

ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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PREFACE

ONE of the fundamental ideas on which this book is planned is that a purpose, not a rule, should guide a student to write well. He must not be made to feel that success in English Composition comes from avoiding something; he should not look forward to being praised just because he doesn't do things. Consequently, we have tried to emphasize a few large, positive, constructive principles and to minimize rules, particularly of the negative sort. Good sense in applying these principles is the means by which the student may succeed in carrying out his purpose. In order that he may not be obliged to subordinate his enthusiasm, his special interest, his intended effect to a rigorous technique, we have tried to make him realize that technique may be molded and modeled to suit his effect. Thus there is no abstract treatment of unity, coherence, and emphasis, and no abstract treatment of the whole composition. But there is specific discussion of the way a particular kind of composition making a particular appeal, whether expository, argumentative, descriptive, or narrative, will utilize the principles of Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis for its own peculiar purpose. In the case of description and narration, which are sometimes thought to succeed by mere vividness, the structural principles will be shown to produce a notable gain in effectiveness. Moreover, flexibility in paragraphs and sentences receives special attention. Since the interest of style depends so largely

upon the weaving of words into sentences, we have treated emphasis, variety, and rhythm with more than usual fullness and explicitness.

The pictures accompanying the descriptive extracts by Scott, Hawthorne, Ruskin, Blackmore, Stevenson, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Phillpotts, and others will, it is hoped, prove stimulating. By comparing pictures of actual scenes with descriptions of these scenes from the same point of view, students gain a lively sense of method and choice of words. Furthermore, in the treatment of setting in narration, the illustrations emphasize the skill with which authors have infused the atmosphere of place and country into their stories.

The arrangement of the book follows the order in which students do their work. First comes that part of the process of writing which takes place before any words are put on paper — namely, gathering and weighing of material: here special attention is given to the various preparatory steps — the use of books and periodicals for expository and argumentative material, the weighing and estimating of one authority against another, the use of libraries, catalogues, indexes, and the making of notes on books and lectures. Then follows the discussion of the principles which come into play in the particular form of composition which the writer decides to work in. The succeeding parts deal in turn with the structure of paragraphs and sentences, and the effective use of words. Assignments of reading and exercises, however, may be given in any order which suits a teacher's methods.

In the frequent references to *College Readings in English Prose*, edited by F. W. Scott and Jacob Zeitlin, that useful work is cited as *College Readings*.

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WHY IT IS WORTH WHILE TO STUDY ENGLISH COMPOSITION

IN going from school to college, we pass from a place where instruction is chiefly by recitation to a place where instruction is largely by lectures. It is important not to be misled by the liberty which this change brings with it. Instead of supposing that at last we have found a place where the professor does all the work, and rejoicing in the sense of security which comes when we know that we are not going to be forced to stand up and make a ridiculous exhibition, we must learn not merely to keep up our work without the daily spur of oral recitation, but also to take really good notes on lectures. Mere good intentions will not help us to do this. It is a knack, which college freshmen have hitherto had little if any chance to acquire.

Again, when we leave school for college, we go from a place where there are relatively few books, where the whole of a book is ordinarily used, and where books are, in a way, guaranteed, to a place where there are immense quantities of books, where parts of books rather than the whole are read, and where the notion of guaranteed books is quite at variance with the whole idea of the maturity and responsibility of the college student.

These are important differences, and they bring new and valuable lessons.

First of all, they necessitate learning to find one's way about the college library, to use the catalogue of it, and to go through the motions necessary to get books from the shelves. The time to learn these things about the library is the first month in college, for then it is no disgrace not to know things, and if they are learned then the help to the student's other work will be the greater.

Then, too, the fact that in college ~~parts of many books are read instead of the whole of a few~~ makes it necessary to learn, without reading the book through, whether it contains important material. Particularly for people who are in a hurry, the preface, the table of contents, and the index are of the utmost value. Practice in using these will mean a gain in speed and accuracy which will react helpfully in various directions.

But this is not the most difficult thing to be learned about books at college. Heretofore there has been little occasion to ask what to do when books disagree, and in consequence one has come to suppose that "if the book says so, it must be true." Instead of that notion one must, before the words "higher education" can mean anything in his particular case, learn to read "not to believe and take for granted, but to weigh and consider." To learn that is a task broader than any single course. Yet the place of the course in English composition is a very important one in this regard, for in it much can be done to teach how to weigh evidence, how to decide in advance which of two books is probably the more reliable, and how to judge between conflicting statements. This information is a priceless possession, not merely for a college undergraduate, but for a business man, a voter, or a reader of newspaper editorials.

Again, the fact that college composition is greater in amount and is on the whole done in larger units than school composition, necessitates learning two more lessons, in which it is the special function of teachers of English composition to help, though the benefits of those lessons are not wholly or even chiefly to appear in the work done for the Department of English. These two lessons are: first, learning not merely to write well, but to write well rapidly; and, secondly, learning not merely to write respectable short compositions in which the structure is simple and obvious, but also to plan and to sustain compositions of a hundred pages or more which shall not only be satisfactory in point of knowledge, but which shall be so carefully mapped out and so well supplied with guide posts that the reader has no excuse for losing his way.

Specifically applied to English composition, all this means that the college student must work under a large and sensible definition of that subject. Though few if any would acknowledge that they suppose English composition to include only "that part of my written work which I do in order to satisfy the Department of English," many seem to have quietly adopted this definition as a working principle. Yet it is manifestly a luxury which no one in search of a real education can possibly afford, for it leaves out of account not only the larger number of opportunities for practicing English composition, but precisely those forms of composition by which we are most likely to be judged both in college and afterwards. For example, it leaves out of account all conversation, all letters, and all written work in courses other than English. If we regard some of our writing as English