

**THE ESSENTIALS OF
PROSE
COMPOSITION**

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The Essentials of Prose Composition by James Morgan Hart

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JAMES MORGAN HART

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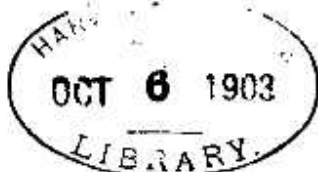
THE
ESSENTIALS
OF
PROSE COMPOSITION

BY
JAMES MORGAN HART
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PREFACE.

THE first three chapters of this book are in the main a reproduction of the lectures delivered to the Freshman class in Cornell University during a number of years. Chapters IV. and V. have been taken, in outline, from the author's *Handbook*, but with very many alterations and additions; practically they have been rewritten. Chapter VI. is entirely new; it may be said to represent the Cornell experience and views, not only of myself, but also—and chiefly—of the instructors in charge of a Freshman class of nearly two hundred and fifty students.

In the preparation of this book my steadfast aim has been to offer something practical, simple, and inexpensive, something adapted to the needs of young persons between the ages of sixteen and twenty. This book is not too difficult for the upper classes of any good high school; in an incomplete edition it has, in fact, been already tested in the classes of one such high school. Nor is it too elementary for the lower classes of a college. It represents, unless I am greatly mistaken, those working principles which the young, in their formative period, between sixteen and twenty, most need in acquiring the gift of correct and easy expression. It embodies the *essentials* of good every-day prose.

I am prepared to admit unhesitatingly, of course, that no two minds will agree entirely upon the essentials of any subject. The value of every book like the present will depend in great measure upon the experience and position of the writer. What, then, are the qualifications of the present writer?

For twelve years I have been the responsible head of an English department which now numbers two assistant professors, four instructors, one assistant, and nearly six hundred students. Of the students, over five hundred are in courses

which are exclusively or in good part courses in writing. With all this writing I am more or less acquainted, certainly to the extent of recognizing blunders and idiosyncrasies in every course, from English 1 to English 16. Further, having given regular instruction to more than one class in the Ithaca High School and read many of their papers, I am familiar with the practical workings of the school system. Besides, at the request of the Regents of the State of New York, I have read not a few of their papers on appeal. Lastly, in the matter of entrance examination, I have read hundreds of entrance papers and also hundreds of school papers submitted for exemption from our *A*-list. The writers represented every kind of preparatory school in nearly every State of the Union.

This book, accordingly, is only a strenuous effort on my part to *image*, see p. 175, the "English question" and discover the most practicable solution.

Stress, it will be observed, is laid upon the Sentence; next, upon Composition-Draughting. The Paragraph, though assuredly not neglected, is subordinated more thoroughly than in other text-books to the Composition as a whole. In this respect the present book represents a slight reaction from the ultra Paragraph-Doctrine which prevailed a few years ago. Concerning the Sentence I wish to be perfectly frank. The Sentence is *the unit of thinking*; yet in the entire domain of education it is the field *most neglected*. College professors complain of the student's inability to think in the direction of natural science, political economy, history, philosophy, and so forth. When closely analyzed, this inability reveals itself as the inability to measure accurately the relations of phrases and clauses to the sentence as an individual proposition. The loose thinker is loose because he is a loose writer, and vice versa. For him the sentence has no *ratio*; he is the embodiment of the illogical *post hoc propter hoc*. The reader will find abundant illustration in the warning examples here cited, especially those in §§ 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 25, 30, 36, 37, 38, 39.

Some critics will doubtless ask: Why is there nothing upon

Diction, the choice and use of words? Is not Diction an essential of all writing? Certainly it is an essential, perhaps the essential, of good writing; for words are the very life-blood of expression. The good writer is known by his words. Unfortunately, diction cannot be taught by any manual such as the present. Where should one begin, where should one end, what system should one follow in teaching the choice of words? The proper structure of writing, the putting together of words and phrases, can be taught and ought to be required of every educated person; this work is an attempt to teach structure. But diction is beyond the powers of any single book or teacher. Shall we begin with the difference between "expect" and "suspect," "affect" and "effect," and rest from our labors with the denunciation of such brutalities as "a combine," "an invite," "a recommend"? We shall be wiser if we recognize the fact that English diction means the English language, and the other fact that to know the English language one must know its literature. Our colleges now prescribe the reading of certain English classics in preparation for college. If that preparation is to be genuine, assuredly it must teach English diction. I can think of no better method.

On the other hand, the reader will please bear in mind that Sentence-Structure, Paragraphing, Composition-Draughting, though they may not teach Diction directly, nevertheless promote it indirectly, by cultivating the habit of discriminating. The person who is taught to forecast his treatment of the subject and construct proper sentences will inevitably be led, consciously or unconsciously, to weigh his words. The incompatibility between close thinking and loose or vulgar wording is inherent.

It may not be amiss to repeat here the explanation given at page 24: examples printed with an * prefixed have been taken from school and college papers. They are merely a few out of hundreds collected in the last three or four years. They will serve to illustrate present tendencies.

J. M. HART.

Cornell University, May, 1902.

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