

SHORT STORY

# Preparing to Read

# Eleven

by **Sandra Cisneros**



*Cumpleaños de Lala y Tudi (Lala and Tudi's Birthday Party)* by Carmen Lomas Garza.  
Oil on canvas. 36" x 48".

What Do  
**You**  
Think

What can you learn about someone's character from how he or she acts in an embarrassing situation?



## QuickWrite

What is your definition of an "embarrassing moment"? Describe a situation at school that might embarrass a student your age.



# Reader/Writer Notebook

Use your **RWN** to complete the activities for this selection.

**SKILLS FOCUS** **Literary Skills** Understand characterization. **Reading Skills** Make inferences.

## Literary Focus

**Characterization** The way a writer reveals a character's personality is called **characterization**. A writer may directly tell you that a character is shy or sad or may make it obvious by revealing a character's shy *actions* or sad *thoughts*. As you read "Eleven," notice how Rachel's character is revealed through her actions and thoughts.

## Reading Focus

**Making Inferences** Writers seldom explain everything. You must figure out some things by making **inferences**: combining clues in the text with what you know to make an educated guess. Making inferences helps you uncover the story's full meaning.

**Into Action** Use a chart like this one to make at least two inferences about characters and events in "Eleven." An example is provided for you. Add rows to make inferences based on other details.

It Says ... (in the story)	I Say ... (what you know)	And So ... (inference)
It's Rachel's birthday.	Birthdays are usually happy days that people look forward to.	Rachel must be excited about her birthday.

**TechFocus** As you read, imagine how Rachel would tell her story in a video diary. What would she say? How would she say it?

## Writing Focus

### Think as a Reader/Writer

**Find It in Your Reading** Cisneros creates word pictures that appeal to the senses: "My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can't stop the little animal noises coming out of me." This image connects to sight, touch, and hearing. List other sensory details from this story in your *Reader/Writer Notebook*.

## Vocabulary

**rattling** (RAT lihng) *v.* used as *adj.*: shaking and hitting together. *Rachel felt all the years of her life rattling inside her like coins in a metal box.*

**raggedy** (RAG uh dee) *adj.*: torn and in bad condition. *The sweater was worn and raggedy.*

**itchy** (IHCH ee) *adj.*: causing a feeling on the skin that makes you want to rub or scratch. *The red sweater was made of an itchy, uncomfortable material.*

**invisible** (ihN VIHZ uh buhl) *adj.*: not able to be seen. *Rachel wished that she could be invisible and disappear.*

## Language Coach

**Figurative Language** In "Eleven," Rachel uses many interesting and vivid comparisons to describe how she feels on her birthday. When she says that growing older is "like an onion or like the rings inside a tree," she is using similes, a kind of figurative language. A **simile** is a comparison of unlike things that uses a word such as *like*, *as*, *than*, or *resembles*. Which of the Vocabulary example sentences above contains a simile?



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# Sandra Cisneros

(1954– )

## Writing from Experience

Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago, where she grew up speaking both Spanish and English. Although she sometimes had a hard time in school, she eventually became a teacher and a highly acclaimed writer. Today she lives in San Antonio, Texas. Her childhood experiences, her family, and her Mexican American heritage all find a place in her writing.

## “Inside I’m Eleven”

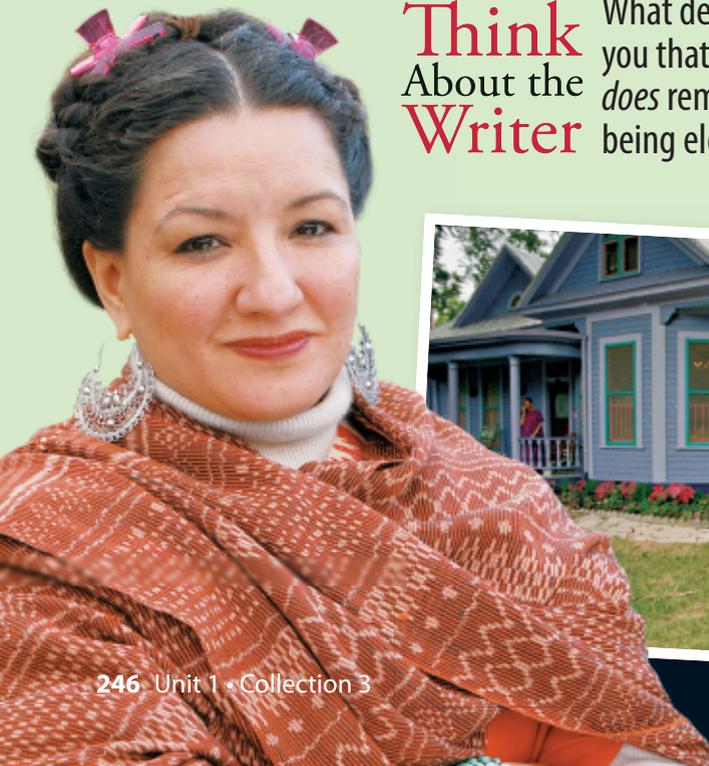
In much of her writing, Cisneros explores the feeling of being shy and out-of-place. In this quotation, she describes what she sees when she looks back on her childhood:

“When I think how I see myself, I would have to say at age eleven. I know I’m older on the outside, but inside I’m eleven. I’m the girl in the picture with the skinny arms and a crumpled shirt and crooked hair. I didn’t like school because all they saw was the outside of me.”

