



The Ends, Means & Methods of Classical Writing

by William Michael, December 2010

Summary: *Understanding the arts of speaking and writing from the perspective of the ancients allows us to understand why we ought to be studying the classical liberal arts, what we ought to be studying and how we ought to be studying it.*

There's a lot of stuff for sale today in educational circles. Five hundred years ago, it wasn't so. There were a handful of books considered necessary for a sound education and mastery of those books was the simple objective for students and teachers. Printers were few and in some countries they were under the watchful eye of the kings. The Grammar in England was that of William Lily, known as "the Royal Grammar", and among the Jesuits, that of Emmanuel Alvares. The Logic books were written by Aristotle, Rhetoric was taught by Cicero, and so on. The same curriculum was enjoyed by students in all Christian countries, for centuries and centuries. It was no mystery what the children had to learn. The real question was whether a child could do the work.

Today, far less attention is given to the goals of education and more to the marketing messages of people trying to sell books. Schools are buying whatever the publishers make available. Homeschooling parents are often buying whatever is for sale at the local conference or what they know other people to be using. This situation is worst among what has been called "classical" educational programs because the parents and teachers judging the materials are ignorant of the subjects and arts to be learned. Thus, the booksellers can say almost anything they want and no one knows whether it's true or false. Wisdom might warn us to "Never judge a book by its cover.", but today, the opposite has almost become the rule. Folks are buying books based almost entirely on appearances.

You probably cannot read Greek, have never studied Cicero's letters or Caesar's histories, and don't know the difference between a trochee, iambus, spondee or dactyl. You probably can't name the five canons of Rhetoric, any of the commonplaces of Dialectic or the difference between Music and Astronomy, but as a school principal, classroom teacher or homeschooling parent you're making decisions about what needs to be studied, how and when. You may be hoping to provide a child with an education that, throughout history, would have been taught by a master who mastered these when he himself was a child. You're undertaking, in a dark and confused generation, an incredibly difficult task. Unfortunately, you're probably getting advice from people who are no further along in these subjects than you are but who are seizing upon an opportunity to appear so. That advice is going to multiply your difficulties and possibly leave you far, far short of your goals in the end.

In this article, I'd like to give you some helpful direction. I'm not going to paste quotes from other modern gurus and pretend that proves anything. My advice comes from the masters themselves because I study and believe that I know them pretty well and share their goals in my own work.

I'd like to give you a free and convenient fly-over of the arts of Grammar and Poetics so that you can see the goal to which students--historically--were directed when education served better ends than it does today. Students then were simply studying the classical (not modern) liberal arts, as everyone had done before them. When we see and understand the goal of that education, particularly as it applies to the language arts, the excellence of the means by which students were brought there will become clear. You will be able to see whether this goal is of interest to you or not and know whether another course will better serve your interests. Most importantly, you will no longer be prey for book-sellers who hope their cover is impressive enough to close the deal with you. Reading this article may take you an evening, but it can save you from years of confusion.

IT BEGINS WITH THE ABCs

In the CLAA, we study classical Latin and Greek as Christian students have since the Church was founded. You'll soon understand why. Unfortunately, some modern teachers advise that Latin should be read with "Ecclesiastical" pronunciation, which is completely false. Anytime we read a master speaker or writer, we must do so with the sounds they themselves would have used. The reason for this is that classical authors arranged their words so that they would be pleasant to the ear and easy on the tongue. They were not newspaper reporters simply chronicling their ideas, but were masters of language who wanted express the best thoughts in the best words. It would be ridiculous, then, to read anything from classical Rome with the accent of a 16th century French Catholic priest, just as it would be ridiculous for a reader to think that Shakespeare is read just as well with a southern drawl as he is with his own English. Church pronunciation is for reading Church Latin and classical pronunciation is for reading classical Latin.

