

# *Charlotte Mason and the Trivium*



## Planning Classical Lessons with Narration

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By Jason Barney

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# Introduction

Thank you for downloading this free resource on Charlotte Mason and the trivium. My name is Jason Barney, and I'm the Principal at Coram Deo Academy, a classical Christian school in Carmel, IN. I'm really excited for the opportunity to share with you about Charlotte Mason and how her lesson structure might help us apply the trivium even better in our classical schools today. And one reason I'm excited is because I know that what I'm sharing with you works. It's not just some pie-in-the-sky philosophical idea without practical application. For more than a decade I served at a school that was one of just a handful of classical Christian schools around the nation who have leveraged the ideas of Charlotte Mason, a late 19th century British Christian educator. And because of the practices I'm going to discuss today, our teachers have some unique and really powerful tools in their toolbelt that help students learn for themselves.

For several years now I have been sharing how Charlotte Mason's practice of narration derives from the classical tradition and uniquely embodies classical principles and values. In 2018 I presented at ACCS an earlier version of the content I'm sharing here. Then in 2019 I trained the faculty of the Geneva School in narration, and shared an ebook *How to Implement Narration in the Classical Classroom* which received hundreds of downloads from educators across the nation and all over the world. In 2020 I did more research on narration, revised and expanded the ebook into a full length treatise published with the CiRCE Institute, *A Classical Guide to Narration*. In addition, I shared about the practice of narration with more than 600 educators through virtual conference sessions and training opportunities. While I've always believed in narration, there was a hunger for it that I hadn't expected.

My goal in this free resource is to share with you about the Narration-Trivium lesson structure, both why it works from a big picture philosophical perspective, but also how to practically embed it within your day-in and day-out practices of the classroom. If you're looking for a more detailed exposition of the pedagogy behind narration specifically, you'll want to purchase my book through CiRCE *A Classical Guide to Narration*. This short lesson planning manual won't give you the full background. However, if you've already read the book, this resource will help you plan lessons according to the pedagogy and principles described in it.

## A Comparison: Charlotte Mason and Dorothy Sayers

Well, before we dive into the heart of the matter, it may be that you came across this resource in spite of not knowing much about Charlotte Mason. Perhaps you've heard of her from local homeschool movements, or you've heard of schools devoted to her ideas, but you don't yet know her writings on education for yourself. So maybe you're thinking, "Who was Charlotte Mason and why should we listen to her anyway?"

Let me introduce her to you by way of contrast with someone we've all heard of: Dorothy Sayers. So let's compare Dorothy Sayers and Charlotte Mason: the one was an Oxford medievalist issuing a clarion call and prophetic critique of modern education Charlotte Mason, on the other hand, was a British educator who led a national parents' union devoted to education, and who attempted to construct a traditional alternative right on the cusp of modernism.

In her famous essay entitled "The Lost Tools of Learning," Dorothy Sayers confessed that her experience of teaching was limited and she sardonically commented that she didn't expect her suggestions to be followed, because the war for traditional education had at that point already been largely lost; whereas Charlotte Mason a little less than a century earlier was a practitioner, who worked as a teacher for many years,

before founding a college for teachers, and then a nationwide movement, going on to write six volumes on education, replete with practical explanations of what they were doing in their schools, as she tried to get the larger establishment to pay attention to the remnant movement of schools and families that she led, based on the incredible results she claimed that they were getting.

Based on this quick contrast, we should have some different expectations on what we might get from Sayers on the one hand and Mason on the other. We should expect to get a strong critique from Sayers' essay, as well as the basic positive principles that she would envision schools operating by. However, from Charlotte Mason, we get more of an applied philosophy with the details worked out practically, in a way similar to her younger contemporary across the Atlantic John Milton Gregory, who expressed many of the same principles of Charlotte Mason in a very different style.

This is one of the reasons why we in the classical education movement should listen to Charlotte Mason, just as many have picked up John Milton Gregory's *The Seven Laws of Teaching*. Her six volumes on education try to work out practically some of those same principles of classical education that were endorsed later on by Dorothy Sayers, but in more detail in terms of curriculum, instruction, lesson planning, etc. Also, her very distance from us (the Victorian era) as well as her closeness, at the cusp of the modern era, dealing with issues like evolutionary theory and higher biblical criticism, make her an intriguing Christian classical philosopher of education for our movement to glean insights from.

Now her popularity among the homeschool community might initially give us some faulty assumptions about her, as if she focused on homeschooling to the exclusion of the work of schools, but after her first two volumes on home education and parents and children, her 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> volumes are almost exclusively focused on school education. Anyone who picks up one of her volumes can tell that she is a deep thinker, well read in both the great philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, as well as the cutting

edge educational thinking of her day, which she quotes from and criticizes freely. So much for why we should listen to Charlotte Mason as classical Christian educators today.

