

The Seven Liberal Arts of Classical Education

The Verbal Arts (Trivium)

1. Grammar
2. Logic
3. Rhetoric

Math Arts (Quadrivium)

1. Arithmetic
2. Music
3. Geometry
4. Astronomy

This article is designed to help understand the curriculum and philosophy of The Classical Academy. TCA is focused on applying the grammar, logic and rhetoric stages of the Trivium to all subject areas.

The three levels (or developmental stages) of the Trivium are a little misleading. Grammar is not limited to “English Grammar,” but is better associated with basic facts and knowledge of any subject matter. All subject areas have basic information that must be grasped before an individual would be able to move on to the next level of competency.

The next level is Logic or understanding. Once basic facts (or content) are mastered, one must understand how facts relate to one other and affect the whole of the subject. This is the stage where all the questions are asked: who, what, when, how, why, where, to what degree and so on.

Finally, after Grammar and Logic, the student is prepared for Rhetoric – original thought. Students at this level have mastered the basic facts, understand the relationships, and are ready to take the subject matter to the next level-forming their own personal interpretation or developing new applications. This is where problem solving and creative thinking emerge. In addition to developing these original thoughts, students are expected to be able to express them in a polished, well-conceived written or verbal format.

The Trivium roughly coincides to: Grammar grades K-6, Logic grades 7-9, and Rhetoric grades 10-12, although portions of each can be found integrated at all levels. The Quadrivium, or the study of “Math Arts,” is the study of individual subjects. This portion of study, while it may begin in the high school years, was traditionally relegated to the university level.

Trivium: Grammar K-6

For centuries Classical Education was the standard. All educational institutions in the western world used this approach. About the turn of the last century, educational fads began to take over public education and the classical approach became passé. In 1947, a British mystery writer named Dorothy Sayers wrote a short essay, "The Lost Tools of Learning," in which her major premise was that students/adults no longer knew how to learn. She believed schools were teaching a disjointed, unconnected flow of facts, not giving the students a logical system by which to organize material and absorb it. We recommend reading this essay; it is brief and insightful. Copies are available in our school library.

Dorothy Sayers refers to the Grammar stage as "Poll-Parrot," because the students love to share what they have learned reciting back, singing little songs and jingles, rhyming words, playing on words as with Doctor Seuss, and so on. They have a wonderful ear for words, which gives rise to their ability to pick up a foreign language. The Grammar student memorizes things very easily and quickly, such as math tables, the periodic table, biological classifications, and the Preamble to the Constitution. Students enjoy learning and will parrot back anything presented in an interactive, fun method. The excitement of learning literally oozes from these children. Educators and parents must work to cultivate this passion for learning and not extinguish it by rushing the student into the next stage.

The website for the Sayers essay: <http://www.gbt.org/text/sayers.html>

Trivium: The Logic or Pert Stage

In about the seventh grade, students enter into the Logic, or as Dorothy Sayers would say, the Pert Stage. Students are no longer interested in just learning facts, now they want more. They want to go deeper into the subject: what, who, where, how, why. No longer content to just know about the Civil War, they want to understand the issues leading up to the firing on Fort Sumter. They want to understand the economics of the war, the state rights issues, and the moral and legal factors that came into play. What was General Lee's strategy at Gettysburg? Why did General Sherman burn everything on his march to the sea? Why did some people hate President Lincoln? As you can see, they ask a lot of questions.

Often times this questioning or, as it may be interpreted, challenging, may come across as being disrespectful. In the hands of a wise teacher the pert stage is very exciting. A teacher must recognize this for what it is; students have moved on to the next stage and are asking to go deeper. The teacher must respond and change the goals from "students will know and be able to answer," to "students will understand and be able to explain." This is not only challenging for the teacher but is extremely rewarding. Students are excited because this is the dawn of a new learning stage that is different, and the teacher is responding to this new demand for additional information. A rich partnership is forged between teacher and students, and a new ownership of their education is accepted. If this fire is fed properly, students will thirst for new material.

It is during the Logic Stage that a curriculum of formal logic is introduced. This has all but disappeared from today's classrooms. Logic is a formal course in seventh and eighth grades. The desired outcome is clear: logical thinking and the ability to separate truth from fiction and fact from theory. Students will also discern what does and does not support an issue and what is relevant and is not relevant in making a correct decision.

This also sets TCA apart. Seventh and eighth graders are doing something that most other students this age in Colorado public schools will not be doing or learning. TCA students are pioneers in raising the standards of education.

Trivium: Rhetoric – The First Harvest

It is during the Rhetoric Stage, or as Dorothy Sayers would say, the Poetic Stage, that teachers view the first glimpse of the fruits of their educational efforts. In this stage, students now hopefully express themselves in polished, well-thought, grammatically-correct spoken and written verse. The Rhetoric Stage should demonstrate the subject content from the Grammar Stage and the organized thought process from the Logic Stage, and introduce the first signs of mature original thought.

Of all the stages this has to be the most exciting! Teachers and parents have been waiting expectantly for students to bring forth new insights to ordinary subject matter they had previously overlooked. Creative thinking, the new approaches to old problems that provide more effective answers, may change the way they process and do things. Remember, creative thinking, problem solving, and new applications do not spring forth from a void but come from the foundation of content and organized thought (grammar and logic).

It is here, for the first time, that students are able and allowed to begin the process of specializing in subject matter of their interests. This does not promote the total elimination of social studies from the science/math student or vice versa. Nor does it permit the students to ignore the finer points of the spoken and written word. But, if a student's interest and ability lies either in the math/science or the liberal arts areas, an emphasis in that area is encouraged.

The Rhetoric Stage climaxes with graduation. TCA proudly graduated its first class in June of 2004!