

WHAT ARE THE PROGYMNASMATA?

The ancient Greeks prepared their grammar school stage students for participation as citizens at the Heliaia, or people's court, by having them work on a series of writing exercises called the progymnasmata. These preliminary exercises increased in length and complexity as the student advanced.

The progymnasmata provide a firm foundation for imitation of great writers. Through these imitations students are introduced to a variety of writing skills which will help them learn how good writing works and will help them express their own ideas.

Below is an outline of the exercises compiled by the Greek rhetorician Aphthonius, in the 4th Century B.C.

EXPRESSIVE WRITING

1. **Narrative:** Analyzing and imitating short narratives from history and mythology, identifying the components, attributes and modes of a narrative. Practice in condensing, expanding and slanting narratives using vivid diction, imagery, dialogue, and credible details.
2. **Description (Ekphrasis):** Learning to create vivid descriptions of people, things, places, time, and actions. Learning to order the details of description. Examining the role of sentence variety in writing style. Identifying the different types of sentences.
3. **Fable:** Examining fable structure. Manipulating fables to be condensed, expanded, slanted. Presenting a fable inductively as well as deductively.

EXPOSITORY WRITING

4. **Proverb:** Studying maxims and sententia, and identifying their themes. Using a proverb as a component of an essay to relate to personal experience or a modern issue.
5. **Anecdote (Chreia):** Using a story about a famous person to illustrate a point in an essay. Identifying verbal, action and mixed anecdotes and their uses.
6. **Encomium and Invective:** Praising or blaming a given subject, usually a person. Controlling levels of English usage, analyzing uses of pathos, ethos and logos.
7. **Comparison:** Comparing a given subject with another subject. Practice using techniques of transition.
8. **Common topic (Commonplace):** Explaining the good or evil that a person represents.
9. **Speech-in-Character (êthopoia):** Inventing dialogue which a given person might have made on a specified occasion. Chronology of progression of ideas.
10. **Confirmation and Refutation:** Arguing for or against an issue in question. Analyzing the truth of a statement. Inventing and arranging arguments according to probability and clarity. Identifying biased and fallacious statements.
11. **Thesis:** Inquiring through reason into a debatable question, which argues a general point. Writing and supporting a thesis statement.
12. **Proposal of law:** Arguing for or against a legislative proposal. This we save for the Advanced Placement United States Government class.

Progymnasmata uses models of writing, written only by the very best writers, such as:

Ovid -- master of description

Plutarch -- moral biography

Shakespeare -- encomium, invective, speech-in-character

Benjamin Franklin -- technique

Charles Dickens -- irony and characterization

Winston Churchill -- pathos, ethos, logos

Martin Luther King - rhetorical devices

Tony Blair -- commonplace

The two year Progymnasmata class focuses on the following aspects of writing throughout the study of the genres:

- role of diction, sentence variety, and rhetorical devices in writing style
- uses of pathos, ethos and logos in rhetoric
- ways to generate ideas and arrange them in an effective progression
- role of the audience in determining purpose and style
- the importance of delivery
- the essential attributes of clarity, brevity and credibility