

ENGLISH COMPOSITION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

BY

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY, Ph.D.
FREDERICK ERASTUS PIERCE, Ph.D.
HENRY NOBLE MACCRACKEN, Ph.D.
ALFRED ARUNDEL MAY, M.A.
THOMAS GODDARD WRIGHT, M.A.

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PREFACE

THE purpose of the authors of this volume has been to combine, in one book, a set of directions for good writing, based upon sound principles and written, primarily, for the student, with a varied and extensive collection of examples drawn from *all* the forms of discourse, and inclusive of both brief excerpts and complete essays, arguments, and stories. We have added supplementary material in the several Appendices, and a selected list of books, which may be used with this manual, or consulted for parallel discussions of the topics here taken up. Exposition, Argument, Description, and Narrative present differing problems in the teaching of English Composition, and vary in their degree of usefulness with the individual, the course, and the institution. We have endeavored to give to each the proportionate space and the kind of treatment which the average student requires. The whole composition, the paragraph, the sentence, and the word have been discussed in their relation to Exposition, because, for the average student, it is the power to explain clearly which is of primary importance. Thus Exposition has been given a predominant space. The chapter on the Sentence goes into minute detail because the average student, at present, does not understand the structure of the sentence; the chapter on Narrative deals with constructive problems mainly, because it is in learning to construct a story that he can best make Narrative increase his powers of expression; the chapter on Description includes literary and esthetic problems, because one variety of Description can only thus be taught. An order of succession for these various topics has been chosen after experiment with many classes. Nevertheless, except that Exposition must come first, the teacher will find that the plan of this book permits any arrangement of subjects which his own experience may have led him to desire. Acknowledgments of

the kindness of various publishers will be found in the footnotes to many selections. Our indebtedness to the authorities in rhetorical theory is too extensive for specific reference. The bibliography in Appendix X is but a partial confession of obligations to earlier workers in the field.

The chapter on the Sentence in this book is the work of Mr. May and Mr. Wright; the chapters on Argument, on Exposition, and the Whole Composition have been prepared by Professor Pierce; those on Simple Narrative, the Story, and the Paragraph by Professor Canby; those on Description and the Word by Professor MacCracken. All the authors, however, have united in the criticism, in the elaboration, and in the revision of every part of the volume.

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INTRODUCTION

To write well is to put one's mind in communication with the minds of others. To write well is to solve a triple problem, and a successful solution will depend upon how far one masters the three branches of this problem, straight thinking, adequate expression, and good form.

Straight thinking is probably the most important of all; certainly it must come first. You must know what you wish to say and what you wish to accomplish by saying it before you put pen to paper, or you will seldom write well. Carlyle, who knew how to write well even if he did not always do so, once said, "As for good composition, it is mainly the result of good thinking, and improves with that, if careful observation as you read attends it." Schopenhauer, the German philosopher, puts this truth even more forcibly in his essay on authorship and style: "Obscurity and vagueness of expression are at all times and everywhere a very bad sign. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred they arise from vagueness of thought. . . . When a right thought springs up in the mind, it strives after clearness of expression, and it soon attains it, for clear thought easily finds its appropriate expression. A man who is capable of thinking can express himself at all times in clear, comprehensible, and unambiguous words. Those writers who construct difficult, obscure, involved, and ambiguous phrases most certainly do not rightly know what it is they wish to say; they have only a dull consciousness of it, which is still struggling to put itself into thought."

Adequate expression is the next step in composition, and it is adequate expression chiefly which a book like this one is designed to teach. The "mute, inglorious Milton" of Gray's *Elegy* was presumably a man who had thought, but had not learned to express himself. The theory of expression is simple. The difficulty lies in the application of this theory to thoughts, ideas,

feelings, which are weighty enough to be worth writing about. It is quite true that any hard worker could learn adequate expression for himself, since the principles which govern it are, after all, only those which logical thought and common sense would be sure to develop. It is also true that one can learn shorthand, Latin, painting, or civil engineering without a teacher, even without a textbook, but we are well aware that such a method is wasteful of time, and therefore inefficient. The chapters which follow constitute a set of directions and a selection of models for Exposition, Argument, Description, and Narrative, which, if properly used, should save time in learning to write.

