A Classical Approach to Writing . . .

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

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elements of our instruction as well as student development.[3] For instance, since our students begin logic instruction in eighth grade, we postponed confirmation/refutation instruction until ninth grade. Here is an abbreviated look at our scope and sequence across the grades, focusing on the placement of newly taught exercises:

Grades 3-6: Fable, narrative
Grade 7: Maxim, chreia, characterization (as a speech-in-character
Grade 8: Encomium/ invective, comparison, description
Grade 9: Confirmation/ refutation,common topic
Grade 10: Thesis, for/ against laws

Along with teaching the progymnasmata forms, Mrs. Marsch's approach also incorporates classical tools like imitation. For example, when writing fable or narrative, students are given excerpts from excellent literature as source material. Utilizing the principle of imitation, students first condense the original narrative passage, working to retain its narrative core (the *who*? *what*? *when*? *where*? *why*? and *how*?), then expand their condensed versions, adding in meaningful details. After completing those steps, they might use one of various narrative slants to rework the text.[4] In this example, the student writer retells a biblical narrative (Gen. 37:2-11) from the perspective of Joseph's older brother Reuben:

"My dear brother, Joseph, is my younger sibling and the favorite of my father, Israel. I have always loved him and have ignored the many gifts that have been showered on him, although about a week ago Joseph made me a little jealous. As we walked to my father's tent, Israel came running out of the purple cloth that served as a door. He held a magnificent robe of various colors and all our eyes were drawn to it. To our dismay, Israel gave Joseph the robe. I envied him, but I think my brothers despised him. They began whispering horrible things about him and almost started a riot."

In another instance, after condensing and expanding the fable, "The Fox, the Ass, and the Lion," students retold it in another setting, using human characters instead of the original animal characters. In the following sample, the fox and the ass become juvenile pranksters, while the lion is the boys' school administrator:

"Monster Moor and Goblin Fester haunted the halls of Evergreen Elementary School for six long years. Their partnership had proved to be a troublesome problem for Mrs. Pratt, Evergreen's principal. Somehow the boys always managed to evade detection, although they traumatized the school with constant pranks."

Through these kinds of processes, students learn to adapt the elements of the progymnasmata to suit different rhetorical goals.

We also endeavor to connect progymnasmata and literature instruction. For instance, when teaching maxim (proverb amplification), I have found it helpful either to draw a proverb from literature we are reading or to use the literature selection as the example within an amplification. Here is a portion of a student's maxim from *Macbeth*, written after we read Shakespeare's play:

" 'What's done cannot be undone.' Lady Macbeth, 5.1. Lady Macbeth, though insane, shows Shakespeare's godly wisdom when she says that one's deeds cannot be changed, no matter how much one regrets having done them. Lady Macbeth knows that things like murder cannot be reversed once committed and knows so because her conscience, even in her sleep, has been afflicted by her murder of King Duncan: she says this while sleepwalking."

Last spring, our end-of-the-year culminating activity found students writing and delivering speeches-in-character as the various characters from the year's literature. This required students to attend to the plot details and to consider the character's speech patterns (word choice) as well as that character's particular perspective within the story. When they gave their speeches orally, students also practiced rhetorical elements of delivery. Here is an excerpt from an eighth-grade student's characterization of Bertie Wooster from PG Wodehouse's *Joy in the Morning* (which he delivered in a suit and tie while using a British accent):

"Engaged?! Again?! And to Florence Cray of all the pie-faced females?! Now, mind you, I did not ask for this, but due to an unfortunate set of past events, she finds it necessary to bung to my side and announce our engagement. The old heart bleeds for all the men she has lured in, and I squirm like a worm on a hook at the thought of a man actually going through with the marriage."

As I grow in my comfort with the progymnasmata, I continue to see more ways to integrate them with literature instruction and comprehension. Description can be used to draw out the details from a particular scene in a novel or play and to emphasize the

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importance of "showing" versus "telling" language. Encomium/invective (praise/blame) is useful for highlighting the admirable or negative qualities of particular characters in literature, while comparison can be used to consider two different protagonists or antagonists from different works, or the protagonist and antagonist from the same work. Here is the beginning of an encomium speech for Aragorn from JRR Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring:*

"My comrades, we have gathered for the coronation of his soon-to-be majesty, Aragorn II. We have come from the corners of Middle Earth: the grassy Shire, the cold Dwarves' mines, the mysterious Elves' forests, the massive Plains of Rohan, the halls of Gondor, and as far away as the palace in Dunadain. Every one of us recognizes this man standing before us as the honest, valiant warrior, Strider. Even his mere name lifts our spirits and makes us proud of our hero and friend."

At one point I could not have used "comfort" and "progymnasmata" in the same sentence, but I am becoming more comfortable with these exercises. Three primary factors have contributed to this. First of all, I read every example of the progymnasmata exercises I could find. Along with that, I received instruction in the progymnasmata by taking Mrs. Marsch's tutorial myself. My personal examples and experience from this have been invaluable to me on a couple of fronts. Becoming a student not only required me to carefully work through my understanding of the exercises,[5] but my written pieces have also served as a classroom resource, providing a model for my students and authenticity for me as students see that I have actually done what I'm asking them to do. The final factor that has increased my comfort with teaching progymnasmata has been the use of Mrs. Marsch's curriculum. Even in places where I haven't been able to directly apply her material, it has given me ideas for developing my own assignments.

Along with growing in understanding the practical application of progymnasmata, I am increasingly grasping the philosophical underpinnings of the progymnasmata as a vital component of developing skilled rhetoricians. Additionally, I am coming to realize the ways that the progymnasmata are the basis of the composition forms (description, narration, exposition, and argumentation) taught to me as a student. Even though, as a seventh/eighth-grade teacher, I work with students who haven't yet reached the rhetoric stage, I labor in the hope that the skills students develop through the progymnasmata will be tools for them to use later on when they are inventing and delivering persuasive essays and speeches. As D'Angelo states in his preface to *Composition in the Classical Tradition*, "These exercises embody a familiar way of teaching and learning writing, preserving its advantages, while harking back to and obtaining additional advantages from a venerable rhetorical tradition whose practical usefulness has proved itself over many centuries and that remains relevant today."[6]

Resources: The following include some of the resources we perused while developing goals and materials for progymnasmata instruction.

- Cindy Marsch, "Writing Assessment Services," www.writingassessment.com
- Frank J. D'Angelo, *Composition in the Classical Tradition* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2000).
- Gideon O. Burton, *Silva Rhetoricae*, rhetoric.byu.edu/
- Lene Jaqua, et al., *Classical Writing*, www.classicalwriting.com/index.htm
- Susan Wise Bauer, *Writing with Ease: Strong Fundamentals* (Charles City, VA: Peace Hill Press, 2008).
- Andrew Pudewa, Institute for Excellence in Writing, www.excellenceinwriting.com/

NOTES

1 "The word *progymnasmata* is Greek for 'preliminary exercises.' These exercises were taught in ancient Greece and Rome to educate young men in rhetoric, in effective and persuasive public speaking and writing." Lene Jaqua, et al. http://www.classicalwriting.com/Progym.htm

2. Frank J. D'Angelo, *Composition in the Classical Tradition* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2000).

3. Even the ancients did not entirely agree on the order of the progymnasmata exercises.

4. For examples of narrative slant, see D'Angelo or Marsch.

5. An idea which D'Angelo echoes in his preface to *Composition in the Classical Tradition*.

6. D'Angelo, *Composition in the Classical Tradition*.