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DESCRIBE: An Instructional Approach to Support Students with Disabilities as They Engage with Primary Sources

Ben Freville, EdD *

Assistant Professor, School of Education, Dominican University

Colleen Reardon, PhD

Professor Emerita, School of Education, Dominican University

This article discusses the DESCRIBE strategy that is designed to increase the accessibility of text-based primary sources for students with disabilities and other students who struggle with reading comprehension, making connections with background knowledge, and analyzing and synthesizing content information. DESCRIBE supports students in reading text-based primary sources in order to understand their unique features, contexts, main ideas, supporting details, and text-specific vocabulary in ways that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and College, Career, and Civic Life Social Studies Standards (C3). The authors provide a description of the instructional steps of the strategy and a copy of the graphic organizer that is used when implementing the strategy. The article concludes with a description of a pilot study that supports the use of this strategy and points to the need for further research that includes a focus on student use of metacognitive skills.

Keywords: disciplinary literacy, instructional strategies, primary sources, reading informational text, students with disabilities

Given the increasing number of students with disabilities included in general education classrooms, it is important that these students can comprehend and analyze primary sources. While many teachers have a deep understanding of primary sources and their use in the social studies curriculum, using them with students with disabilities can prove challenging. In this article, the authors provide background information on primary sources, their value in the social studies curriculum, and the difficulties students with disabilities face when studying them. Implementation of the DESCRIBE strategy is presented as a way of aiding these students in reading and understanding primary sources. A pilot study about the effectiveness of the DESCRIBE strategy is discussed at the end of the article.

Primary Sources and Their Roles in the Social Studies Curriculum

Primary sources, the artifacts created by individuals living at a particular period of time, provide insight into a time in history in a way that secondary sources, when used as the sole source of information, cannot. These artifacts were created as individuals of a given time period went about their daily lives and provide the reader with a sense of how people lived and experienced life. They provide a window into people, issues and historical events and how they affected those who lived at that time (Library of Congress, n.d.; Morgan & Rasinski, 2012).

The increased availability of digitized primary sources through websites such as the Library of Congress and National Archives has led to greater integration of original documents, maps, photographs and other artifacts into middle and high school classrooms. This availability allows for expanded opportunities to enrich the social studies curriculum. Furthermore, research supports the integration of primary sources into the curriculum (Allen & Dutt-Doner, 2006; Cantu, 2003; Morgan & Rasinski, 2012; Ruffin & Cappel, 2009) and illustrates the learning benefits that students experience when primary sources are included in lessons (Brown & Dotson, 2007; Crew, 2008; Tally & Goldenberg, 2005). While the integration of primary sources has proven positive, students with disabilities may not completely experience these benefits because of the reading levels, vocabulary, visual processing, and background knowledge required for reading and analyzing primary sources (Ferretti, et al., 2001; Freville, 2009).

Realizing the Full Potential of Primary Sources

As students gain a deeper benefit from their study of primary sources, they begin to understand the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of these documents. When students engage with primary source documents, they examine multiple documents to look for patterns or connections among them, speculate about meaning, cite evidence as they make inferences, and corroborate what they know based on their prior knowledge or evidence from other documents. To engage with primary sources in this way, students need sufficient skills in reading, including the ability to grasp essential concepts, observe details, and access background knowledge. Teachers can use targeted instructional strategies to support students who need to build skills in these particular areas. Through the use of such strategies, students are better equipped to meaningfully engage in a study of primary sources in a more complex and nuanced way.

Primary Sources and Alignment with National Standards

Engaging in the study of primary sources simultaneously provides opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills as outlined in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the College, Career, and Civic Life Social Studies (C3) Standards. The Common Core standards place increased emphasis on disciplinary literacy which includes reading, analyzing, summarizing, determining central ideas and making logical inferences from informational texts. They focus on stating, verbally and in writing, evidence from texts, close reading of complex text and integration and analysis of content presented in diverse formats and media. They place a strong emphasis on vocabulary development. Students are expected to acquire and use both general academic and domain-specific words and phrases. They are expected to state and evaluate an argument and specific claims in a text and analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge and compare approaches the authors take (Common Core English Language Arts Standards, n.d.).

Similarly, the C3 Standards were developed to support a more rigorous social studies curriculum and to build students' proficiency in problem solving and critical thinking. They were designed to enhance students' abilities to participate as engaged citizens in a democratic society (National Council of Social Studies, 2013). With an emphasis on inquiry-based learning, deep and enduring understandings, and interdisciplinary learning, the C3 standards further serve to support alignment of programs with the common Core State Standards.

Challenges of Using Primary Sources and the Promise of Strategic Instruction

The study of text-based primary sources such as travel logs, diaries, pamphlets, speeches, and letters is not without problems, particularly for students with disabilities or other students who struggle with reading (Ferretti et al., 2001). The unfamiliar vocabulary of many primary sources creates a challenge for many of these students who often lack the breadth and depth of vocabulary that other students gain from more extensive reading and the use of independent word learning strategies (Bryant et al., 2003; Reardon 2009; Reardon & Freville, 2009). These students often lack proficiency in higher level thinking strategies such as paraphrasing and identifying the main idea and supporting details (Hock et al., 1999).