The sounds of classical Latin are very simple. There is one sound per letter:

a f <u>a</u> ther	i mach <u>i</u> ne	r trilled <u>r</u> in <u>R</u> oma
b <u>b</u> ib	k <u>k</u> iss	s <u>s</u> ister
c <u>c</u> ake	l <u>l</u> ove	t <u>t</u> ent
d <u>D</u> ad	m <u>M</u> om	u bl <u>u</u> e
e r <u>e</u> ign	n <u>n</u> un	x f <u>o</u> x (ks)
f fl <u>u</u> ff	o r <u>o</u> se	y "Greek l", like German ü
g <u>G</u> od	p <u>p</u> ope	z b <u>e</u> ds (dz)
h <u>h</u> ead	q <u>q</u> ueen	

In addition to the basic sounds, there were five diphthongs, in which the sounds of two vowels are combined into one sound and--this is important--treated as one vowel sound in pronunciation.

ae a + e	ei e + i	oe o + e
au a + u	eu e + u	ui u + i

Practice reading these words aloud--one syllable at a time:

Roma	quaestor	sacerdos
Cicero	imperator	Scipio
Caesar	Iudaea	eloquentia
Iulius	Academia	philosophia
Marcus	memoria	Hercules
Italia	Augustus	pontifex
populus	cui	clementia
gladius	Vergilius	excelsis

Now, when you come across a word like "Carthago" or "philosophia", you will tend to read it with English sounds of "th" in "math" and "ph" in "phone", but this wouldn't be true classical pronunciation. In classical speech, the consonant sounds would have been kept separate, though joined in one breath much like a diphthong. The "th" would sound like the "th" in "Thomas" and the "ph" would sound like the "ph" in "loophole".

ONE SYLLABLE AT A TIME

In English, we hear the words "flee" and "flea" and know the difference only by their spellings or by the surrounding context. As students move into Latin and Greek, they find that these languages have homonyms just as English does. In English we have words that are written the same (homographs) but have different pronunciations and meanings. The meaning of the words PREsent and preSENT are determined by their correct pronunciation. The same is found in Latin. For example, the Latin verb **lego** can mean either "I send" or "I read" based on the length with which the vowel E is pronounced. The verb **amaveris** can speak of the future or the past based on the length of the syllable IS. Pronunciation, therefore, matters just as much as it does in English. It becomes extremely important as students move into poetics as we'll see further below.

To rightly pronounce every word we must know how they were spoken by those who originally used them. The rules for right speaking begin with knowing the length of each syllable. We must, therefore, know how to quickly divide Latin words into syllables. There are just a few simple things to understand--remember these are rules for Latin words, not English:

1. Every separate vowel sound forms a syllable.
2. Syllables divide before a single consonant.
3. Consonants are separated unless they are "blends".

The words we read above are broken into syllables below. See if you can explain why the words are divided as they are, based on the rules above:

Ro•ma	quaes•tor	sa•cer•dos
Ci•ce•ro	im•pe•ra•tor	Sci•pi•o
Caes•sar	lu•dae•a	e•lo•quen•ti•a
lu•li•us	A•ca•de•mi•a	phi•lo•so•phi•a
Mar•cus	me•mo•ri•a	Her•cu•les
I•ta•li•a	Au•gus•tus	pon•ti•fex
po•pu•lus	cui	cle•men•ti•a
gla•di•us	Ver•gi•li•us	ex•cel•sis

The masters spoke of words as "smooth" or "rough" based on the number of hard consonant sounds the word had. The Latin word **aurora** (the dawn) is smoother than **barbaricus** (foreign). You should notice that the names of many words were smooth or rough in harmony with the smoothness or roughness of the object they named. This is one reason why it is not good for us to dismiss classical pronunciation as though it had no significance and was a mere historical coincidence. Many words are made smoother with ecclesiastical pronunciation and this can have an effect on the effect a word's pronunciation has on our thoughts of the object it names. For example, the name **Cicero** would have been a rough word in classical Rome--and a fitting name for a rough and tough defender of truth. The softening of his name to Italian CHEE-che-ro or worse, the English SI-se-ro has an effect on our thoughts of the man named. Imagine changing the pronunciation of the English word "kick" to "cheech" or "sis". "Come on, Tommy, sis the ball." The word "kick" suits the roughness of the action and makes the word more effective in communication than "sis" would be.

MEASURING SYLLABLE LENGTH IN LATIN

Once we are able to rightly divide words into syllables, we then must be able to know the length of the syllables: long or short. We need to make sure that we do not confuse long and short *syllables* with long and short *vowels*. They are not the same thing, though long and short vowels do help to mark long and short syllables. A short syllable may be compared to a quarter note in music--a single beat in the rhythm of speech. A long syllable has the length of two short syllables, comparable to a half-note in music.

1. If a syllable contains a long vowel or a diphthong, it is long.
2. If a syllable contains a vowel followed by 2+ consonants sounds, it is long.

