

## WHAT ARE THE PROGYMNASMATA? (AND WHAT ARE WE DOING IN THIS CLASS?)

The ancient Greeks prepared their grammar school stage students for participation as citizens 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 you will be introduced to a variety of writing skills which will help you learn how good writing works and will help you express your own ideas.

Below is an outline of the exercises compiled by Greeks in the 4th Century AD, and it is the one we will use for the next two years.

1. Narrative: Analyzing and imitating short narratives from history and mythology, usually a couple of paragraphs.
2. Description (ekphrasis): Learning to create vivid descriptions of an event or place.
3. Fable: Manipulating fables to be condensed, expanded, slanted and more.
4. Proverb: Using a proverb to relate to personal experience or modern issue.
5. Anecdote (chreia): Using a story about a famous person to illustrate a point, usually with a moral.
6. Refutation: Arguing against an issue in question.  
and Confirmation: Arguing for the truth of a statement.
7. Common topic: Explaining the good or evil that a person represents.
8. Encomium: Praising a given subject, usually a person.  
and Invective: The opposite of encomium.
9. Comparison: Comparing a given subject with another subject.
10. Characterization (êthopoiia): Inventing dialogue which a given person might have made on a specified occasion.
11. Thesis: Inquiring through reason into a debatable question, which argues a general point.
12. Proposal of law: Arguing for or against a legislative proposal in general terms.

from The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

About this time I met with an odd volume of the *Spectator*. It was the third. I had never before seen any of them. I bought it, read it over and over, and was much delighted with it. I thought the writing excellent, and wished, if possible, to imitate it. With that view I took some of the papers, and, making short hints of the sentiment in each sentence, laid them by a few days, and then, without looking at the book, tried to complete the papers again by expressing each hinted sentiment at length, and as fully as it had been expressed before, in any suitable words that should come to hand. Then I compared my *Spectator* with the original, discovered some of my faults, and corrected them. But I found I wanted a stock of words, or a readiness in recollecting and using them, which I thought I should have acquired before that time if I had gone on making verses; since the continual occasion for words of the same import, but of different length to suite the measure, or of different sound for the rhyme, would have laid me under a constant necessity of searching for variety and also have tended to fix that variety in my mind and make me master of it. Therefore, I took some of the tales and turned them into verse; and after a time, when I had pretty well forgotten the prose, turned them back again. I also sometimes jumbled my collections of hints into confusion, and after some weeks endeavored to reduce them in to the best order, before I began to form the full sentences and complete the paper. This was to teach me method in the arrangement of thoughts. Buy comparing by work afterwards with the original, I discovered many faults and amended them; but I sometime had

the pleasure of fancying that in certain particulars of small import I had been lucky enough to improved the method or the language, and this encouraged me to think I might possibly in time come to be a tolerable English writer, of which I was extremely ambitious.

12:50

take roll

pronounce class name

What is classical?

1:00

BenFranklin classical American writer, inventor, politician

As a politician and diplomat Ben represented the American colonies in France and Britain, negotiating treaties of alliance with the former, and peace with the latter. At home, he helped to draft the Declaration of Independence (which he signed) and was later involved in the drafting of the American Constitution.

often referred to as our "wisest American"

description of writing lessons passage\*

1:15

let's go back further....

Brancacci Chapel\*

Michelangelo -- show drawings\* & tell story

1:20

let's go back further...

the Greeks: progym handout\*

1:30 (20 minutes)

summarize narrative "Leading By Example" do as a group

### GIVE ASSIGNMENT

I talked with them about what the word "classical" might mean. We came up with the definition "something of quality that stands the test of time" .

We talked about Ben Franklin as an American classic of sorts and read his passage about how he learned to write by copying the Spectator. We talked about imitation being an important way to learn.

Next we went back in time to the Renaissance and I showed them pictures of Maccachio's "The Tribute Money" fresco, which is the one that ALL the famous greats copied as part of their own education. I talked about seeing that myself and how special that was and showed them copies of Michelangelo's copies of the painting. More imitation of classics.

Finally we went back to the Greeks and talked about how much they did to describe and analyze the world around them. I mentioned 4th century B.C., but no names. Then I gave them the Alexander anecdote from D'Angelo [I decided, after very much internal debate, to go with D'angelo's order because I felt it was a bit more natural and also because I felt I could use material that would appeal to the older kids first -- to get them hooked -- before we go to the fables] and spent a little too little time having them

shorten it to 3 words per sentence. I copied those down for the group, who copied them in their notes. Their assignment was to rewrite the anecdote in condensed form