Question 2: What did the author think I already knew?
“What’s he talking about?”

At some point, you’ve heard something on a sports channel and thought to yourself, “What’s he talking about?” Maybe while watching a snowboarding event in the winter, the commentator announces that the next snowboarder up is known for nailing the McTwist. We have no idea what that is, and the commentator expects us to know something that we don’t know.
“What’s he talking about?”

The same thing can happen as we’re reading. We can find ourselves confused because the author expects us to bring some knowledge to the text that we just don’t have. An author usually expects us to:

- Understand his/her vocabulary
- Visualize what he/she is describing
- Apply prior knowledge
- Follow his/her reasoning
“What’s he talking about?”

When one of these things doesn’t happen, we may say to ourselves, “I don’t get it.”

We SHOULD ask, “What does the author think I already know?”

Trying to identify exactly what it is the author thinks you already know can help us figure out what to do next.
What did the author think I already knew?

Example:

“Americans who lived through the rise of fascism in Europe and militarism in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s wanted to know about the strengths of American democracy.”

The author thinks I already know about _________________.

These are the topics I need more information on in order for the sentence to make sense!
What did the author think I already knew?

Example from a website describing a Dyson bladeless fan:

“The air flows through a channel in the pedestal up to the tube, which is hollow. The interior of the tube acts like a ramp. Air flows along the ramp, which curves around and ends in slits in the back of the fan. Then, the air flows along the surface of the inside of the tube and out toward the front of the fan.”
What did the author think I already knew?

This time, my confusion is not about not understanding a specific word.

The author thinks I can visualize what he is describing, and I can’t. What I need to do is create the visual image I’m lacking.

When I give that a try, this is what I end up with:
Your Turn!

Look at the article about Eli Whitney and the Cotton Gin. As you read, when you notice yourself getting confused, circle the confusing part and ask yourself, “What does the author think I already know?” Jot your thoughts in the margin.
Strategies to help you

Draw pictures ("Sketch to Stretch") and/or look up confusing vocabulary terms to help you come to understand parts of the text that are unclear to you.