Read the following selection.

A sign outside the student union building says: “Guest Speaker Tonight at 8.” It is now 7 p.m. and crowds of students are milling around, waiting for the doors to open. There are so many students, in fact, that the line for tickets extends all the way around the building.

Such a scene might prompt you to think that the speaker must be someone very interesting in order to draw so many people. By coming to this conclusion, you would have made an inference.

Making an inference means deriving something by reasoning. It may also be defined as concluding or judging from evidence. In the examples above, you would have made a judgment about the speaker based on the number of people who wanted to hear what he or she had to say. In other words, you would have inferred something on the basis of visible evidence.

When you read, you often make inferences, whether or not you are consciously aware of doing so. Here is an example:

During the 1930s, the American people struggled to overcome the Great Depression. Because of hard times, many citizens lost faith in the American way of life and in themselves. Fear mounted and became widespread. It was believed that the severe economic slump might actually destroy the country.

Having read this paragraph, you know something that was not directly stated: the 1930s were a time of nationwide insecurity and doubt. This is an inference. It is an idea that is based on the facts, but goes beyond what is stated.

The following paragraph is from an article about the famous blues composer and musician, W.C. Handy. As you read it, think about what could be inferred about the blues tune entitled, “Mr. Crump.”

The day W.C. Handy’s musicians played “Mr. Crump” publicly for the first time, the crowd went wild over it. They pushed up against the bandwagon on which the band rode and begged that it be played over and over. They waved their hands, tapped their feet, and swayed their bodies. In a few minutes, the sidewalks were covered with dancers. People from nearby office buildings stuck their heads out of windows to catch the melody.

The fact that “Mr. Crump” made people literally dance in the streets is clearly stated. The inference you could have made is that it must have been a very pleasing, catchy sound that was new and different at the time.

Now see what you can infer from another passage from the same selection.

One night in 1914, while in search of a song, Handy slipped into a reverie about his first trip to St. Louis, when he had slept on cobblestones along with others who were faced with hard luck. One of them had lamented, “I hate to see the evenin’ sun go down.” Another, Handy remembered, was a woman who had been drinking heavily and who said dolefully as she staggered by, “My man’s got a heart like a rock cast in the sea.” By daylight, he had written the “St. Louis Blues.”

Inference: “St. Louis Blues” is based on Handy’s memories of old times that were also hard times.

Remember: One infers from what another has implied. Sometimes authors imply things very subtly. So it is a good idea to read carefully with an eye toward making inferences. The extra enjoyment you will derive from your reading can make it well worth the extra effort.
When you read, you learn some things because they are stated by the author and other things because you infer them. Read the following paragraphs carefully and note what is plainly stated and what you must derive by inference. Then circle the answer to each question.

1. It is important for us to understand Taiwan’s unusual situation with China. Although opposed to each other’s government, the leaders in Beijing (the People’s Republic of China) and Taipei (capital of the Republic of China) agree on one point: there are not “two Chinas,” there is only one government of China. The Chinese in mainland China believe that their government in Beijing is the legal government of China, while the Chinese in Taiwan believe that their government in Taipei is the legal government. Beijing’s control extends through the 22 provinces of mainland China. Taipei’s control covers only the province of Taiwan.

Which of the following must be inferred from what you read?

a. The two Chinas are antagonistic toward each other.
b. Communist China is vastly larger than the Republic of China.
c. There is total disagreement between the two Chinas.
d. A union between the two Chinas is highly unlikely.

2. Just before the United States entered World War I, President Woodrow Wilson sent protest note after protest note to authorities in Germany calling for an end to the unprovoked sinkings by submarines, and threatening war if they did not stop. Time after time the Germans promised to restrict the activities of their submarines, but there was always some new horror to show that they had forgotten their pledge. At last, after the great liner Sussex was sunk with an appalling loss of life, the Germans pledged not to sink merchant vessels without warning and without ensuring the safety of the people on them. This was on the condition that such ships did not resist or try to escape. Like the others, this pledge was not kept for long.