Students may experience difficulty due to the variety of text structures found in primary sources and other expository texts. Lack of clear organization and the inability to understand text structures be they descriptive, causal, comparative, or sequential, can interfere with reading for understanding (De La Paz & Mac Arthur, 2003; Gajria et al.,

2007). A limited ability to organize information and to recall important information, failure to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information, retain information or identify the main idea, all lead to a limited ability to read with meaning (Bulgren et al., 2007; Ciullo, 2015; Gersten & Okolo, 2007). Many students with disabilities have had limited experience engaging in reading of complex texts and engaging in text in the manner that the CCSS and the C3 standards articulate as expectations of students (Ferretti et al., 2001, Lamb, 2014). Struggling readers who have not learned to internalize metacognitive strategies, approach reading as a rote task with limited cognitive engagement. These students may not attend to key information or employ cognitive strategies effectively (Carr & Thompson, 1996).

Despite these learning characteristics, students with disabilities and others who struggle with reading can benefit from the study of primary sources. To do so, they need to be supported so that their learning is more effective and meaningful (Neumann, 2010). The use of instructional strategies provides a means through which primary sources can be more accessible to students who struggle due limited background knowledge, difficulty in activating background knowledge, limited reading and language skills, lack of attention to visual detail and the inability to see the relationship between details and the main idea (Ferretti et al., 2001). These students are capable of developing proficiency in engaging in complex tasks when provided strategies for doing so and when teachers communicate their expectation and belief that students can do this (De La Paz & MacArthur, 2003; Ferretti et al., 2001; Hock et al., 1999; Whitman & Kelleher, 2016).

Instructional Practices that Aid Students in Organizing and Understanding Information

Research has validated certain instructional practices that aid students, particularly students with disabilities, in organizing and understanding new information. One such set of practices is called *Content Enhancement Routines* (Lenz & Bulgren, 1995, Schumaker et al., 2001). These routines were developed by researchers at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (KU-CRL) and they were designed to aid students with disabilities in understanding critical content in middle and secondary classes. Content enhancement routines require teachers to think deeply about critical content that students need to learn. Teachers must deliver that content in a way that keeps students active in the learning process and review the content in a way that enhances students' retention of it (Deshler & Schumaker, 2006).

Content enhancement routines are teacher-led, instructional strategies that “help teachers carefully organize and present critical content

information in such a way that students identify, organize, comprehend, and recall it” (Deshler et al., 2001, p. 98). Each content enhancement routine is comprised of teaching behaviors that together target a particular instructional goal. Bulgren and Schumaker (2006) explain that the content enhancement routines are grounded in the following research-based teaching and learning principles.

- Actively involving students in the learning process
- Presenting abstract information in concrete forms
- Organizing information for students
- Tying new information to previously learned information
- Distinguishing important information from unimportant information
- Making relationships among pieces of information explicit
- Explicitly showing students how to learn specific types of content

Researchers contend that when attention is given to these principles, student learning increases. As a result, content enhancement routines include explicit techniques to address these principles.

Content enhancement routines are composed of three parts: 1) a teaching device, such as a graphic organizer; 2) a routine or a set of steps that guide students through the thinking processes which enable them to meaningfully access the content; and 3) procedures associated with strategic teaching, e.g. explicitly teaching the routine for completion of the device and actively involving students in the process (Bulgren & Lenz, 1996).

The DESCRIBE Strategy

DESCRIBE is an instructional strategy used by teachers to guide students through reading, analyzing, and understanding text-based primary sources. It was developed by Reardon and Freville (2006), higher education faculty who teach graduate level courses in special education and who have experience teaching students with disabilities at the elementary, middle and secondary levels. It was designed for students who struggle with reading, which may include students with specific learning disabilities, intellectual and cognitive disabilities, emotional and behavioral disabilities, and students on the autism spectrum. (Note: From this point forward, the term *students with disabilities* will be used to include any student with a disability who struggles with reading.) The strategy may also be beneficial for English Language Learners. DESCRIBE is designed to aid students in activating background knowledge, understanding key vocabulary, comprehending and analyzing text, and ultimately, determining the overall meaning of text-based primary sources.

When using the DESCRIBE strategy, the teacher guides students in reading and rereading a primary source document and analyzing elements of the document in order to understand the central ideas and key

supporting details. Through this engagement with the text and with one another, the teachers aids students at arriving at an understanding of the text as a whole and its relevance to the current unit of study.

DESCRIBE is a mnemonic device used to aid students in recalling each of the steps of the instructional strategy. Mnemonic strategies have been found to be highly effective for students with mild to moderate disabilities in a variety of subject areas (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010). The steps of the strategy are listed here.

Describe the document

Explain the concept

State the unit

Comb through the document for unique features and new vocabulary

Read and as you read, ask yourself, “What is this passage about?”

Indicate your response in the appropriate box

Bring it all together

Examine the completed graphic organizer

When preparing to conduct a class with the DESCRIBE strategy, the teacher should post a copy of the strategy steps in the front of the classroom so that they can call students’ attention to each strategy step. The teacher should also project a copy of the DESCRIBE graphic organizer on a document camera or interactive white board. The teacher then hands students a copy of a primary source and explains that the purpose of the activity is to help them analyze and understand it. The teacher asks students to read the primary source or it can be read aloud. After this first reading, the teacher begins the strategy steps. At the heart of implementing the strategy is student engagement. During the instructional process, the teacher asks probing questions to encourage students to think more deeply about the content of the document (Rosenshine, 2012). As students respond, the teacher should paraphrase their responses and ask clarifying questions to encourage students to deepen their thinking. As the teacher and students come to consensus about the content, the teacher fills in the projected graphic organizer and guide students to complete their own.

This strategy is best implemented when teachers complete the DESCRIBE graphic for the specific primary source their students will read, prior to engaging the students in their study of the primary source. The graphic the teacher completes serves as a guide as they support their students during the instructional process. It is not expected that the graphic organizer developed with the students will include the same wording, and in fact, it may include different ideas; however, when teachers develop the graphic on their own first, it helps ensure that

the teacher can anticipate any unexpected challenges that may occur as they engage their students in completing the graphic as part of the instructional process.