## Planning a Classical Lesson?

You may have been intrigued by the mention of a classical lesson planning. In fact, the Narration-Trivium lesson described here is based on a particular interpretation and application of the trivium. Why would we need a lesson structure to follow in our planning? Well, a lesson structure embodies the assumptions about teaching and learning that we have. If we're trying to ensure that our classical schools are genuinely classical, the administrators who oversee faculty need to give careful thought to how teachers are expected to embody the philosophy practically on a daily basis, lesson by lesson.

What criteria are we using to ensure that our faculty are teaching classically? Dorothy Sayers' essay is suggestive, but at times general and it's not always clear to see how this will translate into a teacher's day-to-day lesson planning. Many others in our movement have expressed worry about the possibility of modern educational assumptions slipping in all over the place in our teaching, where we might least expect them, because they are assumptions that we have breathed in without an awareness of where they come from.

I would contend that Charlotte Mason can help us out here and offer a lesson plan structure that trains students in the arts of the trivium. Just as the classical school movement has looked to John Milton Gregory to put more flesh on the bones of our classical philosophy of education, in the same way Charlotte Mason should be another important and pivotal voice in the classical conversation on teaching.

# Chapter 1: The Classical Distinction Between an ‘Art’ and a ‘Science’

Before we describe Charlotte Mason’s lesson structure, we need to first take some time to step back and discuss the trivium. That’s because I’m going to argue that her lesson structure is actually an application of the trivium, the language arts of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric. If we follow Charlotte Mason, what we end up doing in every lesson of virtually every subject is training our students in those three arts. But in order to go with me there I have to first convince you of a slightly different perspective on the trivium itself than you might be used to.

And that’s because our movement hasn’t always held onto an important classical distinction that goes back at least as far as Aristotle’s discussion of the intellectual virtues: the distinction between an ‘art’ and a ‘science’. As a movement of classical Christian schools, we’ve talked a lot about the liberal arts, especially the trivium, and more recently the quadrivium. Recent books, like Kevin Clark’s and Ravi Jain’s *The Liberal Arts Tradition*, have been careful to add in the sciences, including natural philosophy or the body of knowledge about the natural world, moral philosophy, or the body of knowledge about human beings, and divine philosophy, or metaphysics.

Of course, we’ve heard Dorothy Sayers call the liberal arts the lost tools of learning, and we’ve tried to apply her insights about how the trivium arts can map on practically to the different stages of a child’s development, and that therefore the arts aren’t exactly subjects in themselves but more like a way of approaching each subject. But in the classical tradition the difference between an ‘art’ and a ‘science’ was a little bit more subtle.

A 'science' is simple enough because it comes from the Latin word '*scientia*' meaning knowledge. A science is therefore a body of knowledge that a person might master. The way to master a science is simply to learn or discover all the truth that one can about that area, and to retain the ability to demonstrate the core truths in that domain. An 'art' however is not a body of knowledge but an ability to create or produce something. So, for instance, a person who has mastered the art of architecture, will have the ability to design sound and esthetically pleasing buildings. The person skilled in the art of underwater basket-weaving will be able to weave baskets while submerged under water. An art is about the ability to make something, not primarily about knowing truths; this is a really important distinction.

## Aristotle's Definitions of the Intellectual Virtues

This distinction goes all the way back to the great philosopher Aristotle, when he defined the intellectual virtue of 'art' (think the English 'artistry' or 'craftsmanship') as a "state of capacity to make [something], involving a true course of reasoning" (1140<sup>a</sup>.31), whereas 'knowledge' or 'science' is a "state of capacity to demonstrate" (1130<sup>b</sup>.10). In other words, someone who is skilled in the art or craft of basket-weaving has the ability to weave a basket correctly, based on prior experience and practice and according to the actual nature of the materials and the needs of a basket ("a true course of reasoning").

On the other hand, someone who has knowledge, or has learned a particular 'subject' or 'science', is able to show or demonstrate that knowledge, whether through inductive or deductive reasoning. As Charlotte Mason also said, "Whatever a child can tell, that we may be sure he knows, and what he cannot tell, he does not know." Now Aristotle's distinction between the intellectual virtues of 'art' and 'science' became a crucial touchpoint for the classical tradition of the liberal arts and sciences.

However, our modern revival movement has not always been so clear about this distinction.

In its clearest articulation, then, the seven liberal arts were not viewed as ‘subjects’ or bodies of demonstrable knowledge, but instead were highly complex skills that students needed to be trained in over a course of years. Just as a craftsman is apprenticed into his trade, so the student who would become a master of the liberal arts had to imitate and receive coaching from a master of those arts.

One of the reasons that we have not held this distinction well is that there is a confusing double-reference for many of the liberal arts. Under the general heading of philosophy there was a science for every one of these areas, like the science of grammar, since there was in the tradition a whole body of discovered truth about the grammar of various languages, or about logical reasoning, or about the nature of the rhetorical task. There is a science for every art. But learning the science was viewed as distinct from training in the art.

