

Teaching Making Inferences in Grades 3–5

The Stranger by Chris Van Allsburg

Overview and Rationale

Chris Van Allsburg is a master of making inferences. He creates mystery by leaking a story slowly and carefully onto the page through both his words and his illustrations. The clues that he embeds are clear enough to provoke thinking and guessing, but not so blunt as to remove the sense of mystery and wonder.

I've chosen to model making inferences to upper-elementary students with *The Stranger*. Late one summer, Farmer Bailey has an accident. Driving along in his truck, he hits a man dressed in an unusual suit of leather. The farmer brings the stunned and confused (but otherwise unharmed) fellow back with him to his home. Farmer Bailey's wife and daughter welcome the stranger. The doctor comes and tells the Baileys that the man has temporarily lost his memory but will probably be fine in a few days. The man stays on and becomes a part of the family in spite of his odd ways. At the conclusion of the story, students are left to make their own inferences about the stranger's identity. Even though I'm using this mentor text to model making inferences, there are logical stopping points where I also ask questions.

Lexile Framework: 640L

Grade-Level Equivalent: 3.5

Guided Reading Level: P

What the Text Says	What I Say
"Oh no!" he thought. "I've hit a deer." (p. 1)	<i>I'm making the inference that Farmer Bailey is upset about hitting a deer because of the damage it might do to his truck. Or maybe he's upset because he is an animal lover and is worried about the deer.</i>
... the farmer took his arm and helped him to the truck. (p. 3)	<i>I wonder why the man tries to run off. Maybe he's scared. Maybe he's hurt.</i>
"I don't think," whispered Mrs. Bailey, "he knows how to talk." (p. 5)	<i>The author is giving me clues about this stranger. This man doesn't talk and is dressed in weird clothes. These clues are making me ask some questions. I wonder what the Baileys will do next with this stranger. Will they call the cops? Will they take him to a doctor or a hospital? How is Katy feeling—scared of this stranger or curious? What makes Mr. Bailey think this man is a hermit—just his clothes and his not talking? It seems really important to figure out who this stranger is.</i>
"... the mercury is stuck at the bottom." (p. 7)	<i>I know that old-fashioned thermometers show that as something gets hotter, the mercury rises. Here the doctor says that the mercury is stuck at the bottom, so I can make an inference that when he took the stranger's temperature, he was very cold.</i>
The fellow seemed confused about buttonholes and buttons. (p. 9)	<i>Never seen buttons? This clue is more proof that the stranger lives by himself in a place far away from people and stores and modern conveniences.</i>
"Brr," she said. "There's a draft in here tonight." (p. 9)	<i>The author is giving me some clues about temperature playing an important role. First we had the incident with the thermometer. Here we've got the stranger staring at hot soup and the cold air that Mrs. Bailey feels. I also remember that the author set this story at the start of fall, with a cool breeze blowing. Maybe this book has something to do with temperatures and the change of seasons.</i>

What the Text Says	What I Say
... then stopped and looked back, as if they expected the stranger to follow. (p. 11)	<i>The rabbits hopped toward him? I think the author gave me that important detail for a reason—maybe to show me that the stranger has special powers, or that he’s lived in nature so long that wild animals are not afraid of him.</i>
He didn’t even sweat. (p. 13)	<i>I’m thinking that the fact that the stranger didn’t sweat is an important clue about his identity.</i>
He stared at them like a man who’d been hypnotized. (p. 15)	<i>This information seems to confirm my earlier thought about nature being important to the stranger. He can’t stop looking at the migrating geese.</i>
The leaves on the trees were as green as they’d been three weeks before. (p. 19)	<i>Based on these clues, I can conclude that the appearance of the stranger might have something to do with the weather being so different than usual.</i>
It would be much better, he thought, if all trees could be red and orange. (p. 21)	<i>I’m thinking that the stranger wants the autumn to come to the Baileys’ farm. He sees the green trees as ugly and wishes the fall colors for the Baileys. I’m wondering if he can do anything about this.</i>
... without thinking, blew on it with all of his might. (p. 23)	<i>I remember earlier how Mrs. Bailey got cold when the stranger blew on her soup. Using that clue plus my knowledge that the stranger wants the trees to change colors, I can make an inference that blowing on the leaf will bring cold air to help the trees change to their autumn colors.</i>
... the Baileys could tell that their friend had decided to leave. (p. 25)	<i>I wonder where he is going. I wonder why he’s decided that it’s time to leave.</i>
... words that say simply, “See you next fall.” (p. 27)	<i>The author has finished this book without telling me who the stranger is, but I have some clues to make an inference about him. I know that this stranger was cold—the author gave me clues about the thermometer, the draught of cold air, and staring at the steam from the hot soup. I know that this stranger was involved with nature, like the wild animals. I know that this stranger wanted the leaves to change color—like when he blew on the green leaf.</i>
	<i>And in this last bit of the book, I know that the leaves change every fall—and words are etched on the window. I’m getting clues to make me think that this stranger is Jack Frost. Jack Frost is an imaginary person who brings snow, frost, ice, and cold weather. He colors the trees in the fall and leaves patterns on cold windows in the winter.</i>