

Progymnasmata Exercises

(1) Fable

- Students were given a fable, typically one of Aesop's, which they would amplify and abbreviate. Or, they would write a new fable in close imitation of Aesop.
- I had students rewrite the fable of The Ants and the Grasshopper. One group retold the fable from the perspective of the grasshopper, and the other by placing the moral at the beginning of the story as opposed to the end.
- I had students contract the parable of The Prodigal Son from 496 words to 250 words, challenging them to retain the ethos, pathos, and logos of the original while aiming for brevity.
- Compose a fable. (1) Imitate the style of Aesop, even imitating the detailed structure of an existing fable; (2) make the animals behave within their natures - snakes should be crafty, sheep should be simple, etc., (3) unless the fable explains why the animal(s) are acting contrary to their nature.

(2) Narrative

- Narratives are as clear to the facts as possible and answer the five W's and the one H.
- I have my students narrate back to me reading assignments. They do this orally, written, individually, in groups, etc.
- Expand on and contract narratives, but do not turn them into bullet-point summaries. Challenge students to narrate with eloquence.
- I had my students take the 152-word narrative concerning the rose about the love triangle of Ares, Aphrodite, and Adonis and expand it to 300 words. They could borrow liberally from the original for their expansions.
- I located a three-paragraph summary of the fight between Hector and Achilles from Homer's Iliad and had my students rewrite the boring summary from the first-person perspective of either King Priam or Andromache.
- Give the students bare details and have them create a story. In her 2011 ACCS talk, Annie Petzinger gave the example of "Jon goes to his room. Mom scolds Jon. Jon cleans his room." Then, have the students build a narrative around those vague details.

(3) Chreia and (4) Maxim

- Now we get to progym exercises with steps or headings to follow; they function like an outline. Don't put yourself in progym prison with the headings and order of the progym exercises. These are training wheels for the students.
- The headings/steps for the maxim are the same as the chreia. A maxim differs from a chreia in that a maxim amplifies speech only (as opposed to an action or combo of both) and the author or speaker is typically unnamed: (1) Praise the sayer or doer, or praise the chreia itself; (2) Give a paraphrase of the theme; (3) Explain why this was said or done; (4) Introduce a contrast; (5) Introduce a comparison; (6) Give an example of the meaning (7) Support the saying/action with the testimony of others; (8) Conclude with a brief epilog or conclusion.

Here's an example of a maxim from a named source, that being Solomon and Proverbs 21:9: "It is better to dwell in a corner of the housetop, than with a brawling woman in a wide house."

(Introduction of praise) Solomon, that paragon of wisdom, did indeed show his acumen when he stated in Proverbs that it would be better to live in a tiny and insignificant dwelling than to have a mansion but share it with a cantankerous wife.

(Paraphrase) It is indeed better to have domestic harmony than to have that discord that comes when one spouse rails against the other.

(Explanation) A man of so many wives must have known this from experience, yet he gave this proverb as a caution both to wives and their husbands and for their mutual benefit.

(Comparison) Living with a nagging, brawling wife is like living with the radio forever tuned to Rush Limbaugh on a cranky day.

(Example) For example, I knew of one man of great potential for public office who won over every constituency except that at his house. There, where his wife seemed to have an inordinate power of veto, none of his legislation ever passed. He became so discouraged that he gave up his political ambitions and now sweeps floors at Taco Bell.

(Testimony of others) Experts in family science have cautioned us to maintain peace in the home.

(Epilogue) We cannot hope to follow these experts or the older and wisest Solomon if we do not take the advice of the latter and so avoid the unhappy scene described by the former.

- I have my rhetoric students keep a commonplace notebook, and after they've accumulated a number of entries they may their favorite quote and write a chreia.
- My students recite a catechism at the beginning of every class. My econ catechism includes two quotes, one from Adam Smith and one from Frederic Bastiat. I had my econ students write a chreia from either one of those quotes.
- I frequently pull compelling lines from books in my omnibus course and have my students write chreias.
- If you teach Proverbs or any of the Wisdom Literature, they are ripe for chreias and maxims.

(5) Refutation and (6) Confirmation

- These two exercises are two sides of the same coin. A refutation is an attack on the credibility of a claim or narrative. Conversely, the confirmation attempts to prove a given claim or narrative. Both use similar headings.
- Refutation: (1) An introduction blaming the teller of the story or argument (2) Give a summary of the story (3) Attack the claim or narrative as being: (a) unclear (b) unconvincing (c) impossible (d) illogical (e) inappropriate, and (f) unprofitable.
- Confirmation: (1) An introduction praising the teller of the story (2) Give a summary of the story (3) Confirm the claim or narrative as being: (a) clear (b) probable (c) possible (d) logical (e) fitting, and (f) profitable.

