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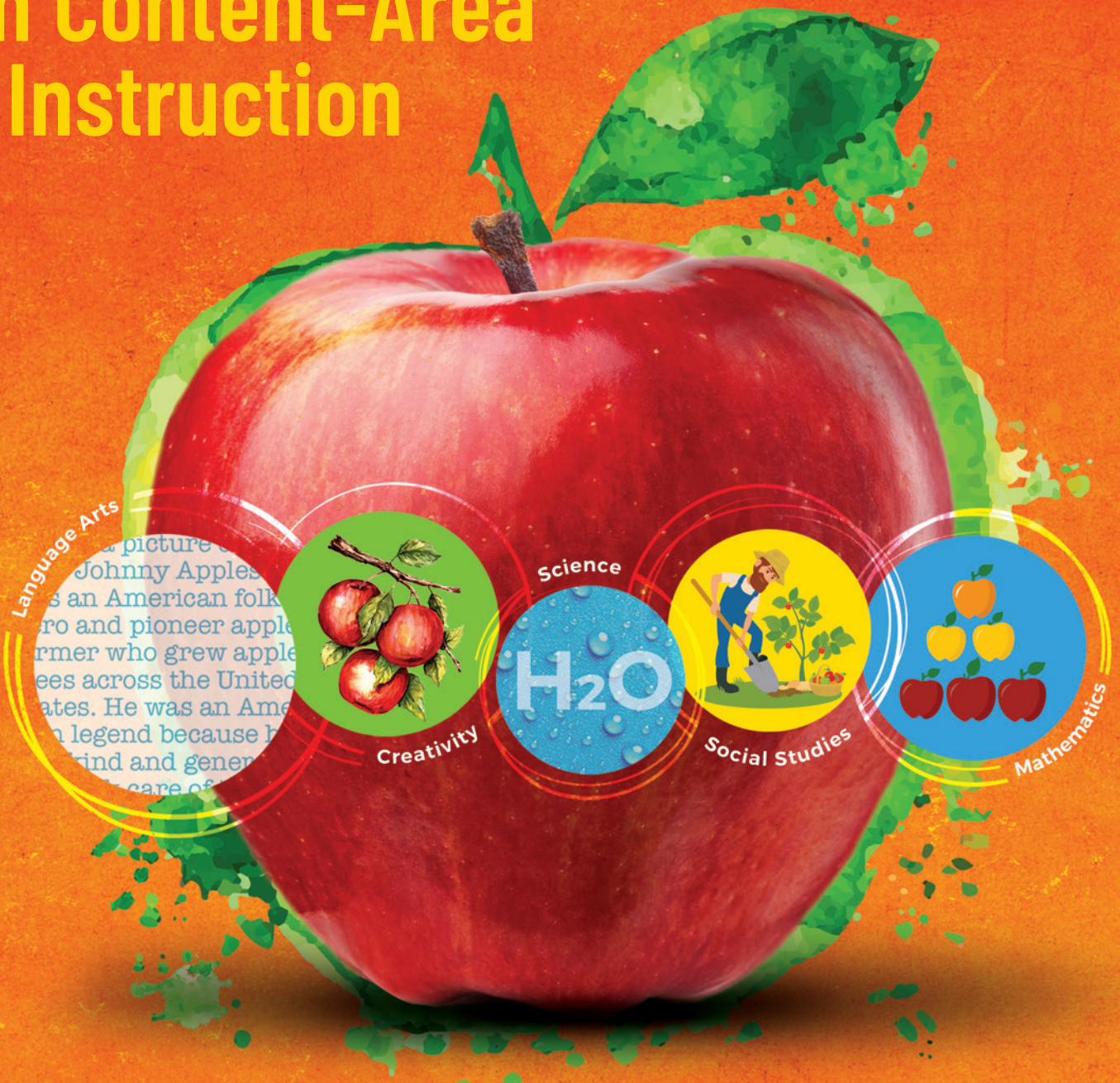
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# VISUAL LITERACY

