

***A Quiet Revolution in Candidate Advancement Requirements:
Memorization or Education or Other Alternatives?***

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Please note: The information in this handout, and the additional details at <http://bessel.org/advance.htm> comes from a survey of letters to all U.S. Grand Lodges in late 2003, plus additional information provided by letter and email from many brethren across the country. Every effort has been made to be as accurate as possible, but if there is any information that should be revised or updated, please contact the author at paul@bessel.org

Introduction

In recent years there has been a quiet but steady movement among U.S. jurisdictions to change the requirements for candidates to advance through the three craft degrees. Many Grand Lodges are now requiring little or no rote memorization, and instead are offering candidates different types of masonic education so they learn about the philosophy, history, structure, and other aspects of Freemasonry as they go from EA to FC and MM. In this breakout session we will attempt to explain and compare the different candidate advancement requirements currently in effect. Those attending this session will be more knowledgeable about options they can consider for implementation in their Grand Lodges for candidate advancement policies, using the best that has been developed in other Grand Lodges.

Pro's and Con's

Those who support long memorization by candidates often make some of these points:

- ◆ Memorization makes candidates more likely to remember the meaning of the ritual
- ◆ Long memorization is a method for candidates to prove they are really serious about freemasonry
- ◆ This promotes a bonding between each candidate and his coach

Those who support alternative methods of candidate advancement often make some of these points:

- ◆ Education, rather than rote memorization, is more likely to result in candidates learning all about freemasonry, including the meaning of the ritual
- ◆ Education is a better method for candidates to prove they are serious about freemasonry
- ◆ Bonding can take place between candidates and mentors discussing education, as well as memorization
- ◆ Education, rather than memorization, is the modern way of learning

There are some who say, "If I had to do it, others should have to do it, too." And there are some who say, "This is what all masons in the past had to do to progress through the degrees, so all masons now and in the future should have to do it, too."

History and Trends in U.S. Grand Lodges

It is difficult to discern exactly what Grand Lodges required of candidates in the 1700s and early 1800s, but there is little if any evidence that long memorization was required. George Washington, for example, kept a careful diary of his activities, and he never made any reference to memorizing any masonic ritual in order to advance from EA to FC and MM. Neither, apparently, did anyone else in that era. It appears that candidates in those days listened to two or more brethren reciting the masonic catechism of each degree, and that constituted the education of candidates. Later, probably around the middle of the 1800s, possibly in response to the antimasonic attacks of the 1830s, candidates for the degrees had to memorize and be able to recite the precise words of catechisms in order to advance, until this became almost universal in U.S. Grand Lodges.

In the second half of the 1900s, this trend started to reverse. As of now, more U.S. Grand Lodges have gotten away from long memorization — 27 to 23. Some require well planned and organized masonic education for candidates,

of the degrees.

Connecticut - The minimum suitable proficiency, which must be demonstrated consists of:

1. The ability to give the signs grips and words of each degree, and to place the Great Lights in their proper position for each degree. (Modes of Recognition)
2. The ability to describe the ceremonies of each degree in answer to proper questions. This shall normally imply memorizing the formal questions and answers set forth in the First Section of the Webb Lectures or the Lectures, which by custom, have been used by the Lodge for each degree. (Steward's Lecture)
3. A thorough knowledge and understanding of the substance of the obligations, which the Brother has assumed. This may include memorizing the Obligations, but must include an understanding of the duties and responsibilities inherent in the Obligations.

Iowa - Since 2002, there is no memorization required. This replaced a short catechism introduced in 1991, that in turn replaced a long catechism. All candidates are expected to be familiar with the signs, words, and grips. There is only one standard of proficiency, the Iowa Systematic Masonic Enlightenment Course. The Grand Secretary said: "We think this is working much, much better than the previous program of memorization."

Louisiana - The Grand Master in 2003 issued a letter saying that prior to 1850 there was no memorization requirement, and recently 1 out of every 3 EA's drop out, with 5,000 lost EA's since 1980. Therefore, memorization is no longer required. Instead lodges establish a program of classes where Masons can study, discuss, and memorize catechisms. "Consistent with the original historic tradition of Masonry," one or more Masons may recite the catechism in the presence of candidates, pausing as needed to insure that they understand the meaning, and know how to give the step, sign, and passes. This does not require any memorization, and may be done immediately after a degree. Prior to this, EAs were required to memorize 180 questions, and the requirements for FCs were only somewhat shorter. Now, proficiency is shown to a committee of 3, and a majority vote of the lodge is the sole judge of each candidate's proficiency. A Lodge may choose to require a candidate to memorize and recite the entire catechism, or it may decide that he is proficient if he can explain it in his own words and demonstrate the signs, token, and words of each degree.