Naturally, students of the liberal arts would gain knowledge of all kinds along the way, especially concerning the liberal art they were studying, just as someone learning the art of basket-weaving would learn many things about baskets and how they are woven. However, a student’s ability to demonstrate their knowledge of basket-weaving is a completely different thing from their ability to actually weave a basket correctly.

The liberal arts of the trivium are a unique case, because the ‘products’ of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric are themselves the communicated products of knowledge, namely reading and interpretation (grammar), discussion and reasoning (dialectic or logic), and spoken or written persuasion (rhetoric).

But the distinction still holds between the ability to make on the one hand and pure knowledge on the other.

## Our Movement's Growing Understanding of This Distinction

How has the classical school movement grown in its understanding of this distinction?

If we go back to Dorothy Sayers's essay on the lost tools of learning, it's easy to see that this distinction between arts and sciences was important for her. She claims that an important difference between 'modern' and 'medieval' education was the emphasis on 'subjects' versus "forging and learning to handle the tools of learning," by which she means the trivium arts of grammar, logic and rhetoric. As she wrote, "Although we often succeed in teaching our pupils 'subjects,' we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think; they learn everything, except the art of learning."

Doug Wilson, in recovering and applying her essay, has emphasized particularly her mapping of the trivium onto stages of a child's development, so that the grammar of each subject is emphasized for young students, then the logic or reasoning for older, and eloquent expression of truth about a subject for the oldest.

Then back in 2006 Robert Littlejohn and Chuck Evans wrote *Wisdom and Eloquence*, in which they argued against a strong emphasis on the trivium as stages of development, based on their analysis of the historical facts of the tradition. They also argued that the tools of learning are not the liberal arts themselves, but are skills like phonetic decoding, reading comprehension, critical thinking, research, public speaking, etc. The liberal arts, both trivium and quadrivium are subjects, not these discrete skills, claimed Littlejohn and Evans.

Now it's important for us to concede their first point. The classical tradition has taught the trivium in many ways, but before Dorothy Sayers

it's almost impossible to find the idea that the trivium represents stages a child goes through in their development.

In the Roman period students went to a *grammaticus* to learn how to read and write in Greek and their own language Latin. Quintilian, the famous Roman orator and educator, discussed how the equivalent Latin word for the Greek '*grammatike*' was '*litteratura*,' literature, or I might say, literacy, and how among other things the student would learn to read literature and poetry, scan the meter, analyze the meanings of words, read it aloud properly with attention to proper phrasing and accent, and interpret it through all the necessary background information, whether historical, geographical or scientific. That was training in grammar.

After that a student would be sent to a rhetorical teacher like Quintilian to learn to speak publicly in every possible situation that might be needed to bring leadership to the public square. After that, his formal education was done, unless a student wanted to go to Athens and study with the philosophers. That's a very different picture of trivium education than what we might be used to; it's not the grammar-logic-rhetoric as stages of development paradigm.

Similarly, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, a student's work in grammar, logic and rhetoric often occurred at the same time and under the same teachers or tutors. Training in all three arts culminated at the medieval university, and did not necessarily shift or transition from one to the other. In fact, at different times and places, the emphasis might fall on one or the other art, almost to the exclusion of the others. For instance, scholasticism represented a flowering of the logical or dialectical art, while the Renaissance issued a clarion call to return to the sources by means of the grammatical art of reading and interpretation. Outside of its original political purpose in the democracy of Greece and the republic of Rome, rhetoric shifted focus and lost some of its cultural prominence.

But to answer Robert Littlejohn and Chuck Evan's last point about the liberal arts being 'subjects', we should go on to a more recent book by

Kevin Clark and Ravi Jain, *The Liberal Arts Tradition*. In their chapter on the liberal arts they use Thomas Aquinas, who held Aristotle's distinction close to his heart, in order to explain that the liberal arts are the "tools by which knowledge is fashioned" (33). Ahah! Perhaps we found Dorothy Sayers' source. "An art could be attained from an extensive foundation in action and imitation forming cultivated habits," say Kevin Clark and Ravi Jain, whereas "a science can be in the mind alone and does not require any practice or the production of anything."

Based on this distinction, from Aristotle to Aquinas and into our own recovery movement, it seems to make most sense to think of the trivium arts as something different than modern 'subjects'. They are well-worn paths, they are complex imitative habits, they are the tools of learning, they are the skills needed to discover and justify knowledge.

## Chapter 2: How This Distinction Changes Our View of the Trivium

Obviously, if this little review of our movement's growing understanding of the trivium as arts is true, then it changes how we should view the trivium. It doesn't necessarily mean that we should throw out our grammar, logic and rhetoric textbooks. But it should radically reorient us on what we think we're doing when we're teaching grammar.

