

# The Trivium

The three arts of language: grammar, logic, and rhetoric.

The trivium is the liberal arts that involve language. We must not forget that, according to ancient and medieval understanding, the ability to use language goes hand in hand with the ability to reason and think; his ability to reason and speak sets man apart from animals. The curriculum of the trivium is grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and classical schools implement these three in a variety of ways.

The three subjects in the trivium are, first, courses of study. Grammar involves learning the fundamentals of a language and how to use it properly. In the Middle Ages and early modern era, this language was Latin, which, because it was simple to learn, was the universal language of communication and scholarship in the West well into the modern era. Logic (dialectic) trains a person in good reasoning so they properly understand questions and make good arguments; the study of logic is built on formal logic, allowing a person to follow the logic of an argument. This is why many classical schools embrace **Socratic discussion**. Rhetoric teaches a student to winsomely and persuasively convey their ideas to others, whether in writing or speech. Classical schools make an effort to teach these three subjects because they train reasoning and language skills.

Many classical schools organize grade levels into grammar school (k-6th), logic school (7th-8th/9th), and rhetoric school (9th-12th). This comes from Dorothy Sayers' astute observation that these three subjects are especially well suited to the developmental stages of a child. Young children enjoy memorizing facts and rules (grammar), junior high students become argumentative and want to know why things are the way they are (logic), and older students begin to be capable of expressing themselves in meaningful ways (rhetoric). Although these developmental stages may be useful, they are not exclusive. Many classical educators also apply the principles of grammar, logic, and rhetoric to other subjects. For instance, the grammar of history might be facts and information, the logic might be making historical arguments and conclusions, and the rhetoric might be presenting or writing about a topic. Most teachers look to teach grammar, logic, and rhetoric in every subject.

# The Quadrivium

The four arts of mathematics or numbers: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music.

The quadrivium, in order: arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy.

The quadrivium involves mathematics: reasoning with numbers and quantities. The four subjects that the medievals categorized under mathematics were arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Today, arithmetic and geometry are considered mathematical, although astronomy and music might seem out of place. The classical art of arithmetic dealt less with rote computation than with finding number patterns and number theory. Geometry, too, was less about plugging in the proper equation than about understanding magnitudes and doing proofs to understand and deduce equations for oneself. The ancients and medievals considered astronomy a subject of the same sort because it involved meticulous observation and calculation to predict the movements of the stars. Music as math may sound foreign to us today, but the Greeks believed music was what numbers did in space and time because harmony, the key to music, deals in proportions. Today, we tend to think of math primarily as a practical tool, but early Greek mathematicians like Pythagoras thought more highly of mathematics, believing it offered theoretical keys to understanding the world. Because the medievals and ancients thought of mathematics abstractly and theoretically, they learned it by figuring out for themselves how equations worked. The quadrivium was considered a liberal art because it was an exercise in logic, reasoning, and thinking, rather than in rote imitation.

“The study of arithmetic is endowed with much praise, since the Lord, maker of things, arranged the universe by number, weight, and measure.... Although we can call all teaching theoretical, [the word ‘theoretical’] applies particularly to mathematics because of its excellence.” ~ Cassiodorus, *Institutes of Divine and Secular Learning*, Book II.3-4”