Good form in writing is like good form in dress. It is bad form to wear a flannel shirt with a dress coat, or a white lawn tie with a sack suit. It is quite as bad form to punctuate badly, to misspell, or to make mistakes in grammar, even if the clearness of your writing is not thereby seriously impaired. Actually, of course, misspelling, grammatical errors, and bad punctuation do usually affect clearness, sometimes utterly changing the sense. But, from either point of view, they are fatal to good writing. Such remainders of illiteracy, for no gentler name can be applied, should have disappeared before the writer has reached the age when he must know how to express difficult and comprehensive thoughts. For various reasons this Utopian condition does not yet exist. Therefore, we have included in the Appendix practical advice for those who need it, in sections upon punctuation and spelling, and upon the use of words, sections which those who require them should study in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of any course in English Composition.

The perfect bloom of good writing is style. But "unto him who hath shall be given." However essential it may be for the literary man, a style is not the most important thing for the average writer. Think clearly, express your thoughts in the most effective manner, be sure that your book, your article, your report, or your theme is given the good form which it deserves. When you can do all this, and not before, you can begin to think of style.

ENGLISH COMPOSITION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

APPENDIX X

A SELECTED list of books which will be useful in connection with the various chapters preceding:—

On Exposition:

- BALDWIN, C. S., *A College Manual of Rhetoric*.
GARDINER, KITTREDGE, and ARNOLD, *A Manual of Composition and Rhetoric*.
FULTON, M. G., *Expository Writing*.

On Technical Writing:

- EARLE, S. C., *The Theory and Practice of Technical Writing*.

On the Paragraph:

- SCOTT and DENNEY, *Paragraph Writing*. (For a detailed discussion of paragraph structure, with abundant examples.)
BALDWIN, C. S., *The Expository Paragraph and Sentence*. (A brief treatment of the subject.)

On the Sentence:

- HILL, A. S., *The Principles of Rhetoric*.
CARPENTER, G. R., *Exercises in Rhetoric and English Composition*. (Advanced Course.)
WOOLLEY, E. C., *Handbook of Composition*.
KIMBALL, L. G., *The Structure of the English Sentence*.
EARLE, SAVAGE, and SEAVEY, *Sentences and their Elements*.

On Argumentation:

- BAKER and HUNTINGTON, *Principles of Argumentation*. (An exhaustive treatment of the whole field of argument.)
BROOKING and RINGWALT, *Briefs for Debate*. (An excellent book when published. Some of its material is now out of date.)
RINGWALT, R. C., *Briefs on Public Questions*.
PEARSON, P. M. (ed.), *Intercollegiate Debates*.
FOSTER, T., *Argumentation and Debating*.

On Description:

- BALDWIN, C. S., *Specimens of Prose Description*.
Composition: Oral and Written.
ALBRIGHT, E. M., *Descriptive Writing*.

On Narrative:

For discussions of narrative:

- BALDWIN, C. S., *A College Manual of Rhetoric*.
GARDINER, KITTREDGE, and ARNOLD, *A Manual of Composition and Rhetoric*.
ALBALAT, ANTOINE, *L'Art d'Écrire*.
ROSS, C. G., *The Writing of News*.
MAXCEY, C. L., *The Rhetorical Principles of Narrative*.

For collections of stories which may be used in addition to the selections in this volume:

- JESSUP and CANBY, *The Book of the Short Story*.
NETTLETON, G. H., *Specimens of the Short Story*.
MATTHEWS, BRANDER, *The Short Story*.

On Punctuation:

- WOOLLEY, E. C., *Handbook of Composition*.
Notes for the Guidance of Authors. The Macmillan Co.
BALDWIN, C. S., *A Summary of Punctuation*.
SCOTT and DENNEY, *Elementary English Composition*.

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