Massachusetts - Each candidate is required to attend District Lodge of Instruction and complete the education for each degree, and receive a certificate to that effect, before receiving the next degree. After the candidate has completed the three classes of the Lodge of Instruction, which deal specifically with the degrees, there is a forth class which deals with the appendant bodies in Masonry. As for memorization, that is usually dealt with strictly by the lodge and what they feel is necessary for each candidate.

Pennsylvania - The candidate is required to answer a short list of questions about the degree just received prior to receiving the next degree. These questions are given and the answers received by the WM or another designated Brother who, when satisfied, indicates that the candidate is qualified for further advancement. The acceptable degree of the candidate's answers varies from one Lodge to another. The proficiency includes basically the grip work and the due guards and passwords and the exam is done in the preparing room, and usually by one of the line officers.

South Dakota - Only requires limited memorization. Requires limited memory exams with an educational format for advancement. However it is up to the constituent Lodges if they accept this, and they may at their discretion use the older long form of memorization. From the GM: "Personally I believe that our educational format has brought about a better informed brother on Masonry and although it requires more memory work from scratch to be an active Officer I have not seen where that was a detriment to their performance."

Utah - Utah passed the necessary changes to its bylaws in 2001 to allow for an Alternative Proficiency Program at the discretion of the Master of the lodge. The APP requires the candidate to study written material (Utah borrowed from Washington, Arizona and others) and then answer some questions regarding said material. The

candidate also has to memorize the obligation of the degrees, the passwords, signs and MM test oath.

Virginia - The Grand Master in 1999, and those since, have issued edicts allowing each Master to use an alternative method (other than memorizing a very long series of answers to catechism questions) for candidate advancement. This alternative method requires:

1. Each candidate must memorize the part of the catechism of the EA and FC degree dealing with the due guards, signs, grips, and words.
2. Each candidate and coach must discuss in detail exactly what the candidate is obligated to in his EA and FC obligations, so the candidate thoroughly understands his obligations (but does not have to memorize their words).
3. Most importantly, each candidate must meet with a Masonic education coach and go over booklets that have been prepared for each degree (EA, FC, and MM) that contain dozens of questions and answers designed to teach each candidate all about freemasonry — its ideals, philosophy, charities, structure, history, customs, etc.— so each candidate can become a knowledgeable Freemason.

Masters of Lodges are to appoint a committee of 3 to meet with each candidate to insure that he has covered each of the 3 requirements listed above, and he is then eligible to advance to the next degree. There are no requirements for MM's after receiving that degree, but they are encouraged to meet the same requirements listed above, and there is an education book for MMs, too.

The previous requirements for advancement, which is still an option for each Master, are:

Sec. 2.110 of the Methodical Digest requires that an EA or FC must be examined in open Lodge in the degree from which he seeks to be advanced, and should prove himself proficient in the catechism of the degree (meaning he has to stand at the altar with his coach, and respond to questions with the exact words of the answers that he has memorized), after which a ballot shall then be taken upon his Masonic proficiency, and if there be a majority in his favor he is thereby eligible for advancement. The Master may have the ballot on Masonic proficiency circulated collectively on all candidates examined on the same degree at that communication. If the collective ballot does not show a favorable majority, it must then be circulated separately on the Masonic proficiency of each candidate included in the collective ballot.

Washington - The Lodge can choose (a) memorization, (b) the New Candidate Education Program, NCEP, or (c) 1 day conferral. The Lodge determines, with the coach and candidate, which alternative is right for each candidate. In 1994-1995 the Grand Lodge introduced the Alternate Proficiency Test, and in 1996 had the first 1 day conferrals. For the NCEP a candidate must complete a written portion and be familiar with the grips, signs, and words. Regardless of which method of determining proficiency is selected, every candidate progressing through the Degrees will be furnished a copy of the New Candidate Education Program.

Conclusions

Grand Lodges are moving away from requiring rote memorization of catechisms for candidates to advance from EA to FC and MM. Some are requiring more limited memorization, of just the signs, due guards, grips, and words, and perhaps explanations of the obligations rather than memorizing their words. More are either requiring or offering optional masonic education programs for new masons. Also, in more cases the decisions about what advancement standards to use, and the implementation of these standards with all candidates, are left up to individual lodges or their Worshipful Masters.

Perhaps it would be useful if more Grand Lodges would study what other Grand Lodges are using as candidate advancement rules and practices, and if some Grand Lodges considered doing statistical studies of retention rates and degree of involvement in masonry by those who advanced through the degrees using alternative proficiencies rather than rote memorization. In any case, probably all would agree that in all places, even in those Grand Lodges where rote memorization of long catechisms are required, it would also be useful to have good masonic education programs available to candidates, possibly as additional or alternative requirements for candidate advancement, in order to try to make new masons enthusiastic about freemasonry, and thus more likely to remain active and involved members..

