

THE CLASSICAL EDUCATION GLOSSARY

Your Guide to Understanding Timeless Educational Terms



From the Trivium to Virtue:
Essential Vocabulary for Your Classical Education Journey

By Christopher Perrin, Humanitas Institute

Why Words Matter in Classical Education

When I was 35 years old, I was a headmaster of a classical school. One day, a parent asked me what seemed like a simple question: "Can you name the seven liberal arts?" I was embarrassed to realize I couldn't answer. I could barely name three or four. And when she followed up with "Why are they called 'liberal'?"—I had no answer.

This is the common predicament of educated Americans who think they are well-educated when they are not. We use words like "classical education" and "virtue" and "liberal arts," but we're often detached from what these words truly mean. We hear about the "trivium" and "rhetoric" and nod knowingly, but if pressed to define them, we'd struggle.

I often say that we could recover the entire classical tradition of education simply by revisiting and redefining educational words. Words matter. They shape how we think about reality. When we understand what "education" originally meant—the cultivation of virtue and the formation of a human soul—it changes everything about how we approach teaching and learning.

This glossary is your invitation into that recovery. Each term opens a door to ideas that have shaped the greatest minds across centuries. Some of these words are Greek and Latin, reminding us that we stand in a long tradition. Others are familiar English words that have lost their depth of meaning.

As you explore these pages, I hope you'll experience what I did—the humbling recognition that there is so much more to learn, and the exciting discovery that this ancient wisdom is as fresh and relevant today as it was two thousand years ago.

Welcome to the great conversation.

Christopher Perrin

Director of Strategic Content, Humanitas Institute

How to Use This Glossary

Icons to Guide You:



Curriculum Terms



Pedagogical Methods



Virtues & Goals



Philosophical Concepts



Latin/Greek Phrases

Each entry includes pronunciation guides for Greek/Latin terms, etymology showing word origins, and related terms for deeper exploration.



THE ESSENTIAL TERMS

1. Classical Education 🏛️📖

A liberal arts education rooted in ancient Greek and Roman traditions that aims to free the mind to think clearly, love learning deeply, and participate in the great conversation spanning centuries. Unlike utilitarian education that trains for jobs, classical education cultivates wisdom, virtue, and eloquence—forming complete human beings.

What makes it "classical": Liberal arts curriculum, great books, cultivation of virtue and wisdom through wonder and contemplation.

Related terms: Liberal Arts, Formation, Scholé

2. Liberal Arts 📖

The seven traditional arts that liberate (free) the mind: Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric (the Trivium) and Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy, Music (the Quadrivium). These are not subjects to study but **tools for learning**—skills you practice that enable you to study any subject well.

Important: The liberal arts are NOT literature, history, philosophy, or theology. Those are subjects you study using the liberal arts as your tools.

Etymology: Liberal = "befitting a free person" (Latin liberalis); Arts = skills you practice, not just know about (Latin ars)

Related terms: Trivium, Quadrivium



3. Scholé (sko-LAY) 🏛️

Undistracted time to study the most worthwhile things, often with friends, in beautiful places. Scholé is restful, contemplative learning—the opposite of frenetic, anxious education. Ironically, our word "school" comes from this Greek word for "leisure," yet modern schools contain very little scholé.

What it looks like: Time for pondering, savoring, and lingering over ideas without rushing; freedom from distraction; community of learning; beauty in the environment.

Related terms: Contemplation, Wonder, Formation

4. Virtue ★

From Latin *virtus* (strength, excellence), virtue means habits of excellence cultivated through practice over time. Classical education recognizes four kinds: **moral virtues** (justice, courage, temperance, prudence), **intellectual virtues** (wonder, zeal, humility, diligence), **civic virtues** (responsibility, honesty), and **spiritual virtues** (faith, hope, love).

Before 1900: When people heard "education," they understood it to mean the cultivation of virtue—formation of a human soul. This was education's clear and natural end.

Can virtue be taught? Yes, but not in isolation. We need models, teachers, and parents, but we must also choose to practice virtue ourselves.

Related terms: Wisdom, Formation, The Intellectual Virtues

5. Wisdom ★

The comprehensive understanding of reality and practical knowledge of what is good to do. Wisdom is the chief goal of classical education—where all study points.

Two types:

- **Cosmic Wisdom** (Sophia): Understanding how all reality fits together as ordered, beautiful harmony
- **Practical Wisdom** (Phronesis): Knowing what is actually real and what is best to do in specific situations

Both are essential. The wise person has comprehensive understanding AND practical good judgment.

Related terms: Virtue, Contemplation, Formation

6. The Trivium 📖 A

Latin for "three ways"—the three verbal arts of Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric. These are the fundamental tools for all language-based learning.