Each step of the instructional strategy is described in detail below. Additionally, a sample completed DESCRIBE graphic organizer based on the *Circular to the Abolitionists of Massachusetts (1838) by A.A. Phelps*, a primary source found on the Library of Congress website, is located at the end of this article. A copy of the original circular, a transcription of the circular, a completed graphic organizer, and a blank graphic organizer are also located in Appendix A. Additionally, a brief list of other primary sources addressing abolition that vary in length and complexity of language can be found in Appendix B.

Describe the Document.

After reading the primary source, the teacher asks students for a description of the primary source document. The teacher directs students to read the bibliographic information for the document. At a minimum, this will include the title and a one line description of the document. The teacher assists the students in paraphrasing the information and writes it in the *title and description of document* box (1) on the graphic organizer. The teacher directs students to write the information on their graphic organizers.

Explain the Concept and State the Unit

The teacher briefly explains the new concept being studied and writes it in the top section of the *concept/unit* box (2). The teacher asks students to share in a few words what they have been studying. The teacher elaborates on student responses as necessary to clarify the unit of study of which the new concept is a part. Then the teacher writes it in the bottom section of the same box (2). Students write the information on their graphic organizers. This step of the strategy helps activate background knowledge and make clear the relationship between the new concept and the ongoing unit of study.

Comb Through the Document for Unique Features and New Vocabulary

The teacher models *combing through* or skimming the document to identify unique features, such as the penmanship of a letter, the structure of a speech, or the arrangement of information on a pamphlet, and new vocabulary. A *think-aloud* should be used to demonstrate the thought process that the teacher uses to recognize unique features of the document and to identify new vocabulary. As the teacher models, they underline

vocabulary and make notes about unique features on the document. After the teacher has modeled the process for the first part of the document, the teacher can draw students into this process by asking them to pick up where the teacher left off. The teacher elicits responses from students and underlines and makes notes on the document. When finished, the teacher summarizes the information (margin notes and underlined vocabulary) and writes it on the graphic organizer; students copy the information onto their graphic organizers. Then the teacher discusses the new vocabulary with the students.

Read-Ask-Answer

This step is completed by paragraph; if the document is longer than three paragraphs, the teacher should divide the document into three equivalent sections. With the first section or paragraph of the document, the teacher models reading this text and asking aloud, “What is this passage about?” Using a think aloud, the teacher models how to arrive at a response to this question. The teacher then records the response in the first box under *read-ask-answer* on the graphic organizer (number 4, box 1). The teacher follows the same process with section or paragraph 2, this time actively engaging students in answering the question, “What is this passage about?” They pose additional prompts to clarify student responses. The information is recorded on the graphic organizer (number 4, box 2). The teacher and students do the same with section or paragraph 3.

Bring it All Together

The teacher then leads the students in a discussion about the main ideas of the document. Together, the teacher and students develop a list of statements summarizing the main ideas using information from the *unique features, new vocabulary, and read-ask a question-answer* boxes of the DESCRIBE graphic organizer. The statements are written in the *bring it all together* box (5).

Examine the Graphic Organizer

As the last step, the teacher reviews the completed DESCRIBE graphic organizer with students in an interactive way, asking them questions and requesting further explanation about the information written on the graphic organizer. The teacher should model how to ask a question based on information from the *bring it all together* box and solicit responses, then encourage students to pose their own questions for discussion.

See the table in Appendix C of this article for further elaboration on implementation of the strategy. The suggestions in the

table demonstrate additional ways to foster student engagement while implementing the strategy.

Pilot Study

Research Questions

A pilot study was conducted to respond to the following research questions: 1) How can primary sources be used effectively with students with disabilities so that they experience the benefits of primary sources? 2) Are instructional strategies specifically designed for use with primary sources beneficial to the learning of students with disabilities? 3) What are teachers' and students' satisfaction levels with the DESCRIBE strategy?

Participants and Setting

Three teachers with Professional Educator Licenses endorsed in Special Education participated in this pilot study. Two of the teachers held master's degrees in special education, and the third teacher had a bachelor's degree in special education and a master's degree in a related field. The three teachers taught in schools in an urban setting in a city in a Midwestern state in the United States. Two of the teachers taught in high schools and one taught in a middle school. One of the high school teachers taught social studies and the other taught social studies and American literature; both were in special education instructional settings. The middle school teacher taught language arts and math in a self-contained classroom, and social studies in a resource room to 7th and 8th grade students with disabilities. In total, the strategy was used with approximately 75 students.

Teacher Training

The researchers conducted two training sessions of approximately three hours each. In the first hour of the first training session, the researchers defined primary sources and showed examples of digitized primary sources from the Library of Congress website. They also presented research showing the benefits students experience when primary sources are integrated into the curriculum. In the second hour, researchers provided an overview of the project and an orientation to the Library of Congress website. They demonstrated various methods for searching the collections of digitized primary sources and engaged teachers in an activity so that they could practice using the various search methods. Researchers then aided teachers in searching for primary sources that could be integrated into upcoming units of study in their classes. In the third hour,

researchers and teachers discussed difficulties that students with disabilities might experience with primary sources.

The second training session focused on preparing teachers to use the instructional practices associated with strategic teaching (Bulgren & Schumaker, 2006; Rosenshine, 2012). In the first half of the session, researchers presented and reviewed general guidelines for strategic teaching listed below.

