

The Vertical Integration of Aphthonius' Progymnasmata

by

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When we graduate significant numbers of High School seniors, who are unable to write with coherence and cohesiveness, let alone style, we put ourselves in a precarious situation.¹ These supposedly educated, literate graduates come to our Universities needing remedial instruction. Instead of being ready to learn about audiences, effective communication, and crafting particular rhetorical themes suited to their subjects, they need rudimentary teaching for putting thoughts to paper. Modern Composition Theory, the basis for current writing curricula in our K-12 system has not been up to the task of effectively imparting the necessary skills of writing to our students. We have lost our way. We no longer know how to teach the fundamental skills of writing to each and every one of our students. Like any complex art when key components are assumed rather than taught students must gain those skills through trial and error; mastery of the art becomes a catch as catch can and only the gifted will experience the triumph of success. The rest of our students will come to view a blank sheet of paper as a device of excruciating torture—to be avoided at all cost if possible and procrastinated when flight proves impossible. This is not a failure of our students, it is a failure of our method. The skills of Written and Oral composition are complex, abstract, and difficult but wholly within the abilities of students to learn.

This paper will review the progressive, vertically integrated stages of Aphthonius' Progymnasmata in hopes of demonstrating the manner in which the fundamental skills of writing can be effectively and consistently taught to all students regardless of socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. All students graduating from our High Schools, barring debilitating learning disabilities,

¹ Since 2005 when the ACT began its writing portion only 23% of the participants have achieved a score indicating competence. <http://www.actstudent.org/scores/writingnorms.html> May 2008

can be taught to write competently, and we will find that even students who struggle with verbal reasoning and expression will be helped with this method of instruction.

The ancient Athenians may have found themselves in a similar situation when Aristotle dismissed “the framers of the current treatises on rhetoric”² as having missed the fundamental, indeed foundational piece of effective communication—what he called the enthymeme or the “substance of rhetorical persuasion.”³ The enthymeme he later identifies as a “general demonstration” that is, a rhetorical argument that engages the imagination of an audience. General stories are a form of enthymeme. Aesop's Fables could be considered enthymemes in Aristotle's sense and as general stories are the tool most effective in engaging the imagination of an audience. The Progymnasmata begins at this point. The first two stages of Aphthonius' curriculum are the Fable and Narrative stages and impart through imitation and repetition the basic skills of inventing stories. Students learn sequencing as well as point of view from imitating a specific story through paraphrase. This skill is reinforced, broadened, and enhanced through rewriting a story multiple times; one of which is inversion or re-sequencing; beginning at the end and retelling the story backwards or jumping into the middle and producing a coherent account. Students also condense the narrative while maintaining the integrity of the story and, again, expand the narrative through the use of figures of description while maintaining the interest of the audience. A key storytelling skill as well as a fundamental component of critical thinking is learning to change the viewpoint from which the narrative is told. And, finally, converting prose into prosody and back again provides a wonderful flexibility in language invention and use. Fourth and Fifth graders learn the six categories of narrative invention—Agent, Action, Time, Place, Manner and Cause through analysis of and retelling of tales—tales that may be chosen to reflect the values and norms of particular communities and provide a rich tapestry of culture for our budding orators. These six components are tools of invention that students will use throughout their writing careers to

2 Aristotle, The Rhetoric, Modern Library College Editions, Random House, 1984, p.1

3 Ibid, p.2

demonstration truth through enthymemes (rhetorical arguments). In addition, students begin learning to utilize reversal, recognition, and Suffering in their enthymemes, creating interesting stories that delight as well as instruct.⁴ All these skills are possible at this tender age because the most difficult part of composition—the generation or invention of ideas—is provided by the story. The students are left with the much easier task of manipulating and varying symbols—words.

