

The Well-Trained Mind

The “trivium” organizes learning around the maturing capacity of a child’s mind.

By Susan Wise Bauer

When I entered university, I was ahead of the other students, not because of superior mental abilities but because I’d been equipped with a closetful of mental tools. I had been schooled at home by my mother.

The education I received was language-centred, not image-centred; we read and listened and wrote, but we rarely watched. My mother spent the early years of school giving us facts, systematically laying the foundation for advanced study. She taught us to think through arguments, and *then* she taught us how to express ourselves.

This is the classical pattern of the trivium, the three-part process of training the mind.

The first years of schooling are called the **grammar stage** — not because you spend four years doing English but because these are the years in which the building blocks for all other learning are laid, just as grammar is the foundation for language.

In the elementary-school years — grades 1 through 4 — the mind is ready to absorb information. Since children at this age actually find memorization fun, during this period education involves not self-expression and self-discovery, but rather the learning of facts: rules of phonics and spelling, rules of grammar, poems, the vocabulary of foreign languages, the stories of history and literature, descriptions of plants and animals, and the human body, the facts of mathematics, and so forth.

By grade 5, a child’s mind begins to think more analytically. Middle-school students are less interested in finding out facts than in asking “Why?” The second phase of classical education, the **logic stage**, is a time when the child begins to pay attention to cause and effects, to the relationships among different fields of knowledge, to the way facts fit together into a logical framework.

A student is ready for the logic stage when the capacity for abstract thought begins to mature. During these years, the student learns algebra and logic, and begins to apply logic to all academic subjects.

The logic of writing, for example, includes paragraph construction and support of a thesis; the logic of reading involves the criticism and analysis of texts, not simple absorption of information; the logic of history demands that the student find out why the War of 1812 was fought, rather than simply reading its story; the logic of science requires the child to learn the scientific method.

The final phase of a classical education, the **rhetoric stage**, builds on the first two. At this point, the high school student learns to write and speak with force and originality. The student of rhetoric applies the rules of logic learned in middle school to the foundational information learned in the early grades and expresses her conclusions in clear, forceful, elegant language.

The student also begins to specialize in whatever branch of knowledge attracts her; these are the years for art camps, college courses, foreign travel, apprenticeships, and other forms of specialized learning.

A classical education is more than just a pattern of learning, though. First, it is *language-focused*: learning is accomplished through words, written and spoken, rather than through images (pictures, videos, and television). Why is it important?

Language learning and image learning require very different habits of thought. Language requires the mind to work harder; in reading, the brain is forced to translate a symbol (words on the page) into a concept. Images, such as those on videos and television, allow the mind to be passive. Faced with the written page, the mind is required to roll its sleeves up and get to work.

Second, a classical education follows a specific three-part pattern: the mind must be first supplied with facts and images, then given the logical tools for organization of those facts and images, and finally equipped to express conclusions.

Third, to the classical mind, all knowledge is interrelated. Astronomy, for example, isn’t studied in isolation; it’s learned along with the history of scientific discovery, which leads into the church’s relationship to science and from there to the intricacies of medieval church history. The reading of the *Odyssey* allows the student to consider Greek history, the nature of heroism, the development of the epic, and humankind’s understanding of the divine.

This is easier said than done. The world is full of knowledge, and finding the links between fields of study can be a mind-twisting task. A classical education meets this challenge by taking history as its organizing outline, beginning with the ancients and progressing forward to the moderns in history, science, literature, art, and music.

Systematic study allows the student to join what Mortimer J. Adler calls the “Great Conversation:” the ongoing conversation of great minds down through the ages. Much modern education is so eclectic that the student has little opportunity to make connections between past events and the flood of current information.

I am constantly grateful to my mother for my education. It gave me an immeasurable head start, the independence to innovate and work on my own, confidence in my ability to compete in the job market, and the mental tools to build a satisfying career.

(Adapted with permission from The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home. www.welltrainedmind.com. Ms. Bauer is a novelist, as well as adjunct faculty at the College of William and Mary.)