1. Prior to instruction, develop a complete graphic to use as a guide during instruction.
2. At the start of instruction, indicate to students that the use of the designated strategy will help them better understand and analyze the primary source.
3. When presenting the strategy, post a copy of the strategy steps nearby so that they can be referenced during instruction.
4. Project a blank copy of the strategy graphic organizer on a document camera or an interactive white board.
5. Provide each student a blank copy of the strategy graphic organizer to complete as the teacher guides them through the steps of the strategy.
6. Guide students through the strategy steps and the completion of the graphic organizer by asking probing questions to guide student thinking and engage them in this process. Point to each section of the graphic organizer to show students where to write key information.
7. After completing all steps of the strategy, using an interactive approach to review the completed graphic organizer with students by asking questions about the content of the graphic organizer.
8. Through this process, the teacher and students are creating knowledge together. While the teacher guides students through the process, active participation from students is key to the entire process.

Researchers presented the DESCRIBE strategy. They discussed the purpose and explained the strategy steps. Using the general guidelines listed above, researchers conducted a class simulation in which they modeled the DESCRIBE strategy.

At the end of the training sessions, teachers planned for integrating the DESCRIBE strategy into their curricula. Teachers chose primary sources from the Library of Congress website that would contribute to the outcomes of their current units of study. For example, one class was working on a unit about World War I. The teacher chose an article from the front page from *The Stars and Stripes* newspaper to show how the newspaper was used to strengthen the morale of the troops and to promote unity within the American forces. Another class was working on a unit about the travels of migrant farm workers in the United States. The teacher chose a letter written by Cesar Chavez that described the life and

experiences of farm workers.

After each implementation, teachers completed a feedback form about the use of the DESCRIBE strategy. The form included a series of questions with a Likert scale and three open-ended questions. Additionally, researchers observed teachers implementing the strategy in their classroom settings. The purpose of these visits was to assess the extent to which each teacher implemented the general guidelines for strategic teaching and the strategy with fidelity. Researchers also interviewed each teacher to gauge teacher and student satisfaction with the strategy. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. Researchers reviewed data for patterns and themes in the three participants' responses. In addition, researchers considered questions that arose that would suggest the need for future research.

Results

Researchers noticed consistent responses when reviewing the data collected from the feedback form, observations, and interviews. First, each teacher believed that incorporating the DESCRIBE strategy into their teaching beyond the time frame of this pilot study would be beneficial to them and to their students. In a question on the feedback form about the extent to which the DESCRIBE strategy helped students to develop an understanding of text-based primary sources, each teacher responded *to a large degree* after each implementation. Teachers' perceptions of student responses also revealed positive student responses to the strategy. More specifically, teachers were asked, *To what extent did students respond favorably to the strategy?* Two teachers responded *to a large degree* to this question, and one responded *to a moderate degree*. Analysis of teacher responses also seemed to indicate that as the teachers became more comfortable implementing the strategy, students responded more favorably to it. This was confirmed by the researchers' observations. They also noted that in all three classroom settings, students exhibited a high level of engagement in the instructional process when the strategy was used.

Teacher responses to the three open-ended questions after each implementation provided additional data. They were asked about the logical order of the steps, whether or not the steps were easy to follow, and the extent to which they were able to use the steps as described in the materials provided. Two of the three teachers' responses to these questions were *to a large degree*. One teacher responded *to a moderate degree* and provided constructive suggestions for revising the strategy steps and the design of the graphic organizer. In general, the teacher suggested providing more space for writing responses. The data gathered in the interviews following observations further confirmed teachers' satisfaction with the steps of the DESCRIBE strategy.

The researchers' observations provided some important findings. The guidelines for strategic teaching were used as a checklist during the observations. The data gathered from the checklist indicates that the guidelines were implemented with fidelity with a couple of exceptions. One guideline directs teachers to post the strategy steps so that they can be referred to during instruction. This guideline is important because it allows students to monitor their use of the strategy, an important metacognitive skill. Two of the teachers did not post copies of the strategy steps. They had copies of the steps on a nearby table for them to see; however, the steps were not posted for students. In future research, this guideline will be explained more fully in the teacher training sessions.

Another guideline states that after completing the DESCRIBE steps and graphic organizer, teachers should review the graphic organizer by asking students questions about the information on the graphic organizer. None of the teachers implemented this guideline. In two instances, classes ended abruptly when the class change bell rang. The two teachers asked their students to bring the materials with them to class the next day. The third teacher completed the activity after the *Bring it all together* step of the strategy and did not implement the *Examine the graphic organizer* step. This step of the process engages students in summarizing and evaluating what they have learned, an important metacognitive skill that is central to learning. It also allows teachers to check students' understanding of the primary source. In other words, without implementing this final step, students and teachers cannot assess the effectiveness of the process. For this reason, researchers will emphasize this guideline in future teacher training sessions.

Discussion

The purpose of this pilot study was to address three questions: 1) How can primary sources be used effectively with students with disabilities so that they experience the benefits of them? 2) Are instructional strategies specifically designed for use with primary sources beneficial to the learning of students with disabilities? 3) What are teachers' and students' satisfaction levels with the DESCRIBE strategy? The data discussed above provide evidence that the DESCRIBE strategy may indeed have a positive impact on student learning. The data also indicate that teachers and students have a positive attitude toward using the DESCRIBE strategy. The researchers will use the findings of this pilot study to make revisions to the DESCRIBE strategy and the teacher training sessions. More importantly, this study will become a springboard for future studies with a larger sample of teachers and students about the impact of the DESCRIBE strategy and other instructional strategies that support the learning of students with disabilities when they use primary sources.

