

**BELLES-LETTRES.  
BOOK II**

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Belles-Lettres. Book II by Augustus Layres

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**AUGUSTUS LAYRES**

**BELLES-LETTRES.  
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BELLES-LETTRES;

BY

AUGUSTUS LAYRES,

PROFESSOR OF VARIOUS LANGUAGES, RHETORIC

AND SCIENCES.



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## INTRODUCTION

TO THE

### STUDY OF BELLES-LETTRES.

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1. In presenting to the advanced pupil this Second Book, we desire to call his attention to our design in writing this treatise, which is, to facilitate the art, and abridge the study of composition.

2. For this reason, the topics and precepts expounded here, are general, and may easily be applied to the special themes of composition, both in verse and prose; without, therefore, it being necessary to detail rules for each particular subject, which would be an endless task.

3. Certain species of composition, either entirely obsolete, or less in use in modern times, like the Fable, and Parable, are here cursorily treated; others, on the contrary, that are very important, and yet, have either been omitted, or only slightly treated by other authors, such as *History, Journalism, Biography, Novel, Romance, and Drama*, are fully expounded.

4. The method pursued in this book, as in the first, is both the synthetical and analytical; the former for teaching the rules, the latter the practice of composition.

5. Concerning the practice of composition, it is well to re-

peat the direction given in the preface of the first book, namely : that "after the pupil has learned well the rules of the art, he must begin by a critical examination or analysis of some good author's composition; for in this manner, the rules will be practically illustrated, and therefore better and sooner understood."

6. This practice we deem essential for the thorough understanding of the rules, not only in abstract, but in concrete also. And it is in this sense that "*example is better than precept*;" which axiom some erroneously understand, as though it meant, that an art may be taught by examples without precepts, which is certainly absurd. For, an art being a system of rules, the teaching of it necessarily implies the exposition of the rules.

7. Contrary to this practice, however, a custom has long been introduced by some authors, and generally followed by schools, to wit: after the rule has been expounded to the pupil, not its execution upon fine models of art, but its manifold violations on wrong examples, are presented to him for criticism and correction.

8. Although this system of teaching may not always be barren of good fruits; yet certainly, it is not the best, nor the most advantageous to the pupil's advancement. In fact, what teacher of music would ever illustrate the power of musical notes, and the theory of their harmonious combinations, by a melange of high discordant sounds? Or, what anatomist would explain the functions of the human organs, on a body either mutilated, or decayed? A faulty example will rather obscure, than elucidate the pupil's idea of the rule; since he sees in practice just the reverse of what he has learned in theory; and being as yet inexpert in the art of composition,



he is required to examine, criticise, and correct violations of rules, which task is very often onerous to a master.

9. In the synthetical method of teaching, according to sound philosophy, the *positive*, namely: the observance of the rules, must precede the *negative*, to wit: their violation. Therefore, after the rules have been clearly explained, the first illustration must be made on good models of composition.

10. Neither are a few classic examples sufficient for the full illustration of a species of composition. The structure and ornament of the various kinds of composition, are often different; they are complex as well as complete. Thus, narrations, descriptions, and letters, depend upon peculiar principles and rules, which often vary in their subordinate branches; they comprise primary and secondary parts; and for the beauty and perfection of each production, it is absolutely necessary that all the parts have a fine proportion, a mutual dependence, a symmetrical arrangement, and a suitable style.

11. Now, to gain a clear idea of the various modes of executing well such difficult works of art, the exhibition of a few models is no more sufficient to a student, than is one simple glance at a compound object, for obtaining a distinct idea of it. Hence, several full examples (and not brief extracts,) from various distinguished authors, are absolutely necessary to illustrate to the pupil the practical execution of the precepts of the art.

12. But, how is this to be done? Shall a book on Belles-Lettres be filled with classic examples for imitation, and with faulty specimens for correction, as some teachers desire? Evidently, such a collection would enormously increase the

size, as well as the cost of the book, to which parents justly object.

13. But were it even convenient thus to enlarge the book, it would certainly be *unnecessary and inexpedient*. It would be unnecessary; because rhetorical readers are used in high schools, which contain more or less good selections from distinguished writers, both in verse and prose. Examples for correction from bad writers, are always plentiful, and within reach. It would be inexpedient; for, the task of finding illustrative examples, and of analyzing and criticising such as are incorrect, must ultimately be left to the scholar himself, after he has well understood the rules, and seen their illustration, both positive and negative, in two or three examples. The student who has acquired such theoretical and practical knowledge of the art, is no longer to be considered totally inexperienced in composition. He is now possessed of the criteria, which he can easily apply to the examples of composition submitted to him for analysis and criticism. And though he may not at once perform this duty with perfection, he will undoubtedly advance in it by degrees.

14. On the other hand, it is absolutely necessary that students, particularly in high schools, should learn the art of analyzing and criticising, not only examples contained in their books, but also all kinds of composition of ancient and modern writers, either perfect or imperfect. It happens not unfrequently, that persons who have graduated with high honors, and obtained fine diplomas, when asked to review a literary production, are utterly unable to make a well-reasoned criticism. Of what avail to them and to society, is the education they have obtained, is difficult to conceive. Their failure in

accomplishing that duty, is to be ascribed to the omission in schools of this necessary and excellent exercise of analyzing and criticising other compositions, beside the meagre examples contained in their books.

15. For these reasons, we hold, that to fill up a book on Belles-Lettres, or Rhetoric, with many and long examples for imitation and correction, is both unnecessary and inexpedient. However, as our judgment may err in this particular, we will submit cheerfully to the decision of more competent judges.