## in Content-Area Instruction



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Foreword by Diane Lapp

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# Teaching Visual Texts

Every day, we are faced with thousands of images as we navigate our lives out of school. We are bombarded with a high volume of images, but that does not imply we know how to make sense of the visual texts that come our way. Many of us can navigate a map, follow steps in a diagram, or comprehend information on a billboard. In addition, digital texts almost always include visuals, and many of our students are masters at visual-based social media, including locating and creating memes to express emotion and information in efficient ways. But most of us interact passively with the powerfully visual messages, without focused attention. In a world where students' interactions with visual texts continue to grow, they will need new skills and strategies to bring to experiences (Serafini 2012).

Communication has shifted from reading words on a page to navigating a wide range of text sources in a world that is overwhelmingly visual in nature. Now, being literate must include the ability to analyze and create through visual communication. Messages are perceived to be incomplete without visuals, and therefore, we must expand our definitions of literacy and what it means to be literate. Literacy learning is no longer limited to reading, writing, listening, and speaking; we must include visual communication.

Literacy researchers have long acknowledged the role of visuals in the language arts. The *Standards for the Language Arts*, jointly published by the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English in 1996, refer to

## Visual Communication



Reading



Writing



Viewing



Responding

the language arts as reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing. However, little attention has been paid to the roles of viewing and visually representing ideas as literacy. More recently, the College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standards added support for enlarging our definitions of literacy to include visual texts. The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects require students to create and analyze an “extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new” (NGACBP and CCSSO 2010, 4). The CCR Standards also require additional focus on information texts within the disciplines that regularly utilize visual texts to communicate complex content understanding. Thus, “inherent in the Common Core State Standards is the push to help students develop the ability to interpret and communicate information visually” (Castek and Beach 2013, 556). In the new Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills adopted for the 2019 school year, students are expected to “respond to an increasingly challenging variety of sources that are read, heard, or viewed” (SBOE 2019, §110.4[b][7]) They can respond using writing, graphic organizers, illustrations, or other products. Visual texts have long been evident in our content-area textbooks, published rich with maps, graphs, charts, photographs, and other visual resources. This book will help teachers make sense of those assets for instruction.

## TERMS TO KNOW

### multimodal

texts that use multiple modes or communication systems to express ideas and information

Each mode expresses meanings in different ways. In this text, we focus on textual modes (including written language) and visual modes (such as drawings and photography), both on how we use them to communicate and on the ways they work together in texts.

“[When using visual text,] students who are not always as successful with text seemed to feel on equal ground with their more academically successful peers because they can all see, so no one had the upper hand.”—**Roper, classroom teacher**

The expectation to include more visuals in the classroom has implications for our instruction. It should shift the way we think about literacy and the language arts, just as text has shifted from words on a flat surface to multidimensional and multimodal messages.

We highlight two different and important approaches to using images in your instructional practice. We provide strategies for viewing images (reading) to access and understand curriculum. We also offer ways for students to visually represent (illustrate) ideas that communicate and demonstrate understanding. Within these two approaches, we share instructional ideas where the visual texts become scaffolds for more traditional literacy goals in reading and writing.

This book is written for teachers who are ready to capitalize on the visual nature of our students’ worlds outside of school to enhance and transform their instruction. But first, let’s be clear about what we mean when we talk about visual texts.

# What Are Visual Texts?

Throughout this book, the term *visual texts* is used to represent the general products viewed and created as part of the strategies. Visual texts are expressions that use pictorial features to communicate understanding and make meaning. While many terms more specifically describe individual types of images, this broad term represents all the pictorials used for instruction, including drawings, photographs, illustrations, icons, graphic organizers, painting, infographics, maps, charts, and memes to name but a few. Referring to visuals as *texts* is also important for educators to understand these resources as valued instructional materials.

