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TEACH YOURSELF GOOD ENGLISH

A PRACTICAL BOOK OF SELF-INSTRUCTION IN
ENGLISH COMPOSITION BASED ON THE WORK BY
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INTRODUCTION

This book attempts to examine the principles that underlie good written English, and to suggest the best methods by which you may learn to write good English yourself.

This is a vaguer task than the grammarian's, and one more difficult to accomplish. He deals with language after it has been written down, and makes his rules to fit with current practice, not to guide it. Like the student of anatomy, his work is to probe and dissect, and he has a whole dictionary of terms by which he may label whatever he finds. To know these labels will not help you to write good English. You may be learned in all the uses of restrictive and illative and copulative clauses, and yet be unable to compose a single sentence with lucidity and ease. The study of formal grammar is useful in itself, but it will no more help you to write than a knowledge of anatomy will help a lame man to walk. This book therefore tries to avoid grammatical labels as far as possible, though in discussing sentence-structure it has sometimes been necessary to borrow them. It aims at showing the processes of prose construction, and once you understand them and have practised them for yourselves, you have no need to know the grammarian's names for them. To have talked much and read much is of more value in learning to write good English than to have parsed and analysed half a library.

Yet, you may ask, how far can good writing

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be taught? It is clearly a different problem from teaching arithmetic or Latin or trigonometry. In all these subjects you may lay down definite rules, but English, written as well as spoken, is both personal and instinctive. In learning to write, you are learning to express *yourself*; if you write well, whatever you write will be plainly and unmistakably your own. It seems therefore almost as difficult to write a book on composition as it must be to write those popular and fascinating handbooks on how to cultivate your personality. The problem is fundamentally the same. Professor Raleigh is extremely severe towards all such writers: "When you go to the teachers of composition, they cannot tell you what to say. They wait until you have said something and then they carp at it. They help you to a good style about as much as detectives help a thief to a good life."

Yet, with deference to Professor Raleigh, there are many ways in which such a book as this may be useful. You learn to compose by stages, learning first to express yourself in simple sentences and to give them variety, then to link your simple sentences into longer ones, and finally to link these into a paragraph. In this way you are able to practise and perfect your writing at each stage, and so to avoid the lopsided, ungainly style of the man who writes upon instinct as the words come into his head. In considering vocabulary, and in examining examples of bad writing, you sharpen your critical sense, and in the practice of précis and paraphrase you gain accuracy and conciseness, while in the later chapters you will find advice on tackling essays, descriptions and stories. By

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the time you have worked through this book, you will have absorbed the principles of good writing, and you will insensibly put them into practice. Most valuable of all, your study will have taught you how to criticise your own work, and you will have no need of a teacher, since you will rarely find a severer critic than yourself.

Some of the exercises set require criticism or correction of style; others demand original writing. The first can generally be checked by the Key; for the second, it is only possible to provide specimen compositions which will serve as a standard, and illustrate a different method of approaching the same subject. You cannot be too strongly urged not to look at the Key until you have finished your own exercise, however strong the temptation. Nothing more effectively paralyses the mind than to read what someone else has written on the same subject. Never be content to answer a question in your head; to write down an answer requires clearer thinking and more precise expression, and clearness and precision are qualities indispensable to any writer.

If it is at all possible, work with another student. You will find that each stimulates the other, and in criticising another's work you become more critical of your own. But, most important of all, you must yourself continually practise writing, not only formal composition, but letters, diaries—anything that offers freedom of self-expression. Without this constant practice you will never be able to write well or fluently, but, having learnt all the graces and arts of style, will be left disconsolate with nothing at all to say.

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