

The Progymnasmata

Ancient teachers of Rhetoric used a long set of exercises that have come to be known as progymnasmata. Details varied from teacher to teacher, but there is a remarkable degree of uniformity. Many of the exercises are still taught by modern teachers (and modern textbooks), though often without the classical terminology. The traditional arrangement was as follows:

1. Fable.
2. Narrative.
3. Anecdote/Cheria.
4. Proverb/Maxim.
5. Refutation.
6. Confirmation.
7. Commonplace.
8. Encomium/Panegyric.
9. Vituperation/Invective.
10. Comparison.
11. Impersonation/Characterization.
12. Description.
13. Theme/Thesis.
14. Propose/defend/attack a law.

However, for this class, we will break down the assignments as follows (each will be discussed in greater detail during the semester):

For the Notebook

Retelling (either):

- Fable.
- Narrative.

Explaining/amplifying (either):

- Anecdote/Cheria.
- Proverb/Maxim.

Visualizing (either):

- Impersonation/Characterization.
- Description.

Structuring:

- Comparison.

For the Portfolio

Epidictic argument—praise or blame?

(One of the these):

- Commonplace.
- Encomium/Panegyric.
- Vituperation/Invective.

Forensic argument—what happened?

(Either of these):

- Refutation.
- Confirmation.

Political argument—what to do?

(Either of these):

- Theme/Thesis.
- Propose/defend/attack a law.

Fable.

Amplify one of Aesop's fables, turning indirect discourse into direct discourse, adopting a different point of view, or altering the chronological presentation (beginning *in media res* or using flashback for instance).

Study the following versions of the same story, noting differences in point of view, tense, type of discourse, etc.

The Ants and the Grasshopper by Aesop.

(Translated, original version):

THE ANTS were spending a fine winter's day drying grain collected in the summertime. A grasshopper, perishing with famine, passed by and earnestly begged for a little food. The ants inquired of him, "Why did you not treasure up food during the summer?" He replied, "I had not leisure enough. I passed the days in singing." They then said in derision: "If you were foolish enough to sing all the summer, you must dance supperless to bed in the winter."

Third person, major character:

Weary in every limb, a solitary ant tugged over the snow a piece of corn he had stored up last summer. *It would taste might good at dinner tonight.* It was then that *he noticed* a grasshopper, looking cold

and hungry, standing beside the path.

“Please, friend ant, may I have a bite of your corn?” asked the grasshopper.

The ant looked the grasshopper up and down. “What were you doing all last summer?” He asked. *He knew its kind.*

“I sang from dawn to dark,” replied the grasshopper.

“Well,” said the ant, hardly bothering to conceal his contempt, “since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter.”

Omniscient Narrator:

Weary in every limb, the ant tugged over the snow the piece of corn he had stored up last summer. It would taste mighty good at dinner tonight.

A grasshopper, *feeling very cold and hungry*, looked on from beside the path. Finally *he could bear it no longer.*

“Please, friend ant, may I have a bite of your corn?” he asked.

The ant looked the grasshopper up and down. “What where you doing all last summer?” he asked. He knew its kind.

“I sang from dawn to dark,” replied the grasshopper, *fondly remembering the warm sun and the tall, golden grass.*

“Well,” said the ant, hardly bothering to conceal his contempt, “since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter.”

First person, major character:

Cold and hungry, I watched the fat ant tugging a huge piece of corn over the snow. My feelers twitched, and I was conscious of a tic in my left hind leg. My stomach churned and my mouth watered at the sight of that succulent piece of corn. Finally I could bear it no longer. “Please, friend ant,” I asked politely, “may I have a bite of your corn?”

He glared at me. “What were you doing all last summer?” he asked, rather smugly it seemed to me.

“I sang from dawn to dark,” I said innocently, remembering the happy times.

“Well,” he said with a priggish sneer, since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter.”

Third Person, dramatic:

An ant tugged a large piece of corn over the soft, new fallen snow. He was perspiring in spite of the cold. Beside the path stood a grasshopper, its feelers twitching. He watched the ant for some time.

“Please, friend ant,” he said, “may I have a bite of your corn?”

