

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROGYMNASMATA

by James A. Selby

Christ is the center. At Whitefield Academy in Kansas City, Missouri, where I serve as Dean of Faculty, we put Jesus Christ at the center of our educational methodology. As with other committed Christian schools we have a faculty and staff of committed Christians who daily put their faith to work in teaching their students. Every class, every day, opens the Bible and seeks God's truth. We memorize, study, and apply God's Word constantly. We consistently and systematically use Scripture to judge ideas that our culture presents to us as truth. We are committed to teaching from a Biblical worldview.

In one of his fables, "The Dog and the Shadow," Aesop told of the consequences of grasping for something that looked better than what you already possessed:

It happened that a Dog had got a piece of meat and was carrying it home in his mouth to eat it in peace. Now on his way home he had to cross a plank lying across a running brook. As he crossed, he looked down and saw his own shadow reflected in the water beneath. Thinking it was another dog with another piece of meat, he made up his mind to have that also. So he made a snap at the shadow in the water, but as he opened his mouth, the piece of meat fell out, dropped into the water, and was never seen more.

Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow.

The West possessed a wonderful composition curriculum for close to two millennia. This composition curriculum is analogous to the meat in the fable. Western culture thought it saw another, possibly better method of instruction and dropped classical methodology. We grasped at a shadow and we lost the substance.

For classical schools, the mark of an educated person was the ability to write and speak well. We identify ourselves as classical Christian schools, and so our mark might be described as graduating individuals with the ability to write and speak well about God and His creation—goodness, truth, and beauty. We recognize that a successful composition is the successful application of the Trivium. In a successful composition, the grammar is correct, the ideas are logical and clear, and the expression is engaging and pleasing. Such application marks a classically educated individual.

The Progymnasmata begins to develop logical and rhetorical structures in the mind.

Good writers, then, are good thinkers, both logically and rhetorically, and good compositions must be driven by both the intellect and the imagination. The Progymnasmata begins to develop logical and rhetorical structures in the mind. Good writing, as well as good speaking, is logically correct and it is a pleasure to encounter. Our minds and imaginations are

uplifted by a well-communicated encounter with truth. Such an experience lies at the heart of excellent communication. We rejoice in this type of quality and have taken as our task, as our goal, to ensure that every graduate is a good writer.

I have recently spoken with three university academics, all Christians, one of whom is a college president, another the director of an honors program, and the third the head of an English department. All three mentioned writing as the greatest weakness of incoming freshmen. All three mentioned the second critical weakness was the inability to reason, which is directly related to a successful composition program. One of the problems we face as a culture is that we are not graduating students who write well. Unfortunately, we fail not in just one but in all three areas of good composition. We need simply to turn to the editorial page of virtually any newspaper on any given day to see the results of our current composition curricula. Faulty grammar displays our ignorance of the basic rules on which we must have agreement in

order to effectively communicate ideas to one another. Logical fallacies, both formal and informal, pepper our essays testifying to our inability to think through a problem in such a way as to bring us to any kind of truth. The absence of any pleasing style or elegance ensures that, even if we possess truth, we will persuade no one that we have something important to say about how we should live our lives.

All three [academics] mentioned writing as the greatest weakness of incoming [college] freshmen.

Of course excellent composition does not come out of thin air. Even as it takes a master craftsman years to learn his craft in order to produce excellence, so the making of an excellent communicator takes time. Like all crafts, basic skills must be learned. Intermediate and, finally, advanced skills must be taught progressively with constant review and use of previously learned skills. This process takes time. Bonner, in his book *Education in Ancient Rome*, cites the Romans who sent children at age 10 or 12 to the grammarians. These youngsters already knew how to read and write, and now they were being prepared for training in the schools of rhetoric. The Trivium, applied to language (Latin in the past, English today) as the subject, in fact, takes a full ten to twelve years to teach. The Progymnasmata, as a part of this process, develops writers who are good thinkers, both logically and rhetorically, because good compositions must be driven by both the intellect and the imagination. The Progymnasmata begins to develop logical and rhetorical structures in the mind.

The history of the Progymnasmata is covered fairly well in *Education in Ancient Rome*. Here Bonner traces the Progymnasmata to at least 100 B.C., and possibly back to the golden age of Athens in the fifth century B.C. The current exercises we are using come from Aphthonius, who, according to James Butts and Ronald Hock, lived sometime in the late fourth or early fifth century A.D., and spent at least part of his life in Antioch. For the first hundred years of its life, Aphthonius' little text had numerous competitors. However, due to its clarity and comprehensiveness, it became the course of study in preparation for instruction in rhetoric. Originally written and used in Greek, the first Latin translation occurred in 1507, with a second in 1532. Aphthonius' curriculum was the composition text in preparing Grammar and Dialectic students for Rhetoric until the eighteenth century, both in Europe and the Colonies. It gave way at Harvard to the rhetorical manuals of William Dugard and Thomas Farnaby, with the emergence throughout the Western world of "a demand for a more scientific and less rhetorical curriculum." (*The Chreia*, James Butts and Ronald Hock, p. 221.)

