

CRITICAL LITERACY SERIES

Making Inferences



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Introduction

Effective instruction in adolescent literacy does not rely on one strategy alone. Vocabulary acquisition, metacognition, writing, and reading comprehension are just a few. Reading comprehension strategies are, however, the cornerstone for student learning. Most struggling readers can, and do, read. Their difficulty is not in articulating the printed text. The challenge to these readers is an inability to understand and process the ideas expressed by the words.

The nature of this problem in adolescent literacy reaches deeper than a student's reading of literature. Not only does a student's ability to comprehend text impact his or her English Language Arts skills, but also his or her capacity to read, understand, and learn concepts in other subject areas. This is our call to action. This is the rationale for providing teachers like you with the resources you need to not only provide students with direct, explicit comprehension instruction, but to provide you with the materials for students to transfer strategies to the content areas.

This title focuses on helping students to develop their ability to make inferences. Inferences are evidence-based guesses. For proficient readers, this skill is automatic and often times subconscious. Making inferences, in fact, involves some fairly simple tasks when broken down into components. On the most basic level, the skill involves an ability to recall relevant details or "clues" provided by a text or non-print medium. The skill may also involve the ability to connect ideas to the information provided in order to draw conclusions.

The 20 lessons in this book will provide students with models for instruction and application of making inferences in a variety of contexts organized around core content areas. Used to extend and enhance your existing curriculum, each lesson is intended to target instruction of making inferences. Therefore, activities and instruction range from 20 to 50 minutes to complete.

Whodunit?

Class Configuration

Time required:

30–40 minutes

Structure:

student groups of 4–5 (activity sheet), entire class (discussion)

Materials:

- 1 copy of the activity sheet for each student
- an overhead transparency or scanned electronic file of the Clue Sheet so clues may be projected and revealed a few at a time

Learning objectives:

- Students use known facts to make inferences about a mysterious event.

Standards

IRA/NCTE

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

McREL

Language Arts: Standard 7. Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts

Laying the Groundwork

Accessing students' prior knowledge will help them to develop new skills. Before starting this lesson, make sure students understand concepts such as the following:

- A *Whodunit?* is a mystery story in which readers use clues provided in the text to infer the solution to the mystery.
- As additional clues are provided, readers' solutions may change.

Whodunit?

Students should be familiar with the following vocabulary:

morgue a room or building where dead bodies are kept before burial or cremation

polonium-210 a rare and highly radioactive chemical

Teaching Tip

Mysteries engage readers of all ages, particularly when they are given opportunities to solve the mystery. You can repeat this activity by using Minute Mysteries (or activities with similar names), which can be found online by using the search words “minute mysteries.”

Instructional Guide/Procedure

- Divide students into small groups of 4–5 and distribute the activity sheets (one per student). Explain that although they will work in groups, each student is responsible for completing the activity sheet.
- Lead the class in a brief discussion of why Whodunit? mysteries are popular with readers. Be sure the discussion includes the fact that readers are invited to engage in the story by trying to figure out Whodunit?
- Project the first set of clues (Clue Sheet). Read the clues to the class, and give the small groups up to 10 minutes to discuss the clues and write their responses to question 1.
- Ask volunteers to briefly share their responses and explanations. Point out that many solutions are possible at this point, so all reasonable inferences are acceptable.
- Repeat this process with the second set of clues.
- Ask volunteers to briefly share their responses and explanations for question 2. Point out that while fewer solutions are possible at this point, the mystery is still not solved, so all reasonable inferences are still acceptable.
- Repeat this process with the final clue, giving 5 minutes for small group discussion.
- Ask volunteers to briefly share their responses and explanations for question 3. Point out the likely solution to the mystery (see Answer Key).

Whodunit?

Supporting All Learners

- Students who are struggling with this activity will benefit from working in the small groups. Make sure that group assignments are heterogeneous.
- Support English language learners by assigning them to heterogeneous groups so peers are able to assist them in formulating and writing their responses to the questions.
- Challenge students who are ready for more by asking them to create their own Whodunit? activity. Encourage students to use news articles or online “minute mysteries” to find ideas.

Assessment

There are various ways to assess student understanding beyond their completion of the activity sheet. Choose one or more of the following methods to evaluate their learning:

- Record your observations during the activity and discussion.
- Display all the clues and ask students to list only those that lead to the final solution.

Answer Key

1. ...
2. ...
3. ...

Name _____

Date _____

Whodunit?

Clue Sheet

Clue Set 1: A man is lying dead in the hospital morgue. The cause of his death is a mystery. Here's what the police know to be fact:

- The victim once worked for his government as a spy.
- In recent years, he publicly criticized the government he once served.
- He became violently ill and was hospitalized.
- Medical personnel were unable to identify the cause of his illness.
- On the day he became ill, he:
 - met with another former spy at a hotel where they drank tea.
 - ate lunch at a restaurant with a person who claimed to have proof of crimes committed by this same government.
- Three weeks later, the victim died in the hospital.

Clue Set 2: It is several weeks later. The police have additional facts. They now know the following:

- The victim died from a rare form of radiation poisoning (polonium-210).
- Thirteen other people including eight hotel employees and two hotel guests tested positive for polonium-210 exposure.
- A teapot at the hotel tested positive for polonium-210 exposure.
- Traces of radiation were found at the victim's home, the restaurant, the hotel, and in other locations, including airplanes.

Final Clue: A final clue has surfaced. The source of the polonium-210 has been traced to a nuclear facility in the homeland of the victim and the former spy he met for tea.

Name _____

Date _____

Whodunit?

Activity Sheet

Review the first set of clues provided by your teacher. Discuss with your group, and then write your response to question 1.

1. What do you think caused this man's death? Explain your answer.

Review the second set of clues provided by your teacher. Discuss them with your group, and then write your response to question 2.

2. Review your first response. Does the additional information change your thinking? Explain your answer.

Review the final clue provided by your teacher. Discuss it with your group, and then write your response to question 3.

3. Review your second response. Does the additional information change your thinking? Explain your answer.