The ant seemed to study the grasshopper for a moment. “What where you doing all last summer?” he snapped.

“I sang from dawn to dark.”

“Well,” said the ant, as a faint smile crept over his face, “since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter.”

First person, minor character (frame tales structure):

It was a beastly cold afternoon. I always seem to get guard duty on the coldest days. A little after three o’clock Macpherson came over the hill, lugging a piece of that corn from storeroom B over in Swan Creek Valley. He was mumbling to himself. “What’s the matter, Laddie?” I asked him. “The cold numb your brain?”

“Huh? Oh, it’s you, Angus. I just had a run in with one of those good-for-nothing grasshoppers. May they all rot. There I was, bringing home this bit of corn for tonight’s dinner, thinking how good it would go with a bit of ale, when this ragged bum comes up and puts the bite on me for my corn.

‘Please,’ he says, as sweet as honey, ‘could you spare a bit of corn?’ I tell you, Angus, he absolutely

reeked. He probably drinks up every penny he gets. So I asked him, ‘What’d you do all last summer?’ I knew the type. Real proud like he says, ‘I’m a musician. I sang and played the whole summer, from dawn to dark.’ Hah! A Musician! You might have known it! ‘Well,’ I said to him, ‘since you’re such a talented fellow, you can just dance away the winter.’”

“You really put him in his place, Mac. They’re all a useless bunch.”

“They certainly are, Laddie,” he said. “Say, I better get this corn inside now. Time is money you know.”

“Right you are,” I said, and I held the door open for him as he carried the corn inside.

Third person, dramatic (play script):

Grasshopper: Please, friend ant, may I have a bite of your corn?

Ant: What where you doing all last summer?

Grasshopper: I sang from dawn to dark.

Ant: Well, since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter.

Third person, dramatic (movie script):

Scene 12

[Note to costume department: Ant should have ragged, working class clothing with a slight eastern European flavor suggesting the oppressed proletariat. Ant should be slightly over dressed in a heavy coat. Clothing should be dark, conservative, and new.]

[Note to properties department: provide a stolen shopping cart, full of papers and cans for grasshopper]

(Open: wide-angle lens from tree top, looking down through bare branches. Wind machine on low, swirling snow softly to emphasize barrenness of landscape. Camera: Narrow focus down through branches to a grasshopper behind a screen of brush beside a path. Close up on face. Shift to medium length to show grasshopper’s ragged clothing. Close up shot on feet to show ragged, inadequate shoes. Shift to wide angle behind the grasshopper to show an ant approaching, carrying corn.)

(Close up on grasshopper’s face)

Grasshopper: Please, friend ant, may I have a bite of your corn?

(Shift to medium length lens to show all of ant, emphasizing his sturdy winter clothing, heavy snow boots, and generally healthy, well-fed appearance.)

(Close up on ant’s face)

Ant: What where you doing all last summer?

(Close up on Grasshopper’s face)

Grasshopper: I sang from dawn to dark.

(Close up on ant’s face)

Ant: Well, since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter.

(Close up on grasshopper’s face, alternating with wide angle as the ant walks away. End with widening shot of grasshopper, pulling the camera back up in the reverse of the opening shot).

Third Person, omniscient (epic poem style, dactylic hexameter):

Formicae Gryllique.

Once through the winter’s wind trudged a black ant in the snow where the blizzard’s blast
Hard from the Northland blew, cutting his soul’s fire, while grim with resolve he
Bore up his burden, a great piece of corn he had stored for the winter’s feast,
Safe from the specter of death by starvation, a river of bounty for
All of his children till Spring with her blessings should break forth with blossoms.

There by the roadside stood a wayfarer, a singer of songs and a Chanter of Odes to the bounty of summer, now wracked with despair and Twisted with hunger pangs. Oh, how his soul burned with memories of tall grass and Winds that were warm, scented sweetly like fine wine, like perfumes from Asia. "Please," he implored the laboring insect, "I beg you for mercy, the Smallest of crumbs, which you in your great wealth surely could spare me, for I am an artist, a singer of sweet songs, now fallen on hard times and Dying of hunger." The ant looked him over and sneered with contempt, "Go dance for your supper you free-thinking liberal. I'll not give a dime to a Bum who won't work. It is people of your type who screw up the country, who Don't understand the least thing about money. You're useless. You're hopeless; you Ought to be shot." And the ant turned his back on the grieving grasshopper and Went on his way without any remorseful thoughts, sure of his judgment.

