

# A Classical Education Primer

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What exactly is a “classical Christian school”? Most people hearing this description today would have little idea what it means. The term “classical” refers to a very specific set of education principles, but many people today might dismiss the term “classical” in this context as synonymous with a “traditional” or “ordinary” Christian school. Classical education was indeed ordinary many years ago, but it is hardly that today. The education described in the autobiography of a well-educated person from one or two or centuries ago, would sound very familiar to a classical student, but quite foreign to those educated in “public” schools today. I became involved with classical education at a small local private school, first as the parent of a student enrolled there, then invited to join their board of trustees, and finally becoming a part-time teacher and learning to employ the classical method in a classroom. Along the way, as has long been my habit, I read everything I could find on the subject.

While classical education is quite foreign to most people today, it has been central to education for most of the history of western civilization, coming to us originally from the ancient Greeks. Classical education was founded on the trivium, the progymnasmata, and rhetorical oratory. Later the quadrivium was added. The trivium is both content, and a theory of the three stages of learning: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. The progymnasmata is a system of fourteen teaching exercises ranging from fable, to thesis. In medieval times the quadrivium expanded the classical curriculum with four additional areas of content: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. The quadrivium may be understood as the study of “number”; arithmetic being pure number, geometry being number in measured space, music being number in measured time and sound, and astronomy being number in the measured movements of the heavens. Contemporary classical Christian education integrates all areas of the classical curriculum with a Christian foundation and expands the curriculum with additional contemporary subjects. The principal failing of most non-classical contemporary education is its intentional abandonment of the trivium, and at best a haphazard employment of the progymnasmata. Contemporary educators began a calculated movement away from the classical method and curriculum in the last century as part of the humanist movement for reasons which shall become clearer as we better understand the classical method.

Many people would partly recognize the names of the three stages of the trivium, without understanding their full significance. First is the grammar stage from which we get our name for “grammar school” and spans from birth through about sixth grade. The logic stage corresponds roughly to middle school. The third and final stage is the rhetoric stage and may begin any time in high school or later. These ages and corresponding stages are useful approximations, which do not apply uniformly to every individual or every subject, but the order of progression through

these stages is necessary and consistent. Even an adult, well into the rhetoric stage of development in basic education, will find it useful to follow an orderly progression through the stages of the trivium when learning any new field of study. While the trivium was developed by the pagan Greeks, the wisdom of their educational structure was recognized even by early Christians, who saw that the trivium's grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages correspond quite well with the Biblical concepts of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

The grammar stage of learning is that stage where the elemental building blocks of a subject are taught; the knowledge upon which all subsequent understanding is built. We are most familiar with the term "grammar" from our study of English grammar, indeed so familiar that we often think of grammar only in terms of the building blocks of language, but all areas of learning have their own "grammar." In mathematics, it is necessary to first learn such things as number systems, and arithmetic operators. In art, one must first learn the color wheel, and the skills required to create images with different media. Contemporary classical educators continue to prefer to teach the grammar of language through the study of classical Latin and Greek, both for their value as root languages to many other western languages, as well as for the elegance of their formal structure. Contemporary classical teaching methods for the grammar stage may use flash cards, rhymes, songs, and games to support the repetition required for rote memorization of such things as times tables, spelling, vocabulary, or geography.

The logic stage of learning expands upon the foundation laid in the grammar stage with the addition of rules for combining these building blocks into more complex structures. In mathematics there are rules of association and commutation, methods for finding a least common denominator, and methods for factoring complex expressions, which correspond to the "logic" stage of learning mathematics. In the field of music, after one has learned the grammar building blocks of musical meter, note, scale, and instrument, there are principles of expression, and genres of style for combining these basic skills which correspond to the "logic" stage of learning to create music. Classical teaching methods for the logic stage will practice the manipulation of grammar and logic with exercises that may duplicate the great developments of masters in the field. In mathematics they might repeat the discovery of solutions to important problems, in music they might learn to perform the work of a master composer, and in art they might learn the traditional styles of various genres of art. There is still rote memorization required for the logic stage, but the logical constructs also embody elegant structure and purpose that can be understood in a way that supports learning, unlike much of the knowledge that must be memorized in the grammar stage.