Although we could debate the strengths and weaknesses of modern composition theory, the most telling criticism is its lack of success.

Current composition theory—at least current when I was taught in high school and college—is based on four types of discourse: Descriptive, Narrative, Argumentative, and Expository, with five modes of development: comparison, contrast, definition, exemplification, and, finally, cause and effect. This theory devolved from the Progymnasmata and lacks in a number of ways. Although we could debate the strengths and weaknesses of modern composition theory, the most telling criticism is its lack of success. The curriculum is not producing good writers.

THE FISHERMAN PIPING by Aesop

A fisherman skilled in music took his flute and his nets to the seashore. Standing on a projecting rock, he played several tunes in the hope that the fish, attracted by his melody, would of their own accord dance into his net, which he had placed below. At last, having long waited in vain, he laid aside his flute, and casting his net into the sea, made an excellent haul of fish. When he saw them leaping about in the net upon the rock, he said: "O you most perverse creatures, when I piped, you would not dance, but now that I have ceased, you do so merrily."

The fisherman represents modern Western culture. Through the use of faulty inductive logic, he abandons the historical precedence of fishing with nets in order to use the more pleasing method of flute playing. Unlike the fisherman, we have not yet tired of waiting in vain for success. We have still not returned to the proven methods of teaching composition, and we are starving as a result. The answer for the fisherman was to return to the proven method of catching fish with nets. The answer for Western civilization is to return to the proven method of learning to write with the Progymnasmata.

I said we have not yet tired of waiting, but, in fact, we are seeing some promising glimmers of change. Evidence of a return to the classical methodology of composition instruction is arising in a number of places. Two college-level textbooks published in the last three or four years use the Progymnasmata. The website *Silva Rhetoricae* from BYU has an extensive discussion of this curriculum with a wealth of information. Dr. Gideon Burton, who is responsible for this website, has mentioned that a group of Swedes are working to bring back this curriculum to the public schools in their country. A workshop such as this is another evidence that we in the classical Christian school movement are seeing interest in the Progymnasmata as well.

I have been using this curriculum for seven academic years and several summer-school sessions and have taught all 14 stages in the classroom. Whitefield adopted this curriculum in 2001, and we saw dramatic improvement in the writing of a large number of our students. We use it to teach composition from the fourth grade through the ninth. I believe that writing daily is necessary for success. I find that the more I teach the Progymnasmata, the better I understand its brilliance.

If one does not think well and think rhetorically—not just logically, but rhetorically—then good writing is vastly more difficult and often a frustrating experience. The Progymnasmata, as we are using it, consists of fourteen stages. Each stage of the Progymnasmata trains the mind to think not just more clearly but also rhetorically, as well as allowing students to constantly practice the effective use of words and sentences. The Progymnasmata brings students to the point where they are able to effectively learn from master communicators through imitation. This curriculum prepares students for the rhetoric stage in ways no other curriculum can prepare them.

We use a different set of skills when we persuade to truth than when we discover truth. In the discovery of truth, we use the intellect and the tools of logic and right reasoning. In the persuasion to truth, we use not only the intellect and the tools of logic and right reasoning, but in addition, we must use the imagination and the tools of rhetoric and right communication. We must engage our audience's imagination in order to persuade. Persuading to truth is a different task than discovering truth and, therefore, we use the Progymnasmata—the “before exercises”—beginning in the fourth grade and complete them before students enter the Rhetoric years in the tenth grade. The Progymnasmata begins to develop rhetorical structures in the mind.

Not having been trained to think rhetorically, I find myself using logical presentations and propositional truths and not being successful in persuading people to change the course of their lives. We may assent to truth but not change our lives. When I finally changed my diet several years ago, it was not the result of propositional truth. I already knew the truth. I had known it for years, and yet I still ate too much of the wrong kinds of food. Then in July of 2000, during the course of about a week, my imagination was engaged in three distinct ways by three separate sources, and I changed the course of my life. I changed the eating habits of forty years as a result of my experiencing truth through the successful engagement of my imagination, not my intellect, which had been engaged for years without effect.

When the rich young man came to Jesus to ask what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus spoke truth to that young man rhetorically. The propositional truth is that we must serve God and God only. By the young man's response, we see that he had already assented to this propositional truth and believed he was in obedience. But he was not. At this point, Jesus did not repeat the propositional truth, which the young man knew, but instead told him a modified narrative. The young man himself became the main character who must go and sell all he possesses, give the money away, and then come back to follow Jesus. Jesus

told the rich young man a true story, not a propositional truth. By engaging the imagination of the young man and persuading him of the truth, the young man could no longer intellectually assent but mistakenly believe he was in obedience to the truth that a man must serve God and God only. Confronted with the power of this truth, the young man tragically rejected the truth and left in sorrow. Jesus communicated effectively and rhetorically.