If '*grammatike*' is the ability to read and interpret texts, with all the sub-skills attached to it, like phonetic decoding, background knowledge, reading comprehension, etc., well then, what students need to master grammar in this sense is lots and lots of coached practice; they don't necessarily need another lecture. They need to read harder and harder texts in all sorts of subject areas. And they need to be actively coached by their teachers in how to do this well, in what needs to be known and understood, in order to interpret this text correctly. And over time with practice, students will become more and more literate, they will become grammarians, skilled readers and interpreters.

The same can be said for logic or, I prefer, dialectic, the art of reasoning and discussion. In order to master this art, students need to do lots and lots of discussing, being forced to think carefully about what they have read. They need to learn to argue with one another respectfully, anticipate others' trains of thought, call out faulty reasoning in themselves and others. Most of all, they need accountable practice in discussing important matters at a higher and higher level.

Mastering rhetoric, lastly, comes in the ability to speak or write persuasively and knowledgeably about all manner of subjects. It is not the same as learning about the subject of rhetoric, the types, the proper divisions, rhetorical devices and flourishes that can be used, though these

are all things it would be great for them to know about. But a student could learn the science of rhetoric, be ready to spew forth the definitions of every term, yet be the least persuasive speaker or writer in the world.

## The Twofold Understanding of Grammar, Dialectic and Rhetoric

This leads me to propose a twofold understanding of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric. Each is both an art and a science, both a complex skill of communication and a traditional body of knowledge about that area. So in a way, everyone is right, Sayers, Wilson, Littlejohn and Evans, as well as Clark and Jain. This is perhaps easiest to see if I use my absurd outside example: basket-weaving.

Imagine two different people who claim to be wise in the art of basket-weaving. One of them knows the whole history of basket-weaving, can name all the important figures, describe key changes in different cultures' application of basket-weaving, and he himself even has his own particular theories about why basket-weaving developed as it did, but unfortunately, he has never actually woven a basket for himself. The other has never heard of any different way to weave a basket than the way that she was taught by her mother growing up, and yet she weaves baskets daily, that only get better and better, sometimes departing from her mother's tradition with bold and innovative designs. The first person is wise in the science of basket-weaving; the second is a trained basket-weaver, an artist in her own right. Of course, many artists also know some of the science, and many scientists have a rudimentary practice of the art. Some few are masters of both the science and the art.

The same can be said of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric. There are bodies of knowledge about these arts that one can master. One can become a grammarian, one can study the philosophy of logic, or one can take

courses in rhetorical studies at a university. Some amount of study in these sciences can help one to master the arts, just as knowledge of the history and various techniques of basket-weaving is useful to the artist. But someone could be a powerful public speaker without any study of the history of rhetoric, because of a combination of natural talent, imitation and coached practice. Are you with me so far?

This changes things for us as classical educators because it forces us to ask the question, Which type of wisdom are we aiming for here? Artistry or demonstrable knowledge? If you look at many of our textbooks in grammar, logic or rhetoric, you have to admit that the method of the textbook seems to assume that the goal is primarily to teach our students knowledge about these 'subjects,' as if that were enough. This is to treat the liberal arts as if they were sciences.

Now don't get me wrong here. A science is a very good thing, and can be helpful, especially if it is fused with appropriate practice. However, the sciences of grammar, logic and rhetoric can be deadening for unprepared students, if they are learned in the absence of training in the arts. There is a reason in the tradition that the liberal arts preceded the sciences. And perhaps I should mention that it's a particular flaw of the Enlightenment and modernism that the sciences and being scientific are preferred to anything else. This may be one of the ways that we as classical educators have implicitly fallen prey to modern assumptions about education.

## John Locke's Critiques of Traditional Trivium Instruction

At the same time, we're not the first classical educators to have fallen prey to this error. For instance, John Locke, the Enlightenment British philosopher, in his work on education, wrote:

*For I have seldom or never observed anyone to get the skill of reasoning well or speaking handsomely by studying those rules which pretend to teach it;*

*and therefore I would have a young gentleman take a view of them in the shortest systems that could be found without dwelling long on the contemplation and study of those formalities. (Some Thoughts Concerning Education, 140)*

Locke claims that learning rules won't make you either an eloquent speaker or a brilliant conversationalist, nor will logical systems of analyzing mode and figure, predicates and predicables, teach a young gentleman to reason well. That requires, he goes on to say, the imitation of great authors or thinkers and practice in reasoning to the truth or speaking publicly. He recommends that young children be asked to narrate stories they have read, from Aesop's fables, and to read great orators.

It seems that even in Locke's day the classical practices of the trivium had gotten crystalized into a deadening form, where students learned the science, but not the art. They memorized rules for logic and rhetoric, but couldn't reason to the truth, let alone speak fluently. As he explains later on,

*There can scarce be a greater defect in a gentleman than not to express himself well either in writing or speaking. But yet, I think, I may ask my reader whether he does not know a great many who live upon their estates and so, with the name, should have the qualities of gentlemen, who cannot so much as tell a story as they should, much less speak clearly and persuasively in any business. This I think not to be so much their fault as the fault of their education. (141-2)*

This is an important warning for us to hear well in our movement, in order to be sure that our schools don't fall prey to this same fault. One of the best ways we can address this defect is through the lesson structure of Charlotte Mason. So let's now turn to her.

## Chapter 3: How Charlotte Mason Anticipates Dorothy Sayers

In many ways Charlotte Mason anticipates the ideas of Dorothy Sayers. For instance, at the end of her essay on the lost tools of learning, Sayers bemoans how the teachers “are doing for their pupils the work which the pupils themselves ought to do,” and then she concludes with that memorable statement summing up the heart of her philosophy, “For the sole true end of education is simply this: to teach men how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain.”

In a similar way, Charlotte Mason has often been quoted as saying, “there is no education but self-education,” by which she means among other things that the students must do the work of learning for themselves, rather than be spoon-fed by their teachers. In her 3<sup>rd</sup> volume *School Education*, Charlotte Mason claims that the

*Children must Labour... [must get] ideas out of [books]... the labour of thought is what his book must induce in the child. He must generalise, classify, infer, judge, visualise, discriminate, labour in one way or another, with that capable mind of his....*

Many times in her works Charlotte Mason bemoans the flood of ineffective teacher-talk or the type of textbooks that are as dry as sawdust, or the watered-down books for children that she calls ‘twaddle.’ In her final volume, she said, “I am jealous for the children; every modern educational movement tends to belittle them intellectually....”

## The Tools of Learning and the Principle of Self-education

This principle of self-education comes out of a Christian respect for children as persons made in the image of God, rather than as empty receptacles waiting to be filled with the teacher's knowledge, poured down as from on high. Starting with the Enlightenment and moving into the modern era, there came to be this assumption that the best thing we could do for the youth would be to liberate them from the superstitions of the past by filling them with the assured results of modern science.

As Charlotte Mason said, this tends to belittle children's intellectual nature as actually being capable of perceiving and discerning the truth themselves. The ultimate end, of course, of neglecting the principle of self-education is to leave children prey to the propagandist and mass-marketer, as Dorothy Sayers so eloquently portrayed.

But Charlotte Mason attempted to head off where this was going through her focus on the students' own work, their own mental, moral and emotional growth, likening them not to an inanimate basin to be filled or slate to be written on, but to a living breathing mind to be fed with the best food available, and given plenty of exercise and outdoor air. In essence, we could say, students need to be fed on the proper mind-food of knowledge, conveyed in the form of well-written books on every subject, and then exercised through the liberal arts, the work of reading and interpreting, thinking and discussing, and speaking and writing persuasively about all they have learned.

## The Power of a Lesson Structure That Embodies the Trivium Principle

Charlotte Mason's standard lesson structure embodied this trivium principle of focusing on training students in the arts of learning. Instead of focusing on the teacher perfectly preparing morsels of tasty knowledge for students to memorize and then spit up again on a test, only to forget it again, Charlotte Mason proposed that students should be actively trained in the habit of attending fully to a text, and then be asked to narrate or tell it back. Narration, which Locke had earlier recommended, becomes for her a key-stone skill for students to develop.<sup>1</sup>

If you can imagine for a moment a history, literature, Bible or science class at your school, in which the students opened their copies of a well-chosen, vibrantly written book, and the core of the lesson centered on the teacher or students reading aloud the text, with careful attention to the words and phrases, new vocabulary, vivid images, and then after a section the book was closed, and students, either one at a time or in pairs, were called upon to narrate back everything they could remember from the passage read, not summarizing but imitating the author's language, catching turns of phrases and hitting upon the salient details that stuck out to them.

This is what happened in virtually every subject at Charlotte Mason's schools, and it is very classical. To see students attentively taken with living books, as Charlotte Mason called them, quietly and peacefully engaged in the art of learning; trained and habituated to read well and fluently with the expectation that they will assimilate and remember what

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<sup>1</sup> Narration was an early staple of the rhetorical and grammatical tradition, functioning primarily as one progymnasmata (preliminary exercises), though was globalized into a core learning practice in any subject during the Renaissance by Erasmus and Comenius, and reapplied to a text-based education by Charlotte Mason. For more on the history of narration, see my *A Classical Guide to Narration*.

they have read; and then given the time to contemplate, to recreate in their own words and memories, a record of the things they have read. This is students doing the work of learning for themselves. This is a lesson structure in which Dorothy Sayers's principle of true education is at work, "teaching [young] men [and women] how to learn for themselves."

What more important and fundamental practice of learning could there be than training students to read good and challenging books, one passage at a time, with careful and focused attention? And just as John Locke expressed a hundred years earlier, how better to make fluent and copious storytellers and public speakers, than to give them daily practice in speaking aloud in front of others of what they have just learned?

