



What is Classical Education?

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Most of us have a difficult time defining the word *education*—it has a wide range of meaning and is used in different ways in different contexts. Certainly education can be formal (as in a *college education*) or informal (*his stern aunt provided him a fresh education in manners*).

The word *classical* is no easier to define. It can refer to a certain kind of music (that came well *after* the Greeks and Romans) and a certain kind of literature (the “classics” of western civilization). It can refer to a historical period (The Greeks and the Romans) and architecture (style, concepts and motifs from Greece and Rome). Of course it can also refer to Greek and Latin when used in the phrase *classical languages*.

Given the wide semantic range of both *classical* and *education* it is not surprising that the phrase “classical education” is also used with various and legitimate meanings (language is flexible). Here are several ways the phrase is used:

1. A study of the Greek and Latin languages (linguistic definition)
2. A study of the Greek and Latin languages and the history, literature, art, philosophy and culture of Greek and Roman civilization (linguistic and cultural definition)
3. A study of the great ideas of western civilization as contained in the classic “great books” produced by that civilization; a study of the “best that has been thought or said.” (intellectual history definition)
4. A study of the seven liberal arts of grammar, logic, rhetoric (the trivium) and arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy (the quadrivium). (curricular definition)
5. A study of the seven liberal arts employing traditional teaching insights and methods (such as singing, chanting, Socratic discussion and debate) passed down to us by past educators. (pedagogical definition)
6. The cultivation of wisdom and virtue by nourishing the soul on truth, goodness and beauty by means of the seven liberal arts (soul-ish or psychological definition)
7. An approach to education that seeks to create a community of learning, characterized by academic rigor, warmth and delight and involving vibrant interaction of teachers, parents, friends and others. (communal definition)

Now, all these definitions reflect current use. This is because classical education, as a rich, complex 2500 year-old tradition, does contain many important elements (linguistic, cultural, intellectual, curricular, pedagogical, psychological and communal elements). Because classical education is so rich and complex, it is hard to sum it up in one or two sentences. Here is a crack at it—this time including a theological element:

Classical (and Christian) education: a traditional approach to education that blends Christian theology with the historic curriculum and pedagogy of the seven liberal arts in order to cultivate societal leaders characterized by wisdom, virtue and eloquence.

This may be a decent “dictionary definition,” but like so many brief definitions of complex topics, it is so general that it lacks clarity and punch. What after, all is Christian theology, pedagogy and the seven liberal arts? And if we listed the liberal arts, how many of us would like to know more about grammar, logic or rhetoric as an art? How many of us have a clear sense of what *virtue* and *eloquence* mean? But alas, when we abbreviate we must leave things out. So where do we go from here? To the same place we go after putting down the dictionary—to an article, encyclopedia, pamphlet or book; another level down.

To go another level down, we can recommend:

An Introduction to Classical Education: A Guide for Parents (45 page pamphlet available in paperback but also available as a free download at [Classical Academic Press.com](http://ClassicalAcademicPress.com))

The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Philosophy of Christian Classical Education (Kevin Clark and Ravi Jain, published Classical Academic Press)