When a student has learned the grammar of a subject, and understands its logic, the student is finally prepared to go beyond what has been taught to create his own unique expression of that subject. It is as if the knowledge and understanding are akin to the gestation and early nest-development of a beautiful bird which suddenly takes flight with rhetorical expression. Like

the grammar and logic stages, we tend to recognize the term rhetoric more narrowly to describe a form of spoken discourse. It is difficult for us to appreciate fully what oratory meant to the classical Greeks because we are awash in a sea of communication, most of which is rhetorically vacuous and incompetent. Television, radio, billboards, printed books and magazines surround us in every waking moment of our day. If we turn on the radio or television and hear a serious rhetorician speaking, most people today will switch to some lighter form of entertainment, finding such discourse too demanding. The ancient Greeks held oratory in much greater esteem, and exercised it with a great deal more care and deliberation, an example we would do well to return to. The great orators of their day were great men indeed. A student had to master the grammar and logic stages of learning before earning the right to enter the ranks of the rhetoricians. One imagines that even an average logic-stage student then would easily recognize the rhetorical fallacies that we are oblivious to today. The foundation laid down in the first two stages of the trivium was seen as necessary to be sufficiently qualified to have a valid opinion from which to speak. Until then, the student's opinions on a subject were of little consequence to anyone but the teacher guiding that student's learning. There is humility and respect inherent in the classical method, in that man's knowledge is viewed clearly as "standing on the shoulders of those who came before." Public oration was a privilege that had to be earned by learning what had been passed on from the past. We may understand this better if we remember that this was long before the invention of movable-type or any form of mass media as we know it. Oratory in the public forum was akin to "publishing" for the ancient classicists. Just as a distinguished professional journal will not publish the writings of a beginner in their field, scholars in ancient Greece needed to establish their qualifications before they could earn the right to "profess" their ideas in public oratory. This is the derivation of our word "professional," one whose standing has earned him the right to profess his ideas either through public oration – or today – through publication. The competent rhetorician then is the culmination of scholarship.

The remarkable thing about the three stages of the trivium is that the stages align quite well with observed natural development in young people. Any parent of a grammar-stage child will recognize the incessant questioning and an insatiable appetite for gathering facts. Children in this stage seem to enjoy rote memorization, even engaging in it for play. It seems that each answer only suggests ten more questions. A child in this stage of learning will often repeat something they are learning, chant-like, sometimes to the point of annoyance to the adults around them, yet without any hint of boredom. Children at this stage seem to be "hardwired" for the task of rote memorization as they accumulate the grammar of every subject they are exposed to. As I wrote this, sitting in a coffee store, a little girl about two years old came in and sat down with her father near me. In the first five minutes of her arrival she had practiced naming "table, chair, light, up, down, dad, and phone" talking to herself, thoroughly content to practice the correct application of those words. I could see in her face the utter satisfaction of simple knowledge. She had no need to form a sentence, or understand the words in some deeper way, she needed no audience, it was enough to revel in the correct application of "her" words.

A child entering the logic stage of learning is also quite recognizable to anyone who has spent much time with middle school students. The questioning of the grammar stage gives way to a crude form of argumentation. Almost any statement asserted by a peer or an adult may be the subject of a challenge, clarification, juxtaposition, comparison, or contrast from the student in the logic stage. Their logic will generally lack the sophistication or relevance of a competent rhetorician. The perfectly correct statement, "In one more day you will be a teenager," may be met with the retort: "Actually I will be thirteen at one second after midnight, before it becomes daytime." This is a classic "shallow" early-logic-stage argument which can be quite frustrating to a parent, but is a perfectly normal developmental exercise. While not incorrect, this argument contributes nothing useful to the discourse. It is simply the novice logician exercising a new-found ability, however annoying it may be to those they exercise upon. The student at this stage who is taught the formal structures of logic and logical fallacy will internalize these with this repetition and practice.

The student who has fully mastered the first two stages of learning and matured sufficiently may enter the rhetoric stage of learning. This stage is characterized by a student who goes beyond the grammar and logic they have been taught to combine these in new creative ways, developing ideas and opinions that are worthy of being publicly "professed." The typical student today reaches this stage of maturity in their learning sometime during high school and college. A competent rhetorician knows the historical foundations and fundamental principles of their subject thoroughly, and has learned nearly all they can about their subject from others. Clearly, some disciplines take longer to reach this stage than others. The rhetorician stands on the shoulders of others, and leaps beyond this foundation to contribute new ideas, theories, and knowledge to their field. Knowledge and understanding that is "greater than the sum of its parts" and may aspire to wisdom.

The progymnasmata is a set of fourteen methods employed by the classical teacher to lead the student to knowledge and understanding. The name progymnasmata is a linguistic "cousin" to the more familiar word gymnasium, a place where one exercises to learn athletic skills. In much the same way, the progymnasmata may be thought of as a set of exercises for the development of knowledge and understanding. Some of these techniques would be quite familiar today, while others would very likely be quite obscure. Most teachers of any persuasion would find it difficult to teach without using some of these methods, but the classically trained teacher strives to employ them all. The fourteen exercises of the progymnasmata are fable, narrative, anecdote, proverb, refutation, confirmation, commonplace, encomium, vituperation, comparison, impersonation, description, thesis or theme, and defend / attack a law. A casual examination of just the familiar terms in this list correctly creates the image of a process that builds on the knowledge and tradition passed on from before. It is interesting also to note that the two terms perhaps most unfamiliar today, encomium and vituperation, describe examinations of individual

character. As I learned to be a classical teacher, I was encouraged to find ways to apply these exercises to every subject I taught, and found them powerfully effective techniques that challenged and refined my own understanding.