Grammar: Understanding and using language correctly; the foundational knowledge of any subject

Logic/Dialectic: Thinking and reasoning correctly; making valid arguments and detecting fallacies

Rhetoric: Speaking and writing persuasively, beautifully, and effectively

Not stages: The trivium is NOT a sequence (grammar stage → logic stage → rhetoric stage). Students practice all three arts simultaneously at age-appropriate levels throughout education.

Related terms: Liberal Arts, Quadrivium

7. The Quadrivium 📖 A

Latin for "four ways"—the four mathematical arts: Arithmetic (number itself), Geometry (number in space), Astronomy (number in space and time), and Music (number in time). These train students in abstract reasoning and reveal the mathematical harmony woven into creation.

Related terms: Liberal Arts, Trivium

8. Formation / Paideia 🏛️

The shaping and cultivation of a complete human person—body, mind, and soul—toward wisdom, virtue, and flourishing. Education understood not as information transfer but as transformation of the whole person.

From Greek *paideia* (from *pais*, "child"), encompassing everything involved in raising a child into a fully formed adult. Before 1900, this is what people meant by "education."

Related terms: Classical Education, Virtue, Wisdom

9. Wonder 🎓 ⭐

An astonished encounter with reality that sparks love and study. Wonder is the best beginning for lasting learning because it creates intrinsic motivation—students *want* to know more because they've been captivated by something true, good, and beautiful.

Aristotle's insight: "It is owing to wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize." Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.

Related terms: Scholé, Contemplation, Intellectual Virtues

10. The Great Books 📖

Classic texts of enduring value containing archived human wisdom. Books worth reading in every generation because they wrestle with perennial questions about truth, goodness, beauty, justice, and what it means to be human.

Latin maxim: *Optimus Magister Bonus Liber Est* – "The best teacher is a good book"

Examples: Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, the Bible, Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Dostoevsky, Tolkien

The method: Great books must be read slowly, discussed with others, wrestled with, questioned, and revisited—not skimmed or summarized.

Related terms: The Great Conversation, Socratic Discussion



11. The Great Conversation 🏛️

The ongoing dialogue across centuries about the most important questions of human existence—truth, goodness, beauty, justice, and how to live well. From Homer to today, each generation reads and responds to what previous generations have said.

Classical education's goal: Equip students to participate meaningfully in this great conversation—to read its texts, understand its arguments, and add their own thoughtful voices.

Related terms: The Great Books, Formation, Wisdom

12. Socratic Discussion 🎓

A method of pursuing truth through dialogue and questioning, modeled after Socrates. Rather than lecturing, the teacher asks probing questions that lead students to discover truth for themselves through collaborative reasoning.

Why it matters: Develops critical thinking, teaches clear articulation of ideas, and helps students discover truth rather than merely receive it.

In classical schools: Socratic discussion in the upper school is one of the essential requirements for a school to be considered fully classical.

Related terms: Logic, Dialectic, The Great Books



KEY PRINCIPLES & PHRASES

Three Latin Pedagogical Principles

Festina Lente
(fes-TEE-nah LEN-tay)

"Make haste slowly"

The paradox: By taking time to ensure mastery at each step, students actually progress faster because they retain what they've learned. Depth enables speed.

Multum Non Multa
(MOOL-toom non MOOL-tah)

"Much, not many"

Better to master a few things deeply than to superficially cover many things that will be forgotten. Better to study fewer books but study them well. Depth over breadth.

Repetitio Mater Memoriae
(reh-peh-TEE-tee-oh MAH-ter meh-MOR-ee-eye)

"Repetition is the mother of memory"

Revisiting material deepens understanding, strengthens memory, and increases love for what is learned. Not mindless rote repetition, but thoughtful return to ideas and texts in fresh ways.

The Nine Essential Intellectual Virtues

Virtue	Description
Love / Wonder	Gratitude and admiration for the cosmos; delight in what exists
Zeal / Studium	Thirst to know and understand; earnest curiosity
Humility / Docility	Recognition of ignorance; willingness to be taught
Diligence	Love-compelled study that stays on task
Attentiveness	Full presence and focused concentration
Discipline	Disposition to do work carefully and thoroughly
Courage	Perseverance when learning is difficult
Temperance	Balanced use of time and energy
Responsibility	Realizing all deep learning requires student's choice



The Six Essential Qualities of a Classical School 📖

For a school to be truly classical (not just classical-friendly), it must demonstrate:

1. Classical Curriculum

Liberal arts, great books, natural sciences

2. Classical Pedagogy

Singing/recitation (lower school), Socratic discussion (upper school), wonder and contemplation

3. Strong Faculty Culture

Teachers growing in

4. Liberal Arts Foundation

Trivium and quadrivium woven through all subjects

5. Transcendental Worldview

Truth, goodness, and beauty exist objectively

6. Formation in Wisdom and Virtue

Ultimate aim is cultivating human excellence

Classical-Friendly Schools: Some schools demonstrate several qualities but not all six—still worth considering but different from fully classical schools.



Quick Reference Table

Original	English	Meaning
Festina Lente	Make haste slowly	Master each step before proceeding
Multum non Multa	Much, no many	Go deep rather than wide
Repetitio Mater Memoriae	Repetition is the mother of memory	Revisiting deepens understanding
Optimus Magister Bonus Liber Est	The best teacher is a good book	Great books are eternal teachers
Scholé (σχολή)	Leisure / leisurely learning	Unistracted time for study
Paideia (παιδεία)	Education / formation	Complete formation of the person
Sophia (σοφία)	Wisdom (cosmic)	Comprehensive understanding
Phronesis (φρόνησις)	Virtue / excellence	Knowing what is good to do
Virtus	Realizing all deep learning requires student's choice	Human capabilities perfected
Studium	Zeal / eagerness	Healthy desire to know

YOUR JOURNEY CONTINUES

Next Steps for Exploring Classical Education

1. Explore Our Website

- Read "What is Classical Education?" – our comprehensive guide
- Use the Humanitas School Finder to locate schools near you
- Watch introductory videos explaining classical education principles

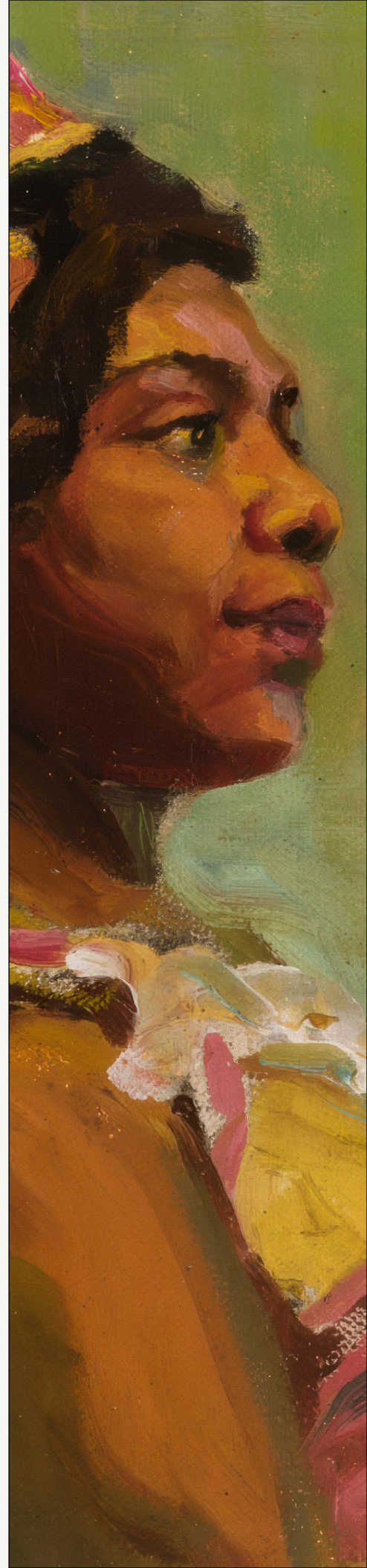
2. Subscribe & Stay Connected

- Newsletter: Weekly insights on classical education
- Christopher Perrin's Substack: "Renewing Classical Education"
- Podcasts: Separate series for Mothers and Fathers
- Monthly Video Stories: Be first to see our storytelling series

3. Recommended Reading

- The Scholé Way by Christopher Perrin
- The Lost Tools of Learning by Dorothy Sayers
- A Human Education by Christopher Perrin (forthcoming)

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About the Humanitas Institute

The Humanitas Institute exists to renew classical education and form virtuous, wise, and eloquent human beings. We serve parents, educators, and leaders through:

- The most comprehensive School Finder for classical education
- Resources for understanding and implementing classical education
- Training and support for classical educators
- Research and thought leadership in the field

Founded on Ancient Wisdom, Focused on Modern Renewal

Classical education has shaped the greatest minds for over two millennia. It's not outdated—it's timeless.

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Forming virtuous, wise, and eloquent human beings

A Final Word

If you've read this far, you now know more than most professors at liberal arts colleges about what the liberal arts actually are. You understand terms that were common knowledge 150 years ago but have been largely forgotten today.

This recovery of language is itself an act of recovery of a tradition. Words shape how we think about reality. When we recover the depth of meaning in words like *scholé*, *virtue*, and *wisdom*, we begin to recover the educational tradition those words represent.

Welcome to the great conversation. There's so much more to explore, and we're here to guide you on the journey.

Christopher Perrin & The Humanitas Institute Team

