

ENGL 355:

Anecdote

For our second *progymnasmata*, you will write an anecdote. Today we use “anecdote” to designate any short, entertaining story that may illustrate or exemplify a common belief. However, for the Greeks, anecdote meant something related, though also very different, from how we use the term today.

Specifically, the anecdote for the ancients—*the kind of anecdote you will be writing here*—is an explanatory commentary on a famous saying from or incident in the life of a famous or wise person. Anecdotes in this form are intended to instruct by explaining the context for and extracting the wisdom from a particular saying. The exercise is designed to teach commentary and the ability to synthesize knowledge from a particular episode.

Procedure

The anecdote has the following division:

1. *Encomium*—A short paragraph praising, generally, the wisdom of the person explored in the anecdote
2. *Paraphrase*—State the quote in question or a summary of the incident
3. *Cause*—Expand on the quote/incident to fully explain what it means
4. *Converse*—Show how not following the advice will result in bad things happening
5. *Analogy*—Exemplify the lesson through an example from nature or daily life (maybe a short fable)
6. *Example*—Provide another figure from history who exemplified this lesson
7. *Testimony of the Ancients*—Find another historical figure who exemplifies the lesson
8. *Brief Epilogue*—Briefly conclude by summarizing what we have learned

You will write each of these stages in your anecdote.

To get started, you will need a few things: the person from history you wish to explore (say Kanye West), the particular quote or episode from their life (“Yo, Taylor, I’m really happy for you, I’m letting you finish, but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time! One of the best videos of all time!”), the cause (“Even if you embarrass yourself, it is important to stick up for your friends”), the converse (“Silence in the face of injustice against those you care about is not ennobling”), the analogy (“the squeaky wheel gets the grease”), and testimony of the ancients (“Emerson once said ‘It is one of the blessings of old friends that you can afford to be stupid with them.’”). If you do not have all these elements, you may need to consider a different topic.

Example

From Aphthonius's *Progymnasmata*:

It is right to admire Isocrates for his art, for he gave it a most glorious name and proved its greatness by his practice of it; he made the art famous, he did not owe his fame to it. To go through the benefits he conferred on human life by giving laws to kings and advice to individuals would be too long; I will speak only of his wise saying on education.

'The lover of education,' he says, 'labours at first, but those labours end in profit.' That was his wise saying; and we shall show our admiration in what follows.

The lovers of education are enrolled with the leaders of education, whom it is fearful to approach though to desert them is foolish; fear always waits on boys, both when they are present and in anticipation. From teachers the attendants take over, fearful to behold, more fearful when inflicting punishment. Fear precedes the experience and punishment follows on fear. What the boys do wrong they punish; what the boys do well they take as a matter of course. Fathers are harsher than attendants, examining their ways, telling them to make progress, viewing the market-place with suspicion; and if punishment is needed they take no account of human nature. But by these experiences the boy, when he reaches adulthood, is crowned with virtue. But if someone, because he fears these things, flees from his teachers, absconds from his parents, avoids his attendants, he is utterly deprived of eloquence; along with his fear he has set aside eloquence. All these things swayed Isocrates' judgement when he called the root of education bitter.

For just as those who work the land laboriously sow the seed in the earth and gather the crops with greater joy, in the same way those who strive for education by their toil acquire the subsequent renown.

Consider Demosthenes' career, which was more devoted to toil than that of any orator and more glorious than that of any. So great was his commitment that he even deprived his head of its adornment, thinking the best adornment is that from virtue. And he devoted to toil what others devote to enjoyment.

For this reason one must admire Hesiod, who said that the road to virtue is hard but the summit easy [Works and Days 286-92], expressing the same wise judgement as Isocrates. For what Hesiod represented as a road Isocrates called the root; both disclosed the same opinion, though in different words.

Those who consider these points must admire Isocrates for his outstandingly wise saying on education.