**Think About the Writer** What details convince you that Cisneros really *does* remember what being eleven is like?

## Preview the Selection

On the day this story takes place, **Rachel**, the story’s main character and narrator, is turning eleven years old. Rachel’s birthday is complicated by a difficult circumstance at school.



**Read with a Purpose** Read this story to discover how a misunderstanding at school affects the eleventh birthday of a girl named Rachel.

# Eleven

by **Sandra Cisneros**

**W**hat they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you are—underneath the year that makes you eleven.

Like some days you might say something stupid, and that's the part of you that's still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama's lap because you're scared, and that's the part of you that's five. And maybe one day when you're all grown up maybe you will need to cry like if you're three, and that's okay. That's what I tell Mama when she's sad and needs to cry. Maybe she's feeling three. **A**

Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is. **B**

You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you. And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the way it is.

Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I'd have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk. I would've known how to tell her it wasn't mine instead of just sitting there with that look on my face and nothing coming out of my mouth. **C**

**A Literary Focus Characterization** What do you learn about the narrator's personality from the thoughts and feelings she shares in this paragraph?

**B Read and Discuss** The author has given us a lot of information about what it means to be eleven. What point is she trying to make?

**C Read and Discuss** Why does the narrator wish she were 102 years old?

**Vocabulary rattling** (RAT lihng) *v.*: shaking and hitting together.

“Whose is this?” Mrs. Price says, and she holds the red sweater up in the air for all the class to see. “Whose? It’s been sitting in the coatroom for a month.”

“Not mine,” says everybody. “Not me.”

“It has to belong to somebody,” Mrs. Price keeps saying, but nobody can remember. It’s an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump-rope. It’s maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged to me I wouldn’t say so.

Maybe because I’m skinny, maybe because she doesn’t like me, that stupid Sylvia Saldívar says, “I think it belongs to Rachel.” An ugly sweater like that, all raggedy and old, but Mrs. Price believes her. Mrs. Price takes the sweater and puts it right on my desk, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out. **D**

“That’s not, I don’t, you’re not . . . Not mine,” I finally say in a little voice that was maybe me when I was four. **E**

“Of course it’s yours,” Mrs. Price says. “I remember you wearing it once.” Because she’s older and the teacher, she’s right and I’m not.

Not mine, not mine, not mine, but Mrs. Price is already turning to page thirty-two, and math problem number four. I don’t know why but all of a sudden I’m feeling sick inside,

like the part of me that’s three wants to come out of my eyes, only I squeeze them shut tight and bite down on my teeth real hard and try to remember today I am eleven, eleven. Mama is making a cake for me for tonight, and when Papa comes home everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you. **F**

But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater’s still sitting there like a big red mountain. I move the red sweater to the corner of my desk with my ruler. I move my pencil and books and eraser as far from it as possible. I even move my chair a little to the right. Not mine, not mine, not mine.

In my head I’m thinking how long till lunchtime, how long till I can take the red sweater and throw it over the schoolyard fence, or leave it hanging on a parking meter, or bunch it up into a little ball and toss it in the alley. Except when math

period ends Mrs. Price says loud and in front of everybody, “Now, Rachel, that’s enough,” because she sees I’ve shoved the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk and it’s hanging all over the edge like a waterfall, but I don’t care.

“Rachel,” Mrs. Price says. She says it like she’s getting mad. “You put that sweater on right now and no more nonsense.”

**But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater’s still sitting there like a big red mountain.**

**D Reading Focus Making Inferences** What details in the story suggest why Rachel feels so strongly about the sweater?

**E Literary Focus Characterization** What do the narrator’s self-description and speech in this and the previous paragraph tell you about her personality?

**F Read and Discuss** How do Rachel’s thoughts here support the inference you made about her strong feelings?

**Vocabulary raggedy** (RAG uh dee) *adj.*: torn and in bad condition.

*Portrait of a Girl* by Rosa Ibarra.



**Analyzing Visuals**

**Viewing and Interpreting** What characteristics does this girl seem to share with Rachel?

“But it’s not—”

“Now!” Mrs. Price says.

