

1 THE LIBERAL ARTS

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The liberal arts denote the seven branches of knowledge that initiate the young into a life of learning. The concept is classical, but the term liberal arts and the division of the arts into the trivium and the quadrivium date from the Middle Ages.

The Trivium and the Quadrivium

The trivium¹ includes those aspects of the liberal arts that pertain to mind, and the quadrivium, those aspects of the liberal arts that pertain to matter. Logic, grammar, and rhetoric constitute the trivium; and arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy constitute the quadrivium. Logic is the art of thinking; grammar, the art of inventing symbols and combining them to express thought; and rhetoric, the art of communicating thought from one mind to another, the adaptation of language to circumstance. Arithmetic, the theory of number, and music, an application of the theory of number (the measurement of discrete quantities in motion), are the arts of discrete quantity or number. Geometry, the theory of space, and astronomy, an application of the theory of space, are the arts of continuous quantity or extension.

The Trivium: The three arts of language pertaining to the mind

Logic	art of thinking
Grammar	art of inventing and combining symbols
Rhetoric	art of communication

The Quadrivium: The four arts of quantity pertaining to matter

Discrete quantity or number

Arithmetic	theory of number
Music	application of the theory of number

Continuous quantity

Geometry	theory of space
Astronomy	application of the theory of space

These arts of reading, writing, and reckoning have formed the traditional basis of liberal education, each constituting both a field of knowledge and the technique to acquire that knowledge. The degree bachelor of arts is awarded to those who demonstrate the requisite proficiency in these arts, and the degree master of arts, to those who have demonstrated a greater proficiency.

Today, as in centuries past, a mastery of the liberal arts is widely recognized as the best preparation for work in professional schools, such as those of medicine, law, engineering, or theology. Those who first perfect their own faculties through liberal education are thereby better prepared to serve others in a professional or other capacity.

The seven liberal arts differ essentially from the many utilitarian arts (such as carpentry, masonry, plumbing, salesmanship, printing, editing, banking, law, medicine, or the care of souls) and from the seven fine arts (architecture, instrumental music, sculpture, painting, literature, the drama, and the dance), for both the utilitarian arts and the fine arts are transitive activities, whereas the essential characteristic of the liberal arts is that they are immanent or intransitive activities.

The utilitarian artist produces utilities that serve the wants of humanity; the fine artist, if he is of the highest order, produces a work that is “a thing of beauty and a joy forever”² and that has the power to elevate the human spirit. In the exercise of both the utilitarian and the fine arts, although the action begins in the agent, it goes out from the agent and ends in the object produced and usually has a commercial value; and therefore the artist is paid for the work. In the exercise of the liberal arts, however, the action begins in the agent and ends in the agent, who is perfected by the action; consequently, the liberal artist, far from being paid for his hard work, of which he receives the sole and full benefit, usually pays a teacher to give needed instruction and guidance in the practice of the liberal arts.

The intransitive character of the liberal arts may be better understood from the following analogy.

ANALOGY: The intransitive character of the liberal arts

The carpenter planes the wood.

The rose blooms.

The action of a transitive verb (like *planes*) begins in the agent but “goes across” and ends in the ob-

ject (*the wood*). The action of an intransitive verb (like *blooms*) begins in the agent and ends in the agent (*the rose*, which is perfected by blooming).

Classes of Goods

The three classes of goods—valuable, useful, and pleasurable—illustrate the same type of distinction that exists among the arts.

Valuable goods are those which are not only desired for their own sake but which increase the intrinsic worth of their possessor. For instance, knowledge, virtue, and health are valuable goods.

Useful goods are those which are desired because they enable one to acquire valuable goods. For instance, food, medicine, money, tools, and books are useful goods.

Pleasurable goods are those which are desired for their own sake because of the satisfaction they give their possessor. For instance, happiness, an honorable reputation, social prestige, flowers, and savory food are pleasurable goods. They do not add to the intrinsic worth of their possessor, nor are they desired as means, yet they may be associated with valuable goods or useful goods. For instance, knowledge, which increases worth, may at the same time be pleasurable; ice cream, which is nourishing food, promotes health, and is, at the same time, enjoyable.

The utilitarian or servile arts enable one to be a servant—of another person, of the state, of a corporation, or of a business—and to earn a living. The liberal arts, in contrast, teach one how to live; they train the faculties and bring them to perfection; they enable a person to rise above his material environment to live an intellectual, a rational, and therefore a free life in gaining truth. Jesus Christ said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).³

The new motto of Saint John’s College, Annapolis, Maryland, expresses the purpose of a liberal arts college with an interesting play on the etymology of liberal: “*Facio liberos ex liberis libris libraque.*” “I make free men of children by means of books and balances [laboratory experiments].”⁴

Science and Art

Each of the liberal arts is both a science and an art in the sense that in the province of each there is something to know (science) and something to do (art). An art may be used successfully before one

has a formal knowledge of its precepts. For example, a child of three may use correct grammar even though the child knows nothing of formal grammar. Similarly, logic and rhetoric may be effectively used by those who do not know the precepts of these arts. It is, however, desirable and satisfying to acquire a clear knowledge of the precepts and to know why certain forms of expression or thought are right and wrong.

