Tip #52: Making Inferences

Did you find a place in your classroom to hang the A.C.T.I.V.E. posters? (I have plenty of extras if you need them.) Have you had a chance to introduce each comprehension strategy to your students? Did you try using the A.C.T.I.V.E. bookmarks? Don't forget you have a couple of professional books in your department that can provide you ideas for teaching these comprehension strategies (Strategies That Work by Stephanie Harvey and Why Kids Can’t Read by Kylene Beers). In any case, please make sure your students are asking questions, making connections, determining important information, inferring, visualizing, and synthesizing as they read. And of course, they should always be self-monitoring as they read using fix-up strategies.

Stephanie Harvey states in Strategies That Work, "Inferring is the bedrock of comprehension... Our life clicks along more smoothly if we can read the world as well as text." How do you teach kids to infer? In order to infer, they must be able to understand on a literal level, use their prior knowledge, and then develop a new understanding. Because of the multiple steps involved, it is probably one of the most difficult comprehension skills to teach. The following ideas can help support the teaching of inferences.

Using Poetry

Ward Kruse, 6th grade teacher at Rabbit Creek, approaches the task by using poetry. Attached is a poem that he found on the Internet (no source available) that has resulted in excellent student thinking and writing. The poem is called "Please Hear What I'm Not Saying."

He gives students construction paper/sticky notes and they work in small groups. Together they read the poem. On the left side of the construction paper, they record questions on stickies they have about what they are reading. He encourages them to do this using each line of the poem. In some cases, an individual line from the poem does not prompt a question. This is fine. On the right hand side of the construction paper, the group writes down (infers) what they think the meaning might be on stickies. Sometimes they can make no inferences based on the question. This is also fine. (Later all groups will combine their stickies together on chart paper so that students can view everyone's thinking.) Check here to see a group’s example and the deep thinking that occurs.

Next he has students design and create their own artistic masks from tagboard, various colored tissue paper, and water soluble acrylic varnish.
Finally he asks students to write original poetry in response to the poem. Because students have had the opportunity to experience group questioning and inferring, they have a deeper understanding of the poet's message. This in turn results in a higher quality of writing. Read these student examples from Ward's 6th grade class.

**Organize Questions and Inferring**

Here is a simple blackline master (only 3 steps involved!) that will help you to organize your students' questioning and inferring. I am also providing a completed example to show you how this might work using *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. (This novel used to be a very popular title for read alouds and for literature circles, but over the years it seems to have been replaced by newer titles. I think every middle school student should be exposed to this powerful book. Survey your kids and find out how many have heard it or have read it. You might be surprised!)

**Source**

*I Read It, But I Don’t Understand It* by Cris Tovani (Stenhouse Publishers, 2000)
Please Hear What I’m Not Saying

Don’t be fooled by me.
Don’t be fooled by the faces I wear.
For I wear a mask.
I wear a thousand masks.
Masks that I am afraid to take off.
And none of them are me.
Pretending is an art that’s second nature with me.
But, don’t be fooled.
Please, don’t be fooled.
Who am I?
Who am I, you may wonder.
I am someone that you know very well.
For I am every man and every woman that you will ever meet.

Author Unknown

The poem mentions that we all wear masks. One mask for our parents. One mask for our teachers. One mask for our friends. Do you agree with that? Do you think we all wear masks? This question about wearing masks is a difficult one.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Inference</th>
<th>Line#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of masks are they?</td>
<td>We think they are all emotional masks.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are you afraid to take the masks off?</td>
<td>If he/she shows themselves, people will judge him/her the wrong way.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you wear faces when you want people to see the real you?</td>
<td>We think that he just doesn’t want people to see him, and when he takes the mask off, he wants people not to judge him.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why doesn’t the author know who he is?</td>
<td>We think that s/he has been pretending for so long, that s/he has forgotten who s/he is.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can the author be every man and every woman that I ever met?</td>
<td>Everybody wears a mask.</td>
<td>15/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does the phrase “pretending is second nature to me” mean?</td>
<td>We think it means that he is so good at pretending to be someone else, he doesn’t have to think about it.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This Is Me

Everyday I try to act like me,
but everyday you treat me differently.
Is it something I did?
Did I do something wrong?
I have to put on a mask,
some short, some long.
I don’t like it when you treat me differently.
This is me.
This is how I was born to be.
I don’t even like to hide and run,
but you hurt my feelings.
I guess it had to be done.
I wish you would actually see me for who I really am.
I want you to treat me like you treat your friends.
It feels like I’m breaking the law when I put a mask on my face.
I’m going to run now and I don’t want to be chased.
You judged me too much,
you let me down.
You treated me like a circus clown.
Please don’t judge me anymore.
You walked all over me as if I was a floor.

By Kelly R. – grade 6

The Meat of Many Faces

This mask you see
it isn’t me.
it’s not who I am
like bologna pretending
to be ham.
I may look different
but it doesn’t mean I am,
like bologna pretending
to be ham.
Bologna pretending to be ham
may look like ham,
but if you really examine me
you’ll find who I really am.
I am bologna, not ham.

By Corey M. – grade 6
Lies & Deceivement

“Who am I” is what I ask, for I am neither man nor woman, child or dog. I am a feeling overcome by emotions of lying, deceivement and hatred for I am one mask. And yet I’ve never realized it?

For years have passed and the mask has now overcome me and thinks this is a very delightful game. I’ve realized that if I overcome the mask I will never be wanted.

To think every night that I deceive my friends, lie to my family, but it’s so simple that I seem to get intent with it it’s pointless to stop even if I end up hurting myself.

I try to give the truth but it decides not to come out. But when I can I feel a sense of triumph surging through my body.

For now I only wear 3/4 a mask, and the rest is the real me hiding deep within my soul.

For to say who I am I would say nothing, for I am only one, but with two minds that are against my will to control.

But I hope one day that this game will end when the real me wins and the loser will vanish.

By Courtney S. – grade 6

Who Am I?

I am always frowning and people don’t really like me.
I like to fight and people don’t like to get in my way.
When people are mad they put me on.
I am the Mad Mask.
Anger is in everyone, which I am sad to say, but people are different in many different ways.
Some always have their Mad Mask on and some almost never do, but as I said everyone is different just like me and you.

By Rebecca W. – grade 6
How to Make Inferences...

Read Between the Lions!

Choose a question from your reading that hasn’t been answered to your satisfaction. Record the question below. Then, using the clues in the text, add any background knowledge you have to supply an inference. Remember many of these questions don’t have one right answer. Be brave!

1. Record a question you have from your reading that you are most curious about.

2. Go back to the text and record any textual evidence that might help you answer your question.

3. Combine the clues in the text with your background knowledge and try to answer the question you asked in number 1.

Source: I Read It, But I Don’t Understand It by Cris Tovani (Stenhouse Publishers, 2000)
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   What does it mean to be released? *(The Giver by Lois Lowry)*

2. Go back to the text and record any textual evidence that might help you answer your question.

   - Old people are released.
   - People who make mistakes are released.
   - Sick babies or twins are released.
   - Sometimes it is an honor/sometimes it is a disgrace to be released.
   - If you don’t like your job, you can be released.
   - Jonas got into trouble when he jokingly asked that Asher be released.
   - Only a few people have seen what happens when someone is released.
   - The community doesn’t seem disturbed by certain releases.

3. Combine the clues in the text with your background knowledge and try to answer the question you asked in number 1.

   I think being released means a person is sent to another community to live out their lives.

Source: *I Read It, But I Don’t Understand It* by Cris Tovani (Stenhouse Publishers, 2000)