In the initial Fable Stage, for example, by using Aesop, we are looking at a single idea and beginning to learn how to use our words to so engage the imagination that the idea is believed by the audience. We identify the structure of the thoughts or ideas that go into the narrative and we learn to create recognition by using figures of description. In other words, we add vivid descriptions of objects or experiences that we have all had (such as trees, stars, or someone's face) to cause the reader to identify with it or remember a similar experience. We learn to restructure facts and tell the same idea. We learn that words represent ideas, and we can communicate the same idea using various words and various sentence structures.

The Narrative Stage builds upon these skills and adds several more skills which help us to think more imaginatively and yet more consciously as well. We become conscious of the six necessary elements of any good narrative: Agent, Action, Cause, Place, Time, Manner—the Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How questions. We learn to identify and use these elements, and we learn what we might vary in the narrative to communicate the same truth.

In the Chreia and Proverb (Maxim) Stage, students learn eight distinct ways to engage the imaginations of their audience in order to persuasively present or clarify a specific idea. These eight ways of developing an idea are rhetorical structures being built into the mind. And so on through all fourteen stages.

One of the most rewarding results for me is that my students' tears are gone. In the past, as a young grammar student, I can remember weeping in frustration with a writing assignment. Before using the Progymnasmata, I have witnessed my own children weeping in frustration with a writing assignment. Before using the Progymnasmata I have witnessed and heard from frustrated parents of any number of students weeping in frustration over writing assignments. Writing does not need to be frustrating and leave us with feelings of hopelessness. We just finished a two-week summer-school session where new incoming

One of the most rewarding results for me is that my students' tears are gone.

Whitefield students, varying in ages from 11 to 15, spent three hours a day, five days a week working on composition. They enjoyed the sessions and actually thanked me and the other teachers for offering the classes! Not only is our students' writing improving, but we are finding a rising level of student confidence as well. The stages of the Progymnasmata are broken into doable pieces that are being successfully mastered by students.

I am filled with wonder when I find my “non-academic” students are writing happily and well. By writing well, I mean they are clearly and persuasively articulating ideas on paper.

According to Bonner, the Romans began formal education around ages 10 to 12. So beginning at that age, the students started work in the Progymnasmata. Those ages, of course, correspond to our grades four through six. At Whitefield we have started with the fourth grade and, at this point, we will teach both the Fable and the Narrative Stage in both the fourth and the fifth grade. The sixth grade will be Chreia/Maxim and Refutation/Confirmation, and so on until the ninth grade when we finish with Thesis and Law.

The implementation at Whitefield, while going well, is not a particularly simple task. With a great deal of ongoing thought, it is still not entirely clear as to how our days will be impacted. We as a faculty, from the fourth through the ninth grades, have made a commitment to spend 30 to 45 minutes a day in composition. I believe that writing daily is necessary for success.

The Trivium was initially developed in order to teach language—first Greek, then Latin. We continue to teach Shurley grammar and spelling to the grammar school as we teach the Progymnasmata.

There is one curriculum currently available to us that has a proven track record of success stretching back over two millennia!

In the Logic years we continue to teach grammar, and we focus more on syntax, or the logic of grammar, as we complete our Progymnasmata exercises. Syntax is taught primarily with Warriner's, supplemented with lots and lots of diagramming. If I have a class that is weak in grammar or syntax, then we spend time working on those areas. These grades four through nine correspond at Whitefield with the Grammar and Logic years. With the tenth grade we begin Rhetoric, and the skills learned with the Progymnasmata will allow us to effectively

imitate the great communicators of the West. Over these three years we move from apprentice writers to journeyman writers as we imitate the masters.

What comes before fourth grade in kindergarten through third grade? Logically, the task in K-third grade is to prepare students for the Progymnasmata. That is done with a beginning Latin program, supplemented with an English grammar program, lots of memorizing, and lots of reading—reading aloud, reading silently, and being read to by adults. The larger the body of language available to the fourth grader, the easier, and possibly the more thorough, his mastery will be of the Progymnasmata.

There are numerous composition curricula available today. How do we decide which to choose? God has given to man three ways to validate truth: revelation, historical precedence, and logic. In regards to revelation, I have not yet found in Scripture a specific composition curriculum to use. So we must turn to historical precedence. There is one curriculum currently available to us that has a proven track record of success stretching back over two millennia! Nothing else is in the same ballpark. Warriner's stretches back fifty or sixty years at most, which is hardly worth considering, and its track record is spotty at best. There has been some recent work done that may or may not prove helpful over time, but we have only ten or twenty years of experience, and I am not willing to risk my children's or my students' ability to write with a new curriculum when I have one available that has worked for over two thousand years. To my mind, two thousand years is a more impressive and certain record of success.

What about logic? First we should realize that it was faulty inductive logic, colored by the sin of prideful men, that moved Western culture away from the Progymnasmata. This curriculum was actually used at Harvard University for its first thirty years until a clamor arose that more modern methods were necessary to confront the challenges of the seventeenth century. Such reasoning was faulty logic. I believe that with careful study and rigorous assessment, logic will align with historical precedence to declare the Progymnasmata as the best way to teach composition.

I am not willing to risk my children's or my students' ability to write with a new curriculum when I have one available that has worked for over two thousand years.