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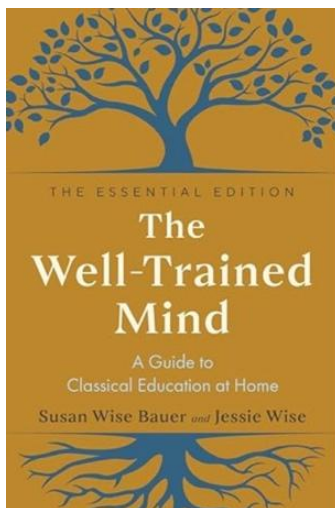
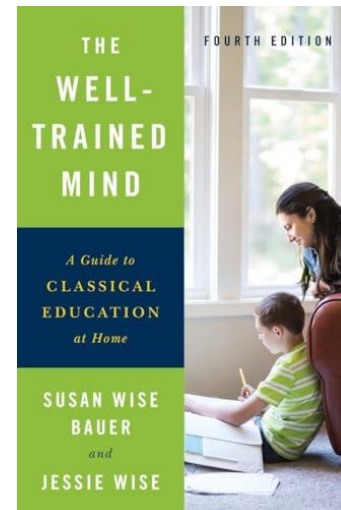
Wise Bauer, S., & Wise, J. (2024). *The well-trained mind: A guide to classical education at home.* W. W. Norton.

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Thanks to an infectious coronavirus, the whole world caught a glimpse in 2020-2021 of what homeschooling can be like with little advance notice and a lot of improvisation. If your pandemic homeschooling experience conjures up feelings of dumpster fires, take comfort in knowing that it is not representative of what homeschooling can be like. For those who found the flexibility of schedule and potential opportunities ideal for their family, *The Well-Trained Mind* is a how-to book for homeschooling parents seeking to provide their children with a Classical education.



The Well-Trained Mind was originally published in 1999, and has been an on-going project of the Wise family ever since. In 2024, the 5th edition was published as a condensed version of the 4th edition (published in 2016), so it is somewhat shorter. I focus here on the 2016 edition as it covers more material than the 2024 edition—848 pages vs 576 pages—and places the recent edition in a broader context.

To best understand this book, it is necessary to learn what is meant by a Classical education. Anthony Grafton and colleagues (2010) defined it as, “the reception of classical Graeco-Roman antiquity in all its dimensions in later cultures,” including “not only the texts, but also the images and objects, the ideas and institutions, the monuments and cultural artifacts, [and] the rituals and practices” (pp. vii–viii). *The Well-Trained Mind* is Classical, based on the educational systems of ancient Greece and Rome using the *Trivium*, which consists of three stages: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. The academic rigor outlined in the book is intended to set a path to help students learn facts, analyze assumptions, think critically, and communicate effectively, which is an excellent way to prepare a student for college.

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The Classical curriculum is organized into four years of study, and if the students are homeschooled throughout their childhood, they repeat the curriculum topics in each stage—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—over 12 years with each subsequent stage having more challenging reading material. On the one hand, this provides a structure that parents can adapt to a wide range of ages of children at different levels which is helpful when teaching more than a single student. On the other hand, the topics have a bias toward Western civilizations, and there are topics that are not covered in the four-year cycle. The book is organized by age, starting with the youngest students in kindergarten through fourth grade. The grammar stage (Chapters 3–12) focuses on language and oral comprehension, basic writing skills, the joy of numbers, an overview of 70 centuries of history and geography, and exposure to art and music appreciation. History focuses on memorization of key facts and individuals, and science curriculum is at an exploratory stage.

The second part (Grades 5–8), is the logic stage, which teaches students to think critically, analyze subjects, and think critically about them (Chapters 13–23). In math this includes incorporating real life math situations like the cost of a trip, family grocery budget, or balancing a checkbook as well as the typical curriculum leading up to pre-algebra. Science expands the exposure to different topics in chemistry, physics, astronomy, and biology. History and geography focus on synthesizing ideas and how events influenced people in different places. Also included at this stage are suggestions for how to use technology appropriately and move your child toward greater independence, and weekly checklists toward that goal.

The third part is the rhetoric stage, Grades 9–12, which develops the skills of self-expression and persuasion in writing and speaking across all subjects (Chapters 24–35). Reading great literature, comparing themes and ideas, and refining writing skills are a particular focus of language arts. This rhetoric stage deepens the complexity of subjects by looking specifically at laws and principles, incorporating programming and more advanced technology skills, developing foreign language skills, and making specific suggestions for how to create a high school transcript and portfolio of work for future college applications.

As a parent who homeschooled three children before the pandemic to help my children with various health struggles, I sampled a wide array of options and found that parental priorities and ideology should be one of the major considerations in what one chooses. The Classical approach has a clearly conservative and religious character, and the recommendations in the book do have academic rigor from a Protestant viewpoint. This can be positive or negative depending on your personal views. One aspect to consider as you identify your own ideology is that a rigorous education can be situated in other philosophies and methodologies, not just a Classical education. Homeschooling is often divided into different educational philosophies: Classical, Montessori, Charlotte Mason, Unschooling, Online schooling, and Eclectic. Charlotte Mason and Montessori are both child-centered approaches that focus on interest and building independence with similarities to Dewey's ideal of child-centered, experiential learning based on the process of inquiry (Fallace, 2011).

