

Why Study Latin and Greek

The practical, cultural, and formative reasons to study classical languages.

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from *The Classical Teacher*, Spring 2007

The ancients did not press practical arguments too far. As Aristotle said, “To seek utility everywhere is most unsuitable to lofty and free natures.” Yet the pragmatic benefits of classical education are the ones our modern society is likely to look for first. Fortunately, they are abundantly available to answer some of the common questions skeptics may have about classical education.

#1 Knowledge of classical languages increases English vocabulary. About half of all English vocabulary comes from Latin and another 20 percent from Greek. These words tend to be the difficult, polysyllabic ones—“SAT words.” A thorough knowledge of classical languages will increase the student’s English vocabulary tremendously.

#2 Classical languages aid in the understanding of English grammar. Studying a highly inflected language—that is, one that marks grammatical changes with a fully developed system of case endings—gives students a better grasp of English grammar. In fact, generations of teachers have observed that Latin teaches English better than English by requiring students to accurately identify each part of speech for every word!

#3 Latin is the key to modern languages. Knowing Latin makes it much easier to learn the grammar and vocabulary of the modern Romance languages (e.g., Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian), since they take about 80 percent of their vocabulary from Latin. Both classical tongues (Latin & Greek) greatly aid in learning other inflected languages, such as German or Russian.

#4 Latin students perform exceptionally well on standardized tests and are sought after by competitive colleges. As a result of increased vocabulary and facility with English grammar, students of Latin consistently outperform their peers—including those who have studied modern languages—on the verbal portion of the SAT. Between 1997 and 2006, Latin students outscored the average by 157 points. Higher scores open doors to competitive colleges and scholarships.

#5 Several careers require knowledge of classical languages. The technical vocabulary of the medical and legal professions and the hard sciences rests on the foundation of Latin and Greek. Latin is still a required subject for some higher degrees, as is Greek for many entering the ministry.

The Cultural Arguments for Classical Languages

While the ancients did not emphasize utilitarian arguments in defending or explaining their educational system, they did argue for it on cultural grounds. Ancient education meant enculturation, the process by which the highest values of their societies were passed on to the next generation. This is as necessary for us as it was for them—perhaps more so in this age of relativism and anti-intellectualism.

#1 Knowledge of the classics increases cultural literacy. Just as Latin increases literacy in English, so does familiarity with Graeco-Roman culture increase cultural literacy. Along with the Bible, classical literature is the key to understanding English literature, as well as the literatures of Europe (e.g., Dante, English Romantic poets). Likewise, art and music are studded with classical references (e.g., Botticelli's Venus, Handel's Semele).

#2 Classical history is our history. As Westerners, we are all heirs to the cultural patrimony of Greece and Rome. Familiarity with the history of the classical world helps in understanding the foundations of our modern democratic society.

#3 The cultural experience of the ancient world is highly relevant to us today. The Roman Empire has been called the first great multiethnic society. Study of Roman successes and failures in this area is timely. Likewise, someone who is familiar with ancient warfare will have a useful perspective on more recent military conflicts.

The Formative Arguments for Classical Languages

The classical curriculum has an unsurpassed track record, not just in filling students' minds with useful knowledge, but also in forming their minds and their spirits. Intellectual discipline, moral virtue, and appreciation of beauty are the regular results of running the classical race.

#1 The classical curriculum imparts exceptional intellectual discipline. Classical languages form the mind, inculcating the habits of precision and attention to detail. "Every lesson in Latin is a lesson in logic." Intellectual rigor prepares the student to discern what is True. It is the surest remedy for the modern ill of relativism.

#2 The classical curriculum inspires moral insight and virtue. The classical world first codified the great virtues of prudence, temperance, justice, and courage. Keeping before the student "the habitual vision of greatness" inspires and uplifts the mind and spirit toward the Good.

#3 The classical curriculum forms aesthetic judgment. Just as the vision of greatness inspires us in the moral realm, living in constant contact with the highest artistic achievements of the West cultivates a taste for the Beautiful. In time, the student will not just appreciate his culture, but will be able to emulate its best and brightest.