Which of the following must be inferred from what you read?

a. Woodrow Wilson was a forceful president.
b. The Germans never received the protest notes.
c. Wilson lacked the backing of the American people.
d. During that time, the Germans did as they pleased.

3. Strictly speaking, military occupation of the South after the Civil War may have been unconstitutional. Congress assumed powers that before had belonged to the president.... As commander-in-chief, only the president had the authority to direct the military. Furthermore, the Supreme Court had ruled in 1866 that civilians could not be tried in military courts when civil courts were functioning, as they were in the South. When other decisions of the Supreme Court also seemed to say that the Reconstruction plans were illegal, Congress threatened to take away the Court’s powers.

Which of the following must be inferred from what you read?

a. During Reconstruction, Congress was not concerned with the legality of its actions.
b. All Supreme Court rulings of the time were ignored.
c. Presidential authority over the military was abused during Reconstruction.
d. Congress took on greater powers than it had formerly had.
Read the following passages and complete the exercises that follow. Write your answers to the questions on the blank lines.

4. The captivating vision of the bygone beauty of Atlantis has enticed countless scholars and scientists into turning their backs on the magnificence of their labs in New York, their libraries in Paris, or museums in Rome to devote a lifetime to the search for the dead, seaweed-encrusted remains of a lost, centuries-old continent, which indeed may never have existed. Atlantis attracts these honest scientists along with the same kind of fanatics who spend their entire lives trying to verify the claim that Francis Bacon wrote William Shakespeare’s plays. The complex Atlantis theme over the years has been tied variously to romanticism, racism, pacifism, socialism, communism, and spiritualism. Crackpots have linked it with cannibalism and flying saucers as well. Over the years, phony intellectuals, faith healers, and crackpots have seen Atlantis as historical proof for every variety of strange philosophy in which they believe.

What inference can you make about Atlantis?

5. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the famous Sherlock Holmes detective stories, was a believer in spiritualism. By the end of World War I, Doyle had decided to give up writing detective and adventure stories for what he considered far more important writing. He wrote a dozen nonfiction works, plus a number of articles for psychic journals, while continuing to strengthen his beliefs in the supernatural. In the 1920s he traveled to the United States to speak on the subject of spiritualism. Wherever his presence was anticipated, he found journalists awaiting his arrival. While they often praised and admired Doyle, there was sometimes an element of mocking humor in their tone.

“Well, now, Mr. Doyle,” inquired one reporter, “do they play golf in the next world?”

“No,” Doyle replied.

“Well,” the reporter persisted, “you said they had amusement.”

“Yes, they say they have more than we,” Doyle said. “Maybe golf is among them, I never heard them say so.”

The next morning he opened the paper to the headline: DOYLE SAYS THEY PLAY GOLF IN HEAVEN!”

What inference can you make about the reporter?

6. Dr. Thomas had just performed the painful duty of informing Mr. Jackson that his wife had died. Then, Thomas, trembling slightly, still gripping his knee with his right hand, performed his last unenviable duty as the physician of Anna Jackson.

“Mr. Jackson, since this is a scientific institution, and since we are young doctors trying to learn as much as possible about medicine, whenever we’re unfortunate enough to have a death, we make it a policy to ask the relatives for their assent to an autopsy.”

He seemed almost lost in his own words, until he came to the distasteful word, “autopsy.” Then he stopped and looked squarely at Mr. Jackson, waiting for a response. But there was none.

“What is this . . . autopsy?” Mr. Jackson finally asked.

“Well,” Thomas went on, looking at the floor in discomfort once again, “it is a search for data by means of a scientific analysis of a patient’s body organs.” Slowly, as he realized the nature of Thomas’ proposal, Mr. Jackson’s chin began to tremble. Then he began to cry.

What inference can you make about Dr. Thomas?