Each of these visual texts comes with its own purposes and benefits, a few of which are illustrated in the chart. This wide range of examples represents both traditional and more modern modes of pictorial communication. Visual texts are found in sanctioned textbooks, Creative Commons, museum stores, and archive websites as well as many other sources. Teachers need to choose appropriate texts to meet instructional goals. Section 2 discusses considerations for choosing visual texts and provides support for teachers making decisions about their instructional practice.

## TERMS TO KNOW

### visual texts

an umbrella term for all pictorials used in instruction

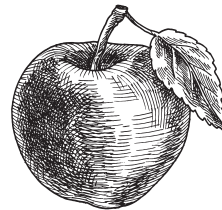
## Representations of Visual Texts



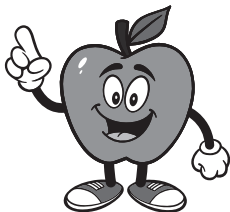
Photo



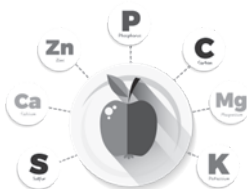
Painting



Drawing



Cartoon



Chart



Emoji



Advertisement

## Benefits to Visual-Based Instruction

The research literature and teachers' voices both validate the many benefits to using visual-based strategies to support literacy across the curriculum. These advantages help “even the playing field” (Holloway 2012, 10) for the students in classrooms who may be new to English or face other academic challenges. The use of visual-based literacy strategies has many assets, including the following:

- **multiple ways to access curriculum**
- **expanding thinking**
- **metacognitive awareness**
- **academic vocabulary development**
- **accountable talk**
- **student engagement**
- **risk taking**

Taking all these advantages together, visual-based strategies can serve as equitable instructional practice.

### Multiple Ways to Access the Curriculum

As discussed, representation of meaning occurs through multiple communication modes. Indeed, “different modes have different potential for expressing meaning” (Albers 2006, 77). When choosing instructional methods for literacy, teachers must consider what the content dictates as well as students' needs. Different communication modes are best suited to express different content understandings, and some better serve varying student learning styles.

In some cases, visuals are simply more effective at conveying meaning. For example, an author may write several paragraphs describing family relationships. The text in Figure 1.1 accurately describes the relationships. However, it is difficult to keep track of the connections because there are many characters mentioned, and it becomes confusing. The same information (plus expanded relationships) can be much more clearly and effectively communicated through a family tree as in Figure 1.2. In this case, visuals are the preferred literacy method for communicating ideas.

In addition, students need multiple routes toward understanding. Sound instructional practice provides a variety of approaches. Some students will best engage with information through the written word. Others will benefit from oral instruction, and still others will thrive using visual communication tools. Since visual learners focus best when they can see information, why not capitalize on their preferred learning style? Here, a student describes how she felt while working with visual texts in the classroom.

“The visual thinking helped me the most because first you look at the picture and wonder what’s going to happen. It’s curiosity.”—**student using visual texts**

My grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and second cousins on my mother's side are all related to the Romanov family. My mother is a descendant of Ivan VI. He lived in Russia a long time ago. Ivan came from a long line of rulers. He was the Emperor of Russia in the 18th century. My mother's family came to the U.S. from Russia, which means that I am Russian too.