All other syllables are short. Now, the problem we find when judging which syllables are long and short is rule #1. We may not know whether a vowel in a word is long or short. You should be able to identify the diphthongs when you see them--and this is why they are important. We will know some of these from our Grammar studies, for example the "o" in the Genitive ending "-orum" is always long, the "i" in the Ablative plural ending "-is" always long, and so on. The rest of the vowels will have to be learned by either (a) hearing Latin spoken rightly or (b) looking up the words in a dictionary to see if the vowels are long or short. That takes time, but will be necessary unless you can listen to a classical Latin speaker who actually practices excellent pronunciation (which you can't). The good news is that the rules of accents will only require us to know the length of the second-to-last and third-to-last syllables. We need not worry about the others. Nevertheless, in the words below, I have marked the vowels for you and the syllables. Now, using the rules above, you should be able to understand why the syllables are long or short: In the chart below, all red syllables are long.

Rō •ma	quaes •tor	sa •cer•dos
Ci •ce•ro	im •pe• rā •tōr	Sci •pi•ō
Caes •ar	lū •dae•a	ē •lo• quen •ti•a
lū •li•us	A •ca•de• mī •a	phi •lo• so •phi•a
Mar •cus	me •mo•ri•a	Her •cu•lēs
Ī •ta•li•a	Au •gus•tus	pōn •ti•fex
pō •pu•lus	cui	clē •men•ti•a
glā •di•us	Ver •gi•li•us	ex •cel•sis

Note: In English we have stupidly used the words "long" and "short" to name vowel sounds with no thought of length at all. The "long A" in **cake** is no longer than the "short A" in **cat**. This is typical English nonsense.

ACCENTS IN CLASSICAL LATIN

Once we can divide a Latin word into syllables and know which syllables are long and short, we can quickly determine which syllable is to be accented. There is one simple rule for the Latin accent:

The third-to-last syllable (antepenult) is accented if the second-to-last syllable is short. Otherwise, the second-to-last syllable (penult) is accented.

Thus, the accent in a Latin word is trying to move to the antepenult unless the length of the penult keeps it from doing so. Now, at last we can see how the accents of these Latin words are determined. Read the words below, accenting the syllables in uppercase letters.

RŌ •ma	QUAES •tor	sa • CER •dos
Ci •ce•ro	im •pe• RĀ •tōr	SCI •pi•ō
CAE •sar	lū • DAE •a	ē •lo• QUEN •ti•a
IŪ •li•us	A •ca•de• MĪ •a	phi •lo• SO •phi•a
MAR •cus	me • MO •ri•a	HER •cu•lēs
Ī • TA •li•a	Au • GUST •tus	PON •ti•fex
PŌ •pu•lus	cui	clē • MEN •ti•a
GLA •di•us	Ver • GI •li•us	ex • CEL •sis

THE RHYTHM OF CLASSICAL LATIN

Knowing that syllables are either long or short and that words were accented in similar places, we can finally consider some more important issues. These issues, we will see, were the issues that history's greatest speakers and writers were concerned with when they spoke and wrote.

The human mind, because it is guided by the ordering and calming of Reason, seeks order. Reason cannot tolerate chaos but seeks to discern an order that it may trace out a source and predict and end. When we hear any speech, our minds seek to know its meaning. When the mind cannot discern an

order, it becomes confused and we become irritated. We don't like to have our ears filled with chaotic sounds that have no meaning, or with sounds that do have meaning, but meaning that is difficult to understand. Sure, it may be "interesting" for 3 or 4 minutes, but beyond that it becomes unbearable. The more orderly and comprehensible speech is, the more pleasant it is for men to listen to. It is easy to follow and easy to remember.

History's greatest speakers and writers knew that no matter how true or important their ideas were to themselves, poorly made speeches could turn off an audience before their message was ever heard. The masters studied this with such great detail that they were careful to make sure that even the rhythm of their speech was in harmony with their audience and subject. For this reason, style became an important part in the study of Rhetoric. The Greeks have left to us entire books devoted to the art of style.

In Latin classes, students are often taught that Latin words can be set into any order because their endings reveal their function in the sentence, but this is only a half-truth. Words may not be set in any order whatsoever, but the masters made use of the flexibility of word order in order to control the suavity (smoothness) and rhythm of their speech.

