

Writing in the Greco-Roman World

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The skills and techniques that are necessary to be able to write any number of genres are taught in every educational system. Education in the Greco-Roman world was no different, though perhaps it did so with a rigor and thoroughness that would surprise those who are familiar only with current methods of teaching writing. Writing was also central to Greco-Roman education, at least in the latter stages of the curricular sequence. Just when and how writing was taught will be the burden of the following discussion of Greco-Roman education.

Greco-Roman education arose after the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C.E. and indeed in response to them. The various Hellenistic monarchies that arose after his death to rule the vast territories conquered by him needed to be ruled by Greek speaking and writing administrators. By the early third century there arose a three-stage curricular sequence — primary, secondary, and tertiary — that emphasized an intimate knowledge of poetry, especially Homer, and culminated in a profound sophistication in writing and delivering the three basic kinds of public speeches — advisory, judicial, and celebratory. [1] This system of education persisted largely unchanged century after century despite the rise of Rome and later of Christianity and ended only with the rise of industrialism, with its need of scientists and engineers more than literate and rhetorically trained leaders.

We can quickly dispense with the primary stage, since writing was not part of the curriculum. Primary students, typically aged seven to eleven and made up of aristocratic boys and girls as well as some slaves and urban marginals, learned only the most basic of skills. They learned to recognize and write the letters of the alphabet; to write their own names; to read individual words and short sentences, usually maxims; to copy these maxims as beautifully as possible; to read brief poetic selections; and to do some simple arithmetic.

The first lessons in writing began at the secondary stage, although writing was not the principal focus. Secondary students, aged eleven to fifteen and made up of only aristocratic boys and girls (and the latter only until they married), concentrated on reading poetry, in particular the Homeric epics, the whole of the *Iliad* and portions of the *Odyssey*, reading, interpreting, and memorizing them. Memorization of thousands of lines enabled them, as adults, to cite appropriate lines as a literate response to any situation, thereby marking them off as educated. This cosmetic function of a secondary education is widely attested in Greco-Roman literature, but one example will have to suffice — a chreia, or anecdote, attributed to the Cynic Diogenes (Diogenes Laertius, 6.67): On being reproached for accepting a cloak from Antipater, Diogenes said: "The splendid gifts of the gods are not to be rejected" (Il. 3.65). [2]

Besides reading poetry — not only Homer but perhaps some Euripides and Menander — and committing it to memory, secondary students also learned grammar, in particular the eight parts of speech that functioned as the organizing principle of the grammatical textbook of Dionysius Thrax. [3] Finally, students began to do some writing — summaries, paraphrases, and letters. For example, one ostrakon from Upper Egypt contains a summary of the first book of the *Iliad*, and students who lived away from home might correspond with parents, as one Thonis did when he wrote a letter to his father that, despite its many erasures and corrections, demonstrated that he was actually learning something. [4]

The tertiary stage began when students were about fifteen years old. Only aristocratic boys remain now, because aristocratic girls would likely be married and also because they could not travel, as their brothers could, to other cities to learn philosophy or, more likely, rhetoric. This is seen, for example, in the young men from cities in Asia and Europe as well as from the Aegean islands who traveled to Smyrna to study

rhetoric with the sophist Polemo (Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists*, 531). [5] And at this stage the principal activity was writing. But writing did not begin with any of the three kinds of speech, as they were too lengthy and complex for boys just leaving the study of the poets. Instead, writing began with shorter and simpler genres — for example, fables, narratives, encomia, descriptions, and comparisons — and since these genres taught the skills and styles needed eventually for writing speeches, they were called progymnasmata, or pre-rhetorical exercises in composition. Various authors selected a number of these progymnasmata, arranged them in a graded sequence from simple to ever more complex, and added for each progymnasma a definition, classification of sub-types, and compositional rules and advice on structure and style. The compositional textbooks, or *Progymnasmata*, of four of these authors are still extant — those by Aelius Theon of Alexandria (late first century C.E.), Hermogenes of Tarsus (late second century), Aphthonius of Antioch (late fourth century), and Nicolaus of Myra (fifth century). [6] Of these Aphthonius' emerged as the favorite, in large part because he provided complete samples of all the progymnasmata, and remained in use through the early modern period, as evidenced by its appearance, in Latin dress, in classrooms at Harvard College in the seventeenth century. A brief discussion of Aphthonius' *Progymnasmata* will illustrate its method of teaching writing.