Conclusion

The integration of primary sources in the social studies curriculum enables students to gain a deeper knowledge of people, issues, and historical events, than can be found through the use of only secondary sources. Due to difficulties in various areas of reading, students with disabilities and others who struggle with reading may not be able to fully benefit from the study of primary sources without additional support. The DESCRIBE strategy is one which enables students with disabilities to access primary sources through development of vocabulary, background knowledge, identification of the main idea and supporting details and summarization. The strategy provides these foundational skills that enable these students to engage in study of these primary source documents in more depth when implemented with fidelity.

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Appendix

DESCRIBE Strategy Sample Materials

C I R C U L A R .

ABOLITIONISTS OF MASSACHUSETTS—

Twenty thousand persons have sent memorials to the State Legislature, asking that body to protest, in the name of the people, against the unconstitutional and despotic resolution, adopted by the House of Representatives of the United States, on the 21st of December last. This is well, but well needs to be made better, even on this topic. Farther, a large proportion, full three fourths of these petitioners, it is believed, are immediate abolitionists. Upon this estimate, then, *fifteen thousand* persons, at least, should, before this, have sent in their petitions, asking the Legislature to declare (1) that Congress has Constitutional power to abolish slavery and the slave trade, in the District of Columbia and the Territories, and the slave trade between the States; and (2) that this power should be immediately exercised. Again, there are, in this State, at least 200 Anti-Slavery Societies formed on the principles of immediate emancipation. At a moderate estimate, these will average 100 members each. But few, very few of them are juvenile societies, and of the others, but a small portion of their members are minors. Besides these, there is a multitude of abolitionists in the State, who are not members of any society. So that, upon the most moderate calculation, there are, in this State, at least 20,000 adults, who are immediate abolitionists, and therefore, upon this estimate, instead of fifteen thousand petitioners to the State Legislature, on the above subjects, there ought to have been, before this, at least **TWENTY-THOUSAND!**—and if there had been, who does not know that the Legislature would at once speak the voice of immediatism on each and all of the topics named? But, alas! what are the facts? Why, that on the first topic, 20,000 have petitioned, and on the latter, only 6,400! Yes, humiliating as is the fact, of *twenty thousand adult abolitionists in the State of Massachusetts, not seven thousand have yet even ASKED their legislature to do what it can, for the overthrow of that system of abominations, which is professedly the abhorrence of their souls!* Friends of the slave, is this right?—Is this abolitionism!—Is this 'remembering them that are in bonds, as bound with them?' Are you to be content with this? God forbid.

What then is to be done? We send out this circular to tell you. Last year the legislature passed the resolution, quoted in the memorial on the next page. In that resolution, the right of Congress to abolish slavery in the District, is admitted; and also, that nothing but 'the public good' should restrain its exercise. What we want this session is, that the legislature shall take another step, and say that justice, humanity, the honor of the nation, and 'the public good,' so far from restraining, require, not only the exercise, but the immediate exercise of this right, in the abolition of slavery and the slave trade both, in that District. To this end, we must make the District our focal point of action. Besides, with 20,000 petitioners against the resolution of Dec. 21st, and only 6,400 against slavery, &c. in the District, what is the influence on the committee of the legislature? Obviously this—that while multitudes are ready to stand for the right of petition, the abolitionists are but a handful. With this state of things, then, and with a committee less favorable to the prayer of the petitioners than that of last year, the prospect now is, that the legisla-

ture will go but little, if it does at all, in advance of last year. The position of our cause is, therefore, most critical. Hence this special circular. Let every person then, who receives it, attend forthwith to the following things:

1. Call at once, a meeting of the officers or members of the Anti-Slavery Society in your place, or if there be no society, a meeting of several friends of the cause, read this circular to them, and adopt measures for the prompt and thorough circulation of the annexed memorial, in every school district in town.
2. Let adults only sign the memorial.
3. Let men and women sign separate memorials.

4. When the circulation is completed, let the signatures of all the men in each town, be united in one memorial, and the signatures of the women in another.
5. Fold each memorial, and write on the back of it, in a plain hand, the name of the first petitioner, the number of petitioners, and the place—thus—Petition of A. B. and — others, ————, for a legislative declaration, &c. that Congress has the right, and ought immediately, to abolish slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia.

6. Let the memorials be all circulated and sent to the legislature, within **THREE weeks, at farthest**,—from this time—sooner if possible. It is important the petitions come in before the committee make up their report, which will be in about this time.
7. It is no objection to persons signing this memorial, that they have signed the former one, as this differs somewhat from that, and is limited to the District.

8. The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States says—'We, the people of the U. States in order to establish justice, * * * promote the general welfare, and secure the blessing of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution,' &c. 'The Declaration of American Independence, says—'That to secure these rights [those of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'] governments are instituted among men, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government,' &c. The quotations in the memorial refer to these: and yet the legislators of Massachusetts gravely suppose that 'the public good,' or 'the general welfare' forbids the 'establishment of justice' and the giving of 'liberty,' by Congress, to one sixth of the people living upon territory under its 'exclusive legislation'!

Our legislators need light. Twenty thousand petitioners will give it. They will make it day-light again, and operate like magic on 'the public good'!

Friends of the slave, the work is yours—will you do it? Rather let me say, what abolitionist is there that will not do it, and do it now? Oh! friends! how would the heart of the slave leap for joy, and that of his oppressor quake with fear, to see us, by our petitions, marching up to our legislative halls, in a solid phalanx of **TWENTY THOUSAND!** Do your duty, one and all, and it can be done.