Now, we're not talking here about poetic *meter*. Meter is the intentional arranging of words in a line to maintain a particular pattern of long and short syllables. We will look at poetry in just a moment, but don't think that all we're talking about here is the artificial and purposeful sound of poetic meter. We're talking here about prose or ordinary speech--not poetry.

Common and useful patterns of long and short syllables were identified and named by the masters:

Name	Pattern	Example
Trochee	long-short	Rōma
Iambus	short-long	legō
Spondee	long-long	Jūnō
Tribrach	short-short-short	populus
Anapaest	short-short-long	ratīō
Dactyl	long-short-short	lītora

A speaker's choice of words was often determined by their sound within a line, not necessarily their meaning. The words *fēlix*, *laetus* and *beātus* all mean "happy", but they have different rhythms. *Fēlix* is a spondee. *Laetus* is a trochee. Synonyms gave writers great flexibility and allowed them to make phrases "sound better".

It should be noted that these patterns did not have to belong to a single word, but phrases as well. Speakers, writers and poets practiced different ways of expressing common phrases to satisfy their need for different rhythm patterns. By practicing "turning phrases" for years, experts could quickly produce desired effects. For example, a speaker could say "he is happy" in several ways, each of which would have a different rhythm and overall sound:

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|--Iambus--|--Iambus--|--Iambus--|
short long short long short long
Be • ā • tus il • le est.

|--Trochee--|--Trochee--|
long short long short
Lae • tus il • le.

|-----Dactyl-----|--Trochee--|
long short short long short
Il • le be • a • tus

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These different rhythms were recognized as being natural to different types of speech. In other words, it was noted that when men spoke casually, in joking or in accusing, they tended to have an iambic rhythm. When men spoke of grave matters, their speech tended to sound dactylic. It was noted that lines that ended in trochees sounded as though they had a natural finish. Therefore, wise men worked to form specific patterns in their speech based on the subjects on which they spoke or wrote. Their speech developed an artificial, yet seemingly natural and pleasant rhythm. Bad writing would be that which was

found to have a rhythm inappropriate to the subject, audience or timing. More importantly, if the rhythm became too obvious, it was feared that the audience would tune the speaker out since his speech would have seemed artificial and untrustworthy. Therefore, a subtle, but sensible rhythm was desired by the masters in their speech.

"There will, perhaps, be a pleasing charm if we integrate metrical units into our composition, yet the actual meters must not obtrude in the general flow of the sentence...only if it is divided and analyzed in the minutest detail, then and only then should we detect that they are meters." -Demetrius, On Style

The poets, on the other hand, who were singing or writing to an audience who knew the purpose of the speech was to please the ear, formed lines (measures) which contained a certain number of these patterns (called "feet"). Dactylic hexameter, called the "heroic meter" as it was used to narrate the epic events in the lives of the heroes of antiquity, was composed of 24 beats per line, made up of dactyls. Since a dactyl was composed of 4 beats, there were six (hexa-) dactyls per measure (-meter). A dactyl could be replaced by a spondee when necessary, but supplied the underlying rhythm of the poem. Let's look at the famous opening lines of Vergil's *Aeneid* as an example:

|-----Dactyl-----|-----Dactyl-----|--Spondee--|--Spondee--|-----Dactyl-----|--Trochee--|
 long short short long short short long long long long long short short long short
Ar • ma vi • rum•que ca • no Troi • ae qui pri • mus ab o • ris.

|-----Dactyl-----|--Spondee--|-----Dactyl-----|--Spondee--|-----Dactyl-----|--Trochee--|
 long short short long long long short short long long long short short long short
Ī • ta • li • am fā • tō pro • fu • gus Lā • vī • nia•que vē • nīt.

Thus, from the simple sounds of everyday speech to the 12 books of Vergil's hexameter, the study of the sounds of letters, syllables, words and speeches enable us to gain a mastery of language and use it as a box full of tools we can use masterfully, rather than as a pile of unidentifiable and half-broken tools that were once used well by others but unknown and useless to us.

WHY THIS ALL MATTERS

OK, this may all seem uselessly academic at this point, but it's really not. The purpose of education is to cultivate more than "common-sense" skills. If common-sense was the goal, education shouldn't be necessary. It is implied by our commitment to education that life isn't as simple as working hard and telling the truth. We were taught by Our Lord to be innocent but cunning and He himself modeled the complexity of human communication by teaching with proverbs and parables. Understanding this complexity is the purpose of the art of Rhetoric. Let's consider then a few practical implications of what we've covered in this article.

