

A FIRST BOOK IN WRITING ENGLISH

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A First Book in Writing English by Edwin Herbert Lewis

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EDWIN HERBERT LEWIS

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IN
WRITING ENGLISH

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PREFACE

It sometimes happens that the study of the principles of composition is left until the overcrowded last year of the high school, under the plea that facts ought to precede generalizations. Is it not better to have the pupil begin two or three years earlier than this to frame simple generalizations for his own future guidance? The first year student daily awakes to new experiences and problems. He demands rules and reasons: "*How* shall he choose theme topics? *How much* shall he put into a sentence? *Why* is *electrocution* in bad usage?" If the principle is asked for, should it not be given—as much of it as can be digested? When such a course is followed, time enough is left in the high school for composition to become a habit. The complex process wherein invention, as it proceeds, is rectified by criticism, involves many delicate reflexes. The formulated principle, invaluable to the student in revising, in turn grows to be an unconscious factor in every succeeding act of composition.

The more essential rules ought not to be mere phantoms to the boy just completing his first year

in the secondary school. In regard to other matters of living, great principles are taught him from infancy, without the slightest fear of setting up too analytic a state of mind. If a boy of three may be told "always to do one thing at a time," must a boy be eighteen before he is told "always to write about one thing at a time"? At three the child is required to control some of his strongest emotions; must he be eighteen before he is asked to check digressions in the paragraph? And is it possible to implant a genuine habit of checking digressions except by leading the student from particular instances to some generalization which he may keep in mind as a norm for future self-criticism? Synthesis and analysis cannot safely be separated; a good prescription for most rhetorical disorders is, more of both. Indeed, what seems to be needed to-day in teaching composition is not one thing, but several: on the one hand, more utilization of literature and more appeal to social interests; on the other hand, more inductions and generalizations by the student himself; on both hands, more time for practice and self-criticism.

In the present book, originally printed privately for my own classes and now rewritten and enlarged, I have tried to present a large number of definite situations to be faced for constructive practice both in organization and in diction; and to give in simple, even colloquial language, all the larger

generalizations which a boy presenting himself at college might reasonably be expected to have been using for two or three years as touchstones of his own work. Except in the chapters on punctuation and grammar, the order of reaching generalizations is meant to be essentially inductive. In these review-chapters a part of the principles come before the illustrations in order to get the help of all past associations. Even here the induction is often gone through with a second time, leading up to a restatement of the principle. It is recommended that students should often be asked to frame generalizations of their own, though the text-book may have led up to similar ones. In Chapters VIII. and X., on words, I have tried to present conditions favorable to the framing of definitions by the student. By various devices I have constantly tried to avoid separation between exercise critical and exercise constructive. Occasionally, after the correct form has been studied, bad English is offered for correction, for the sake of the appeal to the student's personal pride and his sense of the ridiculous; but in general it is assumed that the student's correction of his own bad English will afford plenty of contact with faulty forms.

The book is primarily intended to be used in close connection with the literary studies of the first two years of the secondary course. It may be used later if the arrangement of subjects allows

little time for literature in these earlier years. The order of presentation should,¹ in the author's opinion, follow that of the book. Still, Chapter VIII., on correct choice of words, may be taken at the start if the teacher prefers. Where a good deal of literary study is carried on in the first year, the first eight chapters are perhaps enough for this year. But a rate of progress cannot be prescribed. A text-book is a mere help, and bad in proportion as it tries to be anything more. Its function seems to be to supply the supplementary appeal to the eye, since the living teacher can engage to do this but to a limited extent. It appears obvious that the book should be read slowly enough to permit two things—much parallel literary study, and much revision of themes in the light of preceding chapters. First drafts are sometimes all that are worth making; but usually a task requiring connected discourse is not finished until there have been several revisions. If the student writes each new composition with a view to one particular kind of excellence, and then revises with reference to the kinds of excellence he has previously striven for, he will gradually be able to hold several stylistic principles in mind as he composes. Many themes should be written in class. A limited pe-

¹ From the first, brief supplementary themes, especially reproductions, should be required. For bibliography of material, see Chapter XIII.

riod should be set for the first draft; and half as much time may well be spent in revising before this is handed in. In this revision the student may profitably read his theme as many times as there are chapters to be mentally reviewed.

The remarkable strength of the verbal memory in students of the first two years of the secondary school is a fact by which every teacher must have been impressed.¹ Add to this fact the other, that the pupil's social interests are now in a perfect renaissance of liveliness, and you have exactly the conditions for enlarging the working vocabulary. It is now or never. The boy, though like the man he hates a fine distinction in conversation, is growing out of the exaggerated reticence which has of late seemed to him the manly thing. He is no longer determined to employ what Mrs. Meynell, speaking of the boy of twelve, calls his "carefully shortened vocabulary."² The girl, even more than the boy, is full of new ideas which would flower into speech if the words were to be had. To capture these new interests and satisfy them by literature is of course the best thing. Study of isolated words, whether for knowledge or for power, is but supplementary to the study of the vital functions of words in the living organism. But even the study of synonyms, if pursued in preparation for

¹ Cf. President Stanley Hall's *Pedagogical Seminary*, iv. i. 78.

² *The Children*, p. 103. (*The Bodley Head*. John Lane.)