



Are there some basic facts that every educated person should know?

In the past, there was an understanding that all educated people would be familiar with certain events in the history of the world. Everyone would know about the Flood, the Founding of Rome, the Fall of Rome, The Crusades, Magellan's Circumnavigation of the Globe, etc. Now, as part of the modern education experiment, there is no longer consensus on the important events in human history. In contrast to modern education, a Classical education seeks to reclaim the study of the important people, events, and ideas that have shaped our history, as well as an understanding of their impact on us today.

Most of us had the experience of learning history from an "age-appropriate" or "grade level" textbook and then completing multiple-choice tests to demonstrate that we had temporarily learned the right material for that grade and year. In contrast, a Classical Christian education seeks to train students to really understand history and to know it for a lifetime. In order to accomplish this, Classical educators train children to memorize important facts and stories and expose children to stories over and over again. Rather than asking students to complete multiple-choice tests, Classical educators rely on oral recitation, speeches, debates, and written essays, which demonstrate mastery of the material.

How do we know children can memorize so much information? Has it ever been tried before? To get a sense of what children were expected to know in the past, let's take a visit to Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little Town on the Prairie*. In this book, Laura is about 14 years old. As part of a school exhibition put on to entertain and enlighten the entire town, Laura is asked to recite a summary of the first half of U.S. history. *The time had come. Laura stood up. She did not know how she got to the platform. Somehow she was there, and her voice began. "America was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492. Christopher Columbus, a native of Genoa in Italy, had long sought permission to make a voyage toward the west in order to discover a new route to India. At that time Spain was ruled by the united crowns of—" Her voice was shaking a little. She steadied it and went carefully on. . . . She told of the Spanish and the French explorers and their settlements, of Raleigh's lost colony, of the English trading companies in Virginia and in Massachusetts, of the Dutch who bought Manhattan Island and settled the Hudson Valley. . . . Then she was really launched upon the great history of America. She told of the new vision of freedom and equality in the New World, she told of the old oppressions of Europe and of the war against tyranny and despotism, of the war for the independence of the thirteen new States, and of how the Constitution was written and these thirteen States united. Then, taking up the pointer, she pointed to George Washington.*

Laura goes on until she reaches the point in history that records the statehood of Kansas. At that point, she turns the recitation over to her classmate. What is truly remarkable about this performance is that Laura has not only memorized the history of her country for that school year, but she has mastered it for life. Years later, when she went back to write her novels, the timeline of U.S. history was still fresh in her mind.

What are the benefits of memorizing the information? Can't we just read stories? For the past eight years, my family and I have spent a few minutes each day on memory work in history.

Every year, we memorize a history timeline of about 160 events, beginning at Creation and ending at the present day.¹ My hope is that they, like Laura Ingalls Wilder, will be able to recall this information for the rest of their lives.

There are other benefits to memorizing a timeline of history along with a set of stories about different periods in history. Here are just a few of them:

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- Each time children encounter a new story from history, they know exactly where to file it in their minds.
- Children will grow curious to know more about events they have memorized in the timeline.
- Knowing a timeline of history allows students to compare events in history to one another.

A Mental Filing Cabinet Let me give you a few examples just to show you how this can work. The other day, we were reading aloud Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. My 13-year-old son, his brow furrowed in concentration, interrupted me to ask, "What year did you say this was again?"

"1865."

"Oh, so it was during the Civil War."

"Yes."

"That's what I thought. It seems weird that they are going on a scientific expedition in the middle of the war, but I guess it didn't affect them in Germany."

Even though my son is comparing fiction to actual events, he has achieved several important things. Because he has memorized the timeline of world history for eight years in a row, he can immediately place the events from this novel in context. In addition, he achieved a new level of understanding about Europe's lack of involvement in the Civil War by comparing events that were taking place at the same time.

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Fostering Curiosity Children will pay closer attention to stories if they are already familiar with the people and events. Recently, we were reading aloud a biography of David Livingstone. As we read about how he encountered the Boers during his mission work, my 10-year-old daughter sat up straight: "Mom, is that like Boer Wars in Africa (an event from our timeline)?" We had a brief discussion about how Europeans and African tribes spent decades fighting over the continent of Africa, and then we returned to the story. If we had not memorized the timeline of

history, my daughter would probably have skipped right over mention of the Boers. However, because she had heard that name before, she was curious to know more.

Making Comparisons Finally, knowing a timeline allows students to make comparisons between different peoples, cultures, and events because they can visualize the events that come before and after the event that they are currently studying. One day each week, I tutor high school students in their core subjects. In our U.S. History class this fall, we had an interesting discussion in which we compared and contrasted the American and French Revolutions. This conversation naturally stemmed from a review of our history timeline. Because the events were close together in time, students naturally wondered if the two events were similar, if the people fought for the same reasons, and whether or not they had won the same liberties. As they talked, I drew a comparison chart on the whiteboard, which allowed them to see how these two revolutions were strikingly different.

Should students do anything else besides memorize? One of the common misconceptions about a Classical education is that students do nothing but memorize. If this were true, education would be both boring and unproductive. Instead, Classical educators use the memory work as one component of an education. Families should still be reading exciting stories from history, literature, science, art, and music. When children encounter new material, the timeline helps them organize the new information and compare it to stories they already knew. As children grow older, they read about the same events but in greater depth so that they continue to grow in understanding.

One of the blessings of homeschooling is that we as parents get a second chance at our education. Start building your timeline of history today!

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Endnote:

1. For our timeline, we use the *Classical Acts and Facts History Cards* from Classical Conversations.