

ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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English composition by John Nichol

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JOHN NICHOL

**ENGLISH
COMPOSITION**

Literature Primers. *Edited by* J. R. GREEN.

ENGLISH
COMPOSITION.

BY

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PART I.
INTRODUCTORY.

CHAPTER I.

DEFINITIONS. SYNTHESIS OF SENTENCES.

1. **LITERARY Composition** is putting words together in order to convey our thoughts to others. Good composition conveys our thoughts correctly, clearly, and pleasantly, so as to make them readily understood and easily remembered.

To express ourselves well we must first have something to say. If we have not been able to come to any definite conclusion about a subject, we should be silent.

We must next choose the right names for the things or actions of which we are going to speak. This is not always easy, for we are apt to talk loosely of quantities and qualities; to say there are "thousands" when there are only hundreds, to call an event "marvellous" when it is only unusual, or to refer to "ages" when there are only years.

Lastly, we must arrange our words in the right way, so that they shall fit one another and combine to make good sense: just as we must put bricks or stones together properly to make a building stand. All language is a construction; it is the building or binding of words.

2. The term **Sentence** is applied to every arrangement of words expressing a complete sense, that is, a thought, judgment, or decision.

Every sentence involves a mental realization of two things and an assertion of some connection between

them. When I say "I am here" I have an idea of myself, of a present place, and of my being in it. When I say "Cain struck Abel" I have the idea of Cain, of his brother, and of a blow passing from one to the other. The verb in the latter case is transitive, in the former intransitive: in each we make no more than one plain assertion, and the result is a **Simple Sentence**. But when I say "James and I met John" I make, in short space, three statements:—I met John. James met John. I and James were together. The result is a **Compound Sentence**.

3. Frequently we have to make statements modified by some qualification. This qualification may be expressed by a single word, as "I ran home *quickly*"; by a **Phrase**, or set of words without a subject and predicate, as "I met him *on my way home*"; or by a **Clause**, or set of words containing a subject and predicate, as "I met him *while he was on his way home*." Clauses may often be expressed by phrases, and phrases may be shortened into words—*e.g.*, "when he was acting as an enemy," or "acting as an enemy," or "hostilely."

Co-ordinate Clauses are parts of sentences otherwise independent but connected by conjunctions, as "They gave up the attempt and *retreated to their fortresses*." A **Subordinate Clause** is a clause the construction and meaning of which is dependent on the principal or leading assertion, as "He ran quickly *that he might get home first*." Sentences containing subordinate or secondary clauses are sometimes called **Complex Sentences**.

A sentence may be both compound and complex; it may convey an indefinite number of statements, and each may be qualified by an indefinite number of clauses. There should, however, in every instance be a leading statement, obviously more important than the others, and giving a unity to the whole. Otherwise the facts or thoughts should be expressed in several sentences.

4. Clauses have been called adjective, relative, adverbial, or conjunctive, according to the parts of speech which introduce them: but it is of more consequence to observe that they are expansions in form, in matter, various modifications, either in the way of extension or restriction, of the main subject and predicate.

Half the art of composition consists in keeping the subordinate parts of the sentence in proper relation to the principal parts. Making the main assertion clear is to a writer what making his house stand firm is to a builder. Details of ornament are minor matters.

5. To this end the practice of **Grammatical Analysis**—or splitting compound and complex sentences into their elements (*see Primer of Grammar*)—is an aid. By a converse process, **Grammatical Synthesis**, these elements, the expressions of the separate judgments a sentence contains, are bound together. Take the following:—

Sir Philip Sidney was wounded.

He was at a battle.

It took place near Zutphen.

The wound was inflicted by a musket ball.

It broke the bone of his thigh.

This led to his death.

These assertions are easily gathered up into a single compound and complex sentence:—

“Sir Philip Sydney, at the battle near Zutphen, was wounded by a musket ball which broke the bone of his thigh and led to his death.”

Or take a different kind of construction—

He sacrificed his country.

He sacrificed his friends.

He sacrificed his home.

He sacrificed his personal honour.

He sacrificed them to a cause.

He was now deserting it.

All these facts failed to influence his decision.

Condense thus :—

“That he had sacrificed country, friends, home, and personal honour to the cause he was now deserting did not influence his decision.”

[*Syntheses of a greater number of assertions into variously qualified unities may be made to form the subjects of more difficult but highly useful exercises.*]

6. **Modifying phrases** and subordinate clauses often occupy much more space than the principal clause, but the latter is the pivot of the sentence. The qualifications may either—

- (a) Follow the main assertion ;
- (b) Precede it ; or,
- (c) Be inserted between its members.

Take the following as examples of the three modes of their introduction :—

(a) “The castle consists of a square keep or tower, several storeys high, encompassed by a square embattled wall, which has circular towers at each angle.”

(b) “While the multitudes below saw only the flat sterile desert in which they had so long wandered, bounded on every side by a near horizon, or diversified only by some deceitful mirage, he was gazing, from a far higher stand, on a far lovelier country.”

(c) “The two opposite parties who professed in specious terms, the one a preference for moderate aristocracy, the other a desire of admitting the people at large to an equality of civil privileges, made the state which they professed to serve in reality the prize of their contention.”

7. The first of these is called a **Loose sentence** ; because it might end with “tower” and yet convey a distinct and apparently complete sense ; the adjective clauses are thrown upon what precedes, as if they were afterthoughts. The second and third, where the assertion does not appear till the close, are called **Periods**. In some instances the former, in others the latter mode of construction is preferable.

8. A succession of sentences relating to the same view of the same subject is called a **Paragraph**, the close of which is generally indicated by the next sentence beginning with a new line. The separate sentences explain or illustrate one another, and have the same kind of relation to the paragraph that the clauses have to the sentence.

A series of paragraphs make up a Theme, Speech, or Essay, or Chapter of a Book.

CHAPTER II.

PUNCTUATION.

THE relation of the parts of a sentence to one another should be made as plain as possible by proper arrangement: but it is sometimes made more clear in spoken language by proper pauses, and in written or printed language by **Punctuation**.

The following are the Points common in English, and the main rules for their use:—

1. The **Full stop** (.), or **Period**, marks the close of a sentence, whether simple or complex, loose or periodic. It indicates that the construction is complete and that an assertion has been fully made; though other sentences in the same paragraph may follow to modify the thought. The **Period** is also employed to mark abbreviations, as in Christian names or titles—T. B. Potter; Lord Beaconsfield, K.G.

2. The **Colon** (:) generally indicates that the sentence might grammatically be regarded as finished, but that something follows without which the full force of the remark would be lost:—"Study to acquire a habit of thinking: no study is more important." This point is used after a general statement followed by the specification of two or more heads:—"Three properties belong to wisdom: nature, learning, and experience." A direct quotation is often introduced by a