
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE DENTIST WHO INVENTED COTTON CANDY

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage
- ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key
- ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

THE DENTIST WHO INVENTED COTTON CANDY

The inventor of cotton candy was a dentist. Yes—a dentist. A man whose entire career was built on warning people about the dangers of sugar created one of the sweetest treats in American history.

In 1897, Dr. William Morrison of Nashville, Tennessee partnered with a local candy maker named John C. Wharton. Together, they designed a machine that would change carnival food forever. The device heated sugar in a spinning bowl, then used centrifugal force to push the melted sugar through tiny holes. As the liquid sugar hit the air, it cooled instantly into thin threads. These threads accumulated into fluffy, cloudlike puffs.

They called their invention "Fairy Floss."

Morrison and Wharton unveiled Fairy Floss at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis—one of the largest public events in American history, attracting nearly 20 million visitors. They sold their creation for 25 cents a box, which was half the price of admission to the entire fair. By any measure, it should have been too expensive.

It wasn't. Visitors couldn't get enough. Over the course of the fair, Morrison and Wharton sold 68,655 boxes of Fairy Floss, earning roughly \$17,000—equivalent to nearly half a million dollars today.

But here's what makes the story truly strange: Dr. Morrison wasn't just any dentist. He was a highly respected one. He later served as president of the Tennessee State Dental Association. He wrote articles about proper dental hygiene and the importance of avoiding sugar. He spent his professional life warning patients that sugar caused cavities—while simultaneously selling them pure spun sugar at carnivals.

Morrison never publicly addressed the contradiction. Perhaps he viewed Fairy Floss as harmless fun. Perhaps he believed people would eat candy regardless of his advice. Or perhaps he simply loved watching ordinary sugar transform into something magical.

The name "cotton candy" came later, in 1920, when another dentist—yes, another one—named Josef Lascaux refined the machine and marketed it under the new name. Today, cotton candy remains a carnival staple, and its story remains a reminder that even experts sometimes can't resist temptation.

Word Count: 348 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Smithsonian Magazine

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1

What was cotton candy originally called when it was invented?

- ☐ A) Sugar Threads
- ☐ B) Fairy Floss
- ☐ C) Cloud Candy
- ☐ D) Spun Sugar

2

How much money did Morrison and Wharton earn at the 1904 World's Fair?

- ☐ A) About \$5,000
- ☐ B) About \$17,000 (nearly half a million in today's dollars)
- ☐ C) About \$100,000
- ☐ D) About \$1 million

3

What does the word 'contradiction' mean as used in this passage?

- ☐ A) A type of candy-making technique
- ☐ B) A situation where two things oppose or conflict with each other
- ☐ C) A partnership between two people
- ☐ D) A successful business venture

4

Which detail from the passage best shows that Morrison was respected in his profession?

- ☐ A) He partnered with a candy maker named Wharton
- ☐ B) He served as president of the Tennessee State Dental Association
- ☐ C) He charged 25 cents per box of Fairy Floss
- ☐ D) He invented the spinning bowl machine

5

The passage offers three possible reasons why Morrison 'never publicly addressed the contradiction.' Which explanation do you find most convincing? Use evidence from the text to support your choice.

6

The passage ends by saying cotton candy's story is 'a reminder that even experts sometimes can't resist temptation.' What larger point is the author making about human nature? Can you think of other examples where experts act against their own professional advice?

ANSWER KEY

The Dentist Who Invented Cotton Candy

1. B) Fairy Floss

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: "They called their invention "Fairy Floss.""

2. B) About \$17,000 (nearly half a million in today's dollars)

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states they earned 'roughly \$17,000—equivalent to nearly half a million dollars today.'

3. B) A situation where two things oppose or conflict with each other

DOK 2 — Vocabulary in context. The passage describes Morrison warning against sugar while selling sugar—two opposing actions, which is the 'contradiction' he never addressed.

4. B) He served as president of the Tennessee State Dental Association

DOK 2 — Text evidence. Serving as president of a state dental association demonstrates professional recognition and respect.

5. Sample Response:

Answers may vary. The most convincing might be that Morrison 'loved watching ordinary sugar transform into something magical.' The passage emphasizes the wonder of the invention—sugar becoming 'thin threads' that form 'cloudlike puffs.' Someone who partnered with a candy maker, debuted at a World's Fair, and sold nearly 70,000 boxes was clearly passionate about the creation. This passion may have outweighed professional concerns.

6. Sample Response:

Answers will vary. The author suggests that knowledge doesn't always change behavior—even experts can act against what they know is right. Examples might include: doctors who smoke, financial advisors with personal debt, fitness trainers who eat junk food, or environmentalists who drive gas-guzzling cars. The point is that humans are complex—we can understand something is harmful and still enjoy it. Strong responses will connect this to the idea that expertise and self-control are different things.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Dentist Who Invented Cotton Candy

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- NGSS — Connections to scientific practices
- C3 Framework — Historical thinking skills

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Dr. Morrison warned patients about sugar while selling them cotton candy. Is this hypocritical, or is it just human nature?
- Can you think of other examples where experts don't follow their own advice? Why does this happen?
- Should inventors consider the health effects of their creations, or is that the consumer's responsibility?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research: Find another inventor whose creation contradicted their profession or beliefs. Compare their stories.
- Science: Investigate how cotton candy is made. Draw and label the process of spinning sugar.
- Debate: Should inventors be responsible for the health effects of their creations? Prepare arguments for both sides.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- Smithsonian Magazine