

# Roman Education, Literature and Poetry

In this lesson plan for grade six, students learn about the education, literature and poetry of ancient Rome and how literature tied into other social customs, facilitating collaboration between English Language Arts and Social Studies.

## An activity for grade six English/Language Arts

by Judith Geary

### Learning outcomes

- \* Students will discover commonalities and differences between the cultural values of the ancient Romans and our own by exploring and evaluating literary materials.
- \* Students will use the writing process to express themselves personally and creatively.

### Teacher planning

#### MATERIALS NEEDED

- \*Handouts (provided)
- \*Paper suitable for display
- \*Pens and/or markers

#### TIME REQUIRED FOR LESSON

Three class periods

### Procedure

#### For class one: Roman Education

1. Conduct a discussion about ancient Rome and allow the students to discuss some of what they have learned. Read the page on “Roman Education, Literature and Poetry” and discuss how students feel about the different forms of education available to Roman children of their ages. (5-10 minutes)
2. In pairs, assign or have the students choose, one of the saursoria or controversiae from the page “Write a Roman Speech.” Assign positions on the arguments based on the “taller student” or the “one on the left.”
3. Have students share the arguments for their assigned position with their partners for two minutes each. (5 minutes)
4. Instruct students to write a speech presenting their partner’s position (as a good Roman student of rhetoric could argue either side effectively.) (5 minutes)
5. Have students present their speeches as class time permits.

#### For class two: Roman Literature and Poetry

1. Distribute copies of the page of epigrams to students. Read aloud the introductory paragraph.
2. Ask students which of the sayings are familiar to them already. Ask which seem most applicable to their lives today. Discuss the significance of the fact that these sayings were written so very long ago yet are still meaningful to us today. (5 - 10 minutes)
3. Put students in pairs and have them share and write down as many additional sayings or epigrams as they can remember or create. (5 minutes)
4. Share some of these with the class. (5 minutes)
5. If desired, students may copy some of their products on suitable paper for display
6. Distribute the handout on Roman poetry and explain the instructions. Assign an acrostic and/or a diamante for homework.

#### For class three: Roman Poetry

1. Revisit the characteristics of the acrostic. Have willing students read their efforts aloud, discuss the ways the poems meet the assignment and any editing that needs to be done. (5 minutes)
2. Put students in pairs and have them share their poems with each other, edit and respond to each other’s work. The students may then copy their final version on paper for display. (5-10 minutes)

3. Repeat the above procedure for the diamante.

**\* These poems and epigrams are appropriate entertainment for a Roman banquet.**

### **Assessment**

Speeches will be presented and text turned in.

Poems and epigrams may be displayed

Teacher may design a rubric to check off the characteristics of each assignment

### **Supplemental Information**

Handouts attached

### **North Carolina Curriculum Alignment**

#### **ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS (2003)**

##### **Grade 6**

Goal 1: The learner will use language to express individual perspectives drawn from personal or related experience.

Objective 1.02: Explore expressive materials that are read, heard and viewed by:

- \*making connections between works, self and related topics
- \*comparing and/or contrasting information
- \*drawing inferences and/or conclusions
- \*creating an artistic interpretation that connects self to the work
- \*discussing books /media formally and informally

Objective 1.03: Interact appropriately in group setting by:

- \*listening attentively
- \*showing empathy
- \*contributing relevant comments connecting personal experiences to content
- \*monitoring own understanding of the discussion and seeking clarification as needed

Goal 2: The learner will explore and analyze information from a variety of sources.

Objective 2.01: Explore expressive materials that are read, heard and viewed by:

- \* monitoring comprehension of what is heard, read or viewed
- \* restating and summarizing information
- \* making connections between works, self and related topics/information
- \* drawing inferences and/or conclusions
- \* generating questions

Goal 4: The learner will use critical thinking skills and create criteria to evaluate print and nonprint materials

Objective 4.03: Recognize and develop a stance of a critic by:

- \* considering alternative points of view or reasons
- \* remaining fair minded and open to other interpretations
- \* constructing a critical response/ review of a work/topic

#### **SOCIAL STUDIES (2003)**

##### **Grade 6**

Goal 8: The learner will assess the influence and contributions of individual and cultural groups in South America and Europe.

Objective 8.02: Describe the role of key groups and evaluate their impact on historical and contemporary societies in South America and Europe.

Goal 12: The learner will assess the influence of major religions, ethical beliefs and values on cultures in South America and Europe.

Objective 12.01: Examine the major belief systems in selected regions of South America and Europe, and analyze their impact on cultural values, practices and institutions.

## STUDY LIKE A ROMAN:

### Education, Literature and Poetry

by Judith Geary

ROMAN CHILDREN in the first century B.C.E. might be taught by their parents, by a tutor (usually an educated slave), or might attend a school. Schools were a single teacher and his students and generally met in a rented space, a room in a private home, a shop, or even a street corner. Classes started at dawn and might be over at noon, or continue after a break for lunch.

Girls and boys, from the age of seven to 11, both attended classes in reading, writing, arithmetic and Greek. Secondary education for boys from 12 to 15 years included literature in Latin and Greek. From age 16 on, education for upper class boys focused on rhetoric, the art of persuasive speaking. Girls from the age of twelve were assumed to be preparing for marriage, and lower class boys were working.

Slaves and members of the lower classes were not assumed to be literate. From sources at the time, we believe that most people could read well enough to decipher the inscriptions on buildings and their ticket to the circus. The ability to read and write, especially in Greek, was considered a valuable skill, and there were no barriers to their learning if they were able to find a teacher.

Indeed, some households had a tutor for the slave children. We may also imagine that some of the classes, especially those held in the out-of-doors were being “audited” by the servants of the pupils and others within hearing.

Books were expensive and rare as they were hand-copied one at a time. Scribes copied originals or other copies in columns on sheets of papyrus, which were then glued together and rolled onto spindles. A school was lucky to have a single copy of a work, and students memorized classic passages and made their own copies.



Students more often wrote on waxed tablets with a stylus. The tablet was constructed by pouring melted wax blackened with soot into a frame of wood or bronze. The stylus was used to scratch through the wax to the lighter wood underneath. The stylus had a rounded nub on the end to use to smooth the wax to erase mistakes or reuse the tablet again. The tablet might also be gently heated to smooth the wax for reuse. Even important documents were sometimes written on such tablets of several leaves and closed with cord and a wax seal.



Maybe you would like to try exercises like some Roman children had in their school.

## WRITE A ROMAN SPEECH:

Roman citizens of the upper classes were expected to participate in politics. The ability to write and deliver speeches effectively was an absolute requirement, as was the ability to argue effectively in court. Speech topics were divided into two broad categories. *Suasoria* were speeches intended to persuade someone to undertake a particular course of action. *Controversiae* were speeches in which one argued for one side of a point of law.

Try your hand at some actual school assignments from the Roman period.

### *Controversia: Seneca the Elder, Controversia 1.1*

**The law states: children should support their parents, or be cast in prison.**

Two brothers quarrel among themselves. One has a son. The uncle falls on hard times. Although his father forbids him to do so, the young man supports his uncle; for this reason, his father disowns him. His uncle adopts him. His uncle receives an inheritance and becomes wealthy. His father falls on hard times. Although his uncle forbids him to do so, the young man supports him. The uncle disowns him.

Each student would be expected to argue either for or against the justice of the father's and uncle's actions. Remember, fathers expected absolute obedience from their children and could punish adult children even with death.

### *A Suasoria from Seneca the Elder, Suasoria 3:*

Agamemnon at Aulis has been warned by the prophet Calchas that it is against the will of the gods for him to set sail until he has slaughtered his daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon deliberates: should he slaughter Iphigenia?

Each student would be expected to compose a speech urging Agamemnon either to slaughter or not to slaughter Iphigenia.

### *A Suasoria based on the novel, GETORIX: The Eagle and the Bull*

In the novel, Getorix's father has charged him to face death honorably before the Romans. Getorix deliberates. Should he seek an honorable death at Roman hands, or should he seek to live honorably until death comes?

Each student would be expected to compose a speech urging Getorix to seek death or to seek to live honorably.



This page may be copied and distributed to the students

## LITERATURE:

Roman literature had a “moral” to the stories. They were intended to instruct about right action or warn against foolishness, often the dangers of angering the gods. Epigrams were a popular form of Roman literature, not just written by recognized philosophers, but by educated amateurs. These were witty sayings intended to express some kind of moral or logical truth, much the same as the sayings of Ben Franklin in our own country. Here are some examples of Roman epigrams:

### EPIGRAMS:

“Does it seem marvelous because it was done long ago?” – Livius Andronicus (280-204 B.C.E.)

“Daylight, water, sunlight, moonlight, darkness—for those things I have to pay no money; everything else we wish to use we purchase on Greek credit.” – Titus Maccius Plautus (255-184 B.C.E.)

“We mortals realize the value of blessings only when we have lost them.” – Titus Maccius Plautus (255-184 B.C.E.)

“On ancient ways and heroes stands the Roman state.” – Quintus Ennius (239-169 B.C.E.)

“A friend in need is a friend indeed.” – Quintus Ennius (239-169 B.C.E.)

“Whom men fear, they hate; whom a man hates he wishes dead.” – Quintus Ennius (239-169 B.C.E.)

“Buy not what you can use, but what you cannot do without. What you do not need is dear at any price.” – Marcus Porcius Cato (234-149 B.C.E.)

“Live as you can since you cannot live as you would.” – Caecilius Statius (219-166 B.C.E.)

“He plants trees to be useful to another generation.” – Caecilius Statius (219-166 B.C.E.)

“The law at its most rigorous is often injustice at its worst” – Publius Terentius Afer (185-159 B.C.E.)

“Nothing is ever said that has not been said before.” – Publius Terentius Afer (185-159 B.C.E.)

–Translations from Guterman, Norman.

*The Anchor Book of Latin Quotations*, New York: Doubleday. (1966)

Make up your own epigrams about things that are important to remember in your life today.

## POETRY:

The ancient Romans were fond of playing with words and concepts. If we may consider that poetry, rhyming or not, is a form of literature that focuses on the form as well as the content, we can play with words in a way that echoes the Romans.

**AN ACROSTIC** is any poem whose lines' first letters vertically form either the alphabet, the poet's or a dedicatee's name, or another related word.

Use your own name and compose an acrostic about yourself.

**A DIAMANTE** is a poetic form with a specific format. First choose two nouns that are related in some way. They can be opposites, like: day/night or good/bad. They can be related in another way, like: sea/shore, train/plane or home/family.

Your diamante will be seven lines long. On line one, place your first noun; on line seven, the second. Then create this pattern:

Line one:                                   Noun one  
Line two:                    Two adjectives that relate to noun one  
Line three:                   Three participles that relate to noun one  
Line four:           Four nouns. The first two relate to noun one, the second two to noun two  
Line five:                    Three participles that relate to noun two  
Line six:                    Two adjectives that relate to noun two  
Line seven:                                Noun two

An example:

                                  day  
                                  bright, sunny  
                          playing, eating, learning  
                  warmth, activity, darkness, rest  
                  sleeping, growing, dreaming  
                  dark, starry  
                                  night

Now write your own diamante, using two contrasting nouns or related ones, perhaps one naming something from modern times, and the other a related thing from the time of the ancient Romans.