Figure 1.1 example of descriptive writing

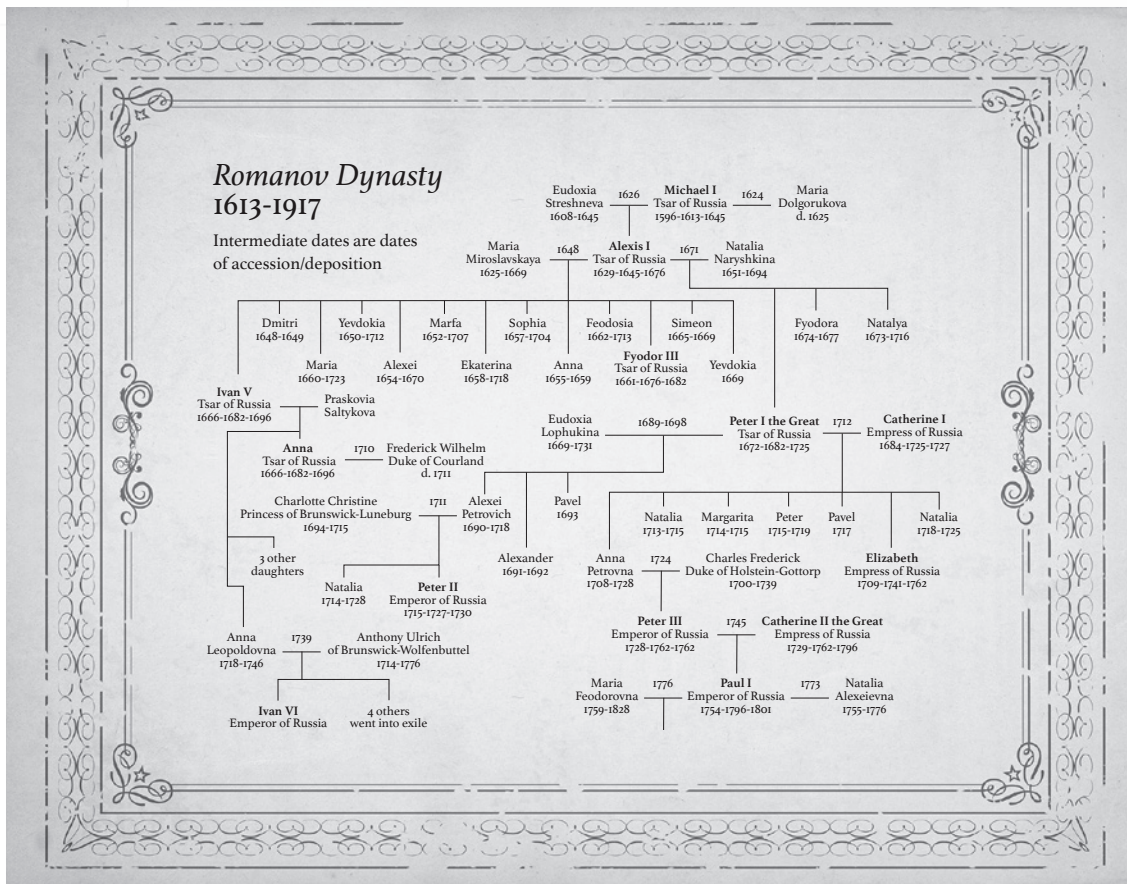


Figure 1.2 example of a family tree





### Overview:

Character Clusters are built upon the long-used approaches of semantic webs and concept maps, which visually represent relationships and connections as knowledge is collectively constructed. Students use expressive vocabulary to list qualities and attributes of the character found only in the visual text. The strategy requires students to identify the specific pictorial elements that justify their claims about the character. Either teachers or students may transcribe students' ideas.

### Purpose:

Specifically, this strategy provides a way for students to organize character traits and other relevant information drawn from a close reading of a visual text. Students identify and use descriptive vocabulary as they analyze key characters in fiction or nonfiction texts. A Character Cluster is an efficient prereading strategy for introducing a specific picture book, read-aloud novel, or character study. A complex image of the character is centered on a blank page.

### Essential Question:

What evidence can you find in the visual text that will help you describe and understand this character?

### Quick Ideas by Grade Level:

**Kindergarten:** Students replicate facial expressions or gestures of the character depicted in the cluster. They then use oral language sentence frames, such as the following:

“Look at me! I am \_\_\_\_\_.”

“You can tell I am \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.”

**Grade 1:** After viewing additional images (and reading or listening to text pages), students return to the Character Cluster to check accuracy of the traits listed.

**Grade 2:** Students create three categories on the Character Cluster: what the character says, what the character does, and what the character thinks.

**Grade 3:** Multiple images of the same character from different parts of the written text can be used to track character changes over time.