Narrative.

Take a factual or fictional story from the poets or historians and retell it in their own words, attempting to be clear as to the facts:

- Who did it?
- What was done?
- When it was done?
- Where it was done?
- How it was done?
- Why it was done?

For example, retell the story of Theseus and the Minotaur as though you were reporting it for a newspaper account or as though it were copy for the morning news report on TV. Keep your story to 250 words or less. Other stories you might consider would be such things as the following:

- One of the Theban plays by Sophocles (such as *Oedipus the King* or *Antigone*).
- *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus.
- The story of Odysseus on the island of Circe.
- The assassination of Caesar.
- The trial of Socrates.
- The Crucifixion of Jesus.
- The revolt of the Maccabees.
- The fall of Masada.
- The Children's Crusade.
- The execution of Savonarola.

At the top of the page, explain who is telling the story to what audience.

Anecdote/Cheria.

("A concise exposition of some memorable saying or deed, generally for good counsel"—Hermogenes.) Example:

How wise was the great Isocrates when he said that we ought not show ourselves intolerant toward that power which, of all the faculties which belong to the nature of man, is the source of most of our blessings. For he rightly observed that none of the things which are done with intelligence take place without the help of speech, but that in all our actions as well as in all our thoughts speech is our guide, and is most employed by those who have the most wisdom. We may go so far as to say that speech (that is, the power of language) is the essential feature of humanity, the gift that gives humans power over their environment (and themselves) and the tool by which all scientific, artistic, and political achievements are made. Indeed, we see in Isocrates a clear understanding of the later

words of Aristotle, "Man is a rational animal." We must never neglect the power of our words, lest we deny our own humanity.

Instead of a saying, a specific action or noble deed done by some famous person could be used, when the action demonstrates some element of wisdom that others should emulate.

Traditionally students were expected to do some combination of the following:

- Praise the original speaker or doer, or praise the saying or deed itself.
- Paraphrase of the theme.
- If possible explain why this was said or done.
- Show a contrast to the saying or deed.
- Compare the saying or deed to some other saying or deed.
- Give an example of the truth or value of the saying or deed.
- Support the saying or deed with testimony of others.
- Conclude with a brief epilog or conclusion

Proverb/Maxim.

Very similar to the cheria exercise above except that it is usually some common saying familiar to most people within a specific culture. It may be attributable to someone, as in the case of many Biblical Proverbs attributed to Solomon. Generally the saying is meant to persuade or dissuade some action ("people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones," "wake up and smell the coffee").

Obviously the book of Proverbs in the Bible provides a ready source of proverbs from ancient Hebrew culture. Other good sources would be such things as Bartlett's Familiar Quotations.

There were a wide variety of elements to the exercise, most of which can be applied to the Cheria exercise as well:

- Praise the saying.
- Paraphrase or summarize the saying.
- Explain why it was said.
- Provide a comparison or contrast.
- Give an example of the meaning.
- Support the saying with ancient or expert testimony.

Refutation.

Some texts combine the Refutation exercise with the following Confirmation exercise under one heading. Classical Refutation exercises challenged the credibility of a myth or legend. Generally, it is pointless to refute that which is obviously untrue, although for exercise purposes this is sometimes done. As an exercise, however, the refutation, will involve something almost everyone accepts as true.

The traditional exercise usually focused on a myth or legend and used the following instructions:

- Condemn the teller, source, or subject of the story.
- Summarize the story.
- Refute the story using the following topics.
- The story is vague, obscure or uncertain.
- The story is implausible or incredible.
- The story is illogical and impossible.
- The story is inconsistent.
- The story is improper or unfitting.
- The story leads to something unprofitable or inexpedient.

Refute a commonly believed story or legend from American history.

Confirmation.

Confirmation is the opposite of the previous exercise. Again, it is usually pointless to argue something, which is obviously true (that is, there's no need to argue that water is wet). For purposes of exercise, on the other hand, people will often attempt to confirm what most people believe to be false.