The trivium is the organon, or instrument, of all education at all levels because the arts of logic, grammar, and rhetoric are the arts of communication itself in that they govern the means of communication —namely, reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Thinking is inherent in these four activities. Reading and listening, for example, although relatively passive, involve active thinking, for we agree or disagree with what we read or hear.

The trivium is used vitally when it is exercised in reading and composition. It was systematically and intensively exercised in the reading of the Latin classics and in the composition of Latin prose and verse by boys in the grammar schools of England and the continent during the sixteenth century. This was the training that formed the intellectual habits of Shakespeare and other Renaissance writers. The result of it appears in their work. (See T.W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*. Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1944.⁵) The trivium was basic also in the curriculum of classical times, the Middle Ages, and the post-Renaissance.

In the Greek grammar of Dionysius Thrax (ca.166 B.C.), the oldest extant book on grammar⁶ and the basis for grammatical texts for at least thirteen centuries, grammar is defined in so comprehensive a manner that it includes versification, rhetoric, and literary criticism.

Grammar is an experimental knowledge of the usages of languages as generally current among poets and prose writers. It is divided into six parts: (1) trained reading with due regard to prosody [versification]; (2) exposition, according to poetic figures [rhetoric]; (3) ready statement of dialectical peculiarities and allusion; (4) discovery of etymologies; (5) the accurate account of analogies; (6) criticism of poetical productions which is the noblest part of grammatical art.

Because communication involves the simultaneous exercise of logic, grammar, and rhetoric, these three arts are the fundamental arts

of education, of teaching, and of being taught. Accordingly, they must be practiced simultaneously by both teacher and pupil. The pupil must cooperate with the teacher; he must be active, not passive. The teacher may be present either directly or indirectly. When one studies a book, the author is a teacher indirectly present through the book. Communication, as the etymology of the word signifies, results in something possessed in common; it is a oneness shared. Communication takes place only when two minds really meet. If the reader or listener receives the same ideas and emotions that the writer or speaker wished to convey, he understands (although he may disagree); if he receives no ideas, he does not understand; if different ideas, he misunderstands. The same principles of logic, grammar, and rhetoric guide writer, reader, speaker, and listener.

Liberal Arts Education

Education is the highest of arts in the sense that it imposes forms (ideas and ideals) not on matter, as do other arts (for instance carpentry or sculpture) but on mind. These forms are received by the student not passively but through active cooperation. In true liberal education, as Newman⁷ explained, the essential activity of the student is to relate the facts learned into a unified, organic whole, to assimilate them as the body assimilates food or as the rose assimilates food from the soil and increases in size, vitality, and beauty. A learner must use mental hooks and eyes to join the facts together to form a significant whole. This makes learning easier, more interesting, and much more valuable. The accumulation of facts is mere information and is not worthy to be called education since it burdens the mind and stultifies it instead of developing, enlightening, and perfecting it. Even if one forgets many of the facts once learned and related, the mind retains the vigor and perfection gained by its exercise upon them. It can do this, however, only by grappling with facts and ideas. Moreover, it is much easier to remember related ideas than unrelated ideas.

Each of the liberal arts has come to be understood not in the narrow sense of a single subject but rather in the sense of a group of related subjects. The trivium, in itself a tool or a skill, has become associated with its most appropriate subject matter—the languages, oratory, literature, history, philosophy. The quadrivium comprises not only mathematics but many branches of science. The theory of number includes not merely arithmetic but also algebra, calculus, the theory of equations,

and other branches of higher mathematics. The applications of the theory of number include not only music (here understood as musical principles, like those of harmony, which constitute the liberal art of music and must be distinguished from applied instrumental music, which is a fine art) but also physics, much of chemistry, and other forms of scientific measurement of discrete quantities. The theory of space includes analytic geometry and trigonometry. Applications of the theory of space include principles of architecture, geography, surveying, and engineering.

The three R's—reading, writing, and reckoning—constitute the core not only of elementary education but also of higher education. Competence in the use of language and competence in handling abstractions, particularly mathematical quantities, are regarded as the most reliable indexes to a student's intellectual caliber. Accordingly, tests have been devised to measure these skills, and guidance programs in colleges and in the armed forces have been based on the results of such tests.