This is when I wish I wasn’t eleven, because all the years inside of me—ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one—are pushing at the back of my eyes when I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does, all **itchy** and full of germs that aren’t even mine.

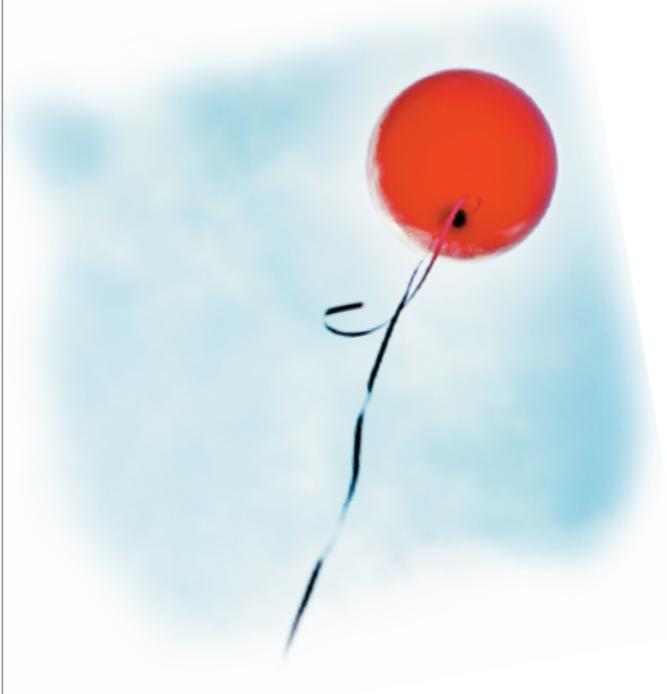
That’s when everything I’ve been holding in since this morning, since when Mrs. Price put the sweater on my desk, finally lets go, and all of a sudden I’m crying in front of everybody. I wish I was **invisible** but I’m not. I’m eleven and it’s my birthday today and I’m crying like I’m three in front of everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid clown-sweater arms. My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can’t stop the little animal noises from coming out of me, until there aren’t any more tears left in my eyes, and it’s just my body shaking like when you have the hiccups and my whole head hurts like when you drink milk too fast.

But the worst part is right before the bell rings for lunch. That stupid Phyllis Lopez, who is even dumber than Sylvia Saldívar, says she remembers the red sweater is hers!

I take it off right away and give it to her, only Mrs. Price pretends like everything’s okay. **G**

Today I’m eleven. There’s a cake Mama’s making for tonight, and when Papa comes home from work we’ll eat it. There’ll be candles and presents and everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you, Rachel, only it’s too late. **H**

I’m eleven today. I’m eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one, but I wish I was one hundred and two. I wish I was anything but eleven, because I want today to be far away already, far away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny *o* in the sky, so tiny-tiny you have to close your eyes to see it. **I**



**G Read and Discuss** How does this situation connect with the inference you made about Rachel’s feelings?

**H Reading Focus Making Inferences** What does Rachel mean by “it’s too late”? Make an inference from clues in the story and your thoughts about how you might feel in a similar situation.

**I Read and Discuss** How has this birthday ended up for Rachel?

**Vocabulary itchy** (IHCH ee) *adj.*: causing a feeling on the skin that makes you want to rub or scratch.

**invisible** (ihn VIHZ uh buhl) *adj.*: not able to be seen.

# Applying Your Skills

**SKILLS FOCUS** **Literary Skills** Analyze characterization; analyze character and conflict. **Reading Skills** Make inferences. **Writing Skills** Write to describe.

Eleven

## Respond and Think Critically

### Reading Focus

#### Quick Check

1. What does Mrs. Price put on Rachel's desk?
2. What mistake has Mrs. Price made?

#### Read with a Purpose

3. What happens to Rachel that upsets her so much in class? How does this event affect her feelings about her eleventh birthday?

#### Reading Skills: Making Inferences

4. How do you think Rachel gets along with the other students? How does she feel about herself? Use the It Says/I Say/And So strategy to make inferences about both questions. (Look for other details to add under "It Says.")

It Says ... In the story	I Say ... What you know	And So ... Inference
Rachel calls Sylvia "stupid."		
Rachel calls herself "skinny."		

### Literary Focus

#### Literary Analysis

5. **Interpret** By the end of the story, Rachel is wishing she were 102—or anything but 11. What point is the author making about age? What does this have to do with the story?

6. **Infer/Connect** What assumptions does Mrs. Price seem to make about Rachel? Why didn't Rachel just refuse to put on the sweater? If you were Rachel, what would you have done?
7. **Make Judgments** Explain whether you think Rachel makes her situation worse by how she acts over the sweater.
8. **Analyze/Infer** At the end of the story, Rachel says that "everybody will sing Happy birthday, . . . only it's too late." What is "too late"? What can you **infer** about Rachel and about how the situation has affected her?

