

SIXTY
COMPOSITION-TOPICS

FOR STUDENTS IN HIGH SCHOOLS
AND COLLEGES

WITH HINTS ON ESSAY-WRITING

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SILVER, BURDETT AND COMPANY

NEW YORK . . . BOSTON . . . CHICAGO

1894

E Educ T 768.94.120

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Dec. 20, 1918

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University Press:

JOHN WILSON AND SON, CAMBRIDGE, U. S. A.



NOTE.

ASSUMING that, in connection with class-work in Rhetoric and Literature, the student of English is required to write an essay, and that he has some freedom of choice as to topic and method, I take up the points on which suggestion may be helpful, in the order of their actual occurrence to him.

J. M. A.



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SIXTY COMPOSITION-TOPICS.

I.

CHOICE OF SUBJECT.

WHEN the student sits down to decide on his "subject," he must consider his own literary need. It is to do what he can do best, but what he can do least well; as a man wishing to gain physical strength exercises his weakest parts. Still, he must not do this to the point of discouragement.

If he is inclined to read history, it is an economical way to read history, *topically*, whether it be history of wars or of arts or of sciences.

As to the subject, he must develop his weak parts. If he find himself inclined to

be too rigidly statistical, he must cultivate his imaginative faculty; and as he reads, endeavor to throw himself into innermost sympathy with the throb of life and thought in distant century or continent.

If he find himself neglecting to be accurate, and permitting his pleasure in imaginative sketching to render him careless of actual detail, let him, in his reading and writing, test every point, and be sure that he commit no anachronism or other untruth.

Again, if he choose an argumentative subject, his attention will be turned toward the method of handling the subject. If it be his temptation here to present the truth in technical simplicity of logical form, he must devote his energy to putting flesh on the skeleton, that we may be convinced of the strength and beauty of the frame, by seeing, not the actual interworkings of the joints, but the lithe and impressive movements of the rounded limbs. If, on the other hand, he be tempted to graceful but empty

expression, he must — to continue the figure — study anatomy.

Thirdly, if the student's fancy be inactive, he must exercise it; to say nothing of writings purely imaginative, he will otherwise never appreciate the simplest metaphor. Half of our every-day expressions are crowded with figurative meaning; and to him who sees the application only in its syllogistic form, the beauty of language, whether spoken or written, will always be dim.

So much as to the importance of cultivating the imagination; as to the best means, much may be done outside of literature, by studying music or painting; but much may be done, too, by reading the works of authors who have imagination, whether they write fiction or history; and very much by attempting to write stories and fancy sketches.

As to the last point, I would say that if the student find that he uses too long words, or expresses his thought vaguely, let him set himself to write for children; and before he

interests them, he will speak simply and to the point.

The following topics are suggested rather as starting-points for lines of thought than as set limits.

The classification makes no special claim to originality, but is adopted as on the whole the most natural one. The advantage of having division-lines remains, though it is not easy to draw them, and we shall often be guilty of cross-division.

I will indicate sixty subjects, under the following heads: —

I. HISTORICAL. — Matters of Fact.

1. The "Consiglio Grande" of Florence, in the sixteenth century.

Compare it, in its constitution and influence, with the popular assembly of any other city, in classical or modern Europe.

2. Pope Julius, and his relation to Italian art; especially his patronage of Michael Angelo and Raphael.

3. The present quarrel over Turkey. Position and authority of the Sultan; his relation to the other monarchs of Europe.

4. Beethoven and Mendelssohn, Michael Angelo and Raphael. Compare two with two in regard to character, work, and influence.

5. Luther and Savonarola as reformers.

6. Friendship of Goethe and Schiller.

7. Friendship of Carlyle and Emerson.

8. Position of the Sophists in the esteem of their contemporaries. Influence on the subsequent development of Rhetoric.

9. What proportion of literary men have led secluded lives, as compared with those that have taken vigorous part in public affairs?

10. Give a brief outline of United States politics.

11. Compare Macaulay's History of England with any other work covering the same ground.

12. Mention certain almost universal pro-

verbs, with the various forms under which they have appeared among different peoples.

13. Give an account of the translations of the Bible.

14. Position of the Jews of the present day in the countries of Europe and Asia.

15. Short sketch of Creole history.

16. The Brooklyn Bridge. Compare it with any like structure in Europe.

17. The Alhambra: its historical position and influence.

18. Influence of novels in politics. For example, "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

19. Domestic architecture in America.

20. The debt of the Middle Ages to the Saracens.

II. IMAGINATIVE. — Matters of Fancy.

1. A story about dolls, for little children.

2. A fairy-story, in rhyme.

3. A landscape. Make a picture for me, that I may see a forest or a solitary mountain or a ruined city, with a pair of birds or an

eagle or a lonely maiden. Make it *mean* something.

