



Education Monthly

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The Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences

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The material which follows is taken from *Illustrations of Masonry* by William Preston, a scholar and Mason of some renown who is widely credited making Freemasonry one of the leading educational influences during the closing decades of the eighteenth century.

Preston's elaboration on the seven liberal arts and sciences provides small but significant insight into their importance in the overall design of learning and self-growth and with a little applied thought, their relevance to masonry in particular will become apparent.

The seven liberal arts and sciences as we know them from our ritual are Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy. And while we are enjoined to make these our course of study, the "WHY?" and "WHAT?" are largely left to us, as are most of the truly challenging lessons in Masonry.

Grammar teaches the proper arrangement of words, according to the idiom or dialect of any particular people; and enables us to speak or write a language with accuracy, agreeably to reason and correct usage.

Rhetoric teaches us to speak copiously and fluently on any subject, not merely with propriety, but with all the advantages of force and elegance; wisely contriving to captivate the hearer by strength of argument and beauty of expression, whether it be to entreat or exhort, to admonish or applaud.

Logic teaches us to guide our reason discreetly in the general knowledge of things, and direct our inquiries after truth. It consists of a regular train of argument, whence we infer, deduce, and conclude, according to certain premises laid down, admitted, or granted, and in it are employed the faculties of conceiving, judging, reasoning, and disposing; which are naturally led on from one gradation to another, till the point in question is finally determined.

Arithmetic teaches the powers and properties of numbers; which is variously effected by letters, tables, figures, and instruments. By this art reasons and demonstrations are given for finding out any certain number, whose relation or affinity to others is already known.

Geometry treats of the powers and properties of magnitudes in general, where length, breadth, and thickness, are considered. By this science, the architect is enabled to construct his plans; the general, to arrange his soldiers; the engineer, to mark out ground for encampments; the geographer, to give us the dimensions of the world, delineate the extent of seas, and specify the divisions of empires, kingdoms, and provinces; and by it, also, the astronomer is enabled to make his observations, and fix the durations of times and seasons, years and cycles. Geometry is the foundation of architecture, and the root of all mathematics.

Music teaches the art of forming concords, so as to compose delightful harmony, by a proportional arrangement of acute, grave, and mixed sounds. This art, by a series of experiments, is reduced to a science, with respect to tones and the intervals of sound only. It inquires into the nature of concords and discords, and enables us to find out the proportion between them by numbers.

Astronomy is that art by which we are taught to read the wonderful works of the Almighty Creator in those sacred pages, the celestial hemisphere. Assisted by astronomy, we observe the motions, measure the distances, comprehend the magnitudes, and calculate the periods and eclipses, of the heavenly bodies. By it we learn the use of the globes, the system of the world, and the primary law of nature. While we are employed in the study of this science, we perceive unparalleled instances of wisdom and goodness, and through the whole of creation trace the glorious Author by his works.

From these descriptions we derive the lesson that the seven liberal arts & sciences constitute a fulsome and broad education, at once honing the mind on the challenges of literary and arithmetic excellence, while adorning it with the beauty of the arts and feeding the soul through an exploration of the divine nature of the heavens and the language given by the GAOTU to decipher them.

The seven liberal arts & sciences then, while alluded to in our Ritual and explored at a very basic level, are truly a foundation stone of the Craft. Masonry, being a progressive science, follows the model of the seven liberal arts & sciences by gradually demanding more of its members. As we improve in knowledge and social intercourse, so are we better prepared to deliver our ritual, make more effective use of our personal intellectual endeavours and more effectively lead and govern the lodge. From those first steps at the altar wherewith we are presented strange language and new ideas, to Solomon's chair whence the Master is expected to teach, enlighten and lead, the seven liberal arts & sciences provide a pattern for learning, growth, and study that guides us through our lives unto the most significant knowledge of all – the knowledge of ourselves.