## Chapter 4: The Narration-Trivium Lesson Structure

Now that I've explained the fundamental practice of having students narrate a well-chosen text, I'd like to put it in the broader picture of Charlotte Mason's recommendations for a standard lesson structure. And here I want to acknowledge my debt to Ambleside Schools International, and Bill and Maryellen StCyr the founders of ASI in particular, who first trained me and others at our school in Charlotte Mason's philosophy. ASI is devoted solely to the application of Charlotte Mason's philosophy in their schools, and Bill and MaryEllen have pioneered an important work in recovering Charlotte Mason's ideas. So I want to acknowledge my dependence on their articulation of Charlotte Mason's lesson structure, though I have engaged with her thinking much on my own since.

In her first book *Home Education* Charlotte Mason laid out the most basic plan for young children still learning to read. In it the parent or teacher would first set up the reading by having a little talk with the child or children, in which where we are in the story is recalled, anticipation is built, perhaps important ideas or words are highlighted. Then there is the reading of the text, in which the teacher reads aloud for the student, sitting with rapt attention, who is then asked to tell it back.

When children first start narrating they may begin with many halts, saying 'and' between every clause. But after a while they gain facility with the art, and the narrations even of young children, says Charlotte Mason, are of high enough quality to be written down and put in a print book. After narrating, and taking any additions or corrections from other students, the teacher leads a second little talk, in which students discuss the ideas of the text, whether it's bringing out the moral of one of Aesop's fables or arguing about a character's motivation or a perplexing phrase.

## The Narration-Trivium Lesson Plan

<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Date and Time:</b>
<b>Trivium Target</b> – Language Skill Objective	What is the chief language arts skill that students will develop? At the end of this lesson will a student primarily be able to produce an interpretation, a train of reasoning or a persuasive discourse? What sub-skills in these areas will be practiced and honed at a new level of sophistication or mastery?
<b>Pre-Grammar</b> – Set-up or 1st Little Talk	Usually vocabulary, background information, and rehearsal of previous content to prepare students’ minds for a high-comprehension reading. For instance, a history lesson could involve having students find important locations on a map. A literature lesson could discuss a certain concept from literary analysis or the sphere of life portrayed in the book. A science lesson could involve recalling the meaning of special vocabulary and the illustrative examples from the text.
<b>Grammar</b> – Reading of a Rich Text	What is the text, author? Which pages constitute the lesson? How will the teacher or students read the text? Be sure to give appropriate details for a substitute. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher reads aloud expressively</li> <li>• Teacher directs student reading</li> <li>• Students read silently or read previously at home</li> </ul>
<b>Pre-Rhetoric</b> – Narration	How will students tell back what they have read? Will they tell back all of the content or is it strategic to focus on a particular section? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oral narration with additions and corrections taken from other students</li> <li>• Partner or group narration (right to left, or left to right; colors or front-back, left-right)</li> <li>• String narration (teacher calls on students successively at stages in the telling)</li> <li>• Written narration (on paper, in notebook, typed, on a whiteboard?)</li> </ul>
<b>Dialectic</b> – 2nd Little Talk	How will you guide students in interpreting, understanding, and thinking through the implications of what they have read? Planning for this might look like listing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion questions</li> <li>• Ideas and concepts</li> <li>• Content mastery goals</li> </ul>
<b>Rhetoric</b> – Response	How will students demonstrate their mastery of the new knowledge, while completing increasingly sophisticated rhetorical tasks? Will they work as a class, in groups or individually on this response? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brainstorming, comparison and contrast, or other tables and charts</li> <li>• Preparation for speech or presentation on topic</li> <li>• Writing prompt (on paper, in notebook, typed, on a whiteboard?)</li> </ul>

## The Practices of Grammar, Dialectic and Rhetoric

As students grow and develop, they read harder and harder texts, naturally, but they also learn the vocabulary, the important literary and historical contexts that help them make sense of the text, or analyze diagrams and engage in labs to fully grasp the concepts. In essence, they learn to read and interpret what they read correctly in every different subject.

The teacher uses the set-up or 1<sup>st</sup> little talk to prepare students' minds for a high-comprehension reading of the text, not assuming that students will just understand everything right away without assistance, but providing the right sort of assistance with the focus still remaining on the students learning to read at a higher and higher level. This, I would contend, though Charlotte Mason did not put it this way, is the traditional understanding of the art of grammar, as the broad and highly complex skill of reading and interpretation. Analyzing parts of speech and sentence structure is only one of many discrete skills that can be used as part of the holistic and incredibly practical ability to decode written communication.

As you'll see then from the lesson structure, I've delineated the first two stages here in the lesson, calling the first stage Pre-Grammar to use classical terminology and the 1<sup>st</sup> little talk in Charlotte Mason's words. I call it pre-grammar because the point of this initial part of the lesson is to prepare students' minds for '*grammatike*', the practice of reading letters and discerning their meaning. The teacher should engage in any variation of direct instruction (telling students what they will not know otherwise, but what they need to know to understand the text); student review, where students are called on to review previous lessons, explain concepts, or rehearse key ideas; or discussion, in which an idea or experience that students will encounter in the text is primed and brought to the forefront of their attention.

