



Elijah Academy Homeschool Handbook

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Curriculum Approaches

A curriculum is more than just the scope of materials selected to cover a learning objective. Each written curriculum is built around an organization of content and designed experiences. Every curriculum designer has an approach to the interaction of the pupil with the course material. The result is a sequence of content and intended vehicles of instruction, or curriculum approach. Understanding the various curriculum approaches is a great starting point for planning your home school. A good goal is to find an approach that is, at the same time, a challenge for the student and easy for the parents to implement. This is, of course, more attainable once the student is self-motivated, but motivation is a topic of broader educational philosophy.

The various methods for organizing this scope and presenting it to the student are the topic of this guide. The scope of the curriculum materials is the topic of another section, our Curriculum Scope Reference. For our current purpose, it is sufficient to note that because not all content is the same, not all approaches should be the same. Consider, for example, the difference between “skills subjects” and “content subjects.” Skills subjects are those that teach foundational knowledge useful in the learning process such as grammar and math. Content subjects such as literature, history, science, and writing rely on the application of skill subjects such as reading, grammar, and math in order to convey their content. The approach to these groups of subjects will be different.

Combining various approaches to different subjects can be described as an eclectic approach. Some homeschoolers, having taken a reading-intensive, “real-books” approach to history, have followed up their book lists by giving their children textbooks - not to trudge through, chapter by chapter - but to read over a period of a couple weeks to make sure the child didn’t miss anything about the big picture. This kind of flexibility and parental attention to limitations in approach is optimal for a thorough and deep exposure in each subject.

One can find various lists of “homeschool approaches” that are longer than the four curriculum approaches here. These lists mix methods of motivation and other aspects of educational philosophy with principles of curriculum design. For example, “Charlotte Mason” is often described as a “homeschooling approach.” Mason’s approach to curriculum design is one of Real Books / Extensive Reading. Her methods of motivation, however, are an educational philosophy that focuses on the habitual and environmental influences on learning. Her methods of motivation focus on instilling a discipline, atmosphere, and lifestyle of learning. Classical Education is also described as an approach to homeschool. As discussed in our History of American Homeschooling, Classical Education is a combination of a staged model of maturation, a reading-intensive curriculum approach, and a style of curriculum design that favors ancient things. So while these “homeschool approaches” do include curriculum approaches, they include elements from broader educational philosophy that we think are helpful to consider separately from curriculum.



1) Traditional / Textbook Approach

In this approach, subject matter is summarized, typically in grade-labeled textbooks, and exercises are provided for the student in an ordered fashion. Teacher's manuals are laid out in parallel to the textbook contents to guide the instructor in presenting lessons to the student. The traditional approach is really the only approach to cumulative "skill" subjects such as mathematics.

Applications: math, spelling, high school science, reading, grammar, art, music, Auto mechanics (skills subjects)

Strengths: cumulative skills subjects such as mathematics, technology, engineering, and science (operational science, not nature study facts).

Weaknesses: individual focus makes it hard on teacher of students in multiple levels.

Strategies: Rely on Teaching Texts, Video Instruction.

Examples: Saxon, Horizons, Bob Jones University Press, Christian Liberty Academy, Rod & Staff Publishers

The scope and sequence for various curriculums can vary greatly even within a method of implementation. For example, Saxon mathematics, takes a unique "incremental" breakdown of the scope of mathematics. This relates to sequence of a curriculum rather than the method for presenting the material. Similarly, the scope of curriculums with the same approach to learning can vary greatly. Some math curriculums focus on conceptual knowledge (Singapore, math-u-see, life of Fred), while most have a procedural focus (Saxon, Horizons, Bob Jones, Abeka). All of these are a traditional curriculum approach, but the scope and sequence of these various curriculum developers within the traditional textbook approach is different.

Various modes of implementation have developed within this approach to overcome the weakness that the home educator must "teach" each subject. The first is that, if textbooks are well-written, the subject can certainly be self-taught. Other variations within the traditional approach move away from teacher instruction and toward independent, structured learning environments to one degree or another, although some replace an in-person teacher with a pre-recorded or streaming video instruction. These various approaches to implementation have pros and cons.

a. Distance/Online Academy

If a traditional approach is taken in every subject it would be exactly a school-style environment administered for the child at home. This "school at home" approach is available in correspondence schools that administer video instruction, testing, and grading. Some examples are: Calvert Education, the Potter School, K-12, Abeka, and Bob Jones. Technology has enabled the Potter School to provide an interactive online classroom experience. Their classroom sizes are limited to 15



