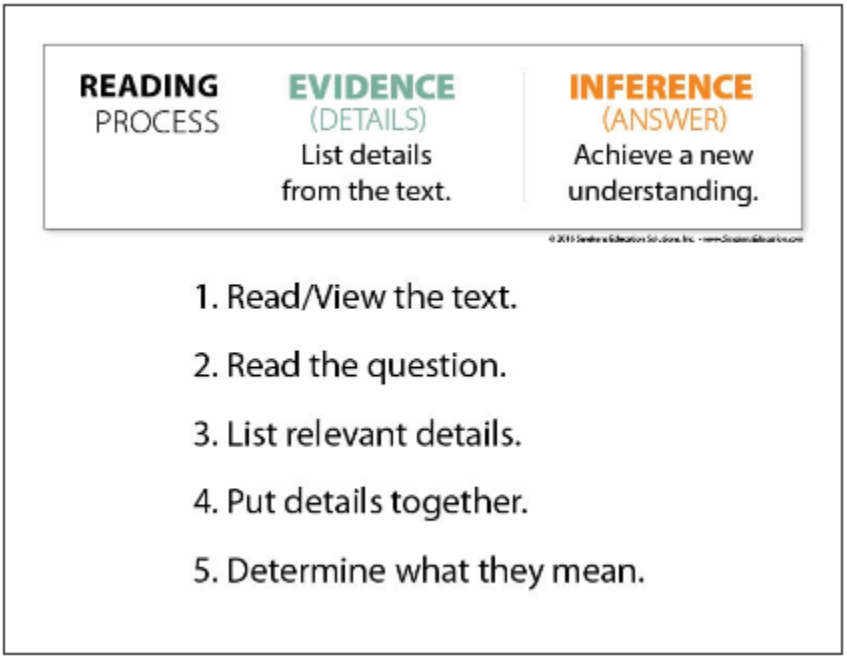
Follow 5 Steps to Make an Inference

Making an inference is a result of a process. It requires reading a text, noting specific details, and then putting those details together to achieve a new understanding. In other words, inferences are not created in a vacuum.

This is important to clarify as many students attempt to make an inference *and then* go find the supporting evidence. That is the reverse of what needs to happen.

To successfully make an inference, students must first look at the relevant information and list those specific textual details. Once they have compiled those ideas, they need to figure out what they mean in order to answer the question. For students to understand *how* to do this, let's break it down into five explicit instructional steps.

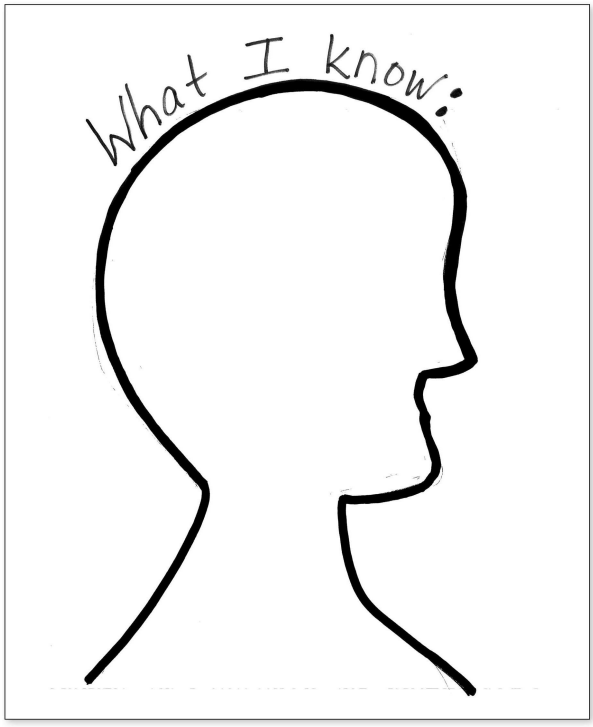


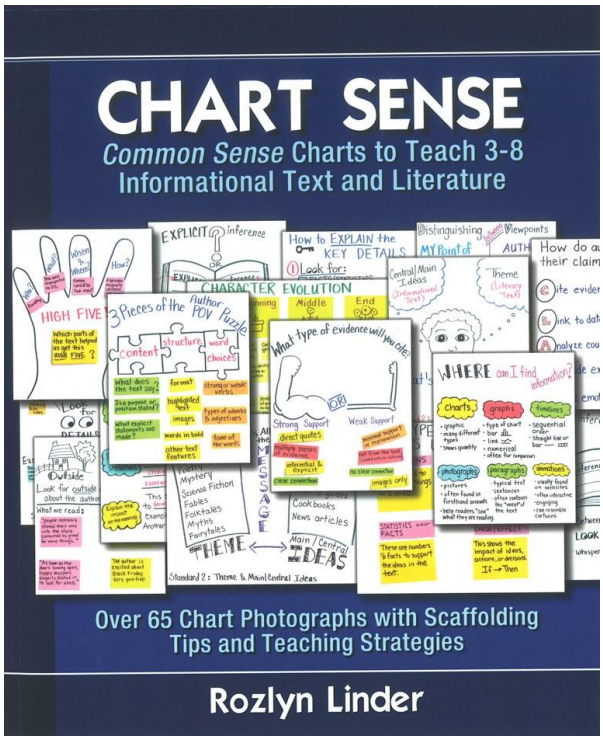
When first teaching these five steps, utilize simple text. This puts the emphasis on the strategy and not comprehension. Then, when you raise the text complexity, students have a five-step process to fall back on.
Here's a simple audio text Kristina Smekens offered in the video:

