

Is IEW “Classical”?

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Institute for
Excellence in
Writing

Listen. Speak. Read. Write. Think!

With the rapid rise of interest in classical education in homeschools, hybrid schools, and even full-time schools, we at IEW are often asked if our approach to teaching writing with structure and style is truly a “classical” one. To some it appears that we lack the proper pedigree since our syllabus lacks obscure Greek terms and also contains modern elements such as multiple reference research reports. However, I believe that we do indeed follow a classical approach in several ways:

- 1) the nine units of our syllabus clearly imitate the ancient rhetoric exercises;
- 2) our stylistic techniques checklist requires students to learn and understand basics of grammar as well as many of the schemes and tropes of classical composition;
- 3) our methodology employs modeling, imitation, and mastery—all mainstays of a classical approach; and finally,
- 4) our materials address all five of the canons of classical rhetoric.

We know the IEW system works. Having offered teacher training, mentoring, video courses, and student materials for almost twenty years now, we see excellent results; students who have practiced with structure and style for a few years usually do very well in advanced classes, college and university environments, and “the real world.”

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Classical Rhetoric Exercises

I first heard the word “Progymnasmata” when a high school teacher with a Ph.D. in English attended one of my seminars. Approaching me at the first break, he commented, “Did you know that this program is very similar to the classical rhetoric exercises of the Progymnasmata?” “No ... tell me more!” I replied. After that, I began to study these preliminary rhetorical exercises, mentioned in several Greek and Roman dialogues and then organized into handbooks—the first of which was recorded by Aelius Theon in first-century Alexandria. Affirmed by Quintilian in his *Institutio Oratoria* (A.D. 95) and then promulgated throughout the Roman Empire in the following centuries, they formed the foundation for rhetorical training in the medieval period. The exercises were organized to begin with storytelling and end with making an argument or proposing a law. During later periods there was an added focus on literature as a supplement to the course, with the intent that students should learn from past examples of effective prose writing.



In our *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* syllabus, Units 1 and 2, students learn to make key word outlines and summarize from notes, an activity almost identical to the first Progymnasmata exercise of “Retell a Fable.” (We recommend Aesop fables for this activity, although any source text, fiction or non-fiction, will work.) Moving on to Unit 3, Retelling Narrative Stories, students learn to take a long thing and make it shorter (or sometimes a short thing and make it longer). In Unit 4, students learn to choose and organize facts by topic, a traditional rhetoric skill still vitally important in academic and professional writing today. Units 5 and 7 focus on the invention process, wherein students learn to “take notes from their brain” by asking increasingly difficult questions, preparing them for Unit 8, the Formal Essay, a model which in its simplest form we can directly attribute to Aristotle. When more advanced students write persuasive essays, they must support a position as well as refute anticipated objections, an arrangement device also taught by the ancient rhetoricians. Lastly, our Unit 9 Writing about Literature models ask students to critically analyze stories, books, poems, or movies, similar to the Progym’s lessons on encomium (praising) and invective (condemning). Thus our nine units teach both the fundamentals of arrangement and invention, the most important skills of the ancient rhetorical exercises.

Unit 1-2: Notes and Outlines

I. _____
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Title _____
by Name _____

1-3 words max
Symbols are free
Numbers are free

Remember:
→ Indent
. , ? , ! + Capitals
Double Space!
Punctuation
Edit Carefully

Unit 3: Story Sequence Model

Title

I. Characters/Setting
(image/feeling)
Who is in the story?
What are they like?
When does it happen?
Where do they live or go?

II. Problem/Conflict
What do they need or want?
What do they think?
What do they say and do?

III. Climax, Resolution
How is the problem/need resolved?
What happens after?
What is learned?
(Message, Moral, Epilogue)

Final Clincher repeats title

Unit 6: Library Research

Source 1 I. Topic 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 5. _____ 6. _____ 7. _____	Source 2 I. Topic 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 5. _____ 6. _____ 7. _____	Source 3 I. Topic 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 5. _____ 6. _____ 7. _____
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Fused Outline

I. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

Clincher

Unit 7: Creative Writing

THINK THREE TOPICS

MY DOG

His looks
His food
His tricks

Who, What, Where, When, Why, How, Best, Worst

I. Introduction
Time/Place/History
3 Topics

II. Topic A
Details
Clincher

III. Topic B
Details
Clincher

IV. Topic C
Details
Clincher

V. Conclusion Repeats Topics
Most Important/Why?

Unit 4: Summarizing References

One Source Text
Choose Topics (1-3)
Notes from Facts, not Sentences
Final Clincher Repeats Title

I. Topic
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
(6)
(7)

4-7 details
3-4 words per fact
choose and limit

Clincher (Repeats or reflects
2-3 key words of the topic)

Unit 5: Writing from Pictures

Topic Sentence = Central Fact of Picture: What do you see?
How did it get that way? What did you see?

I. Central Fact = _____
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
Clincher = central fact

II. Central Fact = _____
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
Clincher = central fact

III. Central Fact = _____
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
Clincher = central fact

Ask questions to get details: where? who? how? when?
what? why? before? after? outside?

Unit 8: Essay Model

Basic Essay Model
(3-5 topics)

I. Introduction
1. Attention
2. Background
3. State 3 Topics

II. Topic A
Details
Clincher

III. Topic B
Details
Clincher

IV. Topic C
Details
Clincher

V. Conclusion
Restate 3 Topics
Which is most important and WHY?

Ask Questions

Who?
What?
Why?
Where?
When?
How?
When?
Best/Worst?
Problems/Solutions?
Value/Meaning?

Super Essay
(6+ topics)

I. Super Intro
II-VI. Essay 1
VII-XI. Essay 2 (etc)
XII. Super Concl.

Unit 9: Critique Writing

Critiques of:
Books, Movies, Plays,
Concerts, TV,
Magazines, Sport
Events, Speeches,
Newspapers,
Musicals

DO NOT USE
"I" or "My"

I. Introduction
Title, Author, Year,
Type-Book, Movie, Music
Background? Setting?

II. Characters & Setting
Who are they? (Describe)
Motivations?
Do they Change?

III. Plot & Conflict
What is the problem?
Wants, Needs?
Important Events?

IV. Climax, Theme, Moral
Turning Point, Ending?
What leads to resolution?
Theme, Message?

V. Conclusion (Your View)
Your favorite part & why?
Most important & why?
Clincher, Title


Using Figures of Speech

Another aspect of training in classical rhetoric is the use of figures of speech: schemes (which appeal to the senses) and tropes (which appeal to the imagination). While there are many dozens of identifiable and practicable figures of speech, the TWSS syllabus introduces several of these as “decorations” in an easy-to-understand and enjoyable way. Our emphasis on dual and triple patterns requires students to develop the use of parallel construction, while the “dress-ups” and sentence openers refine and reinforce basic grammar mastery. Thus we teach fundamentals of elocution, but

in terminology that students—even young ones—can quickly and effectively grasp. By the use of checklists, style techniques gradually become easier and are ultimately mastered, at which point the student “graduates” from the checklist and is free to use (or not use) the various techniques as fits the occasion.

Dress-Ups

- “-ly” adverb
- who/which, whom/whose
- strong verb (I _____) or dual
- quality adjective (the _____ pen) or dual
- adverbial clause (middle) www.asia.wub
[when, while, where, as, since, if, although, whereas, unless, because]



Minimum Rule: One each per paragraph
Indicator: Underline one of each

Sentence Openers

Transitional Words

Besides	Likewise	Second	Therefore
Furthermore	Moreover	Third	Thus
Hence	Nevertheless	etc.	Whereas
However	Overall	So	Yet
Indeed			

1. Subject **(T)** Transition
2. Preposition **(F)** Fragment
3. “-ly” **(Q)** Question
4. “-ing”
5. clausal **(first)** www.asia.wub [when, while, where, as, since, if, although, whereas, unless, because]
6. v.s.s. (very short sentence) 2-5 words

Minimum Rule: One per paragraph as possible
Indicator: Number in margin or brackets at the beginning of each sentence

Decorations

- question
- 3sss (three short, staccato, sentences)
- Dramatic introductory/closing sentence
- Alliteration (beginning letters)
- Simile/Metaphor
- Quotation

Minimum Rule: One different decoration per paragraph, four per story max.
Indicator: Dotted underline or “dec.” in margin, italics when typed

Triple Extensions

Thrice, but never twice...

