
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE WOMAN WHO FOUND A MILLION DOLLARS IN THE TRASH

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.

TERMS OF USE

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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 WOMAN WHO FOUND A MILLION DOLLARS IN THE TRASH

In 2016, a woman in San Jose, California accidentally threw away an envelope containing \$1 million in cash. What happened next became a story of luck, honesty, and the challenges of searching through mountains of garbage.

The woman had been cleaning out her elderly mother's house after her mother passed away. Hidden among piles of old newspapers and junk mail was an envelope stuffed with cash—her mother's life savings, kept hidden for decades. Not realizing what was inside, the woman threw it in the trash along with everything else.

When she discovered her mistake, panic set in. The garbage truck had already come. The envelope was somewhere in the city's waste management system, heading toward a landfill where it would be buried under tons of garbage forever.

The woman contacted Specialized Assistance Services, a company that helps people recover lost items from waste facilities. For a percentage of any recovered valuables, they would search. It wasn't the first time someone had thrown away a fortune—the company regularly helps people find accidentally discarded jewelry, important documents, and yes, cash.

Searchers spent hours at the recycling facility, sorting through compressed bales of paper waste. The odds seemed impossible. But incredibly, they found the envelope—battered and dirty, but with all \$1 million still inside. The cash had survived the garbage truck's compactor and the sorting facility's machinery.

The woman paid the recovery company their fee and kept the rest—still a life-changing amount of money. She later said she would never again throw anything away without checking it carefully first.

Experts estimate that Americans accidentally throw away billions of dollars worth of valuables each year. Old furniture with hidden compartments, clothing with money in pockets, and boxes that contain more than they appear to—all end up in landfills. The lesson is clear: before you throw something away, make sure you know exactly what you're discarding.

Word Count: 310 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: BBC News

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 How much money was accidentally thrown away?

- ☐ A) \$10,000
- ☐ B) \$100,000
- ☐ C) \$1 million
- ☐ D) \$10 million

2 Where had the mother hidden the money?

- ☐ A) In a bank vault
- ☐ B) In an envelope among old papers and junk mail
- ☐ C) Under her mattress
- ☐ D) In a safe deposit box

3 Why did the woman throw away the envelope without checking it?

- ☐ A) She was in a hurry to sell the house
- ☐ B) She didn't realize it contained anything valuable
- ☐ C) She didn't want the money
- ☐ D) She thought it was fake money

4 What does the existence of companies like Specialized Assistance Services suggest?

- ☐ A) People never throw away valuables
- ☐ B) Accidentally discarding valuable items is common enough to support a business
- ☐ C) Landfills are easy to search
- ☐ D) Garbage companies hide valuables

5

What lesson does the passage suggest about dealing with a deceased relative's belongings?

- ☐ A) Throw everything away quickly
- ☐ B) Hire professionals to sort everything
- ☐ C) Check items carefully before discarding, as valuables may be hidden
- ☐ D) Never keep cash at home

6

Why might elderly people hide cash in unusual places rather than using banks?

- ☐ A) Banks didn't exist when they were young
- ☐ B) Distrust of banks, desire for privacy, or habits formed during economic hardships like the Great Depression
- ☐ C) They forgot about bank accounts
- ☐ D) Cash is always safer than banks

ANSWER KEY

The Woman Who Found a Million Dollars in the Trash

1. C) \$1 million

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'an envelope containing \$1 million in cash.'

2. B) In an envelope among old papers and junk mail

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'Hidden among piles of old newspapers and junk mail was an envelope stuffed with cash.'

3. B) She didn't realize it contained anything valuable

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage states: 'Not realizing what was inside, the woman threw it in the trash.'

4. B) Accidentally discarding valuable items is common enough to support a business

DOK 2 — Inference. The company exists specifically to help recover items from waste facilities, and 'regularly helps people find accidentally discarded' valuables.

5. C) Check items carefully before discarding, as valuables may be hidden

DOK 3 — Analysis. The passage concludes: 'before you throw something away, make sure you know exactly what you're discarding.'

6. B) Distrust of banks, desire for privacy, or habits formed during economic hardships like the Great Depression

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking. The mother kept 'life savings, kept hidden for decades.' People who lived through bank failures or economic crises often distrust financial institutions, preferring physical cash they can control.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Woman Who Found a Million Dollars in the Trash

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

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

- Why do you think the elderly mother hid money in her house instead of using a bank?
- If you found a large amount of cash while cleaning a relative's house, what would you do?
- The recovery company charged a percentage of what they found. Is this fair? Why or why not?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Interview an older family member about how they manage money. Have their habits changed over time?
- Research the Great Depression and how it affected people's trust in banks. Create a timeline of major banking crises.
- Design a 'before you throw it away' checklist that families could use when cleaning out homes.

DIFFERENTIATION

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

SOURCE

- BBC News / The Guardian