

The Stages

The Grammar Stage

With that under our belt, let us look at the grammar stage more completely. Simply defined, it is the learning of the body of knowledge of a subject, and most classicists would agree that this is best done by memorization. Most of us have been trained to have an aversion to rote memorization, but it is not harmful, and neither does it have to be dull. I would venture to say that no baby had to be forced to learn to talk, but rather he enjoyed the process immensely. In reality, a child begins learning the grammar of things when he is born and continues from there, but in formal education the grammar stage coincides with the elementary years. In terms of cognitive ability, children at this age automatically zero in on the concrete facts. Therefore it is fine at this stage to concentrate on the concrete and leave the analytical and the abstract out of it.

There is a big push in modern educational theory to introduce abstract concepts to elementary children, and while there is some overlap of the stages with individual children maturing in their thinking individually, for the most part they are not developmentally able to grasp abstracts at this age. Resist the pressure to have young children wrestling with underlying abstract mathematical concepts; feel free to be the only one in miles that does not emphasize self-expression to the detriment of all else in writing class. Ideally, an understanding of anything is not the goal at this age, but rather: have they memorized their math facts and demonstrated that by being able to do computations; have they memorized their phonics and spelling rules and demonstrated that by being able to read and spell correctly; and so on. The problem with attempting to teach abstracts at this age is that children do not yet have the ability to connect relationships between factors, nor do they have the ability to question and reason out the validity of what they have been told, but they have the ability to believe that what they have been told is the truth. That is the beauty of the grammar stage.

The Dialectic Stage

The [dialectic](#) stage is defined as learning to reason, and the body of knowledge learned in the grammar stage is the stuff learning to reason is practiced on. In the grammar stage children learned facts; in the dialectic stage children try to understand the facts they have learned, and begin to relate those facts to one another in a significant way. This stage coincides with middle or junior high school, although it may actually begin for individual children earlier than that, in 5th or 6th grade. It is in the dialectic that the emphasis in cognitive skills shifts from the concrete to the analytical. This is where children are naturally inclined to ask the question "Why?" This is where they question what they have learned in the grammar stage to see if it is in fact true. Truth holds up very well under examination, and only proves its nature by this process. While not advocating children question the things they were taught, if what they were taught is true, we need have no fear of it being questioned, even if that questioning runs to things such as the existence of God or the veracity of the Word. Therefore teaching the science of [Logic](#) is critical at this stage. It gives children the tools they need to question accurately and arrive at valid conclusions. We might be conditioned to react with shock or discipline, even, when children at this age question, argue, or want to know why. If we can understand that going through this process is the necessary step to arrive at the next one and

therefore on to maturity, perhaps we can temper our response and help children learn to question and reason while maintaining an attitude of honor and respect.

The Rhetoric Stage

The last stage is the [rhetoric](#) stage, which focuses on learning the science of communication and the art of expression. In the grammar stage children learned facts; in the dialectic stage children began to understand those facts, and in the rhetoric stage children learn to express what they now understand in the most compelling manner possible. This stage roughly coincides with high school. Cognitively speaking, this stage is where abstract thought reaches its zenith. In this stage, the unknown can be explored because the known is understood; the hypothetical can be introduced and grasped with the mind. The mental jump can be made from the natural to the spiritual, from the practical to the theoretical. Self-expression finally comes into its own in the language arts; "hard" sciences and advanced mathematics are more easily mastered; history can be applied to economics and political science; and Bible study can turn to apologetics.

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