This step is where a lot of the teacher's careful attention goes into asking themselves the question: How can I best prepare my students to understand and deeply engage with this text?

Next is the reading of the rich text itself, and this is where teachers should indicate in the lesson plan what the text is, what page or pages constitute the section that is to be studied, perhaps broken up into two or three different passages to be read and narrated in turn.

Then, based on student needs and the reading skill goals of the teacher, as well as the need for variety, the text can be read in any different number of ways. The teacher can herself read the text aloud, artfully, with phrasing and the proper mood and emotion. This can be important with texts that push students' reading ability, at whatever age they are. It's the perfect moment for a teacher to act just like an ancient '*grammaticus*' and model the art of beautiful and effective public reading. Without teachers modelling this standard, students won't become the readers they could, whether aloud or silently in their minds.

Silent reading is actually a strange phenomenon and for it to be done most effectively a person needs to be able to imagine the spoken word well-phrased in one's mind. Our current practices of simply sending students home to read on their own, without strong training in public reading, is probably what is causing a lot of comprehension challenges for our oldest students. It's not just important for young students. I've found that our high school students understand Milton's *Paradise Lost* and other hard texts best when read aloud to them. So I would highly recommend that we do more reading aloud in our schools.

But of course, there's also students reading silently, which Charlotte Mason endorses in *School Education*, or reading at home. For many of our older middle school and high school courses, students will have a text setup for them, and then they will go home to read it, and come back to school the next day, able to narrate the text from memory without

consultation for nigh on 30 min. When trained in this art over the years, students are capable of incredible things.

I am calling narration Pre-Rhetoric, because I believe it represents the first step of rhetorical training, and that is fluency in speaking and imitation of authors. If we have chosen well-written texts and great books in every subject for our curriculum, then when students narrate them, they are both getting regular practice in speaking to develop that ready fluency that will be needed later on for more advanced spoken and written discourse, but they are also storing away in their minds an imitative foundation of words, phrases, syntax and style from the best authors.

While a simple practice, there are many ways that narration can be done, to provide variety, zest and different challenges. The most basic way is to randomly call on a single student and ask him or her to tell back, as much as possible, holding out for that student to give you everything they can remember, before getting additions and corrections from other students. Another way is to have students tell back in partners, thereby increasing the participation ratio and getting half of the class to tell back at once.

Or for a long passage, say from a literature book, you can have one student start telling the story, then stop him and have another pick up where he left off, and so on until the end, thus ensuring that all students are following along and are accountable for jumping in at any moment. This is called string narration, since several students string together a narration in sequence. Last and perhaps most important is the practice of having students write out their narration, forcing 100% of students to be actively involved in the work of learning, and to practice all the skills of proper writing while storing away the knowledge that they have gained.

Next in the lesson structure is the 2<sup>nd</sup> little talk, where students are trained in dialectic through discussing the ideas of the text. Here is where the teacher guides the students in thinking carefully and deeply about what they have read, either to understand it more fully or to apply it to

broader ideas and concepts. For instance, a historical text about medieval kings could lead into a discussion of leadership and various virtues and vices that are on display. A John Donne poem could lead into a discussion of how he uses surprising metaphors and images for salvation and what that communicates about the nature of Christian experience. A Biology class could discuss the ethics of mapping the human genome and genetic engineering or engage in a lab that leads them through a course of reasoning to discover what they read about for themselves.

Other than the obvious fact of preparing good discussion questions, the teacher should act as a coach, training students in the art of discerning the truth, holding out for real and deep insights, occasionally pushing students' thinking through playing devil's advocate, and enforcing a respectful and fruitful dialogue between peers. Being a dialectician is, as Plato's dialogues illustrate, the art of asking the right question, and so the teacher should model a spirit of creative, genuine and thoughtful inquiry.

Last in a Narration-Trivium lesson comes the response, where students crystalize what they have learned, and display their mastery of the new knowledge through a more refined piece of spoken or written discourse. This could be an exercise completed together as a class, like a comparison and contrast table, in which the class as a whole assembles what they have learned into a persuasive communicative format. But it could also take the form of any variety of writing prompts, whether simply a paragraph or a longer essay or research paper.

Of course, we shouldn't forget the variety of spoken presentations that students should be trained in giving. The assignments given should suit the students' level and ability, and instruction should be given in how to do these well, including specific concepts and skills, but the main thing is that students practice responding to what they have learned in meaningful and substantive ways – ways that will capture their internal motivation to express their views and values and thoughts. The rhetorical enterprise puts a nice cap on the learning experience, and can often become a natural

homework assignment, or, if it is large enough, a lesson of its own on another day.

