Given the public’s fascination with all things related to the Alamo, few are held in higher esteem than an emotion-packed letter written on February 24, 1836, by the 26-year-old commander of the Alamo, William Barret Travis. Only 11 sentences long, the document is a masterpiece of American patriotism and propaganda and its words have long inspired generations of Texans.

The letter is more than a plea for help. It reflects its author and his times. Making sense of historical documents, especially those written in the early 19th century, is a challenge for any student regardless of learning style and ability. To meet this challenge, students will utilize the DESCRIBE primary source analysis strategy developed by the faculty of Dominican University School of Education, River Forest, Illinois.

**Objective**

- Students will analyze the Travis letter using the DESCRIBE strategy.
- Students will be able to discuss and draw conclusions about the purpose and meaning of the letter.
- Students will be able to explain larger themes addressed in the letter and how these themes reflected and influenced Texas and American history.

**TEKS**

7.1C, 7.3B, 7.3C, 7.21B, 7.21D, 7.21F, 7.22A, 7.22B, 7.22D

**Resources**

- Copy of the William B. Travis, February 24, 1836 letter and transcript
- DESCRIBE strategy poster
- DESCRIBE strategy instructions
- DESCRIBE graphic organizer
- Pens and pencils
Warm Up

Ask students if they’ve ever read an article in a magazine or other publication that inspired or motivated them in some way. Call on volunteers to share and ask them how the article influenced their thinking and behavior. Ask them if they can recall any historical documents or speeches that have inspired people to respond in a certain way (Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have A Dream” speech is one example). Tell students they will be reading and analyzing arguably the most famous letter in Texas history to learn why its words have endured the test of time.

Activity Steps

1. Review with students the circumstances leading up to the siege of the Alamo.
2. Provide students with an image of Travis’ original letter in hard copy or projected on a screen. Explain that this letter was the first of several letters written by Travis during the siege.
3. Read the letter aloud slowly to the class as the students follow silently.
4. Call on several students to give their initial impressions.
5. Next, tell students they are going to analyze the letter to see if there are perhaps other messages Travis was conveying to his audience.
6. Distribute copies of the Travis letter transcript and the DESCRIBE graphic organizer to each student.
7. Divide the letter into 3 sections. Make sure students identify the sections on their copies. (See Teacher Copy of the Travis letter DESCRIBE strategy for suggestion. You can divide the letter in any number of combinations, but for this strategy, three would be best.)
8. Display a copy of the DESCRIBE strategy poster to the class. Go over each letter in the DESCRIBE acronym with students to help them understand each step of the process.
9. Use the DESCRIBE strategy teacher instructions provided to guide students through the analysis process. You will need to model the strategy aloud using Section I of the letter.
10. Once you’ve modeled Section I, have the students analyze Section II on their own (or you may choose to put them in pairs).
11. When students have completed their analyses, discuss their findings.
12. Ask students to complete the “wrap up” questions in the next section.

Wrap Up Questions

★ From your analysis, what other message is Travis trying to convey other than a call for reinforcements?
★ What does this letter tell us about the personality and character of William B. Travis?
★ How does this letter help us better understand the issues surrounding the Texas Revolution?
★ In your opinion, what point is Travis trying to make in addressing the letter to “... All Americans in the world”?
★ If Travis had given you this letter to review and critique before it was dispatched by courier, what, if any, changes would you recommend to him? How would your changes affect people differently from the original?
★ In your opinion, does this letter deserve to be ranked among the most important in Texas and American history? Why or why not?

Extension

Ask students to write a response to the Travis letter. Their response should include an explanation of the circumstances at Goliad and Gonzales and the challenges of providing reinforcements to the Alamo.
Commandancy of the Alamo
Bejar, Feby. 24th. 1836 —

To the People of Texas &
all Americans in the world —

Fellow citizens & compatriots —
I am besieged, by a thousand
or more of the Mexicans under
Santa Anna — I have sustained
a continual Bombardment &
cannonade for 24 hours & have
not lost a man — The enemy
has demanded a surrender at
discretion, otherwise, the garrison
are to be put to the sword, if
the fort is taken — I have answered
the demand with a cannon
shot, & our flag still waves
proudly from the walls — I
shall never surrender or retreat.
Then, I call on you in the
name of Liberty, of patriotism &
& everything dear to the American
character to come to our aid,
with all dispatch — The enemy is
receiving reinforcements daily &
will no doubt increase to three or
four thousand in four or five days.
If this call is neglected, I am deter-
mined to sustain myself as long as
possible & die like a soldier
who never forgets what is due to
his own honor & that of his
country — Victory or Death.