Example refutation edited from Chris Schlect's 2004 ACCS workshop:

(Introduction) Woke up, fell out of bed, ran a comb across my head. It's been a hard day's night and I've been working like a dog. Whoever said that dead men tell no tales? He must not have been thinking of John Lennon. Though tragically killed by an assassin's bullet, John Lennon's words continue to live, but not all influences are positive ones. Too often John took us down to Strawberry Fields where nothing is real. And that is what he has invited us to do in this song, *Imagine*.

(Summary) No heaven or hell, no countries, no possessions. Imagine that, John Lennon says. In a universe without heaven or hell, we'll live for today rather than for an

afterlife. Without countries or religions, we remove any reason to kill. Communism, the eradication of private property, will obliterate greed or hunger. John Lennon imagines a secular dream of social and political sameness.

(Attack) We must not be cold to the musical prerogatives of artistic expression, committing the barbarian act of reducing a song to its lyrics, or its lyrics to its dull propositions. But, Lennon puts forth certain propositions that connect to an argument. While extending artistic leave to allow things to remain unsaid, we should ask “Does imagination necessarily bequeath a reality?” How, by joining Lennon's band of imaginers, do I make the world more as one? Unlikely.

Suppose we did get together and imagine away the afterlife, religion, hell, countries, and possessions, and get a room full of idealists to do just this. By omitting these specified things from our vision, we will certainly not create the same picture in the minds of each visionary, will we? If we add more imagining and imaginers, we are sure to end up with more disparity, rather than more oneness. Inconsistent.

Suppose we succeed and achieve Lennon's cherished oneness: nothing to die for, no distinction between my wallet and your wallet, between my wife and your wife, between friends and enemies. What Lennon calls “a brotherhood of man” is actually a sameness of man. What Lennon imagines is that beauty and ugly look the same, that good and evil are moral equivalents, that the true is no different than the false. Improper.

Let us at least commend Mr. Lennon for his bravery. Bringing about his monochrome uniformity will require courageous convictions. What do we do with those who remain out of step with our oneness? What shall we do with that stubborn man of faith who is lacking in imagination so much as to place value in catechisms, creeds, the fellowship of the saints, and the precious word of God? Such a man has no place in Lennon's imagination. Preserving oneness requires their removal. Such was the philosophy of Stalin, Hitler, and Pol Pot. Inexpedient.

- Refute or confirm Catherine Moreland's notion that General Tilney did something nefarious to his wife before discovering the truth.
- Refute evolution in a science class, such as biology. It is elementary, but it helps students think through how generally to refute.

- With my direction, I had my students locate a story or argument in contemporary culture and write a confirmation or refutation of it.
- Have your students refute and confirm, or split the class in half.

(7) Commonplace

- Commonplace is a composition that amplifies inherent virtues or vices. It takes up a general virtue or vice, rather than the specific qualities of a single person. Topics included gambling, theft, adultery, etc. Sometimes it took up the virtues or vices of specific kinds of persons, such as a tyrant.
- The challenge of the commonplace exercise is getting your audience to care about a subject that is commonly agreed upon.
- Argue for a common virtue or against a common vice following these steps or headings: (1) Contrast your common topic with its contrary (2) Amplify your common topic by comparing it to something similar but less evil than itself (3) Rebuke the motivation of the doer of the deed with a proverb or saying (4) Employ a digression with a defamatory conjecture as to the past life of the person accused (5) Refute the idea of taking pity on such a person
- Consider the following headings in discussing this virtue or vice (don't have to use all of them): (a) legality (b) justice (c) profitable (d) practical (e) decency (f) consequences

Example condemning a tyrant modified from George Kennedy's progym textbook :

(Contrary) Consider the intentions of our ancestors. For our benefit, they invented a constitution free of domination, with checks and balances of power. The Founding Fathers sought out the equal application of the law, working out for themselves a single standard of judgment to preserve liberty. This became the law for the nation, a rectification of the evils that tyrants create.

(Comparison) A murderer is a dreadful thing but a tyrant is a greater evil. The former does wrong against one person, but the latter alters the whole fortune of a nation. Yes, murder is an evil that causes grief, but how much worse is a man who causes grief to an entire citizenry?

(Rebuke the motive) Even when men do dreadful things, they often distinguish their righteous motivations from their evil actions. The tyrant, on the other hand, cannot

say his deeds are unintentionally evil. If he had unwillingly attempted tyranny, perhaps one would excuse him from a trial, but since he acted after much planning, how is it just to dismiss something fully intended before the actions?

(Digression) All other persons brought before judgment are held responsible only for their present activity, and often they are let go because of their past life. The tyrant is judged for both parts of his life: he lived his past life with selfish ambition and his present life is worse than his past. So let him be judged for both, both the harm he did earlier and what he did thereafter.