First, whether we care or not, we must realize that our ability to communicate with others is affected by the pleasantness of our speech. We have no example in any of history's wise or holy men of the attitude that says, "Just tell the truth and leave the results to God." The motto of the CLAA's Schola Scriptorum is the biblical proverb, "***Corda hominum manifesta prudentibus.***" which means "The hearts of men are open to the wise.". Thus, anyone who suggests that the hearts of men are closed and mysterious proves himself to be a blind guide. For those who study wisdom, the hearts of men are knowable and predictable and the classical masters show us how to enchant and move them.

Second, as far as curriculum development is concerned, we see the misunderstanding in those schools and colleges that promote the study of the "Great Books", "Great Ideas" or "classics" in English translations. This notion of classical studies is inconsistent with the lives and teaching of the classical authors themselves. It assumes an ignorance that allows it to seem like a good idea, for anyone who reads the classics in depth will see that they would never support such an idea. We can read an English translation of Plato and get the general idea of his message, but this is hardly to study Plato at all:

"Plato's elegance comes from his rhythm...His word order is clearly elegant and musical, but if you invert it...you rob the language of its charm, which comes from its rhythm; for it is definitely not in the thought or the vocabulary." -Demetrius, *On Style* (c. 300 BC)

What is important for the study of Plato (a philosopher) is far more important for the study of the great orators and poets of the past, whose excellence depends even more on their language and style. Thus, the collection that may justly be called "the Great Books" are not "the Great Books" for their bare-bones messages set in any language by modern translators, but for the stylistic mastery of the original authors themselves, in their original languages, for their original purposes. This mastery extends from their subjects and modes of communication, all the way down to their word selection, which is based as much on matters of rhythm and style as it is on meaning. The problems programs have today is that their curriculum arrangement doesn't allow for the proper study of the works of the masters and so they all get lumped into a "Literature" program and are read like English books. In the meantime, the kids are learning Latin from what looks like a comic book and not studying Rhetoric at all. Completed reading lists without linguistic and rhetorical analysis is like rapidly swallowing food that will pass through the body and never be digested. It is a waste of time, energy and resources, regardless of the hype that surrounds it, or how impressive the books' covers appear.

Third, when we enter upon any study of classical languages, it cannot be directed by just any teacher. We must study Latin and Greek in a way that will allow us to study the classical masters in an appropriate way. For this reason, the CLAA's restoration of authentic classical study materials is of the utmost importance for students. Our goal is not to gain some enriching familiarity with language, but to attain a mastery of language comparable to that of the masters--the type of mastery they would encourage us to seek.

Fourth, the art of Music is dependent on the arts of Grammar and Rhetoric. Students ignorant of these first arts will be limited in what they can study in the higher arts. This is especially important to Catholics because the music of the medieval Church grew out of the poetry and music of the Latin masters and the Latin language itself. Gregorian chant, for example, was based on ancient principles of style that were informed by the art of poetry. To dismiss this music in modern circles as a mere historical or cultural preference is ignorant and false--yet that is what is being done by many who are ignorant of the classical liberal arts. Authentic classical studies will allow us to rightly study other arts, like Music.

Fifth, we must not allow ourselves to be chained to the English language, for it is a poor language and incapable of expressing well the complexity of human ideas and affecting the human heart. There will never be an English Homer or Vergil, for such a poet would be required to build with inferior tools and would therefore need to possess a genius greater than the masters who have been unmatched for more than 2000 years. The modern revolution against traditional Christian culture is a fad that must be resisted and attacked, rather than feared and bargained with. Modern culture has all but destroyed the language arts and fine arts and it is not simply a renewed effort among misguided people with good intentions that will undo the harm done. We must intelligently acknowledge the source of the disease and remove it that health may be restored. This is to be done through the diligent study of the classical liberal arts by the next generation.

Therefore, in conclusion, it should be clear that unless a study program can successfully bring a student from his ABCs to the mastery of the art of Rhetoric, it should not be invested in. In the Classical Liberal Arts Academy, we have a very clear understanding of our goal and we are sure that the path we are traveling on will bring us there, since it has brought students there for several thousand years and we aren't changing a thing--just returning to the right path.

Comments? Questions? E-mail Mr. Michael at mail@classicalliberalarts.com.