The three arts of language provide discipline of mind inasmuch as mind finds expression in language. The four arts of quantity provide means for the study of matter inasmuch as quantity—more precisely, extension—is the outstanding characteristic of matter. (Extension is a characteristic of matter only, whereas number is a characteristic of both matter and spirit.) The function of the trivium is the training of the mind for the study of matter and spirit, which together constitute the sum of reality. The fruit of education is culture, which Matthew Arnold⁸ defined as “the knowledge of ourselves [mind] and the world [matter].” In the “sweetness and light” of Christian culture, which adds to the knowledge of the world and ourselves the knowledge of God and of other spirits, we are enabled truly to “see life steadily and see it whole.”⁹

THE LANGUAGE ARTS

The Language Arts and Reality

The three language arts can be defined as they relate to reality and to each other. Metaphysics or ontology,¹⁰ the science of being, is concerned with reality, with the thing-as-it-exists. Logic, grammar, and rhetoric have the following relation to reality.

Logic is concerned with the thing-as-it-is-known.

Grammar is concerned with the thing-as-it-is-symbolized.

Rhetoric is concerned with the thing-as-it-is-communicated.

1-2 *Language and Reality*

ILLUSTRATION: Relationship between metaphysics and language arts

The discovery of the planet Pluto in 1930 illustrates the relationship between metaphysics and the language arts. The planet Pluto had been a real entity, traveling in its orbit about our sun, for centuries; its discovery in 1930 did not create it. By being discovered, however, it became in 1930 for the first time a logical entity. When it was named Pluto, it became a grammatical entity. When by its name knowledge of it was communicated to others through the spoken word and also through the written word, the planet Pluto became a rhetorical entity.¹¹

Rhetoric is the master art of the trivium,¹² for it presupposes and makes use of grammar and logic; it is the art of communicating through symbols ideas about reality.

Comparison of Materials, Functions, and Norms of the Language Arts

The language arts guide the speaker, writer, listener, and reader in the correct and effective use of language. Phonetics and spelling, which are allied to the art of grammar, are included here to show their relationship to the other language arts in materials, functions, and norms.

Phonetics prescribes how to combine sounds so as to form spoken words correctly.

Spelling prescribes how to combine letters so as to form written words correctly.

Grammar prescribes how to combine words so as to form sentences correctly.

Rhetoric prescribes how to combine sentences into paragraphs and paragraphs into a whole composition having unity, coherence, and the desired emphasis, as well as clarity, force, and beauty.

Logic prescribes how to combine concepts into judgments and judgments into syllogisms and chains of reasoning so as to achieve truth.

1-3 *Language Arts: Their Materials and Functions*

Because rhetoric aims for effectiveness rather than correctness, it deals not only with the paragraph and the whole composition but also with the word and the sentence, for it prescribes that diction be clear

and appropriate and that sentences be varied in structure and rhythm. It recognizes various levels of discourse, such as the literary (maiden or damsel, steed), the common (girl, horse), the illiterate (gal, hoss), the slang (skirt, plug), the technical (*homo sapiens, equus caballus*), each with its appropriate use. The adaptation of language to circumstance, which is a function of rhetoric, requires the choice of a certain style and diction in speaking to adults, of a different style in presenting scientific ideas to the general public, and of another in presenting them to a group of scientists. Since rhetoric is the master art of the trivium, it may even enjoin the use of bad grammar or bad logic, as in the portrayal of an illiterate or stupid character in a story.

Just as rhetoric is the master art of the trivium, so logic is the art of arts because it directs the very act of reason, which directs all other human acts to their proper end through the means it determines.

In the preface to his *Art of Logic*, the poet Milton remarks:

The general matter of the general arts is either reason or speech. They are employed either in perfecting reason for the sake of proper thinking, as in logic, or in perfecting speech, and that either for the sake of the correct use of words, as in grammar, or the effective use of words, as in rhetoric. Of all the arts the first and most general is logic, then grammar, and last of all rhetoric, since there can be much use of reason without speech, but no use of speech without reason. We gave the second place to grammar because correct speech can be unadorned; but it can hardly be adorned before it is correct.¹³

Because the arts of language are normative, they are practical studies as contrasted with speculative. A speculative study is one that merely seeks to know—for example, astronomy. We can merely know about the heavenly bodies. We cannot influence their movements.

A practical, normative study is one that seeks to regulate, to bring into conformity with a norm or standard—for example, ethics. The norm of ethics is the good, and its purpose is to bring human conduct into conformity with goodness.

Correctness is the norm of phonetics, spelling, and grammar.

Effectiveness is the norm of rhetoric.

Truth is the norm of logic. Correctness in thinking is the normal means to reach truth, which is the conformity of thought with things as they are—with reality.

The intellect itself is perfected in its operations by the five intellectual virtues, three speculative and two practical. Understanding is the intuitive grasp of first principles. (For example, of contradictory statements, one must be true, the other false.) Science is knowledge of proximate causes (physics, mathematics, economics, etc.). Wisdom is knowledge of ultimate causes—metaphysics in the natural order, theology in the supernatural order. Prudence is right reason about something to be done. Art is right reason about something to be made.¹⁴