The traditional confirmation exercise usually focused on a myth or legend and used the following instructions:

- Praise the teller, source, or subject of the story.
- Summarize the story.
- Confirm the story using the following topics.
 - The story is clear, manifest, obvious.
 - The story is probable.
 - The story is logical.
 - The story is consistent and coherent.
 - The story is fitting and proper.
 - The story leads to something profitable, beneficial, and expedient.

Confirm a legend or story from American history.

Commonplace.

First, it is important not to confuse this "Commonplace" exercise with the list of "commonplaces" (common topics) associated with rhetorical discovery. The basic subject involved here is vice and virtue, or perhaps some commonly held belief about vice and virtue. The usual approach is to amplify the evils inherent in something (such as gambling, drinking, adultery, treason, tyranny) or to condemn persons who participate in such activities (against the gambler, against the drunkard, etc.).

The Commonplace exercise requires you to argue against a common vice or to condemn a type of person exhibiting that vice, employing (where possible) the following steps:

1. Begin with the contrary or a contradiction (for example "It is clear from the profits of our local casinos that most people see no real harm in gambling.").
2. Compare something better to what is attacked.
3. Introduce a proverb, maxim, quotation, or principle that upbraids the motivation (intent) of the doer of the deed.
4. Employ a digression with a defamatory conjecture as to the past life of the person accused. That is, examine and reject whatever motives the person may have.
5. Repudiate the idea of taking pity on such a person.
6. Consider the following headings in discussing this virtue or vice:
 - a. Legality.
 - b. Justice.
 - c. Expediency.
 - d. Practicability.
 - e. Decency.
 - f. Consequences.

Encomium.

Encomium is an expression of praise. Subjects include persons, things (such as abstract ideas), times (as the seasons), places, animals, and growing things, either general or specific. Some of the most famous encomia involve persons. As an exercise, students might produce encomia dealing with persons not necessarily held in high esteem.

Ancient teachers of rhetoric listed several dozen possible points of praise. You might include the following:

1. An introduction/prologue with an announcement of the thing or person to be praised.
2. Description/exposition of the person's origins:
 - a. People.
 - b. Country.
 - c. Ancestors.
 - d. Parents.
3. Description/exposition of the person's education and interests:
 - a. Education.
 - b. Instruction in art.
 - c. Training in laws.
4. Description/exposition of the person's virtues (achievements, deeds, strength, beauty, etc.).
5. Make a favorable comparison or contrast to someone else to escalate your praise.
6. Conclude with an epilogue including either an exhortation to your hearers to emulate this person, or a prayer.
7. Obviously if one is praising a thing rather than a person, these points would have to be modified somewhat. Still, the value, beauty, usefulness, results, etc., would be topics of praise.

Vituperation/Invective.

Invective is the opposite of encomium and is very similar to the "Commonplace" exercise except that it involves someone or something specific rather than a general vice. Condemnation would involve the same points as praise.

Comparison.

The exercise of Comparison involves the juxtaposition of two subjects side by side, showing one to be better than the other (double encomium), one to be worse than the other (double invective), or one to be good and the other bad (encomium combined with invective). Subjects may be the same as those involved in encomium and invective, but often included historical, legendary, or fictitious characters. Some famous comparisons involve comparison of Achilles with Hector and Demosthenes with Cicero.

Specific details for the comparison assignment will be given separately.

Impersonation/Characterization.

Impersonation involves the imitation of the character (ethos) of a person. Traditionally the student was required to compose "lines" (a speech, a conversation, a dramatic monologue) a character, real or imaginary, alive or dead, to speak under given circumstances. One way to do this is to invent a conversation using direct speech that fits the character of the speaker in a specific circumstance. The Poet Robert Browning is especially noted for his skill at such dramatic monologues in which a character speaks directly to some specific audience. Novelists obviously create many characters, each with unique personalities. Writing such an impersonation often involves a good understanding of history, culture, and psychology—not to mention a good ear for language patterns.

