more scaffolding.
- Create an Emotions Bank. A key part of inference is understanding emotions. Make a list – include simple ones like happy or embarrassed as well as more complex feelings such as jealous or guilty. Work with children to create a mind map or table for each emotion that describes:
  - how a character would look
  - how a character would act
  - what a character would say
  - what a character would think

## USEFUL QUESTIONS

- Why...?
- How do you know?
- What is the reason...?
- How does the character feel?
- What evidence is there that...?
- What does this tell us about \_\_\_\_\_’s character?
- What impression do you get of...?