Aphthonius included fourteen progymnasmata, beginning with the fable. Fables were an ideal way for students to begin writing, for fables were not only brief but also familiar to them from their childhood. Students learned to define the fable — a story that is false but also close to the truth — and to classify fables into those that involved humans, animals, or both. No instructions are given in retelling a familiar fable, but they were instructed to place the moral of the fable either at the beginning or at the end. Aphthonius' model fable is that of the crickets and the ants. The second progymnasma is the narrative, which is likewise defined and classified into three sub-types. Specific instructions are provided, as narratives are to contain six elements: who, what, when, where, how, and why. And the qualities of the narrative are clarity, brevity, and plausibility. Aphthonius' model narrative is a mythological story explaining why roses are red.

While the narrative is relatively simple, even if more demanding in what is required and somewhat longer than the fable, the third progymnasma, the *chreia*, makes a significant advance in students' writing skills. The *chreia*, is again defined and classified, but now students learned the style that marked the various kinds of *chreiai*, such as the use of the participle "on being asked" in *chreiai*, when the person to whom it is attributed responds to a question or the participle "on seeing" in *chreiai* when the person responds to a specific situation. Theon's classification is much more complex — a complexity, incidentally, that conforms to the thousands of *chreiai*, that appear in literature and hence shows that this stylistic conformity reflects the habits of expression that were learned in school.

But students not only learned to recite *chreiai* in a style recognizable to all. They also used the *chreia* in their first attempts at argumentation by elaborating the truth contained in the saying or action of a *chreia*. Students were carefully guided when elaborating a *chreia*; the instructions asked students to write an essay of eight parts, in a fixed order, and using a set of conventional topics, transitional particles, and linguistic formulae — conventions that become apparent when comparing the seventeen extant elaborations. [7]

Aphthonius' model elaboration involves a *chreia* attributed to Isocrates, who said that the root of education is bitter, but its fruits are sweet. The elaboration begins with a praise of Isocrates, followed by a paraphrase of the saying in the form of a proposition: education begins with toil but toil that nonetheless ends in profit. Now the student can argue the truth of the saying. The third part of the elaboration starts the proof proper as the student is asked to state the rationale of the saying — by enumerating the fears and hard work that students experience from the demanding expectations that teachers, *paidagogoi*, and parents expected of them. The fourth through the seventh parts all add confirmation to the truth of the rationale. The fourth argues that the converse of the rationale is also true; the fifth, or analogy, shows that the principle of toil before pleasure works in other spheres of life; the sixth, or example, cites a person whose life demonstrates the truth of the saying; and the seventh, or testimony, is a quotation from another author who agrees with Isocrates. The final part, or epilogue, concludes that Isocrates' saying on education is justly admired.

Even by the third progymnasma it should be clear that tertiary students are already writing rather lengthy and complex compositions. But it should also be apparent that they learned to write by composing clearly defined genres and using fully worked out models that provided topical and stylistic guidance. One more progymnasma will demonstrate this conformity to the demands of genre and the authority of models. This progymnasma is farther along the sequence — the eleventh in Aphthonius' series — and is called characterization, which is a short speech that attempts to express a person's character as it is revealed in a specific situation. Aphthonius asked students to write speeches on topics like: what words Hecuba might say as Troy lay in ruins, and what words a man from the interior might say on first seeing the sea.

Such speeches were to conform to a specific formal structure — first addressing the present situation, then moving to the past as a contrast, and finally moving to the future that reflected on the consequences of the situation. Besides structure, students were advised to use language that was appropriate to the speaker — for example, simplicity and self-control for a young man, knowledge and experience for an old man. More generally, the style should consist of short clauses rather than periodic ones.