4. Take "What's Mine's Mine," and sketch Ian and Alister, at some point in the novel where MacDonald does not stop for description.

5. Describe an incident in the life of Luther, picturing the details.

6. Study one of J. G. Brown's street-boy pictures, and write a story from it.

7. Autobiography of a stylographic pen.

8. Interpretation of Mendelssohn's "Volkslied."

9. An old soldier's reverie.

10. Change "Little Women," and make "Jo" marry "Laurie."

11. With the background of Ebers' "The Sisters," write a little story as by-play to the main plot.

12. Imagine a meeting between a Spartan and a modern Russian.

13. Write a Socratic dialogue on the principles of American education.

14. A dream. Make it appear as an actual dream, keeping the vague, flitting aspect of things, and the inconsequent action of the mind, so that I shall dream as I read.

15. What the katydids say.

16. What the November winds and the March winds say to the pines.

17. A bowl of pansies; personify their faces.

18. Take any "continued story" that you are in the middle of reading, and write out some chapters ahead.

19. A Reception to the public, at the White House.

20. Given, a dirty canal-boat, with the low, square box for the family living-room; a tired woman leaning over a stove in one corner, and some ragged children crowding under the bed: — put some element into that life that shall make a day of it interesting material for a story.

III. ARGUMENTATIVE. — Matters of Opinion.

1. How far may an author depart from his central theme or aim?

May a biographer write a general history?

May a general historian write a philosophy?

May a novelist be at the same time a moralist?

2. Mannerisms in artistic production :

How far justified by genius?

How far inevitable to individuality of style?

How far despicable in imitators?

3. Eclecticism, as illustrated by Cousin in Philosophy.

Unworthy of the highest type of mind?

What are its justifications?

What its effect on future schools or individual thinkers?

4. Plea for a "boarding-school education" : — a little knowledge of many things, so long as it is consciously only a beginning, widens one's sympathy, cultivates one's appreciation.

5. Newspapers : their proper function ; nec-

essary difference between city and country issues; influence on the different grades of society.

6. Plea for the study of Anglo-Saxon and Early English; necessary to the study of English words, literature, history.

7. On *à priori* and *à posteriori* grounds, decide whether or not all novel-plots have been exhausted.

8. How is the boundary-line between the Individual and the Universal to be practically determined?

For example, in an appeal to an audience, how far is human nature human nature the world over, and how far must the orator be governed by the special character of his audience?

In telling a child a story, what points are to be relied on as universally interesting to children, and what must be modified for the individual?

9. Which is the more courteous,—the typical Englishman or the typical German? Or are they incommensurable quantities?

10. How do city and country people compare, as to individuality and independence of thought and custom?

11. Ought the misdeeds or shortcomings of eminent writers — either public, like Bacon's, or private, like Carlyle's — to be unnecessarily reported, with the certainty of weakening the influence of their best writing?

12. On what principle and to what extent is success a test of literature?

13. Is Spencer's definition of style, on the basis of economy of mental attention, an adequate one?

14. May not the study of geography and history be treated to more advantage as one than as two departments?

15. What are the relative advantages of the grammatical and natural methods of teaching modern languages?

16. What credit is due to the professional literary critic?

17. In what points is deference to public

opinion a worthy restraint on individual taste?

18. Is a pun the lowest form of wit?

19. What are the theory and scope of summer-schools of philosophy, science, or language?

20. Comparative merits of the leading magazines of the nineteenth century.

II.

PLAN, OR ANALYSIS.

~~I~~ It is a safe rule to think out the entire plan of an essay before beginning to write. Afterwards, of course, it may need very considerable modification. But the guidance this will give to the detailed thought that follows, will more than make up for the time expended on it.

In a story or sketch, the plan will be a simple affair. In a formal, argumentative composition, the analysis must follow the rules laid down in the science of Rhetoric; but it must never, in striving to be complete and logical, become too elaborate or exhaustive.

I will give an unpretentious example of what I mean in these two cases.

Plan for a Child's Story.

A little boy goes into the woods, and spies a balloon hanging to a tree. He climbs into it. The balloon carries him for days, and at last drops him at the North Pole. Everything is ice, but he does not feel cold. All is exceedingly beautiful. He finds Santa Claus in a palace, with fairies making Christmas things. The little fellow wakes, and hears his nurse calling him to supper.

Analysis.

Does Politeness ever require the sacrifice of Principle?

I. Introduction.

1. What is Politeness?
2. What is Principle?

II. Three Classes of People.

1. Those who boast of sacrificing politeness to principle.
2. Those who are polite at the expense of principle.

3. Those who claim to be at the same time courteous and honest.

III. Politeness a Form of Principle.

IV. Conclusion.

Politeness never at war with Principle.