(Rejection of pity) Who will try to win his release by emotional appeal? Probably his children. But when they come into court weeping, remember the liberties secured by our Constitution; surely it is much more righteous to cast a vote for it than for the children of this man. If you pity the tyrant, his evil will have been secured by means of his children. Thus, you will more justly vote in favor of that by which you have been made judges and set free.

- I teach the book of Deuteronomy at the beginning of my omnibus course. My students will choose one of the Ten Commandments and write a commonplace. They are challenged to amplify and make their audience care about laws that nearly all Christians assume are good.
- When I finished Dr. Schlect's ClassicalU course, I had to write an essay concerning the benefits of cultivating sympathy and fellowship among students. So, I wrote a commonplace on sympathy and fellowship.

(8) Encomium, (9) Vituperation, and (10) Comparison

- The encomium and vituperation, like refutation and confirmation, are two sides of the same coin. An encomium is a speech of praise and a vituperation is a speech of condemnation. A comparison is a hybrid composition of an encomium and vituperation.
- Compose an encomium as follows: (1) write an introduction (2) Describe the stock a person comes from: (a) people (b) country (c) ancestors (d) parents (3) Describe the person's upbringing: (a) education (b) instruction in the arts (c) training in the law (4) Describe the person's deeds, which should be described as the results of (a) his/her excellencies of mind (such as fortitude or prudence) (b)

his/her excellencies of the body (such as beauty, speed, or vigor) (c) his/her excellencies of fortune (as high position, power, wealth, friends) (5) Make a favorable comparison to someone else to amplify your praise (6) Conclude with an epilogue that exhorts the hearers to emulate this person.

- Be flexible with the encomium and vituperation when choosing which steps to include or omit. Some may apply more than others.
- Compose a vituperation as follows: (1) write an introduction (2) Describe the stock a person comes from: (a) people (b) country (c) ancestors (d) parents (3) Describe the person's upbringing: (a) education (b) instruction in the arts (c) training in the law (4) Describe the person's deeds, which should be described as the results of (a) his/her evils of mind (such as cowardice or recklessness) (b) his/her evils of the body (such as ugliness, lethargy, or weakness) (c) his/her evils of fortune (abuses of high position, power, wealth, friends) (5) Make a disfavorable comparison to someone else to amplify your censure (6) Conclude with an epilogue that exhorts the hearers not to emulate this person.

Example of an encomium from one of my students that I edited:

(Introduction) Thomas Carlyle once said, "No great man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great men." The history of the world would not be satisfied without the account of the life and love of Jay Gatsby – the Great Gatsby.

(Describe the stock and upbringing) Jay Gatsby was once a rough and ambitious young James Gatz, son to some rather less-than-ambitious farmers whom he never truly considered his parents. James Gatz was a dreamer. He ran away from home when he was but a boy. He moved to the central northwest without a penny to his name and went from coast to coast fishing salmon and digging clams. He hungered to be something more than James Gatz, and the moment he met millionaire Dan Cody, his life would change forever. Dan Cody took the ambitious, seventeen-year-old James Gatz and turned him into a smart and cunning Jay Gatsby.

(Describe the person's deeds) Gatsby was ambitious and hardworking. He built himself up from nothing. He achieved more in twenty years than most do in an entire lifetime. He was a valiant soldier and received high honors in World War I. Great men, indeed, have achieved far less than this.

Gatsby was also a generous man. What he had, he shared with others. He was kind and quick to lend his services. He once made reparations for a woman's dress when it was ruined at one of his parties. His virtue and kindness exceeded all those who knew him.

Gatsby loved with an unequalled passion. Daisy had been the love of his life and she remained so to the very end. Everything he did was ultimately for her. He dreamed of becoming rich and building a large house for her, which he did. He valiantly took the blame for Daisy's killing of Myrtle Wilson, an action which led to his untimely death. He saved the reputation and life of his beloved Daisy, a sacrifice she would never know.

(Favorable comparison) I liken Jay Gatsby to another great man in history, Napoleon Bonaparte. The two men started with very little, became quite prosperous, and achieved their dreams. Napoleon was adored by his soldiers, as Gatsby was loved by many. Gatsby and Bonaparte are often maligned for their faults rather than rightfully praised for their virtues and achievements.

(Epilogue) Jay Gatsby was a man of valor and great kindness. His name lives among the most extraordinary men in history because of these qualities. He was not a perfect man, but the virtues he displayed are ones I call all to emulate. It would do well for all to learn from the lives and loves of valiant men like the Great Gatsby.

