

# **A GUIDE TO GOOD ENGLISH**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649183302

A guide to good English by Robert Palfrey Utter

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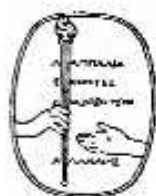
**ROBERT PALFREY UTTER**

**A GUIDE TO  
GOOD ENGLISH**



# A GUIDE TO GOOD ENGLISH

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HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS  
NEW YORK AND LONDON

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## INTRODUCTION

THIS book is offered with the sympathy of a fellow-craftsman to all who seek self-expression through words. It is based on the experience of a number of years spent in handling the manuscript that comes into the office of the newspaper, the magazine, the book publisher, and that which is written in college classes of all sorts, from those composed of Freshmen to those composed of more or less practised writers and teachers who seek from the college special help of some kind. On the basis of such experience I have selected the material for this book. In it I have tried to give answers to the questions which arise oftenest. It is not intended to be a compendium of all knowledge relating to our work, but merely a useful arrangement of the principles, and a few rules, which we must use every day, and which we must have either at our fingers' ends or at our elbows. In general I have presented principles as well as rules, and have tried to steer as free a course as one can between dogmatism and prolixity. Sometimes, however, to avoid discussion which would be out of place in a mere handbook, I have been content to point a safe path without explanation.



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For all readers I hope the index at the end of the volume will make readily accessible all the material the book contains. For beginners in academic classes, who often cannot find what they need because they do not know it by any name, the special value of the book is supposed to lie in the indexing of the common faults under the symbols which teachers commonly use in pointing them out. The symbol which points out the student's error will, I hope, almost automatically direct him to the passage in the book which will diagnose the fault and indicate the remedy. The plan is intended to relieve teachers of the burden of composition work too elementary for college classes, and to save time from the discussion in full convocation of the class of errors into which sixty per cent. never fall, but which the rest exemplify year after year with unfailing regularity. Beyond these hardy perennials of our "decomposition and illiterature" I have not attempted to go. This is not a complete collection of all the seventy times seven deadly sins of English composition, but merely those vulgar errors which experience has shown me are the true *pseudodoxia epidemica* of the writer's craft, so put together and explained that the seeker may easily find what he wants, and find it practically helpful.

Without prejudice to any useful purpose which the book may be made to serve, I suggest in what follows the work I have designed it to perform in college classes.

Let the teacher begin with the assumption that in so far as sins against elementary principles are con-

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cerned, each student is innocent until he has proved himself guilty. Change the character of the prescribed course in English for Freshmen from one in composition to one which emphasizes primarily the study of literature. Choose literary material which is stimulating, study it intensively with reference to the ideas it contains, and hold students to exactness of comprehension, thought, and expression. At each meeting of the class have a written recitation of five or ten minutes, answering some question on the day's lesson, usually a textual question or a question of fact, with the object of finding out whether the student has read the assignment and understood it. Then, having had a recitation from each student, the teacher may feel free to devote the rest of the hour to a discussion of the ideas in the lesson, or to any exercise which will make the students feel the value of what they are reading. Once in two or three weeks there may be written a theme, preferably in class, on topics that demand thought, something more than mere exercise of memory. As many as possible of his papers should be returned to the student, who should be left to study the mistakes marked in his papers by the passages in the book to which the symbols point him. The burden of training himself in elementary matters which he should have learned in school should be thrown on him. His progress should be measured by his improvement rather than by his skill in rewriting after specific errors have been pointed out to him.

On the basis of these papers pick out as early as possible the students who are "deficient in spelling,

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punctuation, sentence and paragraph structure," and organize them into a special class, meeting once a week at least for drill on elementary matters. At the end of the first half-year discharge as many of these as are cured, but continue work with the rest by means of a fifteen-minute conference for each man once a fortnight on a theme which he writes for the purpose, or on any of his written work.

Classes and conferences for delinquents ought to be used for all men in college who need the work, even for those who are not taking courses in English. Papers written in other classes should be periodically examined by teachers of English, and the writers who habitually write inaccurately should be summoned to conferences or placed in the extra class until they show improvement. Accuracy in English should be required for graduation even more strictly than a reading knowledge of French and German.

The effect of this should be to make the student himself strive to correct the deficiencies of his earlier education and to master English as a subject rather than to pass it "off" (his mind) as a course. The plan tends to concentrate the effort of the teacher on those who need it and to inculcate the art of orderly thought, and hence of clear and accurate expression, in the whole class, along with the inspirational teaching of literature. I, for one, prefer to spend time in class on literature rather than on dangling participles and pathetic fallacies. To dwell for ever on these is too much like the "Philadelphia Claverhouse" of Mr. E. S. Martin, who declares of young people brought up according to his ideas: