Lesson Plan

This lesson was made possible through a generous grant from Humanities Texas

Travis Letter
Bexar County

Objectives

- 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.

Introduction:

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 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 Making sense of historical documents, especially those written in the early nineteenth century, is a challenge for any student regardless of learning style and ability.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.

Warm Up:

Ask students if they've ever read something that inspired or motivated them in some way. Call on volunteers to share and ask them how what they read 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 Ask them if they can recall any historical documents or speeches that have inspired people to respond in a certain way (Martin Luther King Jr.'s, "I Have A Dream" speech is one example).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.

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 displayed on 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 three 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.

Vocabulary

Character
a set of qualities that define a person.

TEKS:
7.1C, 7.3B, 7.3C, 7.21B, 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

Wrap Up Questions:

1. From your analysis, what other message is Travis trying to convey other than a call for reinforcements?

2. What does this letter tell us about the personality and character of William B. Travis?

3. How does this letter help us better understand the issues surrounding the Texas Revolution?

4. In your opinion, what point is Travis trying to make in addressing the letter to "... All Americans in the world"?

5. 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?

6. 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.

Historical Document

Letter: William Barrett Travis

Commandancy of the Alamo, Bejar, Feb. 24, 1836

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

TEACHER COPY

The Travis Letter

Commandancy of the Alamo, Bejar, Feb. 24, 1836

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

SECTION 1

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SECTION 2

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.

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SECTION 3

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

DESCRIBE

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

1 Title and description of document

2 Concept/Unit

3 Unique features

New vocabulary

4 Read – Ask a question – Answer

a.

b.

c.

5 Bring it all together

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Lesson

Travis Letter
DESCRIBE Primary Source Strategy

DESCRIBE

★ Primary Source Strategy ★

D escribe the document

E xplain the concept

S tate the unit

C omb for ***unique*** features and ***new*** vocabulary

R ead, and as you read ask yourself, "what is this about?"

I ndicate your responses in the appropriate box

B ring it all together

E xamine findings

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

Graphic Organization:

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.

Travis Letter
Document Analysis

Part 1:

1. What is Travis' purpose for 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.
1.
2.
3.

7. What three adjectives would you use to describe Travis based on what you have read? Explain.

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

Part 2:

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

2. Why is this quote meaningful to you?

3. Make one prediction based on information from the letter.