A. A. PHELPS,
For the Board of Managers of the Mass. A. S. Society.
Boston, Feb. 12, 1838.

Figure A1. Image of Circular written by A.A. Phelps to the Abolitionists of Boston, Massachusetts in 1838 CIRCULAR. Abolitionists of Massachusetts.

Transcription

CIRCULAR. Abolitionists of Massachusetts —

Twenty thousand persons have sent memorials to the State Legislature, asking that body to protest, in the name of the people, against the unconstitutional and despotic resolution, adopted by the House of Representatives of the United States, on the 21st of December last. This is well, but well needs to be made better, even on this topic. Farther, a large proportion, full three fourths of these petitioners, it is believed, are immediate abolitionists. Upon this estimate, then, fifteen thousand persons, at least, should, before this, have sent in their petitions, asking the Legislature to declare (1) that Congress has Constitutional power to abolish slavery and the slave trade, in the District of Columbia and the Territories, and the slave trade between the States; and (2) that this power should be immediately exercised. Again, there are, in this State, at least 200 Anti-Slavery Societies formed on the principles of immediate emancipation. At a moderate estimate, these will average 100 members each. But few, very few of them are juvenile societies, and of the others, but a small portion of their members are minors. Besides these, there is a multitude of abolitionists in the State, who are not members of any society. So that, upon the most moderate calculation, there are, in this State, at least 20,000 adults, who are immediate abolitionists, and therefore, upon this estimate, instead of fifteen thousand petitioners to the State Legislature, on the above subjects, there ought to have been, before this, at least. TWENTY-THOUSAND;—and if there had been, who does not know that the Legislature would at once speak the voice of immediatism on each and all of the topics named? But, alas! what are the facts? Why, that on the first topic, 20,000 have petitioned, and on the latter, only 6,400! Yes, humiliating as is the fact, of twenty thousand adult abolitionists in the State of Massachusetts, not seven thousand have yet even ASKED their legislature to do what it can, for the overthrow of that system of abominations, which is professedly the abhorrence of their souls! Friends of the slave, is this right?—Is this abolitionism?— Is this ‘remembering them that are in bonds, as bound with them?’ Are you to be content with this? God forbid.

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A. A. PHELPS,

For the Board of Managers of the Mass. A. S. Society.

Boston, Feb. 12, 1838.

(Phelps, A.A., 1838)

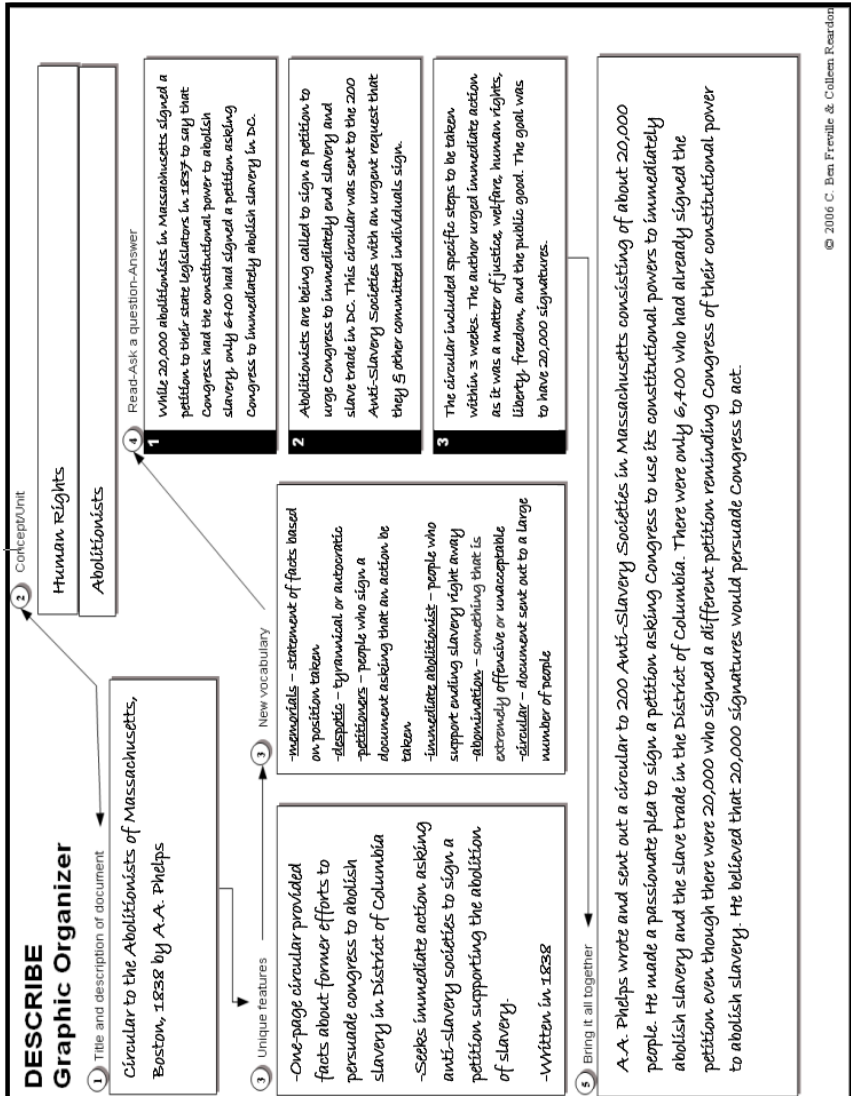


Figure A2. Completed DESCRIBE graphic organizer for the Circular written by A.A. Phelps to the Abolitionists of Boston, Massachusetts in 1838.

