

The core skills that underpin the English section of the 11+/common entrance are actually skills we spend a lifetime learning, developing and practicing. In fact, we start learning some of them from the moment we are born. A baby will gradually pick up cues from its parents' behaviour – are they happy? Angry? Worried? You can't fool a baby! This skill is called inference.

What is inference?

Inference is the number one skill tested in the comprehension section of the paper. For years I have been giving the same example of inference to pupils when the subject first comes up: *We have an appointment for a lesson at 3:00. You have been so busy revising (!) that you haven't left the house all day and so it is a surprise when you answer the door and I am standing there soaking wet.*

What is the weather outside?

Well, you and 99 out of 100 people will then say that it is raining heavily. Of course it is. But of course you don't *know* that it is raining. Someone could have thrown a bucketful of water over me. I might have gone for a swim in my clothes. Unlikely. The most logical explanation is the weather. You have just used your powers of inference. Using the evidence presented you have made a logical assumption. If this was a comprehension question you would state your answer backing it up with this evidence: "it is raining because the tutor's clothes were soaked through."

How is inference tested in comprehensions?

Comprehensions are packed with inference questions:

- How do you know the boys had a poor childhood?
- How would you describe the attitude of the girl's mother?
- How do you know Charles was having difficulties adjusting to the heat?

These types of questions test the pupil's ability to look for clues in the text. It is sometimes called *reading between the lines*. So, the boys might be wearing torn hand-me-downs (this also tests non-common vocabulary); or the mother might be strict on account of her insistence on silence in the company of others; and of course Charles is breathing heavily and wiping away sweat from his forehead.

Inference questions often come with a lot of marks (by comparison, an information question is never usually more than one or two marks). Once you have spotted your answer it is vitally important to format it correctly. This requires a bit more work and practice but it is essential that your answer includes the evidence from the passage – so a good answer will comprise the stated point and the vital clue in quotation marks.

This can all seem a little daunting when you start formatting your answers on paper at the age of 10. That is when it is worth remembering that you have been using your skills of inference your whole life. Everybody has them and you don't stop honing them.

You are Sherlock Holmes

So, what have we learned? Well inference runs the full range, from the obvious: *you know your friend is bored or tired because they have just yawned through your story*; to the more obscure: *whenever the politician was avoiding answering the question her nose twitched and she fiddled with her hair*.

Picking up inference is often innate (which is why it is such a useful comprehension question), but it can be improved. As always, the most effective mind-gym for any literacy skill is reading, and inference is no exception. Reading book after book enables you to make connections without even noticing you're doing it – writers are forever inferring and implying information without stating it directly. In fact, that is what one definition of what poetry might be – inference through words.

On a day to day level there is plenty a parent can do. Ask your son or daughter good quality questions. Don't just pump them for information (what did you do in History today? How was football practice?), but ask them follow-up questions:

- What do you think of your History teacher?
- How did you feel when you lost in football?
- Why do you think the traffic was diverted in town today?
- Which of your teachers do you think would make the best head teacher?
- Why do you like pizza? What is it about the taste of prawns you like?

These sorts of questions go beyond the simple call and response of information. They are questions designed to allow your child to think, feel and express.

Inference in everyday life

When I turn up at a house to start work with a new pupil I often scan the room. *Is there a quiet place where he/she can work? Are there books lying around or on a shelf? Do you all eat dinner around the table?* I ask these questions not because I am a terribly judgemental person who likes to interfere, but because often, although not always, a yes answer to all three are short cuts to good literacy.

A good detective sees clues everywhere. Sherlock Holmes took great delight in cracking cases purely by using inference and logic. He understood the power of the small detail. It is a power available to us all.

Read the following passage and answer the questions **using your own words**.

When Sean opened his curtains on Christmas morning he was immediately disappointed that it was not going to be a white Christmas after all. In fact, the day looked bleak and dull. There was a text message waiting for him from Tom. Both Sean and Tom wanted the same present for Christmas, and indeed this was all they had talked about in the weeks leading up to the big day. Tom's message sounded cheerful - he had received the gift that both of them wanted and would ride over to see him later.

Sean was excited to see if he had got one too and wondered how Mum and Dad were going to get such a big gift under the tree. At least the roads would be clear for Tom and him later. As he put on his warmest clothes his sense of anticipation grew.

When he got downstairs his parents wished him a happy Christmas and gestured to the tree. His gift was smaller than he expected. Too small. His parents looked at each other as he unwrapped it and Sean tried to smile at the right time. It was a Chemistry set. "We know how much you enjoy experiments at school," Mum gave a quick laugh and glanced at Dad. Sean summoned his energies and gave them both a hug.

What gift did Sean want for Christmas and how do you know?

How do Sean's parents feel about the gift they're giving him and how do you know?

Read the following passage and answer the question that follows.