By giving the students the story or the ideas they are not overloaded and stressed, as the ubiquitous and dreaded “What I did last summer” essays overload and stress, inflicting upon youngsters the art of invention long before they are taught how to invent ideas. Writing is truly a difficult skill—an abstraction of an abstraction. Modern composition instruction overwhelms our young students with the task of idea creation on top of language mastery with its precise orthography, penmanship, grammar, syntax and variety of vocabulary choice. In true Darwinian fashion only the gifted survive this onslaught and large numbers of our future citizens, workers and decision-makers simply forsake all hope of mastering skill in language composition, inflicting upon us all a level of language usage that previous generations would consider illiterate. The Fable and Narrative stages embark upon the difficult but essential task of training students how to think compositionally, how to generate ideas, through that most effective of pedagogies—imitation and repetition. Tedium is avoided through the use of different fables and stories that change with each lesson allowing students to engage in repetitive skill building without boredom. The students gain pleasure from a type of invention which requires them to generate words for the ideas given them in the story. By limiting and focusing on specific, age/development appropriate skills the teacher does not confuse the student with an overwhelming task for which they are untrained and unprepared; causing them to become frustrated and shutting down—a common experience often accompanied by tears or a conviction that writing well is impossibly beyond their ability.

4 Aristotle, *Poetics*, Modern Library College Editions, Random House, 1984, p. 236-237

The third and fourth stages--entitled Chreia and Maxim—are introduced at the sixth grade. These stages build directly upon the skill acquired in Fable and Narrative—the ability to create a story through the use of the narrative categories and variation through paraphrase. In these stages students are given a short, pithy statement or what might be called a Proverb or Common Place. Students learn to demonstrate the truth of the Common Place through what Aphthonius calls eight heads of development. The ability to invent four specific types of narrative and to paraphrase in two specific ways are the foundational skills to be learned in these stages of exercises. In addition to an introduction that includes a rudimentary thesis statement and several praise statements to lure the reader on, our budding writers learn to create three different forms of enthymemes (cause, converse, and analogy) and a particular narrative or example (Sign⁵) in order to demonstrate the Common Place. To these five paragraphs are added a simple paraphrase of the saying, a testimony of the ancients which amounts to a paraphrase by a famous or notable person, and a brief epilogue that serves to introduce the idea of a transition sentence. At this point students have learned the sub skills of development necessary to coherently create the body of a paragraph. These exercises resemble an expository essay in modern composition theory.

Seventh grade brings Stages five and six, Refutation and Confirmation, which teach explicitly and effectively the invention of arguments that will be used in the sub skill of creating topic sentences for well constructed paragraphs and set the stage for the skill of cohesiveness in what would correspond to an argumentative essay—confirming, refuting, or qualifying—in modern composition theory. The proverbially belligerent junior high minds begin to learn how to structure their thought and their communication process when given the task of arguing first against and then for, an idea, thought, chain of events, method or story. Aphthonius uses six Heads of Purpose⁶ which correspond to Aristotle's six arguments for his three modes of persuasion—past, present and future. Students take a

5 Ibid., p.29

6 [Malcolm Heath](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/classics/resources/rhetoric/prog-aph.htm), at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/classics/resources/rhetoric/prog-aph.htm>, December, 1997; contra Kennedy.

huge leap at this point for they are gaining a true ability to generate proofs through creative invention. These stages in our experience are the most difficult to master but may be the most significant or important skill to develop. The Heads of clarity, consistency, possibility, plausibility, propriety and expediency form a scheme of invention unparalleled in its usefulness and adaptability no matter what one's cultural context or communication task.⁷

Still in the seventh grade, Common Topic follows with a truly delightful experience for Junior-Highers who are seemingly bent on the destruction of all thought and manners. Common Topic themes are similar to invectives but are directed to general types of evil-doers such as tyrants, drunk drivers, and surprisingly, one of the favorite topics—students who cheat. The Heads or categories of composition in this exercise become standard pieces of any forensic rhetorical event—arguing what was or was not—useful in any and all situations. Students continue developing their skill in the creation of effective exordiums with an adumbrated prologue which includes a thesis statement, and two arguments or heads of purpose supporting the thesis. The adumbrated prologue is followed by three Heads, the contrary, which is a general story, the exposition, which is a particular story told in the first person, and comparison, which is an analogy in story form. These three Heads are followed by three categories which are formed using heads of purpose or arguments, intention—calling into question motivation, digression—conjecturally abusing the subject's past, and rejection of pity by juxtaposition. A concluding category is constructed with all six heads of purpose in a single paragraph.⁸ Common Topic reinforces and varies the skills mastered in the previous stages through a specific focus or narrowing of thought around a particular thesis. Though explicit and focused, students find this exercise a creative and wide open expression of their thoughts. It is one of the most

