

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Recognizing Unstated Assumptions

At times, a sentence seems clear. Later, the reader realizes that he or she did not really understand the information. This may happen because the author of the sentence made an *unstated assumption*. This is information that is not explained because it is assumed, or taken for granted, that the reader already knows certain things. Recognizing unstated assumptions is a part of thinking critically.

To learn how to recognize unstated assumptions, use the following steps:

1. Carefully read each sentence.
2. As each sentence is read, note each piece of information that the author has written.
3. For each piece of information, decide what parts are not understood because the author has made assumptions and has not explained them.

For example, look at the following statements and the sentences in italics after each:

1. By the 1300s, Italy controlled Europe's trade with India and the Far East, including China and the East Indies.
(It is assumed that the reader knows which countries made up the Far East and the East Indies.)
2. The Renaissance did not reach Venice until the late 1500s because the Venetians had looked to Constantinople rather

than to western Europe for art and literature.

(It is assumed that the reader knows what the Renaissance was, how looking toward Constantinople for art and literature would be different from looking toward western Europe, and what countries made up western Europe.)

3. The defeat of the Armada allowed northern Europe to remain a Protestant stronghold.

(It is assumed that the reader knows what the Armada was, what countries made up northern Europe, what "Protestant" means, and what relationship existed between it and the Armada.)

4. During the 1590s and early 1600s, the German states began to quarrel over the terms of the Peace of Augsburg.

(It is assumed that the reader knows what areas made up the German states and what the Peace of Augsburg was.)

For further practice in this skill, read the following paragraph. Then, use the three steps outlined above to determine if there are any unstated assumptions in it.

In 1609, the Dutch sent Henry Hudson, an English navigator, to locate the passage. He discovered the Hudson River and sailed up it to present-day Albany. The following year, he set out on a second voyage in search of the passage. He became lost in a storm. Hudson was never seen again, but his first voyage gave the Dutch their claim in the New World.