- word repetition (many, many, many)
- phrase & clausal repetition
- three “ings,” consecutive or spaced
- three “lys,” consecutive or spaced (not too close in meaning)
- three adjectives or nouns
- three verbs, consecutive or spaced

Minimum Rule: One different triple per paragraph
Indicator: The word “triple” in margin

The Importance of Imitation

IEW’s Structure and Style teaching method is based on imitation, the best way that a skill (such as painting, swimming, or writing) can be learned. Initially, we show a student a model in simple diagram form—what the composition should look like, i.e., the number of paragraphs along with the purposes of each paragraph—along with an example composition (by a student of comparable age) that clearly illustrates the completed ideal. Then, we do one or more compositions together with the student, giving as much assistance as needed until he understands both the model and the process. As we provide for them well-organized content which they then reorganize and re-present, students learn what Benjamin Franklin called “method in the arrangement of thoughts.” In addition to structural models for imitation, we provide extensive lists and resources so that students are not limited to the vocabulary and syntax they may know but can practice using words and usages gleaned from the great writings of the past, thereby expanding their active vocabulary and range of expression through imitation.

If you’ve read much at all about the classical approach to teaching rhetoric, then you’re probably aware that there are five divisions or canons: Invention, Arrangement, Elocution, Memory, and Delivery. I have already shown how the nine units of the TWSS syllabus teach Arrangement (structure) and Invention (thinking), as well as how the stylistic techniques checklists teach Elocution. But what about the remaining two: Memory and Delivery?

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Memorization as a Discipline

One of my great “aha” moments occurred about a decade ago when I realized that one of the fundamental problems in teaching composition is that “you can’t get something out of a brain that isn’t in there to begin with!” No matter how good a teacher I am, I cannot get vocabulary and sentence structures out of a student’s mind unless those things are first established in it. This is why I have been campaigning so aggressively for two things: 1) that teachers and parents will read out loud in huge quantity to children of all ages, and 2) that they return to an appreciation of the power and importance of memorization as a discipline and as a language-building activity.

If you haven’t heard my talk *Nurturing Competent Communicators*, please download it today, give it a listen, and share it with everyone you know. I believe it’s one of the most important things I’ve ever learned.

Some time ago teachers of rhetoric used an interesting expression in regards to memory; they considered it vital that students “furnish the mind” with words, images, ideas, and language patterns that would enable more effective communication. What a wonderful idea: furnishing the mind with beautiful and useful things, much like one might furnish a home with beautiful and useful things. And truly the best way this can be done is through memorization—learning “by heart” poetry, scripture, music, drama, and famous orations, much the way the great American orator Frederick Douglass equipped himself by memorizing speeches of Cicero. One of my favorite products—if not my most favorite—is our *Linguistic Development Through Poetry Memorization*, which provides a repertoire and a methodology for extensive (and enjoyable!) memorization of dozens of great poems—some humorous, some poignant, all classic. I cannot possibly overstate the value of memorizing good language as being fundamental to building excellent communication skills. An interesting bit of trivia from Greek mythology that illuminates the importance of memory for creativity is this: The mother of the Muses (goddesses of literary and artistic inspiration) is Mnemosyne, the goddess of Memory. The ancients knew: Memory is the mother of art!

Learning to Speak Well

Lastly, we note that rhetoric wasn't just about writing; verbal delivery was equally important, especially in a public or legal context. We at IEW have always stressed that we don't just have a "writing program"; we address all the arts of language—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Dr. James B. Webster, who wrote the original text from which the TWSS syllabus was extrapolated, often referred to it as a "written and oral communication program." And indeed, from the Unit 1 exercise of speaking from a key word outline to our *Speech Boot Camp* course and other debate prep materials we offer, the lost canon of Delivery is given its rightful place as an important aspect of rhetorical training.

So, is IEW classical? We think so, but you be the judge. Read a little more about the ancient exercises, classical methodologies, and canons of rhetoric, and see if we meet the standard, even without the fancy terminology. However, we are not exclusively classical any more than good writing and speaking is exclusively classical. We teach what works to create excellence in writing, and it's not surprising that what works hasn't changed for a couple thousand years.