William Barret Travis.
Lt. Col. comdt

P. S. The Lord is on our side —
When the enemy appeared in sight
we had not three bushels of corn —
We have since found in deserted
houses 80 or 90 bushels and got into
the walls 20 or 30 head of Beeves —

Travis
Commandancy of the Alamo
Bejar, Feby. 24th. 1836 —

Section I
To the People of Texas & all Americans in the world —

Fellow citizens & compatriots —
I am besieged, by a thousand or more of the Mexicans under Santa Anna — I have sustained a continual Bombardment & cannonade for 24 hours & have not lost a man — The enemy has demanded a surrender at discretion, otherwise, the garrison are to be put to the sword, if the fort is taken — I have answered the demand with a cannon shot, & our flag still waves proudly from the walls — I shall never surrender or retreat.

Section II
Then, I call on you in the name of Liberty, of patriotism &
& everything dear to the American character to come to our aid, with all dispatch — The enemy is receiving reinforcements daily & will no doubt increase to three or four thousand in four or five days. If this call is neglected, I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible & die like a soldier who never forgets what is due to his own honor & that of his country — Victory or Death.

William Barret Travis.
Lt. Col. comdt

Section III
P. S. The Lord is on our side —
When the enemy appeared in sight we had not three bushels of corn — We have since found in deserted houses 80 or 90 bushels and got into the walls 20 or 30 head of Beeves —
DESCRIPTIVE

Describe the document
Explain the concept
State the unit
Combine for unique features and new vocabulary
Read, and as you read ask yourself, “what is this about?”
Indicate your responses in the appropriate box
Ring it all together
Examine findings

Adapted from the Dominican University School of Education DESCRIBE Primary Source Analysis Strategy.
Describe the document.
[Box 1] Include title, audience, date of letter, physical characteristics, etc.

Explain the event.
[Box 2] Siege of the Alamo

State the unit.
[Box 2] The Texas Revolution

Comb through the document for unique features and new vocabulary.
[Box 3] Use the margins for notes and underline vocabulary. Model skimming through the document, thinking aloud to demonstrate your thought process. As students follow along, you may want to stop every few minutes to encourage discussion and annotate the document accordingly. Using context clues, have students discuss possible definitions of vocabulary words and discuss margin notes to clarify meaning. Summarize the information.

Read and ask yourself, “What is this paragraph/section about?”
Read aloud the first section of the letter and model answering the question.

Indicate responses in the appropriate box.
[Box 4, Section A] Write your response.
[Box 4, Sections B & C] Students will complete on their own.

Bring it all together.
[Box 5] When students have finished processing the entire document, together develop a list of statements summarizing the main ideas and write them down.

Examine findings.
Review the entire graphic organizer with the class, asking questions and requesting further information.

Adapted from the Dominican University School of Education DESCRIBE Primary Source Analysis Strategy.
Part I.

1. For what purpose is Travis writing this letter?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

2. Why did Travis address his letter “To the People of Texas and all Americans in the world?”

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

3. What is the situation at the Alamo at this time?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

4. Using context clues, what do you think these words/terms mean?
   besieged:______________________________________________________________________________
   discretion:______________________________________________________________________________
   garrison:______________________________________________________________________________
   dispatch:______________________________________________________________________________

5. Summarize Travis’ general impression of his situation.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

6. List three topics Travis addresses in the letter.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

7. What three adjectives would you use to describe Travis? Explain.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

8. What one question would you like to ask William B. Travis?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Part II.

1. What quote from this letter do you find to be most memorable?
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________

2. What is your reason for choosing this quote?
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________

3. Make one prediction based on information from the letter.
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
Save Texas History offers the following TEKS-correlated lesson plans, incorporating primary source documents and maps from the Texas General Land Office Archives. Developed by Texas educators, each self-contained lesson plan contains goals, flexible activities and resources suitable for classroom and home school use.

- **Lesson 1**  The Great Military Map of Texas
- **Lesson 2**  Commemorative Maps of Texas
- **Lesson 3**  A Call to Arms
- **Lesson 4**  The Saga of Sam McCulloch
- **Lesson 5**  Pioneering Principles: Why Character Matters

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