Charlotte Mason focuses on child-centered learning in nature and developing the whole child through life-long skills and hands-on experiences. Both Charlotte

Mason and Montessori suggest wide reading and play activities. Unschooling is less structured than Charlotte Mason; it is entirely driven by child interest—think free-range children—and eschews structure. Online schooling can vary depending on the program, but it usually follows a traditional school model with digital homework assignments that can be completed virtually anywhere. Eclectic is combining various aspects of different homeschooling philosophies to develop a personalized flavor for your family, which is common for most homeschooling families as they adopt different aspects of educational philosophies and methodologies.

This book was recommended to me 15 years ago when I started our homeschool journey, and I read the updated fourth edition this year with a new perspective as a reading interventionist and doctoral student. *The Well-Trained Mind* provides a structured and academically rigorous approach that offers an excellent foundation for a child's education. It is stronger in language arts, social studies, and writing curriculum. However, as a child grows into high school, its science recommendations fall short to prepare students academically for the current rigors of a STEM-based field in college. High school students with self-initiative can participate in community college courses and labs to make up for that deficiency.

How do you know if a Classical education is the philosophy you wish to embrace? Your educational philosophy will likely resemble your personal philosophy and habits. If you like having clear timelines and well-defined educational goals, *The Well-Trained Mind* is an excellent resource for preparing your child to develop analytical skills with academic rigor. In this program early elementary students are in the “grammar” stage focused on building a strong foundation of basic knowledge in math, history, and language arts through memorization. Some advantages of this book are that it suggests resources that build background knowledge, which has been touted by Natalie Wexler (2019) and other researchers as a key to improving reading comprehension and learning. Wexler maintains that children need exposure to a wide range of content and experiences to gain vocabulary and understanding of the world. This sequential building of background knowledge is one of the strengths of the book and there is brief but wide exposure to ancient cultures from Asia, Africa, Indigenous Americans, Europe, and more. Another strength of the book is guidance on how to navigate homeschooling throughout a child's K-12 journey, and helping your child prepare for college, which requires intentional planning through the grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages.

This grammar-stage focus on memorization and learning rules has advantages and drawbacks. Memorizing material can be a confidence booster for children and shape their ideology, but it also can be stigmatizing for students who struggle to memorize. Prescribed topics can feel constrictive if you prefer more spontaneous and interest-led opportunities like Unschooling offers. In Classical approaches, the goal of the grammar stage is to expose a child to a lot of ideas and help them memorize facts that can help them connect ideas and start to use critical thinking in the next stage.

Middle school “logic” studies evolve when the student begins to ask questions about relationships between events and people. The goal is to develop critical thinking and understand the rules of logic, which are essential to evaluating the tidal

wave of information the internet provides. The authors highlight that, “This logic will help [a student] ask appropriate questions:

- “Does that conclusion follow the facts as I know them?”
- “Is this speaker sticking to the point, or is he trying to distract me with irrelevant remarks?”
- “Why is this person trying to convince me of this fact?” (Wise & Wise, 2016, p. 283).

Educators can agree that this critical thinking is key to intellectual development. The middle school, logic stage, focuses on using primary texts to learn and develop these critical thinking skills, which is based on more independent learning with discussion and dialogue of ideas. Logic-based skills set the stage for the ability to speak and write about all areas of the curriculum in high school.

High school is in the rhetoric stage, which involves teaching persuasive writing with originality. A primary focus is on the great books and skills of debate, leading to a very limited multiculturalist view of learning, with only a few authors of persons of color proposed out of hundreds of book suggestions. The authors provide a more diverse selection under the additional history reading options that include books from Korea, India, Vietnam, and Japan. The updates and additions to the 2024 edition are helpful, yet the primary focus remains the classics like *Norton Anthologies of Western Literature*.

The discussion of technology skills in Chapter 31 is an important update considering how technology permeates modern life. The authors highlight the importance of understanding the basics of computer programming balanced with the caveat to avoid too much screen time and continue to use pencil-and-paper work. It lacks any discussion on how to use artificial intelligence (AI) ethically, which would be needed in a new edition.

Chapter 37 is a four-page supplement to this edition, addressing children with learning disabilities. The authors encourage a private neuropsychological evaluation for “the child who just can’t figure out reading [...] The child who seems to have no grasp of spelling.” While it is good to identify and address a child’s needs, those descriptions are insufficient for a parent to realize non-neurotypical learning may be a factor (Wise & Wise Bauer, 2016, p. 711). I have a son with dyslexia and dysgraphia who struggled with learning letters and the basics of reading, and the suggestions offered in the book would not have helped in recognizing the issues or finding appropriate resources to provide early intervention.

In summary, *The Well-Trained Mind* provides an excellent structure for providing a Classical education at home, with suggestions for curriculums, resources, and planning for those seeking to educate or supplement the education of their own children. Despite the limited, primarily Western perspective, Classical education may be an option for any parent looking for an alternative to public education. For those feeling overwhelmed with so many choices and decisions, this book provides good insights and suggestions during the homeschool journey.

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About the Reviewer

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