Inference Questions

The 3-Step Strategy

THE QUESTION

- **Which choice most logically completes the text?** The blank usually ends the passage, often right after *suggests that*, *it follows that*, or *therefore concluded that*.
- Now and then the blank is replaced by a question about what can **most reasonably be inferred**. The strategy is the same.

A valid inference is a conclusion built directly from what the passage states, never a creative guess about what might happen next. You may supply the plain common sense the passage takes for granted, but never outside expertise, even on a topic you know well.

1 **Skeleton** · Strip the text down to its logic skeleton.

Read like an X-ray. **Clue keywords** tell you what belongs in the blank: a cause, a turn, a result, a limit. **Decorations** (names, places, vivid details) make a passage feel real but don't change the answer. Almost every passage runs on one of six skeletons:

SKELETON	ITS PARTS	THE BLANK ASKS FOR	LISTEN FOR
Cause and effect	Pillar 1: When X, then Y. Pillar 2: No X, No Y.	the missing cause or effect, or the link between them	*because, since, so, therefore, as a result, unless*
Contrast	Claim A (an assumption), a pivot, Claim B (the truer idea)	what Claim B means for Claim A	*but, yet, however, although, rather than*; quieter: *thought to be, expected to*
Study/Experiment	Goal, Setup (with its testing criterion), Result	what the Result shows about the Goal	*studied, compared, tested*; decode any signal, such as a color
Idea and example	a general idea and one case that stands for it	the idea the case shows, or the case in the idea's terms	*for example, such as, illustrates, thus, thereby*
Reconcile	Fact 1 and Fact 2, which seem not to fit; neither is taken back	the Bridge that lets both facts stand	*if both are correct, nonetheless, despite, and yet*
Deduce	Facts and a Link: a timeline, a restatement, or arithmetic	the Consequence: what else must be true	dates, shares, percents, rules; *it follows that*

> **Contrast or reconcile?** Ask whether the passage throws anything away. A contrast does: Claim A falls. A reconcile keeps both facts and asks what lets them stand together. On test day, sketch a sentence map on your scratch paper (S1, S2, S3 …, a few words a row) until you can see the skeleton without writing it down.

2 **Predict** · Finish the passage from the skeleton alone.

Before you look at the choices, say what belongs in the blank, using only the skeleton. Keep the passage's hedges (*partly, may, likely*): your prediction is a conclusion the passage has already earned, nothing bolder. If the skeleton has two parts (two stages, two facts, both halves of a result), the prediction carries both.

3 **Match** · Find your prediction in new words, then eliminate the rest.

The right choice states your prediction in **different words, same concept**, usually more general ones. If no prediction forms in time, choose the answer closest to the skeleton. Then eliminate ruthlessly: **if the text doesn't say it, you can't infer it.** When every choice has several parts, test each part.

WRONG-ANSWER TRAPS: Outside it (a subject, concern, or person the passage never raises; the most common) · **Reverses it** (the opposite of what the passage supports, or the right fact on the wrong thing) · **Half of it** (one part of a two-part passage) · **Invented comparison** (two things the passage never places side by side) · **Too strong** (the right direction, overstated: *only, never, proves, all* where the passage hedges). *Outside it* and *reverses it* alone account for about 70 percent of wrong answers, which is why eliminating beats hunting.

Two Worked Examples

Example 1 · Cause and Effect (Pillar 1: When X, then Y)

Anatomy textbooks have long described the coccyx, the few small, fused vertebrae at the base of the human spine, as a functionless leftover from an ancestral tail, which makes its persistence something of a puzzle. Evolutionary biologist Marcus Aldric and his team began with skeletal records from many primate species, which show the external tail vanishing from the lineage leading to humans while a reduced set of its vertebrae stayed behind. Then they looked closely at the coccyx itself: where it is better developed, its base carries denser attachment sites for the muscles that steady the pelvic floor and hold up the lower abdominal organs. To Aldric's team, the evidence suggests that the coccyx _____

Which choice most logically completes the text?

A) was present in a wider range of vertebrate lineages before alternative structures assumed its role in supporting pelvic organs.

B) will become larger in future human populations as the muscles supporting pelvic organs require increasingly substantial attachment sites.

C) has been retained in the human lineage partly because its attachment sites contribute to the support of internal organs.

D) provided stronger support for internal organs in early humans than it does in humans living today.

