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W [redacted] The Teacher's Assistant in English Composition; or
Easy Rules for Writing Themes and Composing Exercises on Subjects
Proper for the Improvement of Youth of Both Sexes at School.

Carlisle: George Kline, 1808.

Preface.

The present Work is the offspring of necessity. Being engaged for several years in teaching young people a method of writing their thoughts on common subjects, I was desirous of availing myself of the labours of those who had gone before me, but was disappointed; not a work could I find in our language which afforded me any considerable assistance: . . . After various inquiries, therefore, I found myself under the necessity of composing something of my own; and the present Work is the result of it.

What can be the reason of such a scarcity of books on this subject, it is not easy to determine. Surely the power of putting our thoughts upon paper in a clear and agreeable manner, is of sufficient importance in life to form part of a polite education; nor can it be denied that this, like every other accomplishment, is in a great measure to be attained by rules and practice. It is well known by those who have studied human nature, that whatever is (page 3) to be gained by habit can scarcely be taught too early; and yet the habit of expressing our thoughts in an easy and regular way is generally either entirely neglected, or the last thing thought of in a course of education. It is a great mistake to suppose than an advanced age only can enter upon this part of instruction. The moment young people can read fluently, and talk upon common subjects, they may be enabled to write upon them; and nothing but the habit is wanting. It is true the path must be smoothed for them; we must not expect them to invent matter: what they write must be infused into them, and what we infuse must be of the easiest kind, and so connected that one part will naturally suggest another: when a subject is thus prepared, it will be easy, even for a child, to set it down from memory upon paper; and when once a habit of doing this is acquired, the greatest difficulty is over. By degrees they will naturally supply with their own words those they do not remember, and soon begin to think upon a subject for themselves.

The difficulty which attends an exercise of this kind, without preparing it by the easiest and most gradual advances, is the principal reason why it is so much neglected both by pupils and teachers. To order a young beginner to write upon a subject without giving an outline, by laying down some leading points, is the most unreasonable thing in the world. We ought to expect nothing from tender youth but memory; judgment and invention will come (page 4) by degrees, and ought not to be forced upon the delicate intellects of children too soon. The mind should advance in strength by the same insensible degrees as the body. Too strong exercise in either will prevent the growth of both, just as the want of proper exercise in either will infallibly hinder their arriving at the greatest degree of strength they are capable of. To follow Nature, therefore, in

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that happy medium in which the excellence of almost every operation lies, is the intention of the following Work. How I have succeeded in this intention must be left to the judgment of the Public, and from their sentence their is no appeal. (page 5)

Introduction

Directions to Parents and Preceptors, in the Use of the following Work.

In the first place, the rules in prose must be written out by the pupil, and explained more fully by the teacher. The rules versified must also be copied and explained, by comparing them with the prose; after which the pupil must get them by heart.

In the next place, the teacher must read over the Theme distinctly to the pupil, observing the correspondence of each part with the rules. When this is done, the teacher should talk over the Theme to the pupil, by making use of his own words in as familiar a manner as possible; after which he should read the Theme over a second time to the pupil, and then leave him to put it down from memory as well as he is able.

It will be necessary for the pupil to have a book in quarto, like a copy-book, and to write his exercise on the left hand page: if he should write more than one page will hold, he should turn over the leaf and continue to write on the left hand page, and so on till the Theme is finished.

The teacher should then inspect what is written, and correct what is improper, rather by giving the pupils' thought a proper turn than changing it for more accurate; for it is the pupil's idea which ought to be "taught how to shoot," as an idea thus humored will (page 61) thrive much better in the human mind than one that is not a native of the soil. Care should therefore be taken that the teacher do not affect too elegant a style in his corrections, but, as much as possible, to make them of a piece with the pupil's own production. (FN from Quintilian: "Quintilian excellently observes, "that luxuriance in juvenile composition is an infinitely better sign than sterility. Teachers should not aim at too great correctness, which may possibly cramp the genius too much, by rendering the pupil timid and diffident; or perhaps discourage him altogether, by producing absolute despair of arriving at any degree of perfection."

When the Theme is thus corrected, the pupil should be ordered to copy it out fair, with all the improvements, upon the right-hand opposite page, that the original and the corrected copy may face each other; and this going over the Theme a second time will imprint the corrections in the pupil's mind, and insensibly make them his own.

After the Theme is first read over and explained, it would be advisable to set the pupil upon writing it as soon as possible, that it may not slip out of his memory.