**All grades:** Students create Character Clusters of themselves (see image). This is great as a prewrite or for back-to-school night where parents have to guess which set identifies their child.





# Learning About Fictional Characters

## Objectives

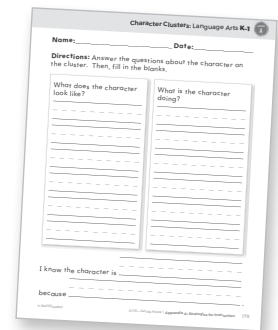
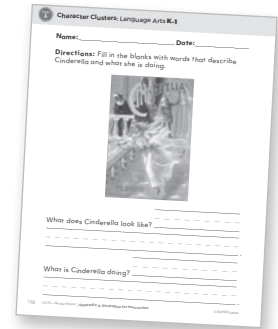
I can read to figure out what the visual text says about a character. I can give proof to support my claims about the character.

## Materials

Gather images from picture books, novels, electronic sources, or other related and complex images. Characters depicted in settings add an additional layer of information. Student drawings may also be used for visual analysis. This lesson example explores an image of Cinderella. The image and Character Clusters Activity Sheets are located on pages 178–179 in Appendix A and in the Digital Resources.

## Time

approximately 20–30 minutes



## I DO

1. Display the complex Cinderella image so that all students can see it clearly. Use an “I stance” (page 57) when modeling. Students do not yet know the character is Cinderella.
2. Say, “From looking at this image, I think the character is worried.” Write *worried* on the poster outside the image boundary. It is important for students to see the image as well as the words transcribed by the teacher.
3. Provide evidence to support this claim. Point to the character’s face. “I think she is worried because of the expression on her face.
4. This is what I look like when I am worried. Does it look like the character’s face?” List two to three more key traits obtained from the visual text around the image using descriptive language in callouts.

4. Use the background or setting of the image to provide additional clues toward understanding the character. “I see she is on stairs. The way she is going down the stairs looks like she is in a hurry.” Make sure to point out the visual evidence to support each claim.

# Character Clusters

## Language Arts K-1 (cont.)



SECTION  
03

### WE DO

1. After several character traits are modeled, have students follow the model and contribute to the discussion. Be sure to elicit appropriate descriptive vocabulary.
2. “I think she is a princess because she is wearing a crown or a tiara.” Elicit additional evidence to support claims when available. “Is there anything else that makes you think she is a princess?”
3. Be sure students are using descriptive vocabulary to identify traits. If needed, ask for paraphrases or synonyms. “Is there another way we can say that?”
4. Direct students to write key words to remember their descriptions. For example, “Write *hurrying* here on the bottom near her feet.”
5. Students may record their ideas on their own Character Cluster Activity Sheet.

### YOU DO TOGETHER

1. Place students in pairs, rereading the visual text to provide additional evidence to support a claim. “Read this picture again, and look closely for any details that may help us understand why she is rushing or in a hurry.”
2. Guide students to have discussions using oral-language prompts. Language frames may be used, provided as a handout or hung in the classroom.
  - When one student suggests an attribute (“I think she is happy.”), the partner responds with “How do you know?” (“I know because she is smiling.”)
  - Have students work together to expand ideas for the same character under development or with another character from the same text. In the example provided, this may be completed with a Cinderella character from another culture.

### I Stance

Teachers use the “I stance” when modeling to demonstrate relevant literacy moves they use in their own practice (e.g., “I always start reading images in the top left corner, the same way I do with written text”). This is different from describing the practice, which is most commonly found in classroom instruction (e.g., “You start reading images in the top left corner.”).



# Character Clusters

## Language Arts K-1 (cont.)

### YOU DO ALONE

1. Independent practice includes time for students to expand their list of character traits.
2. Have students develop word scales or word strings to increase understanding. For example, if the class notes that Cinderella is hurrying, students may add synonyms, such as *rushing* and *running*.
3. Have students draw upon the information in the Character Cluster to write a caption, sentence, or paragraph describing the character based on the visual information.
4. Independent work may serve as an assessment to monitor student progress toward the objective.