- I use the headings from the Encomium when writing letters of recommendation for my students and those letters have noticeably improved.
- Choose a figure from your class (historical figure, fictional character, scientist, mathematician, etc.) and have the students write an encomium or vituperation.
- Comparisons can (1) equally praise two people (2) praise two people while exalting one of the two as more praiseworthy (3) equally censure two people (4) censure two people while condemning one of the two as more deserving of censure (5) praise one and vituperate the other. The purpose is the amplification of the virtues and vices of the individuals.
- Write a comparison that praises Adam Smith and vituperates Karl Marx.
- Write a double encomium of Samwise Gamgee and Frodo Baggins, demonstrating that while both Hobbits were great, Samwise was the greater of the two.

- Write a double encomium of Jane and Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*, demonstrating the equally virtuous qualities of both women.
- Write a double vituperation of Javert and Thenardier from *Les Mis*, demonstrating that while both men deserve censure, Thenardier is worse than Javert.

(11) Impersonation

- Impersonations imitate the ethos of the person chosen to be portrayed. The subject could be historical, legendary, or fictitious. Impersonations are dramatic in form, employing dialogue. Impersonations do not follow formal headings.
- I heard Andrew Kern once say that a great way to discuss literature is to ask your students “What would you have done in a particular character’s circumstances?” This progym exercise helps students answer that excellent question in rhetorically creative ways.
- I had my students create dialogue for Curley and Slim from *Of Mice and Men*. The two characters appear in a scene in the middle of an argument. The students created dialogue hypothesizing how the argument started.
- I had my students retell Jean Valjean’s interaction with Bishop Myriel from the first-person perspective of the bishop and asked them to imitate and capture the voice of the author, Hugo, as well.

(12) Description

- The exercise deals with the vivid description of a chosen subject.
- This exercise is largely useful in heightening or amplifying other progym exercises or other types of compositions.
- Have your students imitate an author’s style when describing.
- Imitate Dicken’s description of Magwitch and Joe Gargery’s wife from *Great Expectations*. Have your students describe themselves or people they know by closely following Dicken’s style and syntax.
- When it comes to description, have your students learn from the masters.

(13) Thesis

- The thesis trains students to create and support a general proposal. Ancient examples included debating political issues such as “Should the city be walled?”,

general social issues such as "Should a man marry?", or speculative or theoretical themes such as "Is the heaven spherical?"

- The thesis traditionally follows the six parts of a discourse for its steps or headings: (1) introduction or exordium (2) narration or narratio (3) partitio or division (4) proof or confirmatio (5) refutation or refutatio (6) conclusion or peroratio
- This may be a familiar exercise since many of our schools use the thesis or something similar in our junior and senior theses.
- Thesis topics are nearly inexhaustible. Who deserves more blame for the War Between the States, the North or the South? Should George have shot Lennie? Is there such a thing as a just war? Should Christians be pacifists? Are science and Christianity compatible? Should high school students read mature literature like *Brave New World*? Again, you know your subjects and you know the controversies within the classes you teach. Have the students pick a side and write a thesis (doesn't have to be long).

(14) Attack or Defend a Law

- This exercise trains students to attack or support existing or historical laws, or the student introduces a law that does not exist.
- This exercise borrows the steps or headings of the thesis and considers questions such as (1) Is it legal? (2) Is it just? (3) Is it expedient? (4) Is it practical? (5) Is it moral/respectable? (6) What are the consequences?
- At the end of my unit on Deuteronomy, I have my students attack or defend the death penalty for murderers, rapists, and kidnappers.
- Students in a government class could attack or defend one of the amendments or congressional term limits.
- This exercise also informs discussions: my omnibus class attacks and defends various positions on birth control during our *Brave New World* unit; my econ class attacks and defends income tax rates and the services provided by the government. Students could then write an attack or defense of laws pertaining to those subjects.

- I had a student write a paper proposing strict limitations on who qualifies for welfare and for how long.

Progym Resources

- BYU's progym page:
<http://rhetoric.byu.edu/Pedagogy/Progymnasmata/Progymnasmata.htm>
- Ifioque progym page: <https://www.ifioque.com/classical-rhetoric/progymnasmata/progymnasmata>
- Educational Renaissance website and podcast, especially for the Narrative exercise.
- Chris Schlect's 2004 ACCS workshop on the progymnasmata and his progym lesson from his ClassicalU course "Effective Upper School Teaching and Leadership."
- Jim Selby's 2002 progymnasmata ACCS workshop.
- Annie Petzinger's 2011 progymnasmata ACCS workshop.
- Jason Barney's 2022 progymnasmata ACCS workshop.
- Roman Road's *Fitting Words* curriculum has several helpful introductory assignments for the thesis.
- *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, pp 484-488. These pages give a brief overview of the progymnasmata and include several suggestions of topics for the progym exercises (some, not all).
- The progym curriculum from Memoria Press.