Classically, impersonation had three approaches:

- Character—the presentation of a known person (often speaking in a specific situation—what would the poet Milton have to say to Rap artist Eminem if they met in a fast food restaurant?).
- Image—the presentation of the ghost or spirit of a known person, perhaps unable to speak in a normal, conversational sense. (Imagine the ghost of Johann Sebastian Bach hovering along the outside of the crowd at a Jazz concert).

- Person—the presentation of an entirely created personality.
- Specific details for this assignment will be given in class.

Description.

Description is a common exercise in beginning writing classes. Basically, it is the attempt to present through language a distinct view of something. Descriptions may involve persons, events, actions, places, objects, etc. Students writing descriptions should keep in mind, first, sensory details (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures) and, second, some sense of orderly presentation (top to bottom, left to right, clockwise, etc.).

Generally, it is best to focus on something specific. That is, rather than trying to describe California, describe the bus station in San Francisco.

For this assignment, select a place that somehow represents "civilization" to you. Describe a place which

1. **is room sized** (that is, able to be seen from a single vantage point, though it need not be inside a building)
2. **is real** (that is, capable of being seen by normal human beings without the aid of drugs or astral projection)
3. is expressive of some aspect of human nature or the human condition, such as
 - a. **museum**
 - b. **church, synagogue, mosque**
 - c. **library**
 - d. **cemetery**
 - e. **courtroom**
 - f. **jail**

Use the following steps to help you:

1. **Study** the place carefully. Write a one-sentence thesis statement that expresses the dominant "mood" or impression of the place, or a claim about what the place demonstrates about the human condition. (**Select** the specific details that demonstrate the truth of the thesis statement.)
2. **Arrange** the details into some meaningful order (top to bottom, left to right, front to back, etc.); provide the necessary transitions and connections to enable the reader to visualize the location of everything.
3. **Express** the details in clear, vivid, exact terms, using direct, active voice sentences (try to avoid using "there is"/"there are" constructions, excessive "to be" constructions, and passive voice constructions).

Classically, students were encouraged to employ many figures of speech in their descriptions. However, they had previously been taught a great deal about the subject of "style" (diction, sentence patterns, and metaphorical language). So, instead, you should focus on literalness of your description, presenting what it IS rather than what it is LIKE.

Theme/Thesis.

The term "thesis" here should be distinguished from the modern term "thesis statement." In this context of the progymnasmata, the term is used for the entire argument rather than just the specific claim to be established. Ancient teachers of rhetoric established a great many subtypes of this exercise, distinguishing, for example, the question "Should a student study Rhetoric" from the more specific "Should Thomas study Rhetoric." Issues involving human activities ("should a city build walls?") were distinguished from theoretical questions considered by the mind alone ("Is Heaven spherical?")

Follow the structure of the classical argument.

1. Begin with an Introduction ("Exordium").
2. Express your claim as concisely as possible ("Narratio").
3. Present your confirmatory arguments (reasons, examples, testimony—that is evidence that supports your claim).
4. Consider possible points of opposition (provide refutation, conciliation, compromise as needed)
5. Conclude with your Peroration.

In proceeding, consider arguments based on the following:

6. Legality.
7. Justice.
8. Expediency.
9. Practicability.
10. Decency.
11. Consequences.

(Specific details for this assignment will be given during class)

Propose/defend/attack a law.

Various ancient teachers emphasized different approaches to defending or attacking proposed or existing laws. Some of the points to be considered include the following:

1. Constitutionality/legality.
2. Clarity and consistency.
3. Justice, fairness.
4. Expediency.
5. Enforceability.
6. Practicability.
7. Decency.
8. Consequences.

The structure of your argument should be similar to that of the "thesis" exercise above.

1. Begin with an Introduction ("Exordium").
2. Express your claim as concisely as possible ("Narratio")
3. Present your confirmatory arguments (reasons, examples, testimony—that is evidence that supports your claim). (Confirmation)
4. Consider possible points of opposition (provide refutation, conciliation, compromise as needed). (Refutation)
5. Conclude with your Peroration.

In proceeding, consider arguments based on the following:

1. Constitutionality/legality.
2. Clarity and consistency.
3. Justice, fairness.
4. Expediency.
5. Enforceability.
6. Practicability.
7. Decency.
8. Consequences.

(Specific details for this assignment will be given during class)