

**WHAT IS ENGLISH? A  
BOOK OF STRATEGY  
FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS**

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What is English? A book of strategy for English teachers by C. H. Ward

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# WHAT IS ENGLISH?

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A BOOK OF STRATEGY FOR  
ENGLISH TEACHERS

UNIVERSITY OF  
CALIFORNIA

BY

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To

ALBERT SHAW

WHO ONCE TAUGHT ME THE MOST VALUABLE LESSON AN  
ENGLISH TEACHER CAN LEARN

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## PREFACE

Many of the ideas in this book have been elaborated as special articles, but the chapters are in no sense a set of reprinted essays. Thanks are due to the following journals for permission to adapt or use parts of what they published:

### *The English Journal*

- Intensive Spelling, Oct., 1914
- Punctator Gingriens, Sep., 1915
- We Must Not Be Enemies, Feb., 1916
- The Bottomless Pond of *oes*, March, 1916
- The Scale Illusion, April, 1917

### *Education*

- English Apparatus, Nov., 1915

### *Educational Review*

- What Is English? Feb., 1916

### *The English Leaflet*

- Inculcated Love, Feb., 1915
- Defending Camelot, Oct., 1916

### *The School Review*

- A Platform of Grammar, April, 1916

### *Bulletin of the Illinois Association*

- Exploring the Comma, Nov., 1916

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## INTRODUCTION

A paraphrase of the Advertisement to *The Vicar of Wakefield* will serve to introduce this book. "A hundred doubts may be stirred by this manual, and a hundred things could be said to prove them groundless. But it is needless. A book may be useful with numerous over-statements, or it may be erroneous without a single emphatic remark. Such as are fond of pulpit-banging will turn with disdain from the author's simple work-shop. Such as mistake suave wording for sound teaching will find no help in this kit of tools for a laborer, and such as have been taught to deride accuracy will laugh at one whose whole stock of advice is drawn from the facts of a long experience."

English has until recently been considered above and beyond other subjects of the curriculum. Its function has been supposed to be the cultivation of insight into beauty, of charm and finesse in expression. Teachers have taken pride in the idea that their beautiful occupation had little to do with imparting facts to crassly ignorant minds; have felt little need of accurate knowledge or careful scheme of attack. Algebra, Latin, physics—these required a teacher to have definite information and to go about his instruction according to plans worked out through centuries of experience. But English—that demanded only hazy desire and the throb of inspiration. A large proportion of its teachers, in both school and college, have been dilettanteish,

amateurish, ignorant of fact, and scornful of system. They have professed horror at the notion that the main purpose of secondary English is to attack methodically the most rudimentary illiteracy. They have felt that such a proposal could come only from a mental blacksmith, and have thus made the mechanics of their art an almost unmentionable subject. But they have not denied the necessity of the gross mechanics, and in practice have done much good work.

Such a jumble of emotion and fact perplexes the novice. And there is another potent cause of perplexity—the experts in pedagogy. They occupy lofty positions, they thunder in conventions, they appal us with articles and books. Though they know nothing of the craft of teaching English, they tell us of noble aims: “Why instead of confining our students to English literature do we not make them acquainted with the first-class literature of mankind?” This from a prominent man in our oldest university. An even better-known man has written “authoritatively” about spelling. The only particles of information in his brochure are wrong in principle; there is hardly a sentence that presents anything concrete; the adjurations are mostly impossible to follow. Lest such violent language should seem the impertinence of a small man toward great ones, the reader is referred to an article in the *Unpopular Review* for July, 1916, “The Professor of Pedagogy Once More,” written by a man who “for twenty years in several institutions has been next-door neighbor” to professors of pedagogy, and who “has on his shelves seventeen feet of pedagogic literature.” This article is not savage or vindictive

or satirical; it rather good-naturedly states such facts as these: "Among the secondary school-teachers, of course, the professor of pedagogy is an oracle and a great man. And it is the secondary school to which, almost exclusively, he addresses his literature. . . . Few college professors would be so naïve as to discuss their methods with a pedagogical expert. . . . He knows, too, that only a sort of professional courtesy prevents them from frankly calling him a humbug. . . . His whole 'line of talk' reveals that he has never considered the question of dealing with responsible minds. . . . Their praises of the delights of literature and art have a curious way of suggesting, by the vagueness and generality of the terms, that these delights are being reported, rather than recalled from personal experience. . . . In the teacher of experience, who takes the pedagogical courses as a condition of promotion, they excite only ridicule and contempt."

Where can the novice look for counsel? He knows not what his objective is, nor what to do, nor how to do it, nor how to correlate the demands for literature and written composition and oral composition and spelling and grammar and "appreciation" and clear thinking and self-expression and sentence-structure and analysis of style—and so on, world without end. Inexperienced teachers perform one third of the English work in the high schools of the author's state, and probably that ratio holds for the rest of the country. They cannot rely on their texts for guidance as teachers of algebra can; and so rapidly have methods changed that they may get only misdirection by recalling how they themselves were taught when they were in school. So there is a