### Differentiation for English Learners

- Have students circle or highlight the relevant details in the image. Provide the word that names the detail.
- Provide a word bank or use classroom word scales for additional support.
- Foster discussion by providing language frames to hang or post in the classroom. Examples may include:

“I know she is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.”

“For example, the artist showed \_\_\_\_\_.”

### Writing for Transfer

Students use the Character Cluster as a prewrite to create a Missing Person Poster.

1. What attributes listed would help us find the missing character?
2. How might we design the poster using words and images to best get people’s attention?



### Marva’s Classroom Moment

Sometimes, prior visual knowledge and experience may work against comprehension. Be sure to clarify misconceptions.

**Student 1:** Look, she fell out of her shoe when she was running!

**Teacher:** That’s an important detail. Do you know any characters who lost a shoe?

**Students:** Cinderella!

**Student 2:** That can’t be Cinderella because her dress isn’t blue.

**Teacher:** How do you know she wears a blue dress?

**Student 2:** That’s what she wears in the movie.



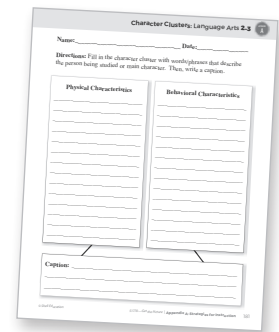
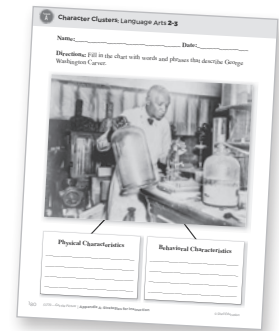
## Learning About Historical Figures

### Objective

I can read closely to figure out what a visual text says directly about a historical person. I can give proof from the visual text to support my thinking. I can infer what the text says about the same person indirectly.

### Materials

Provide images from picture books, novels, electronic sources, or other related and complex images. Characters depicted in settings add an additional layer of information. Student drawings may also be used for visual analysis. This lesson example explores the historical figure George Washington Carver. The image and Character Clusters Activity Sheets are located on pages 180–181 in Appendix A and in the Digital Resources.



### Time

approximately 30–40 minutes

### I DO

1. Identify the historical figure, and find a complex visual text worthy of close reading. Social studies standards may provide some guidelines.
2. Display or project the image of George Washington Carver so that all students can see it clearly. Remember to use “I stance” (page 57) when modeling. Students do not yet know the historical figure.
3. Say, “From looking at this image, I think this person is some kind of scientist.” Write *scientist* outside the image boundary. It is important for students to see the image as well as the words transcribed by the teacher.
4. Provide evidence to support this claim by saying, “I think he is a scientist because the photograph shows that he is using a microscope, and I know scientists use microscopes.”
5. Model and list two to three more key traits obtained from the visual text around the image using descriptive language in callouts. Use details from the setting to provide additional clues toward understanding the character. Make sure to point out the visual evidence to support each claim.



# Character Clusters

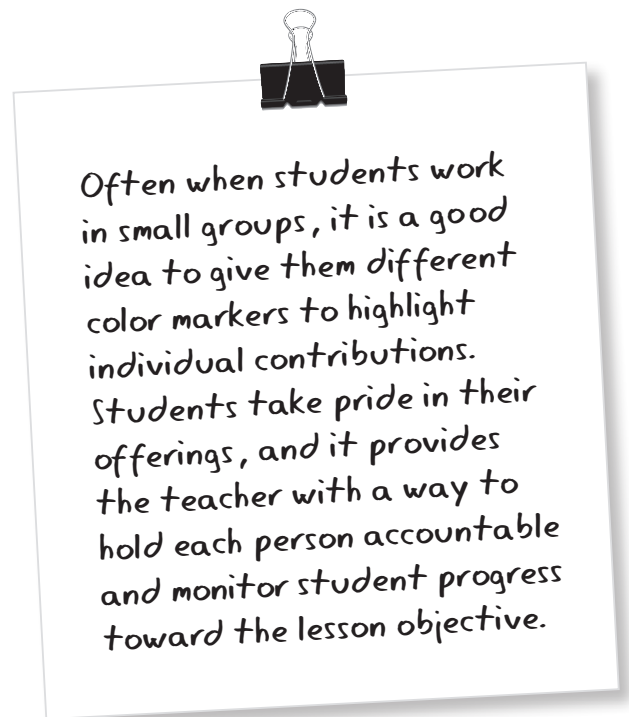
## Language Arts 2-3 (cont.)