Perhaps it would not be without its use to desire the pupil to write his first sketch upon a bit of loose paper, and to leave it till the next morning, when he may try to make improvements of his

own, and recollect something more of the Theme that was given him: he may do the same another morning, and then he should copy what he has done upon the left-hand page of his book of exercises for the inspection of the teacher. This method, if I am not mistaken, will in some measure take away the difficulty which arises from the thought of doing his best at first, and make him enter (page 7) on his exercise with more ease and alacrity than if he were ~~to begin~~ it in a more formal manner in his book. "These little things," as Dr. Goldsmith observes on another occasion, "are great to little man;" and some of the best practical moral philosophers have laid the greatest stress upon the doctrine of associations.

As the capacities of pupils are very different, a very different method should be adopted in teaching them; but scarcely, in any part of education, can instruction be given in classes with so little convenience as in writing Themes. Particular care, therefore, should be taken to let the class be small, and to form them of such pupils as have nearly the same capacity. If a whole Theme should be too difficult either for a single pupil or a class, let them only have the three first parts given them for the first exercise, and the four last for a second: if this should be found too hard, it may be advisable to give them but two parts at a time. Nay, for those who have almost an invincible repugnance to this sort of exercise (which is often the case), a single part at a time may be enough to begin with. "Divide and conquer," as Dr. Johnson observes, "is a maxim true in letters as well as in politics;" and we should always keep in view a rule of the greatest importance in teaching, that the advances in a difficult art cannot be too easy and gradual.

The attentive teacher will observe, that every Theme, Subject, and Essay, has an instructive and moral tendency; and if he is at first displeased with the want of ease and elegance in the language and style, he will easily recollect that such a style would have been unsuitable to the capacities of young people just beginning to put their thoughts on paper, and that the first aim of their teacher ought to be, to enable (page 8) them to express some of the most obvious ideas in the most obvious words. The very elegant style of Mr. Addison would in this case be too delicate to meet their apprehension: his most ingenious turns of thought would be lost upon them; and some of the finest passages in his Spectators might be read to them, without their being able to carry away with them a single idea.

The first object, therefore, in the following Work was, to convey clear and prominent ideas; to arrange these ideas in such a manner as to make one thought suggest another; to give as much imagery to the thought as possible, that a picture might remain in the mind of the pupil which would enable him to clothe it in words, when the more refined and sentimental part of the subject might escape him. In short, it is the business of the teacher, in this case, to embody thought and sentiment as much as possible, and, as Shakespeare finely says, "To give to airy nothing/A local habitation and a name."

In the course of this Work I have derived so little assistance from other writers that I might perhaps pass uncensured for plagiarism if I were to be silent on this head; but candour obliges me to confess some obligation to Knox's Essays, to Jones's Letters

from a Tutor to his Pupil, to Letters from Honoria to Marianne, to Bright's Praxis, and perhaps to a few others scarcely worth mentioning. But most of these I have been obliged to modify in such a manner as to make them more suitable for an exercise; but by far the greater part, with all their faults, are my own; and it remains with the Public to judge whether, upon the whole, I have added any thing to the stock of instruction, and have met the wants of parents and teachers in this very important part of education. (page 9)

It is presumed, that by the time the pupil has written the Themes and the regular Subjects, or those which proceed by parts, according to the rules, he will be enabled to give his mind a little scope, by producing something more like an essay.

It is hoped that the present Work will be found useful, not only to those who are under the care of a teacher, but to those who wish to improve themselves. To these it may be observed, that if they read over the Theme or Subject till they are fully possessed of the sense, and then lay it aside and write down from memory as much as they can recollect, they will, by looking at the Theme, see how far they have deviated from it, and what they ought to correct. This is a practice recommended by Dr. Blair, who advises the pupil to read a passage in Addison, and endeavour to imitate it in the manner above noticed. This, for pupils far advanced, is undoubtedly an excellent practice; but for the younger class of pupils, as we have before observed, Mr. Addison's language seems too elegant and (if I may use the expression) too untangible. A regular chain of thinking, and a coarser and more palpable choice of words, seem best calculated for the improvement of beginners in the art.

It need scarcely be observed, that it is of the utmost importance that pupils should not have the task of writing their thoughts, that young people will risk everything to ease themselves of the burden. This book, therefore, should be carefully kept from them; as even one of them in a school, if the teacher's eye be not upon them while they write, will be sufficient to frustrate his expectations. The rules, (page 10) therefore, should be written out only by the teacher, and given to the pupil to copy, without permitting him to see the book; and even if the teacher were to copy out the Theme or Subject, and read it in manuscript to the pupil, it might probably have a good effect on his mind; as it might lead him to suppose there was no such book in being, and give him that idea of rarity and worth which manuscript generally carries with it above what is in print. (page 11)

THEMES

Of A theme, and the Parts of which it is composed.

A theme is the proving of some truth. After the theme or truth is laid down, the proof consists of the following parts:

1st, The Proposition, or Narrative; where we shew the meaning of the Theme, by amplifying, paraphrasing, or explaining it more at large.

2d, The Reason; where we prove the truth of the Theme by some

reason or argument.