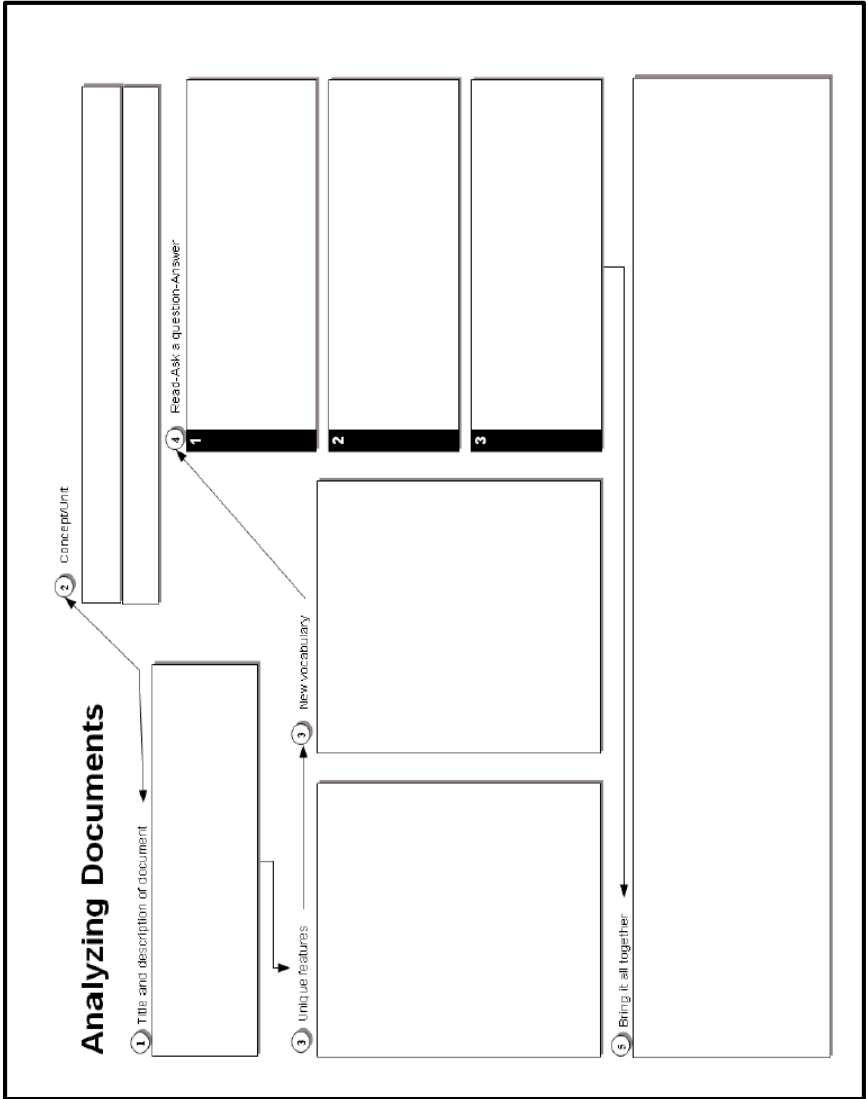


Figure A3. DESCRIBE graphic organizer.

Appendix B

Differentiation and the DESCRIBE Strategy

For some students, a specific primary source may be beyond what a given student can successfully engage with even when the DESCRIBE Strategy is followed. In these situations. The teacher may differentiate by having some students read a different primary source. This differentiation can benefit the entire class as it would bring ideas and information from several sources that could be discussed together in a later class. It is important to realize that if a different passage is chosen for some students, the too would need to be engaged in a teacher-led use of the DESCRIBE strategy.

Alternatively, the teacher would choose a primary source that all students could successfully read and gain meaning.

These are samples of digital primary sources from the Library of Congress, *Three Centuries of Broadides and Other Printed Ephemera*, that could be chosen as an addition to or in place of the one used as the sample in this article. They are shorter, hence the reading demand is not as intense.

Abington *Anti-Slavery Fair*. (1857) *Anti-slavery fair! The Abington anti-slavery fair will commence on Monday evening, Nov. 9th, at Union Hall, North Abington ... Abington, Nov. 6, . Abington. Standard Press, Vaughan's Building, Centre Avenue. Abington.* [Pdf] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.06203500/>.

New England Anti-Slavery Convention. (1859) *Anti-slavery hymns for the New England anti-slavery convention, Wednesday and Thursday, May 25th and 26th.* [Pdf] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.06402300/>.

Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. (1857) *Hymns and songs for the festival in Faneuil Hall, in commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Massachusetts anti-slavery society, Friday evening, January 2, . Printer & Sawyer, Printers, 19 Water Street.* Boston. [Pdf] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.06202800/>.

The next two primary sources are from the National Archives

Petition from Citizens of New York Asking that Slavery and the Slave-trade may be Expressly Prohibited by Act of Congress in all the Territories of the United States; 3/25/1851; Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, Record Group 233.

