

# What is Classical Education?

It is an effort to recover the educational methods and standards of the past. Classical education is a conscious return to the ancient goal of education: teaching children to think and learn for themselves by imparting to them the tools of learning. It is an approach to education that is rooted in the ancient medieval concept of the *Trivium*. The Trivium is comprised of three basic tools of learning; **Grammar** (the tool of knowledge), **Logic** (the tool of reasoning) and **Rhetoric** (the tool of communication and expression). **The Trivium can be viewed as (1) An approach to subjects, (2) An approach to students, and (3) A set of subjects.**

Trivium Category	An Approach to Subjects	An Approach to Students	A Set of Subjects
<b>Grammar</b>	Mastery of fundamental facts and rules	Elementary Age: Concrete thinkers Information sponges Memorization comes naturally	Grammar (Formal study of word usage & language structure. Studied in English & Latin.)
<b>Logic</b>	Training in comprehension and sound reasoning skills	Middle School Age: Beginning to think abstractly. Growth of analytical thinking abilities	Logic (The study of the science of sound reasoning and argumentation.)
<b>Rhetoric</b>	Development of communication, expression and application skills	High School Age: Abstract thinkers Interest in self-expression, communication and creativity	Rhetoric (The study of the effective use of language in speech and writing.)

The Trivium can function\* as an approach to subjects, an approach to students, and as a set of subjects. Subjects are studied by dividing them into their natural parts for learning (knowledge: grammar, reasoning/analysis: logic, and expression/communication: rhetoric). As an approach to students, the Trivium is applied to the natural stages of cognitive development in children. The Trivium is also a set of subjects that are studied extensively in classical education.

The Trivium made up the first three “arts” or subjects of the *Seven Liberal Arts*. The *Seven Liberal Arts* were the essential subjects in a medieval classical education. The first three liberal arts (grammar, logic, rhetoric) focused on the study of language. The last four liberal arts, the “Quadrivium,” focused on the study of numbers or mathematics. The four “arts” of the Quadrivium were Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, and Astronomy (mathematics of pure numbers, mathematics of time in sounds, mathematics of spatial dimensions, and the mathematics of the heavens--space and time). Classical Christian schools often refer to the “*Liberal Arts and Sciences*” since they have expanded the concept of the Quadrivium to include mathematics and serious study of the hard sciences (e.g. biology, chemistry & physics). A thorough “liberal arts” education provides a student with an exceptional foundation in both language (grammar, writing, literature, Latin, etc.) AND math & science (algebra, geometry, biology, chemistry, etc).

The terms “classical education” and “liberal arts education” are somewhat synonymous, but each refers to a different aspect of the education offered in classical Christian schools. *Classical* refers to a commitment to traditional, long-established, exemplary forms and standards handed down from the ancients (Greek, Roman, and medieval educators). *Liberal arts* refers more to purpose and content. In antiquity, the *liberal arts* denoted the education “worthy of a free man” (Latin: *liber*, “free”), as distinct

from the education proper to a slave or trade laborer. The purpose of a *liberal arts* education, as taught in its historic Christian framework, is to instruct the student in clear and logical thinking, persuasive communication, and independent learning. Its purpose is also to impart broad general knowledge, and inculcate a love and discernment for truth, goodness and beauty. The content for achieving these purposes is a substantive and rigorous curricula built around the core academic disciplines of theology (Bible), literature, languages (primarily Latin and/or Greek), philosophy, history, mathematics, and science. This is very different from the specialized and technical curricula designed for the vocational and professional purposes that guide most contemporary secondary and university programs. The purpose of a *liberal arts* education is to shape a particular kind of human --in preparation for life. The purpose of much modern education is to merely train one for a profession --in preparation for a job.

*\*The first two functions, an approach to subjects and an approach to students, were articulated by the British scholar, Dorothy Sayers, in her 1947 essay, “The Lost Tools of Learning.” They constitute her understanding or “insight” as to how the medieval Trivium could be applied to education today. The third function of the Trivium, a set of subjects, is how ancient educators typically understood the Trivium.*

The contents of this document are drawn from numerous publications on Classical Christian Education including Douglas Wilson, *The Case for Classical Christian Education*, Robert Littlejohn & Charles Evans, *Wisdom and Eloquence*, Dorothy Sayers, *The Lost Tools of Learning*, and Gregg Strawbridge, *Classical and Christian Education*.

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## How does Classical Christian Education differ from Modern/Contemporary Education?