I've just been attacked by Dementors and I might be expelled from Hogwarts. I want to know what's going on and when I'm going to get out of here.

Harry copied these words onto three separate pieces of parchment the moment he reached the desk in his dark bedroom. He addressed the rest to Sirius, the second to Ron, and the third to Hermione. His owl, Hedwig, was out hunting; her cage stood empty on the desk. Harry paced the bedroom waiting for her to come back, his head pounding, his brain too busy for sleep even though his eyes stung and itched with tiredness. His back ached from carrying Dudley home, and the two lumps on his head where the window and Dudley had hit him were throbbing painfully.

Up and down he paced, consumed with anger and frustration, grinding his teeth and clenching his fists, casting angry looks out at the empty, star-strewn sky every time he passed the window. Dementors sent to get him, Mrs. Figg and Mundungus Fletcher tailing him in secret, then suspension from Hogwarts and a hearing at the Ministry of Magic — and *still* no one was telling him what was going on.

And what, *what*, had that Howler been about? Whose voice had echoed so horribly, so menacingly, through the kitchen?

Why was he still trapped here without information? Why was everyone treating him like some naughty kid? *Don't do any more magic, stay in the house...*

Using your own words describe how Harry is feeling in this scene.

Read the following passage and answer the questions using your own words.

By bedtime all the faces, the voices had blurred for Charlotte to one face, one voice. She prepared herself for bed, very slowly and deliberately, cleaning her teeth with the new green toothbrush, undressing awkwardly because she did not like to hide herself in the washing-cubicle with her fellow new girl, Susannah; but she was on the other hand much too shy and strange to undress as openly as the other three, Vanessa, Janet and Elizabeth. Vanessa wandered about for ten minutes at least in just her vest and navy-blue school knickers. She had freckles all over her legs. Charlotte had never seen anyone with freckled legs before.

Susannah had ceased chattering which was a relief, but still giggled whenever Janet and Vanessa did, though she could not possibly have heard what they were giggling about. Janet and Vanessa talked, or rather whispered, exclusively to each other. The fourth girl, Elizabeth, was sprawled on her bed, reading a book. Charlotte had a book beside her too, but was so tired and confused she did not want to open it now. Her eyes felt stretched and huge. The light seemed too bright for them, glaring on white walls, white sheets and bedcovers; even the polished brown linoleum seemed to shine too much, so that the darkness when the light went out was thankful and cooling.

‘Pull the blind up, Charlotte,’ a voice ordered – Vanessa’s probably, but it might have been Janet’s.

At first, though so tired, she could not sleep. Her bed was uncomfortable in an unfamiliar way. Her old-fashioned school nightdress felt heavy and hot. All the sounds about her were unfamiliar, from the smothering roars of the aeroplanes to the slither of feet in the passages outside. She heard whispers and giggles from Janet and Vanessa, little snores from Elizabeth, the odd sob from Susannah. She found herself worrying about her own younger sister Emma, whom she had left behind alone at home. After a while she began to think it might be a relief if she could cry as Susannah was doing, so perhaps cry herself to sleep, but she could not cry – her eyes felt quite dried up. Every time too that her eyelids dropped an aeroplane came and jerked her awake again.

Describe the character of Charlotte, the narrator.

Read the following passage and answer the questions using your own words.

David watched his Dad carefully, beaming with pride.

“Now I don’t want you to move, just relax your head. How about that? Does it hurt there?”

The old lady stared back at David’s dad. “Yes, Doctor, it does. Am I going to be alright?”

“You’ll be as right as rain, Mrs Farmer.”

It had been a full 5 minutes since David’s dad had run down the escalator at top speed, David trailing in his wake. But it was David who had first heard the shouts of “Help! Is there a doctor about?”

It was at times like this that David thought how clever his dad was. Just then he noticed three of his school friends watching the drama unfold. He couldn’t help smiling, despite the seeming seriousness of the situation. He thought he would burst with admiration for his father. It was at times like this like this that made up for all those evenings his dad would have to work late. It was times like these that he was glad his dad wasn’t any old person with a boring job. He was a doctor.

Describe how David feels about his father.

Read the following passage and answer the questions using your own words.

Toyo was late for school. He ran about the house desperately getting his things together as the cat, Mitzy, threaded around him, occasionally causing Toyo to swerve out of the way.

He was beginning to panic – he had been warned several times this term already about his lateness and Toyo worried that there might be consequences this time. Why hadn't he listened to his Mum earlier – had she been telling him to get up or had he dreamed it?

As these thoughts raced around his busy head Toyo almost stumbled over something. Thinking it was the school bag he had been searching for he looked down. Mitzy was lying on her back, looking up at him playfully.