#### Literary Skills: Characterization

9. **Analyze** What character traits does Rachel have? What methods of characterization does the author use to show these traits?

#### Literary Skills Review: Conflict

10. **Analyze** Think about Rachel's struggle in this story. What is the external conflict for Rachel? In what way is this also an internal conflict?

### Writing Focus

#### Think as a Reader/Writer

**Use It in Your Writing** Using vivid sensory details, as Cisneros does, write a paragraph describing an imaginary embarrassing situation at school. Use your QuickWrite notes for ideas.

What Do  
**You**  
Think  
**Now**

Did Rachel do "the right thing" in an embarrassing situation? Did anyone? What could each character have done differently?

# Applying Your Skills

## Eleven

### Vocabulary Development

#### Vocabulary Skills: Connotations

A word's **connotations** are the feelings and ideas that we associate, or connect, with the word.

For example, Rachel calls the red sweater "ugly." Someone who didn't hate the sweater might just say it was "plain" or "unattractive." *Ugly* is a strong word that has very negative connotations.

#### Your Turn

Think about *raggedy*, another word that Rachel uses to describe the sweater. Here are some words that mean more or less the same thing as *raggedy*.

rattling  
raggedy  
itchy  
invisible

• old	• torn
• tattered	• shabby
• worn out	• scruffy

None of the words has a truly positive connotation when applied to a sweater, but some of the words are more negative than others. Put the words in order, starting with the one whose connotations seem the *least* negative and ending with the one whose connotations seem the *most* negative. Include *raggedy* in the list.

For each remaining Vocabulary word (*rattling*, *itchy*, *invisible*), identify three or four synonyms—words with a similar meaning. Then, list the words in order of their connotations, from least negative to most negative. Use a thesaurus or a dictionary to help you find synonyms for each Vocabulary word.

#### Language Coach

**Figurative Language** Read this simile from "Eleven":

"But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater's still sitting there *like a big red mountain*."

Remember that a **simile** is a comparison of unlike things that uses a comparing word such as *like*, *as*, *than*, or *resembles*. A **metaphor** is another example of figurative language, but unlike a simile, it compares unlike things without using any comparison words. A metaphor says that something *is* something else: The ugly red sweater *is a mountain, casting its shadow of disappointment over my birthday*. Come up with four of your own figurative descriptions of the sweater in "Eleven." Write two of them as similes and two as metaphors.

#### Academic Vocabulary

##### Talk About . . .

With a partner, discuss the circumstance that makes Rachel feel like her birthday is ruined. What makes it obvious that Mrs. Price has a particular view of Rachel? Use the underlined Academic Vocabulary words in your discussion.

## Grammar Link

### Adjective Phrases: Adding Word Power

Just as one person working alone can accomplish only so much, one word working alone has its limitations. The adjective *large* can tell you that a cat is big, but what does *large* really mean? Adjectives like *large* or *small* don't pack a lot of power. They don't tell you *how large* or *how small* something is, or *what* it looks like. That's why we need adjective phrases. An **adjective phrase** is a group of words that, like an adjective, describes (or modifies) a noun or a pronoun. Adjective phrases add power to descriptions by answering questions like these.

What kind?	Which one?
How many?	How much?

An adjective phrase can tell you much more about the “large” cat:

**EXAMPLE** a large cat *with a fluffy striped tail as long as my arm*

### Your Turn

Use your imagination, and add more details to the nouns below by joining an adjective phrase to each of the adjectives in italics.

- lonely* dog
- hungry* shark
- broken* chair
- tall* tree

**Writing Application** Go back to the work you did for the Writing Focus on page 251 and add adjective phrases to make your description of an embarrassing moment even more vivid.



## CHOICES

As you respond to the Choices, use these **Academic Vocabulary** words as appropriate: adapt, circumstance, gender, obvious.

### REVIEW

### Write a Character Sketch

**Partner Work** With a partner, discuss how Cisneros reveals Rachel's personality. Consider obvious clues such as Rachel's physical appearance, words, actions, and thoughts. Also consider how the story's other characters respond to her. Use these details and your own ideas to make an inference about Rachel. Then, each of you should write your own short character sketch of Rachel. Compare your sketch with the one your partner wrote. Did you agree in your views of Rachel? If not, what were your points of difference, and why?

### CONNECT

### Describe a Birthday

**Timed Writing** What's *your* idea of a memorable birthday? Based on your own experiences or just on your imagination, describe your idea of the best, worst, most unusual, or funniest birthday. Use specific details as you describe this birthday.

### EXTEND

### Create a Video Diary

**TechFocus** Work with a partner to adapt this story as an entry in Rachel's video diary. Write a script, and film the diary entry in one take. Be sure to capture Rachel's personality and voice.



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