	MODERN/CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION*	CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION
PHONICS	Some instruction in how letters work together to form sounds (traditional phonics instruction), but often emphasizes look/say & whole language.	Emphasizes mastery of how letters work together to form sounds.
READING	Uses a mix of basal readers and popular trade books. Less use of classic children's literature.	Student begins reading substantive classic children's literature as soon as he is able and progresses to the "Great Books."
SPELLING	Less emphasis on formal rules. In some extreme cases, may allow or promote inventive spelling.	Rule-guided, prescriptive, taught as application of the formal rules of phonics. If it's not right, it's wrong.
GRAMMAR	Less emphasis on formal rules and explicit direct instruction. More accepting of popular usage conventions, even in formal writing.	Direct instruction on the structure and function of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences with the goal of understanding how "language" functions. Strong commitment to "proper grammar." Grammar and language concepts mastered through the study of English and Latin.
MATHEMATICS	Emphasizes abstract concepts above rote learning of math facts, tables, rules, etc.	Emphasizes mastery of facts, rules, tables, etc., repetitive drills to make math processes habitual, as well as conceptual grasp of numbers, patterns and math processes.
SCIENCE	Based on naturalism and rationalism rooted in Darwinian assumptions.	Based on Biblical Theism rooted in presupposition that God is the Creator, Orderer, and Sustainer of the universe.
BIBLE	Explicit teaching of Bible is generally discouraged or prohibited. If taught, study is limited to "Bible as literature." Truthfulness and usefulness of the Bible is minimized.	Emphasizes systematic Bible reading, study and application. Scripture is viewed as living Word of God.
HISTORY	Multi-cultural influences lead to ignorance of achievements of Western Civilization. Revisionism is often used to support vogue ideological agendas. Traditional approaches to study of history commonly replaced by "Social Studies" –the study of the various aspects of the sociological dynamics of the masses.	Emphasizes history as having purpose because it is the work of God's providence. Holds that our Western heritage should be understood, and unless at variance with Scripture, appreciated. Focuses on the sequence and cause-and-effect relationships between events and the actions and ideas of individuals and nations.
RHETORIC/ SPEECH	Emphasis on subjective creativity and self-expression, as opposed to the more rigorous and objective discipline of wordsmithing. Emphasizes presentation over content.	Teaches student to recognize and use formal structures of persuasion and presentation (the science of Rhetoric).
THINKING/ LOGIC SKILLS	Promotes expression of student's own personal subjective opinion, along with whatever reasons he may have for holding it. The end goal tends to be self-expression as opposed to discovery of the truth.	Emphasizes real difference between truth and validity. Teaches student to identify fallacies of form and distraction. The end goal is objective truth –Logic as science.
LANGUAGE/ LATIN	Foreign languages, while often required, are taught only for practical or multicultural/diversity reasons. Latin instruction is rare and is usually viewed as irrelevant.	Languages are taught to develop intellectual discipline. Practical benefits are secondary (e.g. high SAT scores). Latin is seen as a foundation for precise thinking, English vocabulary, appreciation of classical culture, and of course, et cetera.
LITERATURE	General tendency is to bring books down to level of the contemporary student –books that will entertain and not overwhelm a limited vocabulary, cultural seclusion, and a reluctance to read what may be unfamiliar or difficult. Reading choices often governed by multi-cultural sensitivities. Some instructors may use postmodern deconstructive approaches that stress the reader's subjective biases and ideologies in which each reader produces his own meaning.	Object is to bring student up to the level of great and classical literature, to teach appreciation for challenging books of all ages. Reading choices governed by quality of writing and classic themes. Literature is studied from Biblical worldview perspective using traditional methods of plot, theme, structure, and character analysis in order to objectively understand the author's intent. The original author produces meaning.
EXTRA- CURRICULAR ATHLETICS	Subject to idolatrous views of the body and physical fitness. Often prioritizes sports programs at expense of academics – sometimes the "tail wags the dog."	Strives to neither worship nor have contempt for the body and physical fitness. Recognizes biblical value of bodily discipline and exercise, but does not subject academic standards to demands of sports programs.
END GOAL/ PURPOSE	Preparation for a profession, career, employment. Produce a student who is competitive in the job market. "Vocationalizes" education, training students primarily to function in the economy. Little or no concern for the soul of the student. Education is essentially a secular utilitarian endeavor.	Produce a well-educated, articulate, eloquent, wise human being equipped for a meaningful and godly life. Develop intellectual skills that are transferable to the learning of any subject or craft. Nurtures the soul as well as the mind. Education is preparatory for this life and for eternity. Seeks to produce students who know and love Christ in all they do.

\*Although there are certainly exceptions to these statements in many public and private schools, these statements are fair descriptions of the general trends in contemporary approaches to education. This comparison is an expanded and adapted version of a chart from Douglas Wilson, *A Classical Education Provides a Timeless Introduction to Knowledge*, 1993.