"Now's not the time, Mitzy," said Toyo and then noticed that Mitzy was gesturing towards her bowl. At last Toyo saw his bag, it was on the kitchen counter. As he went to get it, Mitzy followed him hopefully, but Toyo ignored her and, grabbing the bag he marched towards the front door.

"Sorry, Mitzy." The cat's eyes were now like saucers as she followed the disappearing shape of the boy through the window as he ran down the road.

What does Mitzy the cat want?

Read the following passage and answer the questions using your own words.

It was show time. Sasha and Kate were lucky enough to have been chosen to play the lead roles in *Romeo and Juliet*, and now Kate knew the whole school would be gathered behind that curtain.

She fiddled with the knot on her dress. Sasha looked at her and smiled. He seemed calm and comfortable and Kate wondered how he managed it. She paced up and down trying to remember the words to her big speech in Act 2. Her mouth felt dry.

She looked around to see the Stage Manager.

“Could I have a glass of water?” she asked, but her voice was a hoarse whisper.

“Of course, Kate.” He sounded reassuring and gave her a pat on the shoulder. That only increased the butterflies in Kate’s stomach. She wondered if she was going to be sick. Gripping the plastic cup firmly in her hand she found a seat. She wasn’t in the first scene and as the curtain went up she could watch the other actors. The audience seemed to be enjoying it – she began to relax a little.

Then it was her turn. As she got up she felt as if her knees were going to buckle. I can’t do this, she thought.

“Good luck,” said the Stage Manager. You’re on.

Describe Kate’s thoughts and feelings as she waits for the play to begin.

Read the following passage and answer the questions using your own words.

Rachel had been enjoying the visit to Todd's grandparents until dinner. They had chatted amiably and looked at an old photo album. Todd did look funny all those years ago. His grandparents said that he would eat *anything* – they called him the Hoover because of his habit of eating anything that got in his way. He really had been a chubby baby.

Todd's grandmother made an announcement: it's lamb for dinner. I hope that's ok. Rachel tried as hard as she could to keep the smile fixed on her face.

"That's great, Mrs Jones," she muttered. She kicked Todd under the table and he looked over at her with an expression that seemed to say 'I'm sorry'. Rachel was always worried that her allergies might be awkward and now she wondered how she was going to get through the evening. Anything but lamb! She was seething at Todd.

When they were on their own Todd had a suggestion.

"Tell her," he said, I'm sure it wouldn't be a problem.

"No, I can't. Look...it's alright."

She knew she would have to get through the evening, and perhaps the symptoms wouldn't be so bad. She had been well brought up so she would just have to be polite about it.

"Can I give you a hand in there Mrs Jones?"

What is Rachel's problem?

Read the following passage and answer the questions using your own words.

Dennis couldn't work out how things had ended up like this. He agreed it was a nice gesture of his aunt to knit him a jumper, and he even liked the idea that he would design the jumper himself. He enjoyed drawing the plan – the jumper would be based on a chess set with the black queen, his favourite piece, sitting resplendent in the middle.

Nothing could have prepared him for the finished product. It was hideous. A black and white checked monstrosity. At once he knew he could never wear it in public. Of course he had to wear it every time his aunt came to visit, which was too often for his liking.

He had lied in the thank you note – stating that he would wear it every day. He didn't know why he had to lie, weren't his parents always telling him to tell the truth.

Then disaster struck. His aunt was visiting one week and Dennis had diligently been wearing the jumper at home. He had completely forgotten that Friday was 'wear what you want' day at school. Normally he would have jumped at the chance to avoid school uniform, if only for one day. But at dinner his aunt dropped her bombshell:

"Dennis," she said, "you simply must wear your new jumper at school on Friday."

"Yes," agreed his mum, "you should show off your jumper to your friends. They'll all be so jealous."

How does Dennis feel about his new jumper?

Read the following passage and answer the questions using your own words.

James took the second slice of cake that was being offered him.

“And I want all of you to know,” Dad said kindly, “that this is what happens when you work hard for your exams. It doesn’t matter what the result is, I just want you to know that it is all about how hard you work.”

James felt the taste of lemon drizzle cake (his favourite) turn sour in his mouth. He could barely bring himself to smile. Having spent the day playing *Ultimate Driver 3* he was quite tired, and he was struggling to cope with how proud his dad seemed. But the torture was not over...

“I also want to say that we’re proud of you, son.” His mum was beaming ear to ear. “It takes discipline and commitment to buckle down to your studies on a Saturday. I know it will pay off in the exam on Monday”.

Now his elevation to Level 5 of Ultimate Driver didn’t seem quite the achievement it had this afternoon. He muttered something sheepish to his mother but could not eat any more of his cake. His dad looked amazed.

“That’s not like you, James,” said Dad, glancing at Mum. His sister glared at him.

James addressed both his parents. “I’m not sure I can come with you to the beach tomorrow. I’d like to stay home and study.”

How does James feel?
