

USING A CLASSICAL APPROACH TO HOME SCHOOL: Part 2

Common challenges and how to overcome them

Using a classical approach continues to be popular among parents looking to provide a solid foundation and academic rigor in a home school setting. Among the most popular guides is *The Well-Trained Mind*, by Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer—a mother-daughter team who lay out how to build your own 12-year classical curriculum.

The Classical Approach: A Quick Overview

The priorities of a classical curriculum are reading & writing, arithmetic skills, and history. In *The Well-Trained Mind*, the authors lay out a road map for using history as a kind of spine around which you can weave most other subjects; subjects like literature, science, and geography. The book suggests breaking down all of history into four blocks, each covered in a year's time:

- *Ancients* (5000 BC-AD 400): studied in first, fifth, and ninth grades;
- *Medieval-Early Renaissance* (400-1600): studied in second, sixth, and tenth grades;
- *Late Renaissance-Early Modern* (1600-1850): studied in third, seventh, and eleventh grades;
- *Modern* (1850-Present): studied in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades.

As you immerse your child in each period of history, your child:

- reads literature that ties to the time;
- studies geography related to the places and cultures being studied;
- studies the dominant science of the time.

When you study the ancients, for example, your child encounters the sciences familiar to the ancients: animals and plants, the human body, and so on. Similarly, when you study modern history for the first time in fourth grade, your child encounters physics and the atomic age. As a result of studying history in such a methodical and comprehensive fashion—no skipping around—the child learns the history of the world in a logical, linear fashion and, at the same time, builds a mental map of the globe.

Over the course of twelve years, the child encounters each time period—and the relevant literature and scientific discoveries—three distinct times, going into more depth with each encounter.

Pulling a Child Out of School

This plan seems easy enough to follow as long as you are starting at first grade with your child; but how do you cover history in this fashion if you are pulling your child out of school?

The authors suggest that you always begin the history cycle at the beginning. If, for example, you were pulling your nine-year-old out of school, you would not begin covering modern history, even though the fourth-grade curriculum suggested by the authors says to cover the time period from 1850-Present. Instead, you would begin with

ancient history—your literature would include ancient myths: Greek, Roman, Chinese, Egyptian, Africa; the Bible; Homer’s *Odyssey*; the epic of *Gilgamesh*. Your science would be life science, as described earlier.

Since you are starting not at first grade, your child will study the four stages of history fewer than three full times. Nevertheless, he or she will likely emerge with a far greater command of history, geography, and science than that of most school children.

Moving from Another Curriculum

If you have been home schooling using another approach or curriculum, and you’d like to try using a classical approach, you might try folding in one new subject at a time instead of trying to tackle all the subjects. The authors suggest that you begin with history, and for two reasons: first, because it constitutes the organizing principle for other subjects; second, because when you introduce history, you also introduce two other tools that are critical to the Classical Approach—documentation through notebooks, and what the authors call “narration.”

- **Notebooks.** The authors suggest setting up a series of notebooks, one for each subject your child is learning, then using the same notebook for four years. Since you are beginning with history, you would need to set up only that notebook: you take an empty three-ring binder, label it *HISTORY*, then use it to store all of your child’s history reports (see *Narration*, below).
- **Narration.** The way history and reading are reinforced is through reports, or, before a child has mastered handwriting, through *narration*. Narration is a pre-handwriting skill that all children, regardless of age, can use with great benefit. It works as follows: after you have read through a history lesson, the child narrates back to you the main ideas of the lesson. You simply take dictation—i.e., you take down the child’s words—and the resulting document is the child’s narration. The child then creates an illustration to accompany the text and places the narration in his notebook.

Over the next four years every history narration or report goes in the history notebook. From time to time the child reviews her reports or narrations from the beginning, and it is through such review and repetition that the history lesson moves into long-term memory.

Multiple Children

Almost every home schooling family I know who is using a classical approach has more than one child. You can use this approach with multiple children of various ages.

If you have two children who are not four years apart, you can simplify your effort by having them study some of the same subjects as if they were synchronized in the history cycle. Children of different ages can study the same time period of history, learn about the same scientific discoveries, and read the same literature—only at different reading levels and to a different degree of complexity.

In literature, many of the classics are available for the very young in excellent editions with beautiful illustrations. If, however, you can only find an essential book written well

above your younger child's reading level, you or your older child may have to read it to the younger one. Keep in mind, however, that children learn even if the material being read to them is above their grade-level. Periodically, you can pause in the reading and ask what certain words mean or what just took place. The older child can listen as well, or read the material on his or her own.

You can also tailor activities appropriately: While one child writes a history report on ancient Egypt, the younger child can draw and color pyramids and mummies.

Synchronizing some of the essential subjects for your children will make your job easier. It will mean, however, that one or more of your children will only cover the four stages of history two or two and one half times, instead of three full times. But as I mentioned earlier, do not worry—he or she will nonetheless emerge with a firm grasp of history.

Managing with a Toddler

If you are trying to coordinate a classical approach with a toddler in the house, fear not; it can be done. (Susan Wise-Bauer herself has four children—three she is currently home schooling classically, and one toddler.) Try some of these tactics to maximize your learning time with the older kids:

- Have some special toys for the toddler that only come out during school time.
- Wait until naptime to cover subjects that require lots of hands-on attention from you.
- At least once each week, plan an activity that everyone can take part in—like a simple science experiment, play-acting a history lesson, or other project.

Also, remember, this time will pass. There will come a time when things will simplify. Toddlers do grow into school-age kids, and older children become more able to work independently.



Classical education holds fast to rigorous standards, and implementing the approach does require a measure of discipline from the home schooling parent. But that doesn't mean that the model is rigid. On the contrary, families all over the country are finding that they can tailor a classical curriculum to their family's unique needs and circumstances.

Where there's a will, there's a way, and the rewards will be evident in due time: a child who is both intellectually curious and self-disciplined; one who has not only learned how to learn, but is grounded in the lessons of the past.

Diane Speed lives in Bethel, CT with her husband Roy, seven-year-old son Tristan, and two-year-old daughter Holden. In January 2002 she organized a classical education support group that now meets twice each month: one evening for adults, and one afternoon for kids. For more information on the Classical Kids group, please contact Diane at dspeed@salientcomm.com.