SKELETON The effect to explain (Y): the coccyx persists, though textbooks call it a functionless leftover, "something of a puzzle." Background: the tail vanished, but a reduced set of its vertebrae stayed behind. The clue (X): where the coccyx is better developed, it carries denser attachment sites for the muscles that hold up the lower abdominal organs. So the coccyx has a real job: organ support. The blank states the link from X to Y.

PREDICT The coccyx was kept because it helps support the pelvic organs.

MATCH C. Retention (Y) is explained by function (X), exactly as predicted. Note the hedge *partly*: the evidence supports a contributing reason, not the only one.

TRAPS A is outside it: nothing says another structure took over the coccyx's job, and the study looked at primates, not "vertebrate lineages." B is too strong: it turns a comparison across species into a forecast; the passage has no data on change over time. D is an invented comparison: the study compares species with one another, not early humans with humans today.

Example 2 · Contrast (Claim A, a Pivot, Claim B)

Paleontologists have long debated what drove the abrupt disappearance of non-avian dinosaurs near the end of the Cretaceous period. According to the Alvarez Impact Hypothesis, a massive asteroid strike was responsible, and some researchers have further proposed that the extinction unfolded gradually, over several years, as debris lingering in the atmosphere produced a prolonged period of global cooling. However, a recent analysis of sediment records from multiple sites found no evidence of the sharp, sustained temperature drop that such a prolonged cooling period would require — not in the layer marking the impact itself, not in the layer just above it where the last dinosaur fossils appear, and not in the layers documenting plant life's later recovery. This absence suggests that _____

Which choice most logically completes the text?

A) some dinosaur lineages were far more sensitive to the impact's cooling effects than others were.

B) the sediment layers directly above the impact boundary show more pronounced cooling than the layers directly below it.

C) the extinction of non-avian dinosaurs likely would not have occurred had the asteroid impact released even marginally less debris into the atmosphere.

D) the extinction of non-avian dinosaurs cannot be attributed to a prolonged period of post-impact cooling.

SKELETON Claim A: an asteroid strike, followed by a prolonged period of global cooling that lasted several years. Pivot: *However*. Claim B: sediment records show no sign of that cooling, not in the impact layer, not in the layer of the last dinosaur fossils, and not in the layers of plant life's recovery. The blank: what Claim B means for Claim A. A three-for-three absence rules the mechanism out.

PREDICT The extinction wasn't caused by prolonged cooling.

MATCH D. It states Claim B directly. It doesn't deny the impact; it rejects only the prolonged cooling, the one piece the sediment evidence speaks to.

TRAPS A and B are invented comparisons: the passage never compares dinosaur lineages with one another, or the layers above the boundary with those below it; it asks only whether the cooling happened at all. C is outside it: how much debris would have been enough to matter never comes up.

Your Turn

Name _____ Date _____

Practice 1

Botanists studying an alpine wildflower compared plants growing wild at high elevations with genetically identical plants raised in a greenhouse at sea level. When the greenhouse was lit to match the wild plants' daylight hours, the two groups grew and flowered on the same schedule. Only the high-elevation plants, however, developed thick, waxy leaf coatings and high levels of pigments that shield leaves from intense sunlight. The researchers therefore concluded that

_____

Which choice most logically completes the text?

A) the two groups differed genetically in ways that shaped their leaves.

B) the environment in which the plant grows affects whether it develops its protective traits.

C) the plant's protective traits depend entirely on its surroundings and not at all on its genes.

D) the pigments that shield the plant's leaves also control when it flowers.

SETUP · COMPARED: _____ **HELD THE SAME:** _____

RESULT: _____

THE ONLY DIFFERENCE LEFT: _____

YOUR PREDICTION: _____

Your answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)

Practice 2

Archaeologists excavating a temple complex in southern Mesopotamia have found a group of clay tablets recording astronomical observations, stored together in one of its rooms. Inscriptions in the complex's foundations show that it was built around 250 BCE, but the style of the tablets' script shows that the tablets themselves were written in the 600s BCE, the same century as the eclipses they record. Since both dates are considered secure, the presence of the tablets in the complex suggests that _____

Which choice most logically completes the text?

A) tablets from the 600s BCE are more common at the site than tablets from later centuries.

B) the tablets are later copies of observations that were first recorded in the 600s BCE.

C) the tablets were written long before the complex was built and were later placed in it.

D) the observations were recorded by astronomers who worked at the complex.

FACT 1: _____ **FACT 2:** _____

IS EITHER FACT TAKEN BACK? _____

THE BRIDGE (YOUR PREDICTION): _____

Your answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)