

## RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Text comprehension and inference drawing

The following text is taken from *Talking Heads* by Alan Bennett (“A chip in the sugar”, p. 16). This text is used to illustrate the inferences that we make during reading. Some of these inferences we make instantly, while others require a little more thought. The passage is broken down into groups of one or two sentences and a few questions follow. Answer each question by referring to the text you have just read (and not by scanning later sections of the text). After you have answered a question, also write down how you arrived at the answer (or how you drew your inference).

“I’d just taken her tea up this morning when she said, ‘Graham, I think the world of you.’”

1. What might the relationship between the person referred to as “she” and Graham be; sister–brother, wife–husband, mother–son, or friends?
2. Is “she” a child or an adult?
3. Where do you think “she” is?
4. Are Graham and the narrator the same person?
5. Is the “tea” a drink or a meal?
6. What does the text imply about her state of health?

“I said, ‘I think the world of you.’”

7. How might the word “you” be spoken; with rising or falling tone?
8. Do you think this is the first time that the narrator has said this to her?

“And she said, ‘That’s all right then.’ I said, ‘What’s brought this on?’”

9. What is the narrator referring to with the word “this”?
10. What is the clue the narrator uses to infer how she feels?

“She said, ‘Nothing. This tea looks strong, pull the curtains.’ Of course I knew what had brought it on.”

11. Has she sipped any of the tea yet?
12. What colour is the tea; light or dark brown?
13. Are the curtains open or drawn?
14. Is the colour of the tea affected by the light in the room?

“She said, ‘I wouldn’t like you to think you’re not Number One.’”

15. What is meant here by the term “Number One”?

“So I said, ‘Well, you’re Number One with me too. Give me your teeth. I’ll swill them.’ What it was we’d had a spot of excitement yesterday: we ran into a bit of Mother’s past.”

16. What does “it” refer to?
17. What thing might “a bit of Mother’s past” refer to?
18. What does the term “we ran into” imply?

“I said to her, ‘I didn’t know you had a past. I thought I was your past.’ She said, ‘You?’ I said, ‘Well, we go back a long way. How does he fit in vis-à-vis Dad?’”

19. Who might “he” be a reference to?
20. In what context are the two speakers using the word “past”?
21. What is the relationship between the two, and has your view changed since question 1?
22. Is dad alive or dead?

“She laughed. ‘Oh, he was pre-Dad.’”

23. What does the laugh imply?

“I said, ‘Pre-Dad? I’m surprised you remember him, you don’t remember to switch your blanket off.’ She said, ‘That’s different. His name’s Turnbull.’ I said, ‘I know. He said.’”

24. How many years ago might the “pre-dad” relationship have taken place?
25. Why is “that different”?

The questions highlight 25 possible inferences from this short passage. Read the text again and see if you can identify any more information that can be inferred from it. Also, try to decide which type of inference each is from the following:

A *logical inference* depends only on the meaning of words.

A *bridging inference* needs to be made to establish coherence between the current part of the text and the preceding text.

An *elaborative inference* serves to embellish or add details to the text.