3d, The Confirmation; where we shew the unreasonableness of the contrary opinion; or if we cannot do that, we try to bring some other reason in support of the former.

4th, The Simile; where we bring in something in Nature or Art similar to what is affirmed in our Theme, for illustrating the truth of it.

5th, The Example; where we bring instances from History to corroborate the truth of our Theme.

6th, The Testimony or Quotation; where we bring in proverbial sentences, or passages from good authors, which shew that others think as we do.

7th, The Conclusion; when we sum up the whole, and shew the practical use of the Theme, by concluding with some pertinent observation. (page 14)

The Rules versified.

The Theme at large the Proposition gives,
And the same thought in other words conceives"
The Reason shews the Proposition's true,
By bringing arguments and proofs to view:
The Confirmation proves th' opinion's right,
By shewing how absurd's the opposite.
If that's not to be done, it tries t'explore
Some proof in aid of what was giv'n before.
The Simile an apt resemblance brings,
Which shews the Theme is true in other things:
Th'Example, instances from history draws,
That by mankind's experience prove our cause:
The Testimony to the Wise appeals,
And by their suffrage our opinion seals.
Some useful observation comes at last,'
As a Conclusion drawn from what is past. (page 15)

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Notwithstanding that the Theme, from the regularity of its form, seems to be the easiest species of composition, I am much deceived, however, if upon trial this is always found to be the case. A Theme is the proving of some truth, and that closeness of thinking which argument requires demands a greater maturity of the faculties than a subject which is merely narrative or descriptive, and were we are not so strictly tied down to a unity of design. I would therefore recommend it to the teacher, if the pupil finds the Theme too difficult at first, to take him to the Regular Subject; and if this should not be sufficiently easy, to carry him to the Easy Essay, and without restricting him too rigidly to the several parts, to require of him only what he can collect upon the whole. This advice seems to imply, that I have made an inverted arrangement of the points in question; but it may be observed, that this order is easily altered, and that, where the pupil has a sufficient capacity, it is really the

facility of expression
& closeness of thought are
opposite

best. It tends to give a precision of thinking, and to keep the mind from wandering too widely from the subject, which many pupils are apt to do, who have a great facility of expression, but want a closeness of thinking. The propriety of this order, therefore, must depend on the capacity of the pupil; and to this point must all the care of the teacher be directed.

Sample theme topics: Well begun is half done. Perseverance generally prevails. Nip sin in the bud (example used as evidence is from Macbeth). Make no more haste than good speed. 'Tis ill playing with edged tools. No art can be acquired without rules. (As art is the power of doing any thing in the best and most expeditious manner; the way to acquire this power is to observe those methods which have been adopted by artists, and to follow them.) (p 31)

REGULAR SUBJECTS

On a subject, and the method of treating it.

The Definition; the Cause; the Antiquity, or Novelty; the Universality, or Locality; the Effects; namely, the goodness or badness, or the advantages or disadvantages.

1st, If your subject require explanation, define or explain it more at large.

2nd, Shew what is the cause of your subject; that is, what is the occasion of it, or what it is driven from.

3d, Shew whether your subject be ancient or modern; that is, what it was in ancient times, and what it is at present.

4th, Shew whether your subject relates to the whole world, or only to a particular part of it.

5th. Examine whether your subject be good or bad; shew wherein its goodness or badness consists, and what are the advantages or disadvantages that arise from it. (p 48)

The rules for treating a subject versified.

If first your subject definition need,
Define your subject first, and then proceed:
Thus Education, more at large defin'd,
Becomes the culture of the human mind.
Next, if you can, find out your subject's cause;
And shew from whence its origin it draws:
And thus if Education's cause be trac'd,
It will be found in love parental plac'd.
Ancient or modern may your subject be;
Pursue it, therefore, to antiquity:
Thus, Education ever will appear
T'have been the Ancients' first and greatest care.
Your subject may to distant nations roam
Or else relate to objects nearer home:
Thus, idifferent modes of Education yield,
To every writer's thoughts, an ample field.

rule
for
regular
subjects

The subject which you treat is is good or ill,
Or else a mixture of each principle:
Good Education ranks us with the best;
While bad degrades the man below the beast,
And ere your subject a conclusion know,
Th' advantage or the disadvantage shew. (p 49)

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There are few subjects that will admit of being treated in so regular a way as to be viewed in all the points set down in the rules. I have been at no small pains to collect so many as I have done; and, even in a few of these, I have been obliged to drop some of the points: but as there is not any subject which may not be considered in two or three of these points of view, I flatter myself the method here adopted will be found useful to young people, who must generally be furnished (sic) with some hints to be able to say anything upon any subject. I have endeavoured also to place the easiest subject first, but am not sure I have always succeeded: I wish the Teacher to use his own judgment in this respect, to be particularly attentive to the capacity of his pupil, and to give him, two, three, or more points, as he finds his capacity equal to it.