III.

ELABORATION OF POINTS.

HERE nothing but the widest principles may be laid down: —

1. Keep the parts of the essay in good proportion.

2. Never have abrupt transitions.

3. Make the meaning of each point in the analysis clear and strong, by simple amplification, by practical examples, or by analogy.

4. Do not conclude so abruptly that the reader will stop with a mental jerk; nor so slowly that his patience will be exhausted, and the end have an effect of anti-climax.

IV.

CRITICISM OF ONE'S OWN WORK.

HERE, too, all rules may be referred to the one principle of the "golden mean."

1. Let the composition lie untouched for a week. Then look it over cautiously. Study the arrangement, the individual sentence-structures, the words. Be sure that you have used, in every instance, the word to fit the thought; that your grammatical construction is faultless and forcible; that the arrangement of the whole is strong, natural, graceful.

2. Do not criticise too much. There is such a thing as cutting out every trace of originality and of real strength, in the effort to conform the composition to rules. There is no fault to be found with the statement "Two and two make four," except that it is bare. Your writing is not to be made faultless after that model.

V.

FORM OF FINISHED COMPOSITION.

YOU may be incapable of brilliant writing; ~~you are not incapable of copying your essay in correct form for the critic.~~ Failure in this is inexcusable.

The general rules given here may be modified according to the individual taste of the teacher: —

1. Write neatly and legibly, with black ink.
2. Write only on one side of the paper.
3. Leave a margin for critical remarks or corrections.
4. Number your half-sheets, and inclose them in a whole sheet, without folding.
5. On the cover, write your name and the date; on the first inside page, the subject and the plan or analysis; on the second page, begin the essay proper.

VI.

COMPOSITION AN ESSENTIAL FACTOR IN THE STUDY OF RHETORIC.

THE word RHETORIC is interesting in two ways: *first*, it is from the Greek, and reminds us that in the study of its principles we shake hands with Aristotle; *secondly*, the original word refers, not to writing, but to speaking, and so makes us forget our notion of mechanical words on a page, and think simply of the sending of thought from one mind to another.

This transmission of thought without loss of delicacy or of strength, is the task of Rhetoric.

Now, in the apprenticeship to this business, are two distinct rooms: in the one, we must study what has been done by other workmen; in the other, we must work ourselves.

We shall try to show in the next few pages how closely related these departments are, under three natural divisions of the subject:

I. **The Study and Use of Words.**

The study of the origin and history of English words is exceptionally fascinating, because the English language is heir to so many ancient parent tongues. The wealth of thought treasured in our most ordinary English words is worth looking for, and it is impossible to return to a careless, spendthrift use of the most common of these, after we have found in them what Trench calls the "poetry, history, and ethics" of the ages.

In proportion as you know Greek and Latin and Anglo-Saxon will this word-study take you by storm; but it will not be without its abundant reward even if you must take in blind faith the dictionary derivation. If you doubt this, spend one hour in verifying your negative belief. Look up the following words in a good dictionary or book of syn-

onyms, studying carefully the roots, the various meanings and distinctions in their historical order, and the special meanings under the hands of standard authors; and then use the words again as blindly and unenthusiastically as before, if you can: —

| | | |
|----------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Hand (with its compounds). | Metropolis. | |
| Strong. | Interest. | Sympathy. |
| Polyp. | Pontiff. | Parchment. |
| Demon. | Tulip. | Telegraph. |
| Panic. | Hazard. | Phosphorus. |
| Idea. | Prophet. | Heliotrope. |
| Pond. | Legend. | Compassion. |
| Music. | Condolence. | Commiseration. |

Or, take this passage concluding Dr. Storrs' Oration at the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge: study heedfully the words in italics, and see if the meaning be not tenfold more emphatic, and the expression more full of grace and vigor, than before: —

“Surely we should not go from this *hour*, which *marks* a new *era* in the *history* of these *cities*, and which points to their *future indefinite expansion*, without the *purpose* in each of

us that, so far forth as in us lies, with their *increase* in numbers, *wealth*, *equipment*, shall also *proceed* with equal step their *progress* in whatever is *noblest* and best in *public* and *private* life; that all which sets humanity forward shall come in them to *ampler endowment*, more *renowned exhibition*: so that, *linked* together, as hereafter they must be, and seeing the *purple deepening* in their robes of *power*, they may be always *increasingly conscious* of fulfilled *obligation* to the *nation* and to God; may make the land, at whose *magnificent* gateway they stand, their *constant debtor*, and may *contribute* their mighty part toward that *ultimate perfect* human *society* for which the *seer* could find no image so *meet* or so *majestic* as that of a city, coming down from above, its stones laid with fair colors, its *foundations* with *sapphires*, its *windows* of *agates*, its gates of *carbuncles*, and all its *borders* of pleasant stones, with the *sovereign promise resplendent* above it:

‘ And great shall be the peace of thy children.’ ”

It may seem at first that the beauty of the words disappears in the slow process of analysis. Cutting up a beautiful word to examine its elements is like tearing apart a flower to study the sections under the microscope. But even if our specimen fade in the handling, all other flowers take on, thereafter, an added beauty. Do not be afraid of heartless work in word-analysis; it is a clumsy means, but the end is the *immediate* perception of beauty.

This critical process must be carried on till your sense of an author's words is keen and subtle. Then you are ready for creative work. In writing exercises with Diction specially in view, think of two things: —

First. Use words that are absolutely good, — that have a standing in the English language.

Secondly. Use words that are relatively good; — to borrow Trench's figure, words that fit the thought as a garment should fit

the wearer; neither too wide nor too narrow, and suitable in style.

As to the first point, you will often have a choice between Latin and Saxon equivalents. Your decision may be determined somewhat by individual preference for staid philosophical terms, or for the decisive, pithy Saxon. The character of the subject must largely govern your selection.

Two negative rules may be given here: —

Never use extravagant or slangy expressions.

Avoid unnecessary introduction of foreign words and technical terms.

As to the second point, have a well-defined thought to begin with; then,

(*a*) Do not be content with the first word that occurs to you, but look around a little, for a choice.

(*b*) Use a specific word rather than a general one, a concrete rather than an abstract word.

(*c*) Leave out useless words. From many

words we expect much, as we look for a great volume of sound from many voices. If the weaker members be left out, the stronger are much more telling.

For example, compare these two remarks:

"She's a wonderfully charming girl, and I am particularly inclined to take a fancy to her."

"She is charming, and quite captivates me."

Study Herbert Spencer's "Essay on the Philosophy of Style" when you can. It will elucidate this point.

(d) Sometimes, again, the words may be fitted to the thought in their very sound, with onomatopoeic effect. Discordant words give an impression of strife or harshness; smooth liquid words, of gentleness and serenity.

Note, for example, how Carlyle makes his stern thought sterner by harsh words:

"These two principles of Dandiacal self-worship or Demon-worship, and poor-slavish or Drudgical Earth Worship, or whatever that

same Drudgism may be, do as yet indeed manifest themselves under distant and no-wise considerable shapes; nevertheless, in their roots and subterranean ramifications, they extend throughout the entire structure of Society, and work unweariedly in the secret depths of English national existence; striving to separate and isolate into two contradictory, uncommunicating masses."

Now read the same author's words when he writes of human sympathy and affection; and watch the diction and order of rhythm:

"With other eyes, too, could I now look upon my fellow-man; with an infinite Love, an infinite Pity. Poor, wandering, wayward man! Art thou not tried and beaten with stripes, even as I am? O my Brother, my Brother, why can not I shelter thee in my bosom, and wipe away all tears from thy eyes!"

II. Arrangement of Words in Sentences.

First study the effect produced by the masters, in the use of the various types of sentence; and then learn to use these with some degree of the same skill in your own writing.

For example, notice the *direct* method of Emerson, with its effect of immediate appeal to the reader:

“I do not wish to treat friendships daintily, but with roughest courage. When they are real, they are not glass threads or frost-work, but the solidest thing we know.”

Contrast with this the inversions and involutions of the more meditative style of Swinburne's essays: —

“The very essence of Mr. Browning's aim and method, as exhibited in the ripest fruits of his intelligence, is such as implies above all other things the possession of a quality the very opposite of obscurity, — a faculty of spiritual illumination rapid and intense and

subtle as lightning, which brings to bear upon its central object by way of direct and vivid illustration every symbol and every detail on which its light is flashed in passing."

Each of these types of sentence may be perfected on its own line, — with all degrees of intricacy between the two; the simple and the multiplex sentence — construction, clothing the simple and the multiplex forms of thought — will always arise spontaneously from the corresponding types of mind; neither extreme can be safely used as a model, and the taste for more or less of inversion and intricacy of arrangement must be allowed its natural development in each student.

III. Division of Paragraphs.

We find in different writers widely varying principles in regard to this matter. The general law is that each paragraph should be the elaboration of one point or sub-point in the analysis; though much depends on

the mechanical consideration of length. In dialogue-writing, each new speaker — no matter how short the speech — must begin with a new paragraph; and this must continue throughout, whenever a change is made in the speaker.