

Drawing Conclusions

"Conclusions" and "inferences" are synonymous terms. That's why the definition of inferences first offered up almost fifty years ago by S.I. Hayakawa in his book *Language in Thought and Action* fits conclusions as well. Like inferences, conclusions are "statements about the unknown based upon the known" (p.41).

Drawing Conclusions in Daily Life

You probably already realize that in your daily life you draw conclusions on a regular basis. For instance if you and three friends go out for dinner, and four hours later, all three of you come down with stomach cramps and nausea, you will probably conclude that there was something seriously wrong with the food. If your roommate, a normally heavy smoker and drinker, gives up cigarettes and alcohol once he meets a lovely, young soccer player who does neither, you are likely to conclude that he is completely infatuated with her and wants to make a good impression.

Drawing Conclusions Intended by the Author

Despite being aware of how often you draw conclusions in daily life, you might not realize how frequently you do it when you read. For instance, authors don't always state the point or main idea of a paragraph in a topic sentence. Sometimes, they imply, or suggest, a main idea through a series of specific statements that combine to suggest one general thought, leaving it to readers to draw the appropriate conclusion based on the paragraph's content and language.

In the following passage, for example, the author has a strong opinion about historical accuracy in movies. She does not directly state that opinion. Still, it's hard to miss her point, given the tone she assumes and the example she has chosen.

Making Movie History

Are you one of those trusting souls who thinks that movie accounts of historical events are accurate? If so, you might want to consider the cinematic fate of British sea captain William Bligh (1754-1817). In four out of the five films made about the real life mutiny on board the ship Bligh commanded, the HMAV* *Bounty*, Bligh is portrayed as one of the most viscerously cruel men ever to captain a crew. In the movie accounts of the event, Bligh is so brutal his crew justifiably mutinies and sets him adrift, thinking he will die at sea. Yet by all historical accounts, the worst thing Bligh did to his men was make them drink a mixture of sauerkraut and lime juice to fight off the then deadly disease known as scurvy. Brute that Bligh was, he also insisted that his men bathe and exercise regularly. While Bligh did use the whip as punishment, he was no different from any other sea captain of his day, and he relied on such brutal punishments much less than most. Apparently, Bligh's biggest mistake was to let his men spend six months on the gorgeous tropical island of Tahiti, while he waited for the ripening of the breadfruit crop he was supposed to carry back to England for study. By the time the breadfruit plant was sapling size and Bligh ready to depart, many crew members had made themselves at home on the island. When the *Bounty* finally set sail in 1789, crew members were furious at Bligh for making them leave. It wasn't long before that fury exploded into an open rebellion that ended with the crew, led by second-in-command Fletcher Christian, setting Bligh and his remaining supporters adrift in a twenty-three-foot-long launch. Bligh, who was a superb navigator, managed to sail across the Pacific and lived to tell his story in court. However, not surprisingly, some members of Fletcher Christian's family went to great lengths to make Fletcher seem the true hero and Bligh a villain. Although the authentic story of what actually happened on the HMAV *Bounty* is thoroughly documented, film makers always liked Fletcher's story better. It has turned out to be the one that most people,

particularly movie fans, believe to be the true "history" of mutiny on the Bounty. (Sources of information: www.plantexplorers.com/explorers/biographies/captain/captain-william; <http://www.filmsite.org/muti.html> <http://www.filmsite.org/muti.html> <http://www.filmsite.org/muti.html>)

*His Majesty's Armed Vessel

Did you notice how the writer carefully selected her material to lead readers to her intended conclusion: The story of William Bligh illustrates how uninterested movie makers generally are in historical fact. Bligh's sad tale is the follow up to the author's opening, and slightly sarcastic, question: "Are you one of those trusting souls who thinks that movie accounts of historical events are accurate?" While the phrase "trusting souls" is already an indication that the author does not agree, the constant contrast between Bligh's film image and the details of his story force the reader to arrive at the writer's foregone conclusion: It's probably not wise to learn your history from movies.

The Writer's Expectations, The Reader's Responsibility

In the passage on Captain Bligh, the author lays out a series of facts in order to lead you to a conclusion. If you, in turn, read every single sentence in the passage without drawing a conclusion, you wouldn't be completely doing your job as reader—no matter how well you understood the individual sentences. For communication to take place, it's the synthesizing, or combining, of those sentences into a larger point that's required.

