A Classical Approach to Writing Instruction: The Progymnasmata

by Jim Selby, The Whitefield Academy

Most teachers want to do a good job teaching writing. Most would also admit that they do not so much "teach" writing, but rather they "assess" the end product. A subjective and mysterious process, some students seem to get writing while most do not, and we cannot by conscious action seem to do much about it. Writing teachers[1] have "learned" to write through experience—trial and error—not by mastering a vertically integrated, discrete set of skills and sub-skills that make up the craft or art of writing. None of us were taught under classical composition theory and its foundation, the progymnasmata, which is arguably the best curriculum that fully prepares students for tackling the art of rhetoric.

This article will focus on the pragmatic effectiveness of the progymnasmata but I will take the liberty of digressing into language theory, albeit in the broadest strokes, before launching into the heart of the theme. Current writing curriculums derive from one of three theories of language—classical, modern, or process theory—each a product of a particular worldview. Classical discourse theory argues that communication is an art that can be taught through the pedagogy of imitation and repetition[2] — explicit instruction, multiple contexts, and deep cognitive engagement. Modern composition theory affirms communication as art, but its progressive roots produce an abbreviated, ineffective pedagogy that abhors imitation and repetition because of the belief that the child is perfect, needing only to be interested in something to learn. Consequently, it radically gutted classical methodology, eliminating the six to seven years of the progymnasmata, slashing the forty plus "topics of invention" to five "modes of development,"[3] and elevating the four types of composition[4] to ends in themselves, subsuming arrangement and style within these four purposes. The sterile failure of modern theory gave way to process theory in the 1970s. This pedagogy which has dominated writing instruction in our classrooms for the last thirty years notoriously defies logical analysis.[5] Process theory abhors categories of any kind, seeking its essence in an author's "voice" and in the subjective encounter of a reader with a text. Under the tutelage of process theory only 22% of college bound high school graduates who believe themselves equipped to write have been able to write a coherent and cohesive essay upon demand.[6] As classical Christian educators we understand that worldview affects curriculum. This truth holds for writing curricula as well. We must give serious consideration to the only writing curriculum derived from a classical view of language–the progymnasmata.[7] What follows is a brief analysis of the pragmatic genius of Aphthonius' vertically integrated progymnasmata.[8]

The first two stages, **fable** and **narrative**, impart the basic skills of inventing stories. Aristotle identified the *enthymeme* the "substance of rhetorical persuasion."[9] A general story or demonstration shares with the *enthymeme* the fundamental substance of rhetorical argument—the innate ability to engage the imagination by requiring the audience to infer in order to create meaning. Aesop's *Fables* do so with great effect. Through explicit instruction, multiple contexts, and deep cognitive engagement students learn the three components of plot: reversal, recognition, and suffering (Aristotle, *Poetics)*. They also learn the six categories of narrative structure: agent, action, time, place, manner, and cause. In addition to these components and categories of plot that lay a foundation for the canon of invention, young writers learn the skill of creating stories by mastering subskills. These subskills include sequencing—beginning a story at the end or in the middle and retelling it coherently; point of view—retelling the story from the perspective of

Aphthonius Progymnasmata

1. Fable
2. Narrative
3. Chreia
4. Maxim
5. Refutation/Confirmation
6. Common topic
7. Encomium
8. Invective
9. Comparison
10. Characterization
11. Description
12. Thesis
13. Proposal of Law

Jim Selby *is the dean of students at the Whitefield Academy in Kansas City, Missouri. He teaches rhetoric, Great Books, English literature and logic.*

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different agents; condensing—using as few words as possible while maintaining coherence; and expanding though figures. These initial stages begin to train the mind to think compositionally, to generate ideas, through that most effective of pedagogies—imitation and repetition. Students, gifted or not, practice and master a discrete set of manageable subskills. Teachers do not overwhelm and frustrate students by assuming these critical subskills.

The **chreia** and **maxim** stages build directly upon skills acquired in fable and narrative. Students develop or exposit a short, pithy statement or proverb through eight heads of development. The ability to "invent" four story types: general affirmative (cause), general negative (converse), general comparison (analogy), and particular affirmative (example) and to state the same idea in different words (paraphrase and testimony) are the foundational skills learned in these exercises. In addition, students learn an introduction that includes a rudimentary thesis statement and several praise statements meant to lure the reader on as well as a brief epilogue. The ability to create a story through the use of the plot components and structure lays a foundation in the mind for the full-blown skill of invention to be taught next.

Refutation/confirmation teaches students to invent arguments through using a limited number of six topics. As juniors and seniors, our budding writers will master thirty or forty topics in their formal rhetoric classes but these "progym" stages actually train the mind to use these tools to generate arguments. Though the most difficult stages of the curriculum, refutation and confirmation complete the previous four stages and lay a foundation for the most difficult task of writing—invention.[10]

Common topic follows with a delightful experience for junior high school students who seem to relish contradiction and conflict. The heads or categories of composition in this exercise introduce youngsters to the skill of arrangement. Students craft effective introductions which include a thesis statement, and two arguments or heads of purpose supporting the thesis. Six heads or categories follow, three narrative in form and three argumentative in form. A concluding head uses all six heads of purpose mastered in refutation/confirmation. Previous skills are reinforced and varied through a specific focus or narrowing of thought around a new thesis each week. The students find this popular exercise a creative, expansive experience.

