

# THE CENTURY BOOK OF SELECTIONS

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AND  
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## PREFACE

THIS book is not just another book of selections. It comes into being in answer to needs not met hitherto. Admirable in various ways as are many existing collections of models, no one of them seems entirely adapted to the student who aims, not at professional authorship, but at reasonable proficiency in workaday writing. Such a student, to be sure, does not demand that every stroke of his pen shall be utilitarian. He is willing to engage in a variety of tasks, both from sheer interest in them and for the sake of developing versatility. But the end for which he undertakes them is that he may acquire the resourcefulness and skill of a person who is truly educated yet who cherishes no desire to be numbered with the classics. Such a student deserves to be met half-way. The purpose of this book is to meet him half-way, to interest him, to help him to the mastery of clear, forceful, flexible English.

What kind of selections will best answer his requirements?

Obviously, the selections should be interesting. This does not mean that they need be brainless. But it is an astonishing fact that many a collection otherwise well-planned is dull—woefully, hopelessly dull. The very teacher balks. Of the work done in class on these “models” it is he who does a good seventy-five per cent.; but he does it from a weary sense of duty, and he flies to tasks more congenial

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the moment his conscience is salved. As for the student, he is only too aware that the situation is a bad one and he contents himself with seeing what the teacher can make of it. If called upon to shoulder a portion of the burden, he mutters those "curses, not loud but deep," to the sincerity of which Macbeth once attested.

In the present volume no pains have been spared to secure really interesting material. In merit, of course, the selections vary. They also range afar in tone and topic and method. They are gleaned both from standard and from present-day writers. Nevertheless it is the hope of the editors that they are of the kind which will be read, not primarily from compulsion, but because they attract—because they give pleasure.

In the second place, the selections for an ideal volume should be such as the student will find usable. Here again the material assembled in collections is oftentimes amazingly at fault. The student can make no real use of it. To begin with, the pieces are altogether too long. The student's own themes are but three hundred to five hundred words in length. Yet he is supposed to bear in mind as a model an elaborate piece of writing that devotes as much space to a single paragraph as he has for his whole composition. Moreover the pieces are wrought in a manner he may deem excellent but has no desire to emulate. They are stately and cold and remote. A platonic rectitude exudes from them, whereas he "does something smack, something grow to, he has a kind of taste." He not only cannot write like his models. He does not even wish to write like them. The connection between his "models" and his writing appears to him the most unreal of all the polite fictions that have being

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in the educational world. If perforce he imitates one of the pieces, he regards the exercise as a stunt which he will not repeat as long as he lives.

The present volume consists of material that is really usable. For one thing, most of the selections are short. A large proportion of them indeed are confined to a single paragraph; and though the length of the selections increases in the latter part of the book, that length is constantly graduated to the conviction that models should of truth be models. Again, the material, though purposely varied, though sometimes strictly intellectual, though in a few instances shaped with conscious artifice, is never too stilted or too sedate. Its method and manner are such as the student can employ, with due modifications, in writing of his own.

The approach recommended is the simple approach. In this book conventional barriers, such as the mechanical distinction between kinds of composition, are minimized rather than built higher. Forms are well enough, but there are so many of them that no harm can come from skipping a few. The average human being sets out, not to write forms, but to write what he has to say. So, in truth, do the very artists whom the worshipers of forms revere. Therefore the material of this volume has been given its arrangement from natural rather than from scholastic needs and purposes. For those teachers, however, who find the division into forms of value, a separate table of contents is provided.

That models of composition may be really of service two things must take place. The young writer must study each selection he comes to—not recognize it as existing; study it. Afterward he must apply whatever lessons it yields him; after examining what others have done, he himself must do.

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How insure the studying of a selection? First, by making the student sure that his studying shall be of the right kind rather than of the hit-or-miss, shot-at-the-universe kind. This book sets up for him a guidepost to each selection. By so doing it does not perform his task for him; it merely places him on the path of definite and intelligent performance for himself. In the second place, the studying of a selection may be insured by making such study the preliminary to further assignment, a practice which this book follows. The nature of the assignment will be explained presently. Here it need only be observed that the closer linking of model with original endeavor is an incentive to the thorough understanding of the model. The student will pay closer heed to a selection if he sees it not as a thing that ends in itself, but as a thing out of which something else shall grow.

But how apply the knowledge gained from the study of the model? By basing original work upon the principles discovered in it. In this book each selection is followed by a number of topics capable of development by the method employed in the selection. The student may choose any one of them—and every effort has been made to make them pertinent and enticing. But if, as is hoped, they stimulate his imagination and by showing him the kind of thing to be done induce him to put forward a topic of his own, so much the better—he may work upon that.

Although it has been said that preliminary clues and apposite assignments accompany each selection, that practice is not invariably followed. No procedure is so good but that it may become monotonous if too rigidly adhered to. Wherever in this book a departure of any kind seems likely

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to assist, to stimulate, or to challenge the student, that departure is unhesitatingly made.

Such are the larger ideas, purposes, and methods of the volume. In matters of less scope, also, the editors believe that their work is thoroughly practical. An example is the detailed consideration of the paragraph, the logical unit of writing. Young writers as a rule are decidedly at sea as to ways of developing paragraphs, yet the typical book of selections gives them no aid in this fundamental matter. Here the necessary guidance is forthcoming at the very beginning of the course.

Another problem, and a most vexatious one, for the young writer is how to begin themes and how to end them. A whole section of this volume is devoted to the illustration and analysis of sound methods.

Furthermore the student is accustomed to being told, sapiently but vaguely, of the importance of point of view. Why it is important he cannot see; the abstractions have no meaning for him. Here a section is given over to a grouping of articles that treat single topics in a great diversity of ways. Thus it is borne in upon the student that, instead of being restricted to one approach to a subject, he may make his choice among a multitude. Moreover, point of view is made vital by the printing of two versions of "Wee Willie Winkie"—the one by Kipling, the other (presented from an entirely different angle) by a college student. Now every young writer has his favorite story. With "Wee Willie Winkie" as an example, he may retell this favorite from a new standpoint. Nothing could do more to teach him what is really excellent in literary method.

Here and there in the selections infelicitous or even blun-

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dering English intrudes. The editors have thought best to pass over such slips without comment. The alert student, however, should be expected to discover them.

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