> *Imagine a half a dozen students standing at the end of the street. It's a dark morning at 7:00 a.m. The students are huddled together. Several are hugging themselves. Others are jumping up and down. And still others are rubbing their hands together and huffing on them. When the bus arrives, one student hollers, "Bus!" All of the students run to get on the vehicle.*

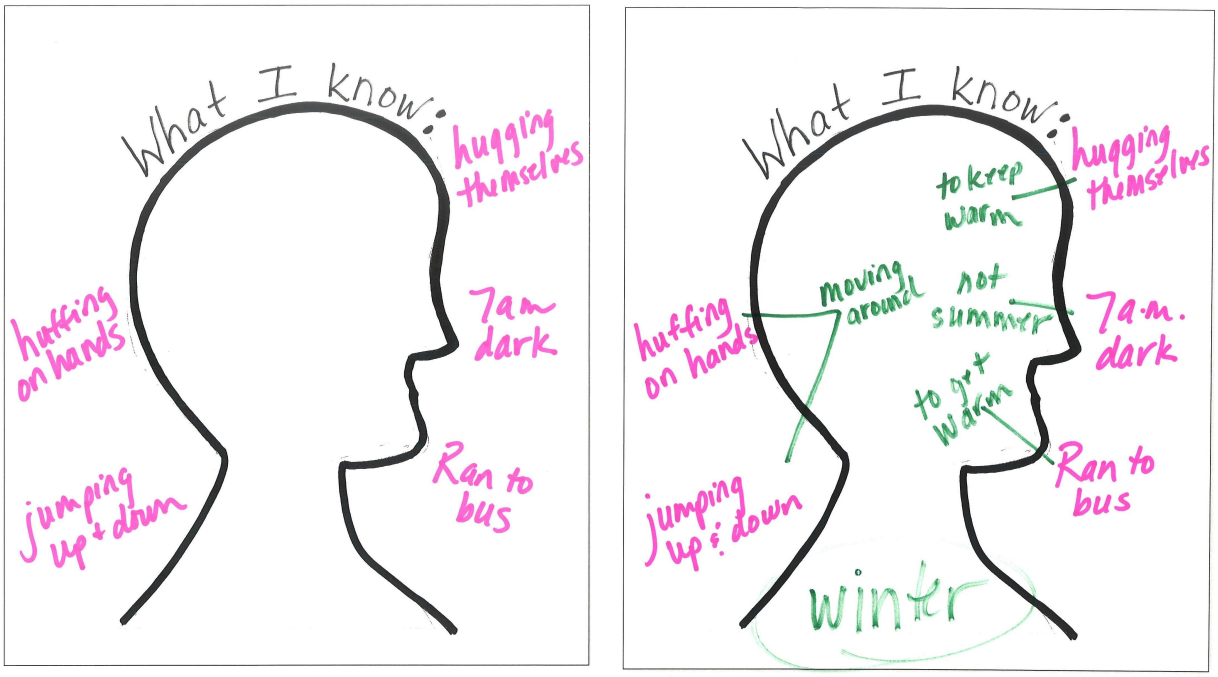
Using that text, let's apply the five-step process.

- **Step 1:** Read the text. (Refer to text above.)
- **Step 2:** Read and understand the question. What season does this scene take place in? (Granted, the answer is obvious—winter. But, by jumping to that conclusion, you would be skipping Steps 3 and 4.)
- **Step 3:** List the relevant details.





Roz Linder in her book *Chart Sense* depicts this process using a silhouette. Outside the silhouette, list the literal details stated in the text that are relevant to the question. In this example, which details from the text have anything to do with season, temperature, weather, etc?



Step 3 requires listing the relevant details. There were other details mentioned in the text, like the fact that *there were half a dozen kids* and that *one kid hollered when the bus was coming*. However, some of these details aren't relevant to the question *"What season is it?"* One part of explicit instruction includes helping students to determine important from unimportant information.

Once relevant details are gathered around the silhouette, it's time for Step 4. Model how to look for patterns and relationships among the details—to determine what these details have in common. To move from Step 4 to Step 5, students have to put clues together, which means thinking about the details one at a time.

Working with the list of details surrounding the silhouette, start with the first jotted note. Ask students to consider, *What does it mean when you jump up and down?*

(NOTE: It's possible that this could mean more than one thing. That detail alone might mean the kids at the bus stop have to go to the bathroom.)

Inferences are made by putting multiple clues together. Group the following details: *jumping up and down, moving around,* and *rubbing and huffing on their hands.* Using background knowledge, predict what the combination of actions might indicate–the kids are trying to generate some heat or keep warm. Add in the other detail about it being *dark at 7:00,* and you begin to move even closer. Pulling on some background knowledge, the reader recalls that it is *not* dark at 7:00 in the summer (in Indiana). Combining the "keeping warm" and that it's not summer leads the reader to infer that it is probably winter. The last detail: *they ran to the bus.* Of course, they ran because they were cold. They had been trying to keep warm, and that's why they were moving around. What's the answer? What's the inference? It's winter. And there it is. Step 5: Determine what it means.

Step 3 and Step 4 are the critical steps to generating an inference. We need to help our students slow down and list the important, relevant details on the outside of Roz Linder's silhouette graphic organizer. Then, they rely on their background knowledge to make connections, generate predictions, and draw conclusions. These are noted inside the silhouette head. Reviewing those "mini-inferences" leads to Step 5 and the ultimate inference/answer to the question. This is then noted within the neck of the silhouette organizer.