



Sussex Freemasons - West Group
'The West Wing'
(Bognor, Chichester, Clapham, Littlehampton,
Midhurst, Pulborough, Steyning and Worthing)

The West Wing Learning and Development Team

‘The West Wing’ Lodge of Instruction Lesson 14

The Winding Staircase.

Preceptors Notes



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Lesson 14 -

Lesson Aim

Understand the symbolism of The Winding Staircase

Lesson Objectives.

By the end of this lesson /tutorial the Masonic Student will be able to:
Analyse and explain the symbolism surrounding the Winding Staircase.



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The Winding Staircase

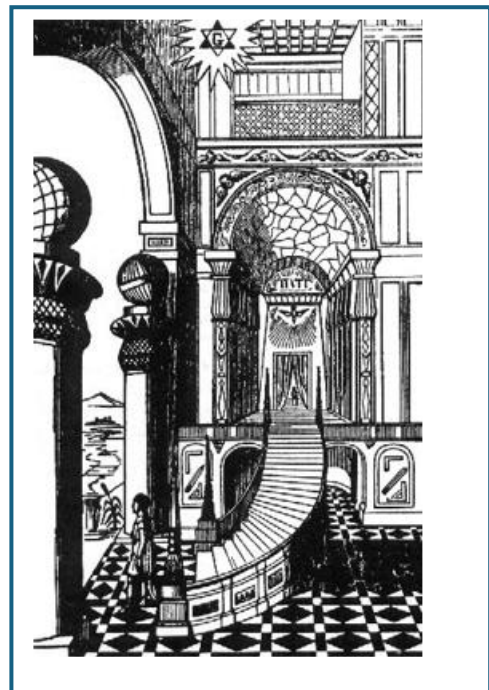
From Moral Foundation to Intellectual Enlightenment

An Exploration of the Three, Five, and Seven Steps

Few symbols in the Fellow Craft degree are as rich in meaning as the Winding Staircase. It is an image of ascent—a journey from one level to another, from what we are toward what we may become. Yet the staircase does not rise in a straight line.

It winds.

At each turn our perspective changes. What was hidden from us becomes visible. What we thought we understood may require us to reconsider. The ascent therefore becomes a fitting metaphor for the development of the human being.



The staircase teaches us that progress is achieved step by step.

Traditionally, the staircase is considered in three principal stages:

Three. Five. Seven.

Each stage has its own lesson, and together they provide a remarkable picture of the development of the Fellow Craft. The first three steps concern the moral man.

The five steps introduce us to the Five Noble Orders of Architecture and the Five Senses.



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The seven steps lead us into the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences, comprising the Trivium and the Quadrivium.

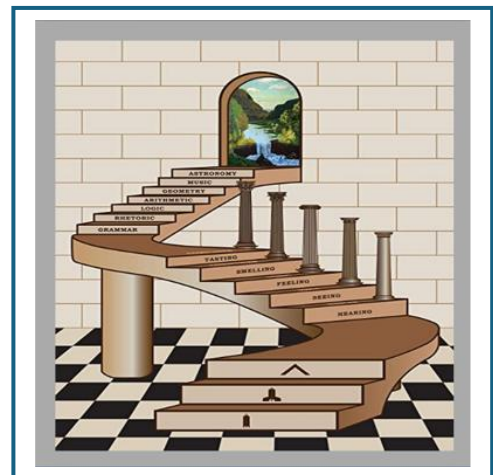
With that foundation established, let us begin our ascent.

The First Three Steps — The Making of a Moral Man

Before the Fellow Craft can become an educated man, he must first become a moral man.

Knowledge without morality can be dangerous. Intelligence without character can be misdirected. Education without virtue can make a man more capable without necessarily making him better.

The first three steps therefore establish the moral foundation upon which the remainder of the ascent must be built.



They are represented by three of Masonry's most important working tools:

The Square. The Level. The Plumb Rule.

These are not merely instruments of the operative builder. They become instruments for the building of character.

The Square — Morality in Our Actions

The Square teaches us to square our actions. It is the symbol of morality, honesty, and rectitude. To act on the square is to act fairly and uprightly toward others. The Square asks a simple but demanding question:

Is my conduct right?



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Not merely: "Is it legal?" Not merely: "Can I get away with it?"

But:

Is it right?

This is an important distinction.