## The Flexibility and Artistic Nature of This Lesson Structure

Now at this point you might find yourself thinking a couple different things. First, and hopefully, you might be excited by how a few core practices in the classroom, which probably everyone would agree are valuable, can be connected directly to the trivium arts. Second, though, you might be wondering about whether you, if you're a teacher, or the teachers under you, if you're an administrator, might find this sort of lesson structure confining and constricting. To you I would like to explain that I view this lesson structure is flexible, admitting for the artistry of the teacher.

So that is why, for instance, I've indicated a box for a trivium target or language skill goal at the top. My thinking here is that a teacher may have a particular focus in a lesson on what they really want students to practice and grow in. For most of our class periods, it would almost be impossible to do every one of these steps fully for each chapter of a history book, say. So the teacher needs to look over the text to see what sort of training it lends itself toward, but the teacher also needs to think about the particular group of students under their charge. Where are they in their skill development? What should I focus on in this next lesson to give them the variety and accountable practice that they need to grow and develop to their full potential as artisans of the liberal arts?

Based on the trivium target, most of a period might be focused on the skill of reading aloud with expression. Or conversely, after a simple reading, most of the time might be spent on an extended debate. Or else, a discussion of the ideas in previous lessons might lead to the set up of a

high quality writing prompt. The point is that different amounts of time could legitimately be spent in each of these activities. Some steps could even be skipped entirely, and the order could be rearranged. The structure is flexible and meant to serve aims of a wise instructor, not to narrowly prescribe a simplistic formula for every lesson.

## The Effectiveness of the Lesson Structure

So what is the benefit of using the Narration-Trivium lesson in planning if the structure is so flexible? The really powerful thing about giving this to teachers, and having them use it in planning their lessons, is that it embodies that self-education principle of both Dorothy Sayers and Charlotte Mason, and it forces teachers to put it into practice in their lessons day after day, class period after class period.

If I had to guess, I would suppose that even in classical schools, many of our teachers spend most of their time planning, thinking through what they as teachers are going to do, rather than about what the students will do. And Dorothy Sayers and Charlotte Mason would say that that is entirely backwards. We are coaches, training students in the art of learning, and facilitating their interaction with ideas, and helping them hone their skills in reading, discussion and composing. We shouldn't be doing their work for them. This Narration-Trivium lesson structure, then, becomes a way for us to keep ourselves and our teachers accountable to that principle. And it centers each lesson around the reading of good books, which we might assume to be the case in every classical classroom, but alas it is not.

Finally, you might notice that this lesson planning tool does not make a distinction between the stages of learning. Now as I close, it's not my intention to discount or argue with Dorothy Sayers's insights here. I think she's right on about many of the developmental changes that go on and how the specific arts of the trivium can be drawn from to challenge each period of a student's development very strategically. I would say that a

tool like this lesson plan can easily be adapted to focus on particular goals and skills that would be specific to a grammar stage, a logic stage or a rhetoric stage. I would just argue that what Dorothy Sayers intended was more of a continuum or matter of degrees, rather than a hard and fast line. For instance, when she attaches research skills to the rhetoric stage, we should recognize the reading and interpretation skills of classical grammar coming into play, just as anticipating objections involves their logical reasoning. The trivium arts all hang together, build on each other and sometimes playfully interact and intertwine. This lesson structure acknowledges that and capitalizes on it.

## Afterward

My main hope in providing this free resource is that you will take away three things: first, an interest in investigating Charlotte Mason's volumes on education more for yourself; second, the importance of the classical distinction between 'art' and 'science', especially for how we teach the trivium; and third, a practical tool for holding ourselves and our fellow teachers accountable to the principle of self-education, the idea that the students must do the work of learning themselves, and only in this way will they develop into the highly literate readers, the thoughtful dialecticians, able to discuss deep ideas and discern the truth, and the knowledgeable and eloquent writers and public speakers that we all want them to be, to the ultimate glory of God and the furtherance of his purposes in the world.

## About the Author

Jason Barney serves as the Principal of Coram Deo Academy in Carmel, IN. In 2012 he was awarded the Henry Salvatori Prize for Excellence in Teaching from Hillsdale College. He completed his MA in Biblical Exegesis at Wheaton College, where he received The Tenney Award in New Testament Studies. Before coming to CDA Jason Barney served as the Academic Dean at Clapham School, a classical Christian school in Wheaton, IL. In addition to his



administrative responsibilities in vision, philosophy and faculty training, Jason has taught courses in Latin, Humanities, and Senior Thesis from 3<sup>rd</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades. He regularly speaks at events and conferences, including SCL, ACCS and the CiRCE Institute. He recently published [The Joy of Learning: Finding Flow Through Classical Education](#), and *A Classical Guide to Narration* is forthcoming with the CiRCE Institute. Jason blogs regularly on ancient wisdom for the modern era at [www.educationalrenaissance.com](http://www.educationalrenaissance.com).

## Resources

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