



HUMANITAS
INSTITUTE

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

The First Semester

A Parent's Guide to the First Weeks of a
Classical Education

COMPANION TO YOUR FIRST 30 DAYS

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You did the hard part.



You asked the questions, you toured the school, you made the decision. Your child is finally enrolled at a classical school.

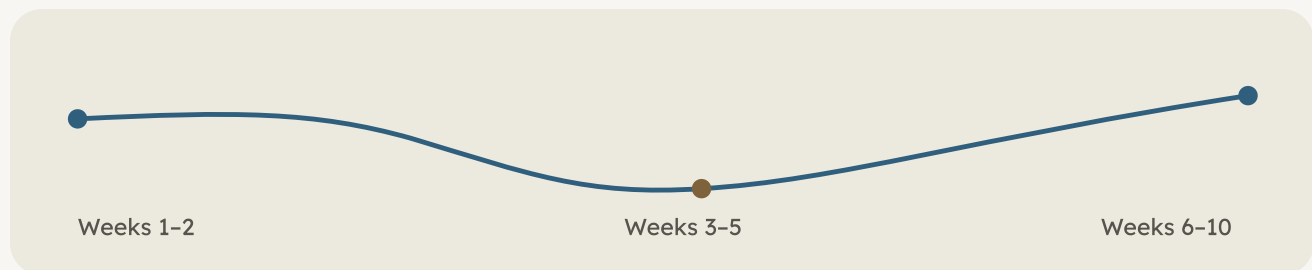
You are now well into the first semester, and you are not entirely sure how it is going.

That feeling is not a sign that you chose wrong. It is a sign that you are paying attention. The first semester at a classical school asks something of a family that most of us were never taught to expect. A classical education is concerned with formation, not just information. Your child is not only learning new material. He or she is learning new habits of attention, memory, conversation, perseverance, and delight. Those habits take time to grow. The first semester isn't mainly about learning how to succeed at a new school. It is the beginning of learning a new way to attend—to books, teachers, the world, and one another.

This guide is a picture of what the first semester tends to feel like, and a handful of things you can do that genuinely help.

ONE

What the first semester usually feels like



Weeks one and two: everything is new and mostly fine. New teacher, new rhythm, new vocabulary in elementary school; new social dynamics and intellectual demands, Socratic seminars, primary source texts, extended reading and essay writing, in middle and high school, all of it comes home at the dinner table. Your child may be tired in a way that surprises you. Classical classrooms ask for sustained attention, and sustained attention takes practice. What feels unfamiliar and tiring in September should become much more natural with time.

Weeks three through five: after the novelty wears off, many families encounter a dip. This is the part nobody warns you about. Somewhere in the early weeks a child who was excited at first will say the work is too hard, or boring, or that they miss their old school. A parent's instinct is to treat this as evidence about the school. In truth, the novelty has simply worn off and the difficulty has not yet become satisfying.

Weeks six through ten: the turn. Something clicks. Usually it is small and you learn about it months later. A poem memorized without complaint. A question at dinner that could not have come from anywhere else.

If your semester does not follow this shape exactly, nothing is wrong. Children arrive at the turn on their own schedule.

TWO

How to help without taking over

The most common mistake loving parents make in the beginning is to manage the difficulty away.

Classical education is aligned with the way humans grow and mature. Just as trees grow stronger as they must face wind, weather, and rain, so will children grow even as they learn to face challenges that test them. This means that in addition to much that will delight a child as she learns, she will also engage in some productive struggle that makes her stronger, that roots her like a tree. For example, a child who is simply given the answer learns the answer. A child who sits with the question learns to think. When we rescue too quickly, we accidentally teach that difficulty is an emergency.

This does not mean you should leave your child alone with frustration. Try this approach.

Instead of the answer, offer company. Sit nearby. Read your own book. Presence is powerful.

Instead of “let me help,” try “read it to me again.” Most of the time a child who reads the passage aloud a second time finds their own way in.

Instead of fixing the frustration, name it. “This is difficult, but you can do hard things” gives a child language for their own effort. It is a sentence they will repeat to themselves for years. “I can do hard things.”

Watch the difference between hard and lost. When the work feels hard, this can be a sign that growth is happening. However, lost means stalled. Your child cannot explain what is being asked, distress persists, or the same frustration continues without progress. When your child feels lost, bring the teacher into the conversation.

THREE

Talking about wonder when the work is challenging

Some of what your child does this semester will be wholly delightful and even feel “easy.” Some of it may be memorization, copywork, and mastering math facts that might feel “hard.”

Both belong in education. The rigorous parts can become enjoyable to students much like even a soccer player can enjoy the work involved in various drills and practice that enable them to play with excellence. The rigorous aspects to learning will become pleasurable in time as students see the skill they are acquiring. The rigorous aspects result in various kinds of satisfaction, in the same way that learning scales makes good music possible. It will take some time for a younger child to learn to see this reality, but we can encourage him along the way.

For example, we can help him to see how difficult learning activities are producing capacity and fruit in his life—even when he might not be realizing it.

Notice out loud when practice bears fruit. The poem they suddenly know by heart. The Latin root that explains a word on a road sign. The multiplication fact that no longer requires counting. The historical figure who appears in a film. The constellation they learned, now visible on an evening walk. You are not teaching in these moments. You are showing your child that school is not a collection of disconnected subjects. Words, numbers, stories, stars, music, history, and the natural world belong to one reality, and that reality is worth paying attention to.



And when a poem or a story resonates with you, say so. “That was beautiful” is a complete sentence and a real education in itself.

