

**PLAIN PRINCIPLES
OF PROSE
COMPOSITION**

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Plain Principles of Prose Composition by William Minto

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WILLIAM MINTO

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BY

WILLIAM MINTO, M.A.

HON. LL.D. OF ST ANDREWS;

PROFESSOR OF LOGIC AND ENGLISH IN THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN;

AUTHOR OF 'A MANUAL OF ENGLISH PROSE LITERATURE';

'CHARACTERISTICS OF ENGLISH POETS, FROM

CHAUCER TO SHIRLEY'

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS,	7
II. THE STRUCTURE OF SENTENCES AND PARAGRAPHS,	23
III. FIGURES OF SPEECH,	44
IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS,	74

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CHAPTER I.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS.

Introductory.

THERE are many excellent people who think that all advice about composition is useless,—that a man has only to know his subject thoroughly, and the expression will come of itself.

An English Dissenting minister recently hit upon a very simple way of making a book. He wrote letters to some hundreds of English authors more or less recognised as competent practitioners of their art, saying that he had undertaken to give a series of lectures on composition to young men, and that he would be glad to have a few words of advice.

Writers are, as a rule, a generous race, and not unsusceptible of flattery, and so many of the eminent men answered the appeal of the ingenious applicant that he was able to make a very interesting book out of their replies. The remarkable thing was that many of them, even some of the most eminent, seemed to hold that the less people thought about the style of their writing, the better they were likely to write.

There is a certain amount of truth in this; how much, I hope to make clearer before I have done. But there is also a large amount of error, a certain amount of absurdity, and perhaps not a little affectation and pretence. The successful practice of all arts must depend largely upon natural gifts. In writing, as in other arts, rules do not carry the practitioner far; rules must always be for the most part negative, and a man may have the completest knowledge how not to write and yet dip his pen and cudgel his brains in vain. None the less it is absurd to suppose that in writing, which is one of the most difficult of arts, a man has nothing to learn, nothing to gain by study,—that he has only to know his subject and the words will come of themselves in the best possible choice and order to enlighten, impress, and persuade.

The obvious truth is that a man who writes well must learn to do so by example, if not by precept. In any language that has been used for centuries as

a literary instrument, the beginner cannot begin as if he were the first in the field. Whatever he proposes to write, be it essay or sermon or leading article, history or fiction, there are hundreds of things of the same kind in existence, some of which he must have read and cannot help taking more or less as patterns or models. The various forms or plans of composition of every kind have been gradually developed by the practice of successive generations. If a man writes effectively without giving a thought to the manner of his composition, it must be because he has chanced upon good models, and not merely because he knows his subject well or feels it deeply and has a natural gift for expression. He can spare himself the trouble of thinking because his predecessors have thought for him ; he is rich as being the possessor of inherited wealth.

Yes ; but example and precept are different things. Everybody would admit that something is to be learned by the study of the masters in writing, as in other arts. The question is whether any general rules or principles can be laid down which may help the beginner in composition. When good examples abound, is it not enough to leave him to their influence ? Is anything to be gained by considering the principles of effective writing ? Does the beginner not learn them best insensibly from studying the practice of effective writers ?