One reason for singling out this progymnasma is because it transcended the classroom, as students later in life frequently turned to characterization so that literature is filled with examples of it, and most of them conform to the form and style inculcated in school. To cite but one, yet intriguing, example: In Chariton's novel *Callirhoe*, written in the mid-first century C.E., we find the heroine, a native of Syracuse, who had been kidnapped and taken to Miletus and is now about to cross the Euphrates River on her way to Babylon. Chariton gives her reflections on this crossing in the form of a characterization and does so by conforming to the present, past, future structure as well as to the prescribed short clauses (5.1.4-7). Especially notable here is that Chariton has not only composed a characterization but has deliberately inverted the classroom example cited above about a man from the interior reacting to first seeing the sea. Now, however, we can formulate her speech as: what words a person from a seaport might say on first going into the interior. That Chariton is deliberately working off this classroom example is evident from some of what she says: "You (=Tyche) gave me a land (=Miletus) where I had one great consolation — to sit beside the sea," and a little later: "I am being taken beyond the Euphrates, and I, an islander, am being shut up in a barbaric interior!" It is seldom more obvious that the habits of thought and expression learned in school continued to influence writers in adulthood.

By the time students had completed the progymnasmata, they were clearly accomplished and versatile writers. But they were hardly finished with learning to write. Now they turned to rhetoric proper and to writing speeches, which in the classroom were called declamations. Subjects were drawn from Greek history — for example, defending Demosthenes on the charge that he accepted a bribe (Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 542) or based on more timeless and fanciful situations. [8] In writing a declamation students turned to rhetorical handbooks, where once again they learned the definition of rhetoric; the classification of speeches into advisory, judicial, and celebratory; and the various parts of a speech and their respective functions.

One such handbook, that by Rufus of Perinthus (1.2.399-407 Spengel-Hammer), epitomizes rhetorical lore and gives us a glimpse of the resources students had when learning to write declamations. Rufus concentrates on the judicial speech, identifies four parts to this speech — introduction, narrative, proof, and conclusion — and then lists various ways each part can be written. For example, he lists fifteen ways of writing an introduction that will render the audience attentive and produce good will or hatred, depending on whether the speech is a defense or prosecution speech. Thus introductions can be based on the speaker, on the opponents, on the judges, on the subject matter, and so on, with each suggestion illustrated with quotations from famous orators, usually Demosthenes. Narratives, proofs, and conclusions can be treated similarly. With such exhaustive lists of ideas students could choose the most appropriate ones and then model their style on the quotations from Demosthenes.

The tertiary curriculum concluded students' formal education, an education that stressed learning to write, at first during the secondary stage and in earnest during the tertiary. The result of such a curriculum was to produce writers who could compose in a number of genres, who knew the appropriate style for each and

could enhance their style by imitating the great prose writers, and who could elevate their writing by quoting from Homer and the poets. Writers who could do all this were accomplished indeed.

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[1] In addition to the classic and still useful treatment of H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (trans. G. Lamb; New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956; repr. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), see now Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[2] See Ronald F. Hock, "Homer in Greco-Roman Education," in *Mimesis and Intertextuality in Antiquity and Christianity* (ed. D. R. MacDonald; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001) 56-77.

[3] See Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, 210-15.

[4] See Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, 112, 215-19.

[5] If girls did learn philosophy, and the Stoic Musonius Rufus advocated it in principle (see Musonius, *Frag. 4* [pp. 42-49 Lutz]), it would have been indirect and at home, as suggested by Hipparchia's having learned about Crates and his philosophy from her brother Metrocles who was Crates' student (see Diogenes Laertius, 6.96). Also of interest here is the situation imagined by Lucian in his *Symposium*, in which the aristocratic Aristaenetus' two children are named Zeno and Cleanthis (5) — that is, they are named after the famous Stoics Zeno and Cleanthes. Zeno is studying Stoicism with Diphilus, and Aristaenetus had presumably studied with the Stoic Zenothemis (6), although his intellectual interests continued into adulthood (10). Given the daughter's name and the importance of Stoicism to her father and brother, it is quite reasonable to suppose that she had learned something of Stoic philosophy from listening to them. For a general account of women in education, see also Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, 74-101.

[6] Translations of all four *Progymnasmata* are at last available in George A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Atlanta/Leiden: Society of Biblical Literature/Brill, 2003).

[7] See Ronald F. Hock and Edward N. O'Neil, *The Chreia and Ancient Rhetoric: Classroom Exercises* (Atlanta/Leiden: Society of Biblical Literature/Brill, 2002) 79-354.

[8] On the latter, see esp. Donald A. Russell, *Greek Declamation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 21-39.