The next three stages of the progymnasmata—**encomium**, **invective**, and **comparison**—deal with epideictic communication—persuading as to what is or is not. The introduction in these stages, the most sophisticated yet, includes, as the previous exercise did, a thesis and two arguments, but then it reaches back to the chreia/maxim stages and uses encomiums with the application of "heighteners."[11] Each head or section serves to develop both the invention and arrangement of arguments covering the full scope of epideictic speech.

The eleventh and twelfth stages introduce the skills of style. The **characterization** stage models for the students "a style that is clear, concise, colorful, unconstrained, not intricate or figurative."[12] This particular style is achieved through paraphrase and an abbreviated word count. "**Description** is an expository discourse which brings the object exhibited vividly into view . . . one should adopt a free, relaxed style and ornament it with different figures, and in general hit off the objects being described."[13] This particular style is achieved through a multitude of details, never dwelling upon an object but moving quickly, and the use of as many figures as is necessary to reach an expanded word count.

The thirteenth and fourteenth stages of exercises serve as a capstone to the six plus years our students have been learning to write with the progymnasmata. **Thesis** and **law** hone the reasoning skills through the introduction of counterpoints or qualification. These stages provide the students with a plethora of opportunities to create arguments using the heads of purpose (invention) and to demonstrate these arguments using the heads of development.

With the completion of these final stages, next year's rhetoric teacher will find a group of skilled, competent writers ready to tackle the canons of rhetoric. No other curriculum has as its purpose the preparation for rhetoric. The "before exercises" or progymnasmata equips students with a basic ability to invent, arrange, and employ style which rhetoric now takes to a height we have not seen from our adolescents since the eighteenth century. The progymnasmata originated in a classical worldview and as classical Christian educators we should give the curriculum serious consideration for adoption in our schools.

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NOTES

1. Whether learning through process theory or modern composition theory.

2. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Book II, Chapter 5, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Quintilian/Institutio_Oratoria/home.html.

3. Comparison, contrast, cause and effect, description, and explication.

4. Narrative, descriptive, expository, and argumentative.

5. Donald M. Murray, "Teach Writing as a Process, Not Product," in *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Victor Villanueva (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2003).

6. The essay portion of the ACT is optional. Only those students who think they can write spend another hour completing the essays.

7. I am aware of at least one writing curriculum that extends the rhetorical canon of invention down into the logic and grammar stages.

8. http://www.leeds.ac.uk/classics/resources/rhetoric/prog-aph.htm

9. Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. Rhys Robers and Ingram Bywater (Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 2.

10. Cicero, *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), II.I.1

11. Aristotle, *The Rhetoric*, Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library / Random House: 1984), 62 (Book 1, ch. 9, 1368a.10ff).

12. Aphthonius, *Progymnasmata*, trans. Malcolm Heath, http://www.leeds.ac.uk/classics/resources/rhetoric/prog-aph.htm

13. Ibid.

Pro-gym-nas-what?

by Amy Kim, The Oaks: A Classical Christian Academy

When I first began teaching at the Oaks Academy, I was not only transitioning from twelve years at home with my children, but also transitioning from teaching in the public school system. Some parts of my newfound job description were familiar to me: grammar and literature would be taught similarly to my previous experience. On the other hand, when I was told that I would be teaching writing by utilizing the progymnasmata, I was at a loss. What exactly was progymnasmata?[1] My department head gave me a list of the fourteen steps of the progymnasmata and their respective elements, which was *somewhat* helpful, but I still struggled to understand these writing exercises. What did they look like in "real life"? Where could I find examples of them? How could I incorporate them into my teaching in a comprehensive fashion? Why should writing be taught this way? I had no idea how to tackle this strange "new" approach.

What followed included hours spent on the internet, trying to find examples of the progymnasmata and examples of teaching materials. I endeavored to incorporate into our literature study the steps of the progymnasmata which I had been assigned to teach my seventh and eighth graders. I began to understand the place of the progymnasmata in the Trivium as a tool for building skilled rhetoricians.[2] And yet, I still found myself struggling to make writing instructions with these forms meaningful and effective. The exercises seemed difficult, if not impossible, to tie to the literature, and any examples I had were either clunky and formulaic or difficult to comprehend because of their ancient language conventions.

Over the next year, my colleagues and I spent a considerable amount of time rethinking our goals for writing education at the Oaks as well as the best means to accomplish those goals. At what ages, we wondered, would the different steps of the progymnasmata be most effective? At what grade should the process begin? How could we develop fluency with the progymnasmata in our secondary scope and sequence? A watershed point came when we began conferencing with Mrs. Cindy Marsch (Writing Assessment Services, ACCS member since 1997) and commissioned her to help us adapt her progymnasmata materials for use at the Oaks. As a result of this philosophical and practical refining, the Oaks writing curriculum now includes progymnasmata instruction in grades three through ten, with eleventh- and twelfth-graders employing the progymnasmata as needed for rhetoric assignments. Formal writing instruction begins with third- to sixth-graders focusing on fable and narrative. In grades seven through ten, we introduce the remaining exercises along with outlining and traditional five-paragraph essay form. In each grade we review the previous progymnasmata exercises in order to help students become fluent with them. We have also decided to teach some of the progymnasmata "out of order" to better coincide with other

Amy Kim *teaches 7th & 8th grade language arts at The Oaks: A Classical Christian Academy in Spokane, WA. The Oaks is an ACCS-accredited school.*