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students, and they provide a-la-carte course offerings. Many public school systems are also starting to offer online academy instruction. The down side to homeschooling this way is that the amount of recordkeeping required can get in the way of instruction. Also, if it is a rigid grade-leveled selection of courses that is being offered, it defeats the idea of opportunity for excellence where deeper interests are piqued. Furthermore, the curriculum is chosen by the course provider, not the parents. However, this is an intriguing development that is likely to continue. As always, the curriculum scopes are the key to evaluating the course offerings. It is the body of knowledge in each subject that is the ultimate goal.

b. Video Instruction

Programmed instruction provides pre-recorded teaching alongside the traditional curriculum materials. We separate this from distance schools in that school records are kept by the parents. The product here is simply the instruction as a supplement to traditional curriculum materials. Video instruction is available on a course by course, and even lesson-by-lesson approach. Curriculum providers such as DIVE into Math and Science and Teaching Textbooks offer video instruction keyed to math and science textbooks from Saxon and other providers. Video Instruction sites such as the Khan Academy and the Hoffman Piano Academy provide ordered resource instruction on specific topics. There is some loss in instruction that is provided by video, particularly the lost opportunity for student feedback and questions. In addition, the motivational aspect is lost as compared with classroom or online academies.

c. Worktexts

Another slight variation of the traditional approach is a “worktext” which includes instructional materials within a consumable workbook. Publishers such as Alpha-Omega (“lifepacs”), Christian Light, and Accelerated Christian Education (“paces”) are worktext-based.

Our caution with this variant of traditional curriculum approach is to pay careful to the scope of these curriculums. Also, pay attention to the sequence – is there enough repetition over time? Testing after only small increments of material tends to encourage cramming to pass the test rather than long-term retention in learning. This continues to be a popular method for beginning homeschoolers, but we have not seen materials in this category that we can recommend as engaging or motivating for the student.

a. Programmed Courses

Programmed courses are also a traditional model with course and instruction fitting into a school year with written materials and lesson presentations. This category of courses goes beyond video instruction to also provide testing and feedback, but by relying on computers to administrate the entire learning program. Online learning environments of this type can also include social features such as coaching, profiles, and message boards. In addition, gamification aspects provide extrinsic



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motivations with features such as user scores, expert levels, and virtual rewards. These features add a new dimension to programmed courses that was not available before the internet enabled social connectivity. Switched on Schoolhouse was one of the first programmed courses, and it implements alpha-omega worktext curriculum in a programmed environment. Rosetta Stone language learning is another example of a programmed course. As always, the curriculum scope is the key to evaluating a course. Khan Academy, for example, explicitly states they are not a complete curriculum in math and that they are designed to be used as a resource to supplement standard curriculums. Be wary of methods that test small increments of learning immediately without sufficient repetition. Remember, repetition is the key to learning, specifically repetition over time.

2) Real Books / Extensive Reading Approach

Our educational system uses newly copyrighted textbooks, still in print, for primary teaching materials. However, this may be the wrong focus for some subjects. Why? Our civilization has the benefit of 500 years of source texts in the English language. An extensive reading approach relies on an organized outlines to introduce these texts to the student. You can find many lists of “real books” or “living books” by grade level online, and our curriculum guide references some of these. Good books go out of print all the time. Many good books have expired copyrights, and are available in eBook form for free or virtually free. This approach fits teaching multiple levels of students the same topic with materials at their own levels. Commonly, this is integrated into a classical philosophy of maturation with 3 learning stages. Of course, lists of “real” or “living” books can be keyed to grade levels instead of maturation stages.

Applications: history, literature, biblical studies, nature study (concept subjects)

Strengths: multi-level teaching can happen on the same topic in classical maturation “stages”, with different source materials. Lends itself also to Integrated/Unit Study approach. Strong vocabulary in source texts.

Weaknesses: individual focus makes it hard on teacher of many levels.

Strategies: Rely on Teaching Texts, Video Instruction.

Examples: Tapestry of Grace, Classical Conversations, Ambleside Online, The Robinson Curriculum, Veritas Press, Sonlight Christian Homeschool, My Fathers World

This approach is a good one for homeschool environment because there is nearly 500 years of books in the English language. Many of these source texts are classic works that have stood the test of time, and there is simply not enough time to read them all in unabridged form, although a good effort can be made of that. This approach is easy on the homeschool instructor because the teaching method involves mainly selecting and putting good materials in front of the student, and evaluating their attention to those materials. And if the student has developed a fascination for reading a good



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book, the process is simple. Lengthy book lists can be found online. The example curriculums will package, sell, and even publish books.