⁷ Interestingly, Aphthonius renames these Heads in the following stage of common topic and will drop two of them in the final stage of thesis and law, leaving the writer with the four efficient causes identified by Aristotle in his *Physics* treatise, Translated by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/physics.html>, Book 2, Chapter 3.

⁸ Malcolm Heath, and was last updated on 9 December 1997. <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/classics/resources/rhetoric/program.htm>

popular of the Progymnasmata.

The next three stages, eight, nine and ten are titled Encomium, Invective, and Comparison, which unlike the Common Topic will deal with particular subjects. These three stages continue to train the students in their ability to utilize and integrate heads of development, shifting from the particular to the general in communicating ideas as well as continuing to train them in the use of heads of purpose or modes of argument. The introductory paragraph for these exercises is the most sophisticated yet. It includes, as the previous exercise did, a thesis and two arguments but then it reaches back to the earlier Chreia/Maxim stages and uses encomiums with the application of “heighteners.”⁹ The Introduction is followed by the Birth or Origin paragraphs, which develops the students ability to alternate enthymeme and example around the categories first of Place and then of Time. These paragraphs are followed by the Education and Achievement sections that teach students three subtle categories of invention that stretch their reason and imagination.¹⁰ These in turn are followed by a Comparison further strengthening their analogical invention and, finally, the Epilogue is a brief restatement of their original thesis.

The eleventh and twelfth stages entitled Characterization and Description introduce sub skills foundational to the rather advanced skills of style. Characterization, a monologue, models for the students “a style that is clear, concise, colourful, unconstrained, not intricate or figurative.”¹¹ The exercise itself is divided into the categories of Present, Past and Future. This division further develops the students' skills of sequencing and told as a soliloquy further hones their narrative ability. This particular style is achieved through continued mastery of paraphrase and confining students to an abbreviated word count.

9 Aristotle, *The Rhetoric*, Modern Library College Editions, Random House, 1984, Book One, Chapter nine, lines 10ff, p. 62

10 These three categories appear to correspond to Logic or purpose, Grammar or physicality, and Rhetoric or effect.

11 Malcolm Heath, and was last updated on 9 December 1997. <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/classics/resources/rhetoric/program.htm>

Next, Description, Aphthonius describes as “an expository discourse which brings the object exhibited vividly into view...In description one should adopt a free, relaxed style and ornament it with different figures, and in general hit off the objects being described.”¹² This particular style is achieved through a multitude of details, never dwelling upon a single object but moving quickly, and the use of as many figures of description and figures of speech as is necessary to reach a required, expanded word count. Further, both of these stages continue to train students through the use of the Heads of Purpose and Development in new applications of character development through soliloquy and description through exposition.

The thirteenth and fourteenth stages, Thesis and Law of the exercises serve as a capstone to the five plus years our students have been learning to write through the Progymnasmata, honing the reasoning skills through the introduction of counter point, which corresponds to qualification in modern theory. These final two stages provide the students with a plethora of opportunities to create arguments (Invention) using the heads of purpose and to demonstrate them using the heads of development. Interestingly, in Thesis and Law Aphthonius reduces the Heads of Purpose from six to four apparently corresponding to Aristotle's' four efficient causes.

With the successful completion of these final stages next year's 10th or 11th grade Rhetoric teacher will find a group of skilled, competent writers who are ready to turn their attention specifically to understanding the needs of the many audiences they will engage in the future. From five paragraph essays, academic articles, and thesis papers to poems, journals, and extemporaneous speeches, students are equipped with the basic ability to invent an unending stream of relevant ideas and the skill to craft the ideas to a form most suited to a particular, contemporary audience. You will find them delightful rhetoric students in the future.

12 Ibid.