Moral character is revealed not when everyone is watching, but when no one is. The Square therefore becomes an internal standard. It reminds the Mason that his conduct should be measured against principles rather than convenience.

The Level — Equality

The second step is represented by the Level.

The Level teaches us that all men are upon the same level with regard to their essential human dignity. Within the Lodge, distinctions that exist in the outside world are set aside.

We may differ in wealth. We may differ in occupation. We may differ in education, status, or worldly achievement. But Masonry reminds us that we meet one another on the Level.

The Level therefore teaches equality. But equality does not mean that every individual possesses identical talents or circumstances. It means that every man deserves to be treated with dignity and fairness.

The Level challenges pride. It reminds the successful man that his position is temporary. It reminds the less fortunate man that his worth is not determined by his possessions. And it reminds every Mason that fraternity requires us to look beyond external distinctions.



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The Plumb Rule — Uprightness

The third step is represented by the Plumb Rule, or Plumb Line.

Its operative purpose is simple: it establishes true verticality. Symbolically, however, it teaches uprightness of character.

The Plumb asks:

Am I standing upright?

Not physically, but morally.

Are my principles vertical when the pressures of life push against me?

Do I remain true when doing the right thing becomes inconvenient?

Do I maintain integrity when compromise would be easier?

The Plumb therefore represents moral stability.

The Square teaches us to act correctly.

The Level teaches us to regard our fellow man fairly.

The Plumb teaches us to remain upright.

Together they form a foundation for the moral man.

Three as Moral Foundation

We can therefore understand the first three steps as a progression:

Square — Right action

Level — Right relationship



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Plumb — Upright character

Or, more simply:

How I act. How I treat others. Who I am.

This is important because the staircase does not begin with intellectual knowledge. It begins with character.

The Mason must first prepare himself morally before he begins the wider intellectual ascent. Knowledge should make a good man better—not merely make an intelligent man more clever.

The first three steps therefore establish the foundation upon which the remaining ascent can take place.

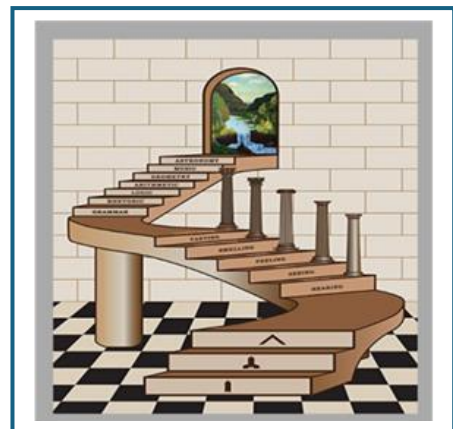
The Five Steps — Architecture and the Senses

Having established the moral foundation, the Fellow Craft proceeds to the five steps.

Here we encounter two important subjects:

The Five Noble Orders of Architecture

And The Five Senses of Human Nature.



At first these may appear to be unrelated. One concerns the construction of buildings. The other concerns our experience of the physical world. Yet both belong naturally to the education of the Fellow Craft.



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The Mason must learn to observe, measure, distinguish, appreciate, and understand.

The Five Noble Orders of Architecture

The traditional five orders are:

1. Tuscan
2. Doric
3. Ionic
4. Corinthian
5. Composite

These orders represent distinct approaches to architectural proportion and ornament.

They demonstrate that architecture is not simply the placing of stones upon one another. It is the application of order, proportion, balance, and beauty.



The Tuscan

The Tuscan is generally considered the simplest of the five orders. It is restrained and comparatively plain.

We may see in it a reminder that great structures begin with simplicity and sound foundations. Before ornament comes structure. Before refinement comes discipline.



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The Doric

The Doric order is associated with strength and simplicity. Its proportions convey solidity. This invites us to reflect upon strength of character.

A Mason must be capable of standing firm. But true strength is not merely physical. It is moral and intellectual strength—the capacity to remain steady when circumstances become difficult.

The Ionic

The Ionic introduces greater refinement and is recognized particularly by its scroll-like volutes. It can therefore invite reflection upon refinement and proportion.

Education should refine the individual.

The purpose of learning is not merely to accumulate information but to develop judgment and taste.

The Corinthian

The Corinthian is the most ornate of the classical orders, famously associated with its acanthus-leaf capitals. Here we may contemplate beauty.

Masonry has always recognized that a structure should possess more than strength. It should also possess beauty. The same may be said of the human character.

A good man should strive not merely to avoid wrongdoing, but to cultivate qualities worthy of admiration.



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The Composite

The Composite combines features associated with the Ionic and Corinthian orders. It therefore provides a useful metaphor for integration.

As our education develops, separate fields of knowledge begin to connect. We discover that mathematics relates to architecture.

That music relates to number. That language relates to thought. That observation relates to reason.

The educated mind begins to see relationships rather than isolated facts.

The Five Senses

The other aspect of the five steps concerns the Five Senses:

- Seeing
- Hearing
- Feeling
- Tasting
- Smelling

These are the traditional avenues through which we experience the material world. They are the means by which information first reaches us. But there is an important lesson here.

The senses give us experience; they do not automatically give us wisdom.

We may see something incorrectly. We may hear something inaccurately. We may mistake feeling for fact. We may draw conclusions from incomplete evidence.

The senses therefore provide the beginning of knowledge, but the educated mind must learn how to interpret what the senses provide.





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This introduces a fundamental principle of the Fellow Craft:

Observe first. Judge carefully.

The Mason should become an attentive observer of the world. He should learn to listen before speaking. To examine before accepting. To investigate before judging.

The five senses therefore prepare the Mason for the intellectual journey that follows.

From Five to Seven

We have now established the moral man through the first three steps. We have developed our awareness of the physical world through the five senses. We have considered order, proportion, strength, refinement, and beauty through architecture.

The staircase now takes us higher. We arrive at seven. And here we encounter one of the most intellectually ambitious portions of the Fellow Craft's symbolic education:

The Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences.

But we must make one distinction absolutely clear.

The seven Liberal Arts and Sciences are composed of:

The Trivium — Three

- Grammar
- Rhetoric
- Logic
-

The Quadrivium — Four

Arithmetic
Geometry
Music
Astronomy

Therefore:

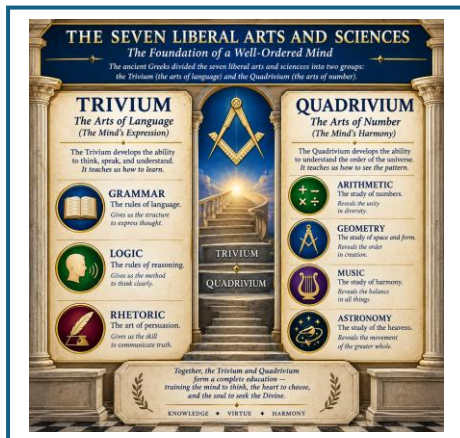
$$3 + 4 = 7.$$



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The three of the Trivium are contained within the seven. They are not the first three steps of the staircase.

The first three steps concern the moral foundation of the Mason. The seven steps concern the intellectual education of the Fellow Craft.

That distinction is essential.

The Trivium — The Three Arts of the Mind

The Trivium traditionally consists of: Grammar. Rhetoric. Logic.

These disciplines concern language and reasoning.

Grammar — Understanding

Grammar provides the foundations of language. It teaches us how language is structured and how meaning is conveyed. For the Mason, this has a deeper lesson.

Before we can properly understand an idea, we must understand the language in which that idea is expressed. We should therefore learn to read carefully. Listen carefully. And distinguish between what a person actually said and what we assume they said.

Grammar teaches discipline in our relationship with words.

Rhetoric — Communication

Rhetoric is the art of effective expression and persuasion.



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A Mason should strive to communicate clearly, thoughtfully, and responsibly. The ability to speak persuasively is a form of power. And power carried responsibility. Words can unite men. Words can divide them. Words can build. Words can destroy.

The Fellow Craft should therefore learn not simply how to speak, but how to speak wisely.

Logic — Reason

Logic teaches us to examine reasoning.

It asks us to distinguish sound conclusions from faulty ones. It teaches us to recognize assumptions, contradictions, and errors in reasoning. This is especially valuable in an age in which information is constantly presented to us.

The question is no longer simply:

"What information can I find?"

It is:

"How do I determine whether it is worthy of belief?"

Logic provides one of the tools for answering that question.

The Quadrivium — Four Ways of Understanding Order

The Quadrivium consists of:

Arithmetic. Geometry. Music. Astronomy.



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Where the Trivium is principally concerned with language and reasoning, the Quadrivium traditionally turns toward number, proportion, harmony, and cosmic order.

Arithmetic — Number

Arithmetic is the study of number. Number allows us to measure and compare. It provides a language for expressing relationships.

The Mason learns that order is not merely something we perceive intuitively. It can often be expressed through numerical relationships.

Geometry — Form and Proportion

Geometry occupies a particularly significant place in Masonic thought. It concerns measurement, form, proportion, and spatial relationships.

The tools of the operative Mason provide powerful reminders of this.

The Square. The Compasses. The Level. The Plumb.

Geometry demonstrates that structure depends upon relationship and proportion. This provides another metaphor for human character. A well-ordered life requires balance.

Our desires must be balanced against our responsibilities. Our freedom against our obligations. Our individual interests against the welfare of the community.

Geometry therefore becomes both a science of measurement and a metaphor for ordered living.



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Music — Harmony

Music introduces the Mason to harmony.

Historically, music was closely connected with mathematical relationships between tones and intervals. Harmony exists because individual elements exist in proper relationship. This provides a beautiful analogy for the Lodge.

Every Mason is an individual. But the Lodge is a fraternity. The goal is not to eliminate individuality. It is to bring individual members into harmony.

Just as music depends upon relationships between notes, fraternity depends upon relationships between men.

Astronomy — The Heavens

Finally, the Fellow Craft turns his attention toward the heavens.

Astronomy expands the scale of our thinking. We move from the immediate world around us to the vast order of the cosmos. The Mason who studies the heavens is reminded of his own smallness. But he is also reminded of the extraordinary capacity of the human mind.

We can observe the heavens. Measure their movements. Discover patterns. Develop mathematical models. And contemplate humanity's place within the universe. The movement is therefore significant.

We began with the individual. We learned to govern ourselves. We learned to perceive the world. We learned to reason about it. We studied number and proportion. And finally, we looked upward.

The Complete Ascent — 3, 5, 7

We can now look back at the staircase as a complete progression.



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Three — Moral Foundation

Square — morality. **Level** — equality. **Plumb Rule** — uprightness

The first three steps teach us how to become a moral man.

Five — Perception and Architecture

Five Senses — our experience of the world

Five Noble Orders — order, proportion, strength, refinement, and beauty

The five steps teach us to observe and appreciate the ordered world around us.

Seven — Intellectual Development

Trivium:

Grammar

Rhetoric

Logic

Quadrivium:

Arithmetic

Geometry

Music

Astronomy

The seven steps teach us to develop the intellectual faculties necessary to understand that world.

Thus we might express the ascent as:

Moral character → Perception → Intellectual understanding

But there is still another step. Knowledge must eventually return to character.

The Purpose of the Ascent

What is the purpose of learning all of this?



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Is the purpose to become clever? To win arguments? To impress our Brethren with our knowledge of architecture or philosophy?

No.

The purpose of Masonic education is ultimately transformation.

The Mason should become better because he has learned. If studying the Square does not make us more honest, what have we learned? If studying the Level does not make us more tolerant and fair, what have we learned? If studying the Plumb does not make us more upright, what have we learned? If studying the Five Senses does not make us more attentive, what have we learned?

If studying Logic does not make us more careful in our judgments, what have we learned? If studying Geometry does not teach us something about proportion and order, what have we learned? If contemplating Astronomy does not inspire humility and wonder, what have we learned?

The staircase is therefore not simply an educational curriculum.

It is a method of self-development.

Why the Staircase Winds

We return now to the most striking feature of the symbol. Why does it wind?

Perhaps because human development is never entirely linear.

We learn. We turn. We discover something new. We reconsider what we thought we knew. We climb again.

Each turn changes our perspective. And this teaches intellectual humility. A man standing at the bottom cannot see what the man standing higher can see. But the man higher on the staircase should never forget that he too was once at the bottom. And perhaps there is another lesson.



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Even the Mason who has climbed many steps cannot see the entire staircase.

There may always be another turn. Another question. Another discovery.
Another opportunity for growth.

The wise Mason therefore never stops learning.

Knowledge, Understanding, and Wisdom

There is a difference between knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

Knowledge asks: What do I know?

Understanding asks: What does it mean?

Wisdom asks: What should I do with it?

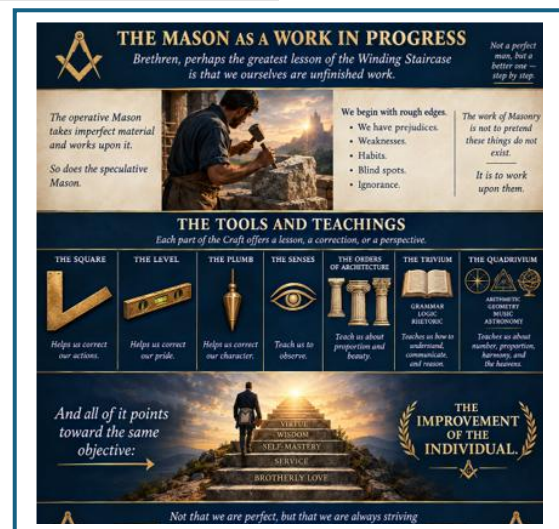
The staircase is ultimately concerned with this movement. We begin by establishing moral character. We learn to perceive. We learn to reason. We study the structure and order of the world. And then we must bring what we have learned back into our lives.

Knowledge should influence conduct. Understanding should influence judgment.
Wisdom should influence action.

The Mason as a Work in Progress

Brethren, perhaps the greatest lesson of the Winding Staircase is that we ourselves are unfinished work.

The operative Mason takes imperfect material and works upon it. So does the speculative Mason.





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We begin with rough edges. We have prejudices. Weaknesses. Habits. Blind spots. Ignorance.

The work of Masonry is not to pretend these things do not exist. It is to work upon them.

The Square helps us correct our actions. The Level helps us correct our pride. The Plumb helps us correct our character. The Senses teach us to observe. The Orders of Architecture teach us about proportion and beauty. The Trivium teaches us how to understand, communicate, and reason. The Quadrivium teaches us about number, proportion, harmony, and the heavens.

And all of it points toward the same objective:

The improvement of the individual.

The Final Step Is the Next Step

The Winding Staircase does not ask us whether we have reached perfection. It asks whether we are still climbing. Perhaps that is why the staircase is such a powerful image.

It does not promise that the journey will be easy. It does not reveal everything at once. It simply provides the next step.

Three steps teach us to become moral men through the Square, Level, and Plumb Rule.

Five steps teach us to experience and understand the world through the Five Senses and the Five Noble Orders of Architecture.

Seven steps open the great intellectual tradition of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences:

The Trivium— Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic—

and the Quadrivium— Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astronomy.



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And perhaps the sequence can ultimately be understood as a journey:

First, govern yourself. Then, learn to perceive the world. Then, learn to understand it. Finally, use that understanding wisely.

The staircase winds because the journey is not always straightforward. It rises because we are capable of growth. It has steps because growth requires effort. And it has no obvious end because the search for wisdom is never truly complete.

So when we next contemplate the Winding Staircase, perhaps we should ask ourselves three questions:

Am I square in my dealings? Am I level with my Brethren? Am I upright in my conduct?

Then:

Do I truly see, hear, feel, taste, and smell the world around me—or merely pass through it?

And finally:

Am I still learning?

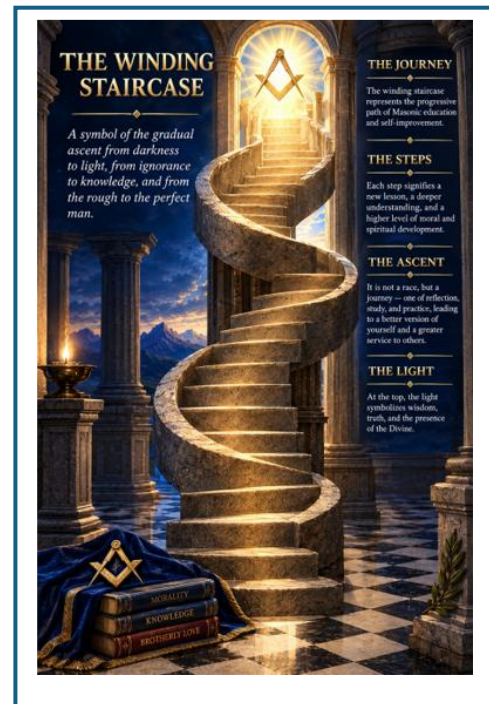
For the Mason who continues to learn continues to climb. And perhaps the greatest lesson of all is this:

The purpose of ascending the Winding Staircase is not merely to rise above where we once stood.

It is to become sufficiently wise that, when we look back, we can help another Brother take his next step.

That is education. That is fraternity. And that is the work of the Fellow Craft.

Brethren, the staircase awaits. The next step is ours.





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Knowledge Check.

1. What is the symbolic significance of the Winding Staircase, and why does it wind rather than rise in a straight line?

- **Answer:** The Winding Staircase represents an image of ascent, symbolising the progressive path of Masonic education, self-improvement, and moral growth from darkness to light. It winds rather than rising in a straight line because human development is non-linear. At each turn, a Mason's perspective changes, revealing new insights, requiring reconsideration of prior assumptions, and teaching intellectual humility.

2. What do the first three steps of the staircase represent, and what fundamental principle do they establish?

- **Answer:** The first three steps establish the **moral foundation** of the Mason. They reinforce the principle that a Fellow Craft must first become a moral man before he can become an educated man, as knowledge without morality or virtue can be misdirected. These three steps correspond to three operative working tools: **the Square, the Level, and the Plumb Rule**.

3. How does the text interpret the symbolic meanings of the Square, the Level, and the Plumb Rule?

- **Answer:** **The Square** teaches morality, honesty, and rectitude, asking whether one's conduct is right rather than merely legal. **The Level** symbolises essential human dignity and equality, setting aside worldly distinctions of wealth, occupation, or status within the Lodge. **The Plumb Rule** establishes true verticality, representing moral uprightness, stability, and standing firm in one's principles when facing pressures or inconvenience.



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4. What two principal subjects are introduced in the five steps of the staircase?

- **Answer:** The five steps introduce **the Five Noble Orders of Architecture** (Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Composite) and **the Five Senses of Human Nature** (Seeing, Hearing, Feeling, Tasting, and Smelling).

5. What specific character lessons are associated with each of the Five Noble Orders of Architecture?

- **Answer:**
 - **Tuscan:** Plainness and restraint, reminding us that great structures begin with simplicity and sound foundations.
 - **Doric:** Solidity and strength, inviting reflection upon moral and intellectual strength of character.
 - **Ionic:** Refinement and proportion (marked by scroll-like volutes), representing developed judgment and taste.
 - **Corinthian:** Beauty and ornamentation (marked by acanthus-leaf capitals), encouraging the cultivation of admirable qualities.
 - **Composite:** Integration, serving as a metaphor for connecting separate fields of knowledge into a unified understanding.

6. What key caution does the text offer regarding the Five Senses?

- **Answer:** While the Five Senses are the traditional avenues through which humans experience the physical world, the text stresses that **senses give experience rather than automatic wisdom**. Because physical perception can be inaccurate or based on incomplete evidence, the Fellow Craft is taught the fundamental principle to **observe first and judge carefully**.

7. How are the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences categorized, and what equation summarizes their structure?

- **Answer:** The Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences are divided into two distinct groups: **the Trivium** (comprising Grammar, Rhetoric, and Logic) and **the Quadrivium** (comprising Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy). This structure is expressed as **3 + 4 = 7**.



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8. What are the three disciplines of the Trivium, and what is their focus?

- **Answer:** The Trivium consists of **Grammar** (understanding the structure of language to read and listen carefully), **Rhetoric** (the art of effective and responsible communication), and **Logic** (the rules of reasoning used to evaluate evidence and distinguish sound conclusions from faulty ones). Together, they focus on language, expression, and reasoning.

9. What are the four disciplines of the Quadrivium, and what central themes do they explore?

- **Answer:** The Quadrivium consists of **Arithmetic** (number and measurement), **Geometry** (form, spatial proportion, and balance in life), **Music** (mathematical harmony and bringing individuals into fraternity), and **Astronomy** (the order of the cosmos and contemplating humanity's place in the universe). Together, they turn toward number, proportion, harmony, and cosmic order.

10. According to the text, what is the ultimate purpose of ascending the Winding Staircase?

- **Answer:** The ultimate purpose of the ascent is **personal transformation and self-development** rather than accumulating facts or winning arguments. The progression moves from moral character to perception and intellectual understanding, aiming for the improvement of the individual so that a Mason becomes wise enough to help another Brother take his next step