### WE DO

1. After a few character traits are modeled, engage students in the discussion. Be sure to elicit appropriate descriptive vocabulary.
2. Possible student responses may include “I think this is a person from long ago because it is a black-and-white photo.” Be sure students are using descriptive vocabulary to identify traits. If needed, ask for paraphrases or synonyms. “Is there another way we can say that?” “This is a historical photograph.” Write *historical* on the border.
3. Elicit additional evidence to support claims when available. Ask, “Is there anything else that makes you think this is a historical photograph?” One possible answer is “I think he is from long ago because I don’t see any computers.”
4. Have students record their ideas on their own Character Clusters.

### YOU DO TOGETHER

1. Place students in pairs to read the picture again and look closely for any details that may help them learn more about the person in the photograph. Language frames may be used, provided as a handout or hung in the classroom.
  - When one student suggests an attribute (“I think he is experimenting.”), the partner responds with “How do you know?” (“He is trying different things. It looks like he is trying to get it to work.”)
  - Have student pairs organize the callouts into two categories: Physical Characteristics (what the character looks like) and Behavioral Characteristics (what the character does). Everything listed in the Behavioral category must begin with a verb.
2. Have students work together to expand ideas from the same image or with a different picture of George Washington Carver.





### YOU DO ALONE

1. Independent practice includes time for students to expand their list of character traits.
2. Have students apply their learning to a new person and independently complete Character Clusters.
3. Instruct students to draw upon the information in the Character Cluster to write a caption, sentence, or paragraph describing the person based on the visual information.
4. Independent work may serve as an assessment to monitor student progress toward the objective.

### Differentiation for English Learners

- Create additional Character Clusters to develop deeper understandings of the historical figure. For this example lesson on George Washington Carver, resources are listed in Appendix C.
- Provide a word bank or use classroom word scales for additional support. All these resources can include visuals and written texts.
- Foster discussion around evidence by providing language frames to hang or post in the classroom. Examples may include:

“For example, the artist showed \_\_\_\_\_.”

“I know she is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.”

“I think this character is \_\_\_\_\_.”

“According to the picture \_\_\_\_\_.”

### Writing for Transfer

Character clusters can be used as a prewriting activity to organize essential character traits before writing about fictional characters or biographical figures.



# Character Clusters

## Wrap Up

### Integrating Technology

#### Grades K-1

- Students and teachers can create basic Character Clusters using PowerPoint and Keynote, which both have built-in callout features.
- Students may use apps such as Inspiration, which was created to organize information and create beautiful visual digital Character Clusters.

#### Grades 2-3

Students can import the character or historical figure into a graphic novel or comic strip that illustrates what the character might say. Comic Life and Strip Generator are two programs that are easy to use with young children.

### Reflective Questions

1. How does looking at an image of a historical figure or fictional character reveal what that character feels and thinks?
2. What are the visual elements in the image that help a reader analyze character or behavioral traits?



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Fill in the blanks with words that describe Cinderella and what she is doing.



\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What does Cinderella look like? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is Cinderella doing? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



# Character Clusters: Language Arts 2-3

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Fill in the chart with words and phrases that describe George Washington Carver.



**Physical Characteristics**

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---

---

---

**Behavioral Characteristics**

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