When we advocate for a “broad” course of education, we mean the essentialist philosophy of introducing the student to the accumulated body of knowledge in each traditional academic subject. This is a philosophy of education rather than an approach. It relates to the scope rather than format of curriculum material. One danger in a real books approach is that there may be some “knowledge gaps” in scope or just in big-picture understanding. Some “Real books” curriculums, such as Tapestry of Grace and Sonlight follow a systematic ordering of material which would guard against gaps. Some that have taken a real books approach have followed up years of study by having the student peruse a higher-level “complete course” textbook for a short period of time to make sure that nothing in the body of knowledge missing from their education.

3) Unit Study / Thematic Approach

This approach is taken when materials from multiple subjects are aligned under a single “topic.” This approach is not exclusive of other approaches. A Unit Study is a curriculum design approach that takes a single theme and breaks it down into categories that apply under various subject headings. For example, under the topic of The War Between the States, the history and geography of the war can be studied. In addition, the topics of disease, amputation, and sanitary conditions apply under the subject of science. These conditions contributed greatly to the death toll, and studying about them in this context makes the concepts come alive. Under the topic of Biblical studies, an inquiry could be made into the use of scripture by both sides in the fight. The cost of the war could be quantified as a mathematical exercise. The study of reading, writing, music, art, and even physical education could also be accomplished under this single topic.

Applications: History & literature, Biblical Principles in other subjects, Vocabulary Lists (integrate with real books), Extensive reading, library skills, research projects.

Strengths: Lends itself to classical stages and extensive reading approach – for example, studying the literature and history of the same period. Also lends itself to multi-level topical learning. Built-in repetition and context reinforces the concepts.

Weaknesses: Teacher-intensive for younger grades, may not be comprehensive presentation of all subjects if relied on wholly.

Strategies: Great way to introduce library and research skills, integrate writing curriculum with history and literature is fairly simple.

Examples: Trisms, Sonlight, Five-in-a-row, Konos, Education Plus



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A unit study approach can be taken in parallel anywhere connections can be made between subjects. This is always a good thing, and often happens naturally when complete, separate curriculum in each subject running in parallel at the student's level. A unit study will reinforce the topic by repetition from a different angle.

4) Delight-directed Learning

This also is not an exclusive approach, since a child's interests can give them motivation to read extensively or even undertake traditional courses of study. Adherents who take this approach in all subjects call it "unschooling." It is charitable to call "unschooling" a curriculum approach, since adherents consciously adopt an environment of no formal curriculum, structure, grades, or tests. Advocates of unschooling believe that the child can be trusted to direct their own learning before they are even capable of logic. Our philosophy is that a broad curriculum gives every child the opportunity to explore diverse interests, and doesn't cater to their idiosyncrasies and character flaws. But that the broad curriculum should have the flexibility to take advantage of individual interests and make "deep dives" when warranted. However, it will take many years of training in some subject before they will see the big picture enough to judge their interest. In particular, the content subjects of science, technology, engineering, and mathematical theory (STEM subjects) rely heavily on skills built over many years of progressive study in mathematics and science concepts.

But it is a fact that a person's interests will ultimately guide their pursuit of deeper specialty knowledge and hobby pursuits that often lead to more successful learning than structured academic learning. This is entirely appropriate for deep dives and for extracurricular subjects. It is also not exclusive of other approaches, since – once interest has been expressed – the opportunity can be pursued in any of the other ways. However, because many life skills in this category can only be pursued really without a pre-written curriculum, it can be considered its own curriculum approach.

Applications: Athletics, Special Projects, Science Projects, Independent Study, Work Experience, Auto Mechanics, volunteer ministries, home economics.

Strengths: can capitalize on intrinsic motivation

Weaknesses: takes dedication, thought, and direction on the part of the parent to keep up with and support student's interests.

Strategies: Open library access, ample extra-curricular activities, parental support of child's interests.

This approach applies well to life skills type learning such as auto mechanics and summer jobs. These can be some of the most rewarding aspects of the child's education. Home education has the opportunity for flexibility in schedule to adjust for supporting a passionate pursuit of a child's specific



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interest in a subject. One caution is that this should not be done to the neglect of the broader course of study.