The Steps in Drawing Conclusions

To draw a conclusion about implied main ideas in paragraphs, you need to do the following:

1. Consider what each sentence says about the common topic.
2. Ask yourself what general thought or idea emerges when you put all of those individual pieces of information together. Here it helps to ask yourself what common thread the individual sentences seem to share. In the case of the sample paragraph, the sentences all help build the contrast between Bligh's actual behavior and his movie image.
3. Think of the idea that emerges as the author's implied main idea and the purpose of the passage.

Practice Drawing Conclusions About Implied Main Ideas

Here are some useful links:

- [beginning practice](#)
good for getting down the basics
- [advanced practice](#).
- for a real challenge:
[first challenge](#).
[second challenge](#).

Drawing Conclusions Not Intended by the Author

Not all the conclusions a reader draws are intended by the author. Readers often use what a writer says to arrive at conclusions the author may never have even considered. For instance, in his

textbook *Society, Myths and Realities*, Professor Alex Thio writes the following under the heading "The Family:"

Newborn babies do not even know their gender, much less, how to behave like girls or boys. Influenced by parents, children quickly develop a sexual identity and learn their gender roles. Right from birth, babies are usually treated according to their gender. At birth girls tend to be wrapped in pink blankets and boys in blue ones. Baby girls are handled more gently than boys; girls are cuddled and cooed over, but boys are bounced around and lifted high in the air. (p.268)

Based on this excerpt, which conclusion seems more likely to you:

- a. In the debate over which shapes behavior more powerfully, nature or nurture (genetic inheritance or environmental influence), writer Alex Thio is likely to take the side of nature over nurture.
- b. In the debate over nature versus nurture, writer Alex Thio is more likely to take the side of nurture over nature.
- c. In the debate over nature versus nurture, it's impossible to conclude where writer Alex Thio might stand.

Now Thio may never have intended for his paragraph to lead to a discussion of which is more important, nature or nurture (This is, by the way, an ongoing debate.). Still it is possible to conclude even from a short excerpt like the one shown here that the author would be inclined toward the power of environmental influence. Conclusion b. seems more likely because in the development of sexual identity, Thio comes out so strongly in favor of the family as the main socializing influence. It would be different if he were reporting on the work of researchers who had studied the behavior of infants, then conclusion c. would be the best answer. However, in the above excerpt, the author speaks from his own perspective. He is not reporting on a point of view held by others. Because he takes such a strong stand on how the family environment shapes an infant's sexual identity, it's quite possible to conclude that he tends to see the environment as a powerful force when it comes to shaping other characteristics besides sexual identity.

Practice drawing conclusions not intended by the author.

Unconscious Inferences

While inferences and conclusions are synonymous, inference seems to be the more common term to describe information that we automatically add to a text while reading, almost without realizing that we are doing it. For an illustration of this reader-supplied information, look at the following set of sentences and note the information in italics the writer expects the reader to infer to make the sentences coherent, or connected, enough to give up their meaning (excerpted from Alex Thio, *Society, Myths and Realities*, p.408):

By itself poverty does not produce revolution. Most of the world, after all, is poor (*and yet we don't see revolution in most of the world.*) When people have long lived with misery, they may become fatalists, resigned to their suffering (*In the face of prolonged suffering, people are probably more inclined to become fatalists than revolutionaries.*)

Conscious Conclusions

While the terms "inference" and "conclusion" seem to be used interchangeably when the discussion is about how writers, speakers, or listeners are consciously trying to arrive at an idea that hasn't yet been put into words, "conclusion" is the term more likely to be used in descriptions of logical arguments. Thus, writing teacher Elaine Maimon, in her wonderful book *Writing in the Arts and*

Sciences, describes arguments as conclusions that "follow from" or are "supported by" other statements and uses this example to illustrate a "simple argument" (pp.37-38):

The butler's fingerprints were found on the murder weapon. Therefore, the butler is the murderer.

According to Maimon, the first sentence is the evidence and the second the conclusion. As you must realize, that second sentence is also an inference, but in the context of arguments, make sure to call it a "conclusion."

Author's Final Note of Thanks

This web page on conclusions as well as the one on inferences is the result of an e-mail exchange I had several years ago with Professor Dawn Sedik of Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida. Professor Sedik tactfully suggested I expand my view of the role inferences played in reading. (At that point, I was fixated on implied main ideas). I followed her advice to the point that I now see the importance of inferences and/or conclusions in every aspect of reading—from the most basic prose comprehension to the most sophisticated discovery of bias in what seem to be purely informative texts. My thanks to Professor Sedik, who patiently let me find my way to her point of view, while I hesitated at every step. Socrates couldn't have done it better.