Socratic questioning, named for, and made famous by the philosopher Socrates, is not explicitly a part of the progymnasmata, but an implicit and powerful technique of classical teaching, particularly in the logic stage and beyond. In this technique, the teacher questions the student, first to discover the relevant foundation of knowledge already attained, and then by asking questions just at the edge of their understanding, guides the thinking of the student to new understanding. In this way, the Socratic questioner may lead a student through the same path to knowledge taken by those who first discovered it. A student who has thus been led to “discover” new understanding, may truly then “possess” it.

Much that popularly passes for education today fails utterly as the direct result of having abandoned the trivium. Fundamental to the philosophy of the "humanists" is an abhorrence of absolute truth, or preexistent, preeminent deity. They have taken seriously the serpent's claim in the garden that “Ye shall be as gods.” Believing themselves to be the only “god” they need, the humanist is unwilling to be bound to truth as it is handed down by those who have gone before, insisting that the world, even the historical past, can be re-created as they believe it should be, or should have been. The humanist may claim sincerely, “that may be your truth, but it is not my truth.” In this context, the early humanists spoke often of their abhorrence of the rote memorization and drill characteristic of the classical grammar stage, seeing it as slavish devotion to tradition. Dispensing with this, they encourage even young children to “express themselves” and discover their “truth” about a subject. Modern humanist education has taken this so far as to abandon even the very notion of objective standards, having given themselves over to the anarchy of, not atheism, but omni-theism – we are all god; “Ye shall be as gods.” Yet even in this foundation of their beliefs, they are liars and deceivers, true to the nature of the serpent who inspires them. While professing to be the essence of tolerance toward all ideas, they indoctrinate a humanist dogma founded more on blind faith than any theology in all of history, and are utterly intolerant of any doctrine that would teach otherwise. Young students who have not yet mastered either grammar or logic are encouraged to express themselves, while being subtly indoctrinated in the way of “correct” humanist belief in pragmatism and relativism, defenseless to apply reason or tradition that might undermine these “truths” [sic]. In the process of undermining the classical method, the student fails to learn a reliable foundation on which to build their ideas. The classicist confidently says this student has been sold a fraudulent education lacking any valid foundation, while the humanist believes he has “evolved” beyond the need for devotion to any tradition, no matter how rich its foundation. The Christian surveys the world and sees entropy, not evolution, at work, but suspects the cure is not far off.

My own education came about many years ago just as the humanists were succeeding in removing the last vestiges of the classical curriculum from “public” schools. I had the good fortune to attend a small Christian school until half way through the fourth grade, enough to learn most of a proper grammar education, phonics, and a great love for reading; these were my academic salvation. Even though the school was not explicitly classical, it had never occurred to them to deviate from tradition. At that point, my parents became concerned that I might miss-out on the “new math” which was then being introduced in public schools. It now seems absurd to think that there was anything “new” in mathematics that needed to change the training of a fourth-grader. From that point forward, my education went downhill until I graduated from high school with only four classes in my senior year and much of the traditional curriculum no longer required. Many years later when my eldest son reached school age, I discovered that things had only gotten much worse since I had left school. It had become standard policy to not correct, or assign any score or grade, to any work through the fourth grade for fear of “impeding the creativity or self-esteem” of the students. This discovery became the impetus for the search that led me to rediscover classical education. Regrettably, I did not have the benefit of a proper classical education, but through avid reading, and learning to teach classically, I have come to an approximation of its result, and an appreciation of its value.

There is a small but growing movement of classical Christian educators in this country, both in many small classical academies, and in the form of support for home-schoolers. I have been fortunate to find such schools for my sons and have witnessed astonishing accomplishments from them. Classical education theory has radically changed the very way that I view knowledge, and everything I now study as an adult. It has revolutionized my life and the lives of my sons. I have come to understand that our society is in great peril for abandoning it. I think that perhaps never in the history of our great nation has there been so great a need for a new generation of young people educated classically, and filled with the Word of God. If we feel a need for men and women like our founders, we must educate our youth as our founders were educated.

If you are the parent of school age children, please, find a classical school near you, or home-school with a classical curriculum. I have never met a parent who regretted the decision to provide their child a classical education.