FOUR

Partnering with your child's teacher

You and your child's teacher are working toward the same end. That sounds obvious, but it changes how you write emails.

Make first contact before you need anything.

A short note in the first month, saying you are glad your child is in their class and asking whether there is anything helpful to know, is worth a great deal later.

Bring observations, not verdicts.

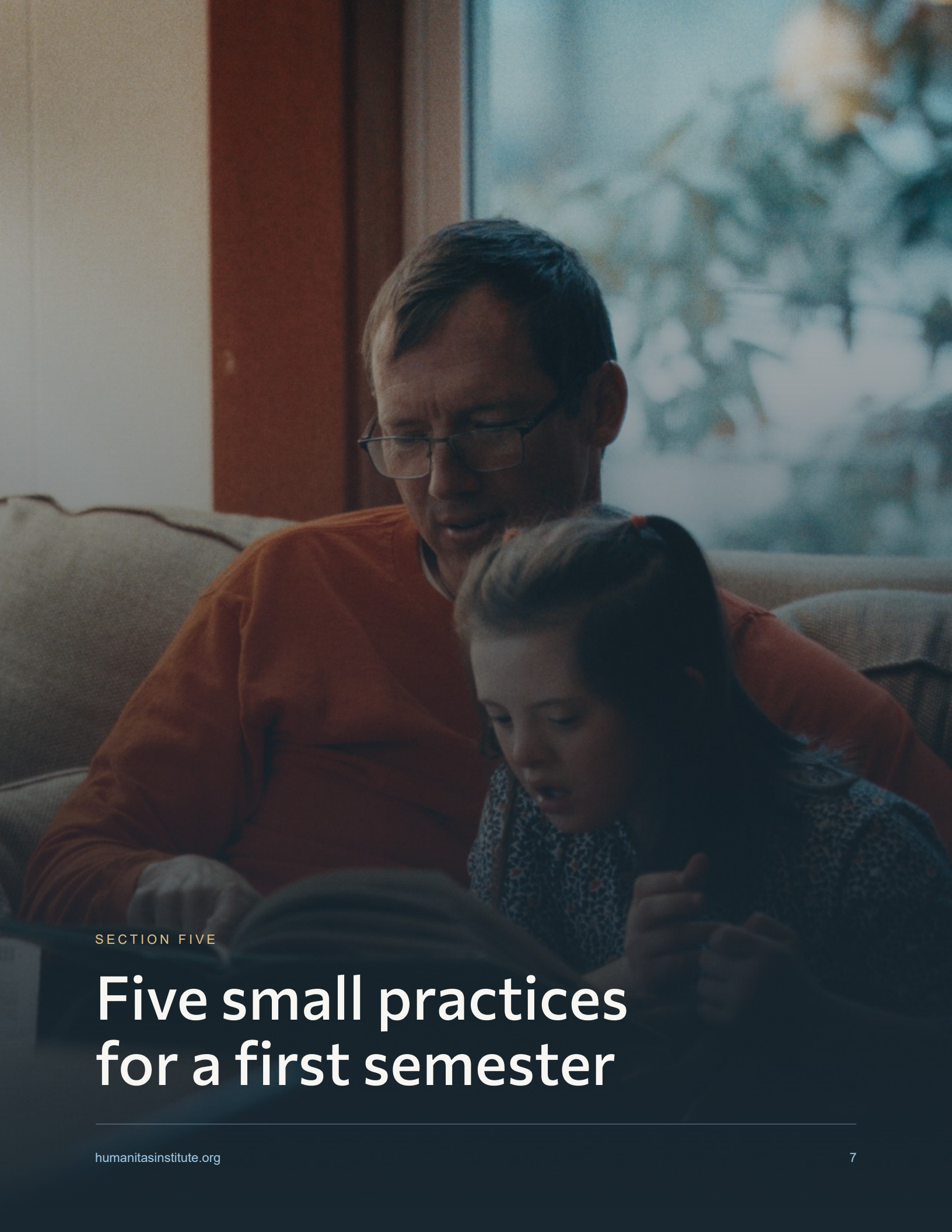
"He hasn't said much about school lately, and I'd love to hear how things are going" invites partnership. "He says the class is too hard" invites a defense.

Ask what the teacher is seeing.

Teachers notice things at school that no parent can see at home.

Assume the long view.

A classical school is trying to form your child across years, not optimize a semester. Some things the teacher is not worried about are things you do not need to worry about either.



SECTION FIVE

Five small practices for a first semester

FIVE

Five small practices for a first semester

- 1 Read aloud, even to older children. Take ten minutes and read from a good book you enjoy, maybe an old favorite or one from the curriculum. If you choose only one practice from this list, reading aloud is a very good place to begin.
- 2 Eat dinner together as often as you honestly can. Conversation is where a child's education becomes their own.
- 3 Learn the names of things on your walks. The tree, the bird, the street. Naming is a form of attention, and attention is what the school is trying to cultivate.
- 4 Let some evenings be slow. Restful learning is a real principle, and a gift. A tired child does not learn well.
- 5 Make memory work visible: Post the week's memory work somewhere visible, the refrigerator, the bathroom mirror, and practice along with them.

The first semester is not a test you can fail.

It is the beginning of something that will take years and will mostly happen out of your sight.

What your child needs from you this semester is not expertise in classical education. It is your attention, your steadiness when the work is hard, and your willingness to be curious alongside them.

You do not have to master classical education this semester. Stay close, pay attention, ask good questions, and learn alongside your child. That is more than enough for a beginning.

CONTINUE

If you have not yet, read [*the Classical Education Glossary*](#), it will help you understand the vocabulary coming from your child's school that you may not have heard before.

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