

Terri Jackson

By Sydney Fox

Directions: Read the following story. On a separate sheet of paper, stop and answer the questions as they appear. Use the sentence starters in your *Cognitive Reading Strategies* handout to help you frame your responses. Write your responses using *complete sentences*.

1. Prediction – Preview the questions at the end of the story. Based on the questions, what predictions can you make about the story?

On the first day of sixth grade, I sat in my quiet homeroom class and observed all the people who I would eventually befriend and possibly graduate with. I glanced around the room and noticed that the majority of the middle-class kids were dressed in their nicest first-day outfits. My glance stopped on a shy-looking girl in the back of the room. She wore a stained, yellow plaid shirt with a pair of frayed jeans that had obviously had several owners before her. Her hair was unusually short and unwashed. She wore dress shoes that were once white and frilly pink socks that had lost their frill with too many wearings. I caught myself thinking, *That's disgusting. Doesn't she know what a bathtub is?* As I looked around, I figured others were probably thinking the same thing.

2. Prediction – What do you predict the conflict of the story will be? What are you basing your prediction on?

The teacher began checking the attendance, each person casually lifting his or her hand as names were called in turn.

“Terri Jackson?” the teacher asked, following the roll with her finger. Silence. “Um, Terri Jackson?”

Finally we heard a meek answer from the back of the room, followed by the sound of ripping cloth. We all shifted in our seats to see what had happened.

“Scary Terri ripped the armpit of her shirt!” one boy joked.

“Eww, I bet it's a hundred years old!” another girl commented. One comment after another brought a roar of laughter.

I was probably laughing the loudest. Sadly, making Terri feel insecure made me feel secure and confident. It was a good break from the awkward silence and uncomfortable first-day jitters.

Terri Jackson was the joke of the whole sixth grade that year. If we had nothing to talk about, Terri's trip through the lunchroom was an entertaining conversation starter. Her grandma-looking dress, missing front tooth, and stained gym clothes kept us mocking and imitating her for hours.

3. Connection – Review what you've read so far and make a connection. Label it T-T (text to text), T-W (text to world) or T-S (text to self).

At my twelfth birthday party, ten giggly, gossipy girls were playing truth or dare, a favorite party game. We had just finished a Terri Jackson discussion. It was my turn at the game.

“Umm . . . Sydney! Truth or dare?” one of my friends asked.

“How about a dare? Bring it on. I'll do anything.” Oh, if only I'd known what she was about to say.

“Okay, I dare you to invite Terri Jackson over to your house next Friday for two whole hours!”

“Two whole hours?! Please ask something else, please!” I begged. “How could anybody do that?” But my question was drowned out by a sea of giggly girls slapping their hands over their mouths and rolling on the floor, trying to contain their laughter.

The next day, I cautiously walked up to Terri as if her body odor was going to make me fall over dead. My friends huddled and watched from a corner to see if I would follow through with the brave dare.

I managed to choke out, “Hey Scary—I mean Terri—you want to come over for two hours Friday?”

4. Prediction – What do you predict will be Terri's reaction to Sydney's invitation? Why do you feel this way?

I didn't see her face light up because I had turned to my friends and made a gagging expression. When I was satisfied with their laughter of approval, I turned back to Terri. Terri's face was buried in her filthy hands; she was crying. I couldn't stand it. Half of me felt the strongest compassion for her, but the other half wanted to slap her for making me look so cruel and heartless. That was exactly what I was being.

"What's got you all upset? All I did was invite you over," I whispered, trying not to show my concern.

She looked up and watched my eyes for what seemed like forever. "Really?" That was all she could say. Her seldom-heard voice almost startled me.

"I guess so, if you're up to it." My voice sounded surprisingly sincere. I'd never seen her flash her toothless smile so brightly. The rest of the day I had a good feeling, and I was not dreading the two-hour visit as I had before. I was almost looking forward to it.

5. Prediction – How do you think things will go during Terri's visit? What are you basing your opinion on?

Friday rolled around quickly. My time with Terri passed by in a flash as the two hours slipped into four hours, and I found myself actually enjoying her company. We chatted about her family and her battles with poverty. We discovered that we both played violin, and my favorite part of the afternoon occurred when she played the violin for me. I was amazed by how beautifully she played.

I would love to tell you that Terri and I became best friends and that from then on I ignored all my other friends' comments, but that's not how it happened. While I no longer participated in the Terri bashing and even tried to defend her at times, I didn't want to lose everyone else's acceptance just to gain Terri's.

Terri disappeared after the sixth grade. No one is sure what happened to her. We think that she may have transferred to a different school because of how cruelly the kids treated her. I still think about her sometimes and wonder what she's doing. I guess all I can do is hope that she is being accepted and loved wherever she is.

I realize now how insecure and weak I was during that sixth-grade year. I participated in the cruel, heartless Terri-bashing sessions because they seemed kind of funny in a distorted way. But they were only funny because they falsely boosted my own self-confidence; I felt bigger by making someone else feel smaller. I know now that true confidence is not proven by destroying another's self-esteem, but rather, by having the strength to stand up for the Terri Jacksons of the world.

6. Connection – Make a text-to-text connection between this story and one of the other stories we've read so far this year.

7. Evaluation – Evaluate how you did with your predictions.

8. Interpretation – What surprised Sydney about Terri Jackson? How did Sydney's thinking about Terri change?

9. Recall – What two reasons does Sydney give for why she participated in the "Terri-bashing"?

10. Application – What autobiographical writing prompt could you create that would tie into the theme or main idea of this story? Start with "Write about a time when . . ." or something similar.