I doubt not but a great degree of stiffness will be sometimes perceived, by endeavouring to bring all the points to bear on some of the subjects; when, when it is recollected that the object of the present work is not so much to form the style, as to furnish matter for writing, it is hoped the stiffness will be overlooked. Ease is the completion (sic) of every operation of art, and therefore ought not to be expected in the beginning. p. 50

Sample subjects. On Education (educ is one of the most important concerns of society). On Government (Government is that order among rational creatures which produces almost all the benefits they enjoy) On War (scourge of all men). On Peace (ultimate wish of all men). On Philosophy. On Gaming.

EASY ESSAYS

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The following Essays cannot be reduced to the same rules as the foregoing Regular Subjects; and the pupil therefore, may feel a want of the assistance which these rules afforded him. For which reason, I emagined, (sic) that dividing eash Essay into its principal component parts, and giving to each part an abridgement of its contents, would, in some measure, assist the memory, and remedy the want of rules.

I would, therefore, advise the teacher, after he has read the Essay to the pupil the first time, then talked it over, and read it again to him the second time, to repeat distinctly the several heads of the Essay, as set down at the bottom of the page. Thus, after having read and explained the first Essay, On the importance of a Well-spent Youth, I would have him remark distinctly the number of

heads, and say, the first head is "All desire to arrive at old age, but few think of gaining those virtues which alone can make it happy." The next is That "Life is a building, and youth the foundation." The next--"All the latter stages of life depend upon a good use of the former"--The last--"Age therefore, requires a well spent youth to make it happy."

Perhaps if these abridged contents were to be repeated by the teacher before each head in the second reading, as well as after the whole is read, it might tend to imprint the subject more strongly; but I would by no means advise him to suffer the pupil to take them down in writing." (page 83)

Other easy essay topics: On the Necessity of Submission to Teachers. On Diversions. On Time. On Modesty (Cicero tells us he never had a good opinion of a young orator who did not display modesty). On Flattery. On the Folly of Indulging the Passion of Anger.

NARRATIVE

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There is another method of training young people to write, which is perhaps easier than any of the foregoing, and that is Narrative. All who have the use of reason, can relate a transaction in the manner they have heard it; and though to do this to the best advantage is not a very easy task, yet to do it tolerably is perhaps less difficult than any other species of composition. For this reason, I have thought proper to give some specimens of the Narrative; that nothing might be left untried to induce youth to the habit of writing down their thoughts on whatever might be the easiest to them at first. Nothing so easy to comprehend and retain as a story, and therefore nothing so easy to write down from memory. I would therefore advise the teacher to read over something of this kind to the pupil, and, if possible, to make him tell it over again, and to order him to write it down from memory. This should be corrected and re-written, like the other exercises, and repeated till a facility is obtained, and an ability of proceeding to something more difficult.

In order to induce the pupil to exercise his imagination, I would advise (sic) the teacher to give him first a short narrative, and after he had done that to give him the same story amplified: for which purpose I have given him some example of both these kinds, which, if the teacher finds to be useful, may, with very little trouble, be multiplied at pleasure. (p. 152)

Sample narratives: Fidelity respected by Enemies (about Battle of Philippi) Filial Piety rewarded. The false Happiness of Tyrants (Dionysius and Damocles).

SKETCHES AND OUTLINES IN NARRATIVE

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In teaching to write Exercises, I have often observed that the most difficult part of the composition is the connectives. If a pupil, therefore, of the lower class, seems remarkable(sic) backward in writing, perhaps it might not be improper to direct him to make his sentences as short as possible, and, instead of tacking one member to another in a long chain by relatives and conjunctions, to relate his story by sort detached members(sic). When he has done this, the teacher may shew him how these connectives may be supplied, and, by copying over the exercise thus connected and perfected, he may be led to a use of the connectives by himself. This may be called giving a sketch of a subject.

But as some pupils have an almost invincible repugnance to putting down their thoughts upon paper, every method, and even every strategem should be made use of to induce them to try at it: for which purpose, I have often thought that if a short simple story were read to them, and then a paper given them with the leading words of the story written at certain distances, and left for them to fill up, it would be an easy means of bringing them on to undertake that terrible task of writing their own thoughts. This may be called drawing the outline of a subject, in the same manner as a drawing-master traces the outlines of a picture which he leaves for the pupil to fill up; and there seems to be no reason why one method should not be as conducive(sic) to improvement in writing, as the other in drawing. Both these modes of writing will be exemplified in the following pages. (page 166)

Sample topic: Courage and Judgement united in Necessity (story of Roman battle with the Albans) Friendship Continuing After Death (friendship of Titus Volumnius and Marcus Lucullus)