[Online Version, <https://docsteach.org/documents/document/petition-from-citizens-of-new-york-asking-that-slavery-and-the-slavetrade-may-be-expressly-prohibited-by-act-of-congress-in-all-the-territories-of-the-united-states>]

Draft of Senate Joint Resolution 16 Submitting the 13th Amendment to the States; 1864; (SEN 38A-B2); Bills and Resolutions Originating in the Senate, 1789 - 2002; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. [Online Version, <https://docsteach.org/documents/document/senate-thirteenth-amendment>]

Appendix C

Elaboration on Implementation of DESCRIBE Strategy Step

Steps	Teacher Questions or Prompts	Student Action/Response
<p>Describe the Document</p>	<p>Teacher asks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is the title of this document? Ask someone to read it aloud. When was it written?</i> • <i>How could you describe this document in just a few words?</i> • <i>Work with your shoulder partner to develop a short description.</i> <p>The teacher can solicit ideas and guide the students in a single statement based on the students' ideas.</p> <p>Teacher writes the title, date and one-sentence description on the graphic that is projected.</p>	<p>Students look for title and date of the document.</p> <p>Working in pairs, students develop a short description of the document.</p> <p>Students participate in process of identifying a single description.</p> <p>Students copy the document title, date and one-line description.</p>
<p>Explain the Concept</p> <p>and</p> <p>State the Unit</p>	<p>Teacher asks students for volunteers to share in a few words, what they have been studying in their social studies class in recent weeks.</p> <p>Provide some time for students to think and then share information in pairs. Then have students share with the class.</p> <p>Teacher acknowledges student responses, provides clarifications, and further prompts, if the students are not able to give a full response.</p> <p>The teacher will then tell the students the name of the concept they will be studying in more depth today and writes the name of the unit and concept on the graphic organizer.</p>	<p>Students will provide information about what they have been studying in their social studies class, using a few minutes to think to themselves, share thoughts with a classmate and then participate in full class sharing.</p> <p>Write the name of the unit and the concept on the graphic organizer</p>

<p>Comb Through the Document to Find Unique Features and New Vocabulary</p>	<p>Teacher introduces this part of the strategy by saying, <i>When we read documents that may have been written many years ago, we want to look at what is unique about them. This will help us understand them better. So, let's skim through this document and circle what you think is unique. Here are some things to look for: the way the document is written (by hand, in a letter, the structure of a speech, and the arrangement of information in a pamphlet or announcement) any accompanying illustrations and the style of language used.</i></p> <p>The teacher conducts a “think-aloud” as a way of modeling for students how they are looking for unique features and then invites the students to identify other unique features.</p> <p>Teacher may need to provide the following reminder: <i>When we skim, our eyes move quickly across each line, but we do not read every word.</i></p> <p>Teacher tells students their next step saying, <i>Let's skim the document again, and this time underline any words you do not know.</i></p> <p>Again, the teacher does a think-aloud as they choose new vocabulary for the first part of the document and underlines the words. Then they invite students to continue to underline vocabulary that is new to them throughout the remainder of the document.</p> <p>The teacher writes the vocabulary words they identify on the graphic and then asks student to share words they did not know. As a class, they decide which vocabulary words to add to the</p>	<p>Students share their ideas by identifying unique features they see and by underlining vocabulary.</p> <p>They may look up definitions of vocabulary in dictionaries known for providing “student-friendly definitions.”</p> <p>Students copy unique features and vocabulary in the boxes provided on the graphic organizer.</p>
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	<p>list of words the teacher had started. (Note that some of the words the students identify may not be central to understanding the document but could be briefly explained during the reading of the document).</p> <p>The teacher then defines the words on the graphic in student-friendly language and/or has the students look at an online dictionary with student friendly definitions.</p>	
<p>Read-Ask-Answer</p> <p>and</p> <p>Indicate Your Response in the Appropriate Box</p>	<p>The teacher asks this question three different times, once for each paragraph or section of the document.</p> <p>The teacher reads the first paragraph or section and models using a think-aloud for completing the response to the first box.</p> <p>The teacher and students then read the second part of the document and answer the question and then the third. This is done with the teacher guiding the students.</p> <p>One student may read aloud; they may read together aloud, or the teacher may provide a recording of each paragraph.</p> <p>NOTE: It may be necessary to review with students how to find the main idea and details so they can respond to the question: What is this passage about?</p> <p>For example, main ideas are usually found at the beginning or end of a paragraph, may be a word that is repeated several times or is an idea the author describes as “the most important thing...”</p>	<p>Students listen to the reading of the first paragraph and the teacher’s “think aloud.”</p> <p>The students participate in reading the second part of the document and engage in determining what this passage is about.</p> <p>They then write the passage that has been generated by the class and teacher and write it on the graphic organizer.</p> <p>The same process is followed by the final passage of the document.</p>

	<p>Details tell more about the main idea. It may be an example or detail.</p> <p>Recognize that students who struggle with this section of the strategy will develop their ability to respond to the question “What is this passage about?” with ongoing support that can then be faded.</p>	
Bring it All Together	<p>The teacher leads the students in developing a summary of the document. They would say, <i>Let’s look at the information in each of the boxes. Now, how can we bring all of this information together in about 4 sentences?</i></p> <p>The teacher may ask the students, <i>What is one idea that you think is important that we include? Can someone add another or add to what our first student has said?</i> The teacher would provide further prompts or questions and keep the discussion focused on bringing their ideas together.</p>	
Examine the Completed Graphic Organizer	<p>The teacher and students review once more what they have written in the “bring it all together” section of the graphic organizer. It is now time for the teacher and the students to generate questions that the teacher and students can then answer.</p> <p>The teacher models how to ask a question and might say, <i>I will read our ‘bring it together section’ once more and you read along with me. A question I would raise is “How did...?” or “Why was it important?” or “Whose idea was this?” or “Who was going to make the decision?” or “What do you think will happen?” or</i></p>	

	<p><i>What in our “bring it together response makes you think that...?”</i></p> <p>Prompt students to ask questions they develop providing support as needed so that students can generate questions.</p>	
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Appendix C. Further elaboration on implementation of the DESCRIBE strategy to foster student engagement.



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