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HOW TO WRITE CLEARLY: RULES AND EXERCISES ON ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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PREFACE.

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Almost every English boy can be taught to write clearly, so far at least as clearness depends upon the arrangement of words. Force, elegance, and variety of style are more difficult to teach, and far more difficult to learn; but clear writing can be reduced to rules. To teach the art of writing clearly is the main object of these Rules and Exercises.

Ambiguity may arise, not only from bad arrangement, but also from other causes—from the misuse of single words, and from confused thought. These causes are not removable by definite rules, and therefore, though not neglected, are not prominently considered in this book. My object rather is to point out some few continually recurring causes of ambiguity, and to suggest definite remedies in each case. Speeches in Parliament, newspaper narratives and articles, and, above all, resolutions at public meetings, furnish abundant instances of obscurity arising from the monotonous neglect of some dozen simple rules.

The art of writing forcibly is, of course, a valuable acquisition—almost as valuable as the art of writing clearly. But forcible expression is not, like clear expression, a mere question of mechanism and of the manipulation of words; it is a much higher power, and implies much more.

Writing clearly does not imply thinking clearly. A man may think and reason as obscurely as Dogberry himself, but he may (though it is not probable that he will) be able to write clearly for all that. Writing clearly—so far as arrangement of words is concerned—is a mere matter of adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, and auxiliary verbs, placed and repeated according to definite rules.[1] Even obscure or illogical thought can be clearly expressed; indeed, the transparent medium of clear writing is not least beneficial when it reveals the illogical nature of the meaning beneath it.

On the other hand, if a man is to write forcibly, he must (to use a well-known illustration) describe Jerusalem as "sown with salt," not as "captured," and the Jews not as being "subdued" but as "almost exterminated" by Titus. But what does this imply? It implies knowledge, and very often a great deal of knowledge, and it implies also a vivid imagination. The writer must have eyes to see the vivid side of everything, as well as words to describe what he sees. Hence forcible writing, and of course tasteful writing also, is far less a matter of rules than is clear writing; and hence, though forcible writing is exemplified in the exercises, clear writing occupies most of the space devoted to the rules.

Boys who are studying Latin and Greek stand in especial need of help to enable them to write a long English sentence clearly. The periods of Thucydides and Cicero are not easily rendered into our idiom without some knowledge of the links that connect an English sentence.

There is scarcely any better training, rhetorical as well as logical, than the task of construing Thucydides into genuine

English; but the flat, vague, long-winded Greek-English and Latin-English imposture that is often tolerated in our examinations and is allowed to pass current for genuine English, diminishes instead of increasing the power that our pupils should possess over their native language. By getting marks at school and college for construing good Greek and Latin into bad English, our pupils systematically unlearn what they may have been allowed to pick up from Milton and from Shakespeare.

I must acknowledge very large obligations to Professor Bain's treatise on "English Composition and Rhetoric," and also to his English Grammar. I have not always been able to agree with Professor Bain as to matters of taste; but I find it difficult to express my admiration for the systematic thoroughness and suggestiveness of his book on Composition. In particular, Professor Bain's rule on the use of "that" and "which" (see Rule 8) deserves to be better known.[2] The ambiguity produced by the confusion between these two forms of the Relative is not a mere fiction of pedants; it is practically serious. Take, for instance, the following sentence, which appeared lately in one of our ablest weekly periodicals: "There are a good many Radical members in the House *who* cannot forgive the Prime Minister for being a Christian." Twenty years hence, who is to say whether the meaning is "*and they*, i.e. *all the Radical* members in the House," or "there are a good many Radical members of the House *that* cannot &c."? Professor Bain, apparently admitting no exceptions to his useful rule, amends many sentences in a manner that seems to me intolerably harsh. Therefore, while laying due stress on the

utility of the rule, I have endeavoured to point out and explain the exceptions.

The rules are stated as briefly as possible, and are intended not so much for use by themselves as for reference while the pupil is working at the exercises. Consequently, there is no attempt to prove the rules by accumulations of examples. The few examples that are given, are given not to prove, but to illustrate the rules. The exercises are intended to be written out and revised, as exercises usually are; but they may also be used for *vivâ voce* instruction. The books being shut, the pupils, with their written exercises before them, may be questioned as to the reasons for the several alterations they have made. Experienced teachers will not require any explanation of the arrangement or rather non-arrangement of the exercises. They have been purposely mixed together unclassified to prevent the pupil from relying upon anything but his own common sense and industry, to show him what is the fault in each case, and how it is to be amended. Besides references to the rules, notes are attached to each sentence, so that the exercises ought not to present any difficulty to a painstaking boy of twelve or thirteen, provided he has first been fairly trained in English grammar.

The "Continuous Extracts" present rather more difficulty, and are intended for boys somewhat older than those for whom the Exercises are intended. The attempt to modernize, and clarify, so to speak, the style of Burnet, Clarendon, and Bishop Butler,[3] may appear ambitious, and perhaps requires some explanation. My object has, of course, not been to *improve upon* the style of these authors,

but to show how their meaning might be expressed more clearly in modern English. The charm of the style is necessarily lost, but if the loss is recognized both by teacher and pupil, there is nothing, in my opinion, to counterbalance the obvious utility of such exercises. Professor Bain speaks to the same effect:[4] "For an English exercise, the matter should in some way or other be supplied, and the pupil disciplined in giving it expression. I know of no better method than to prescribe passages containing good matter, but in some respects imperfectly worded, to be amended according to the laws and the proprieties of style. Our older writers might be extensively, though not exclusively, drawn upon for this purpose."

To some of the friends whose help has been already acknowledged in "English Lessons for English People," I am indebted for further help in revising these pages. I desire to express especial obligations to the Rev. J. H. Lupton, late Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, and Second Master of St. Paul's School, for copious and valuable suggestions; also to several of my colleagues at the City of London School, among whom I must mention in particular the Rev. A. R. Vardy, Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge.

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Before electrotyping the Fourth and Revised Edition, I wish to say one word as to the manner in which this book has been used by my highest class, as a collection of Rules for reference in their construing lessons. In construing, from Thucydides especially, I have found Rules 5, 30, 34, 36, 37, and 40_a_, of great use. The rules about Metaphor and Climax have also been useful in correcting faults of taste in

their Latin and Greek compositions. I have hopes that, used in this way, this little book may be of service to the highest as well as to the middle classes of our schools.

Footnote

[1] Punctuation is fully discussed in most English Grammars, and is therefore referred to in this book only so far as is necessary to point out the slovenly fault of trusting too much to punctuation, and too little to arrangement.

[2] Before meeting with Professor Bain's rule, I had shown that the difference between the Relatives is generally observed by Shakespeare. See "Shakespearian Grammar," paragraph 259.

[3] Sir Archibald Alison stands on a very different footing. The extracts from this author are intended to exhibit the dangers of verbosity and exaggeration.

[4] "English Composition and Rhetoric," p. vii.

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I. CLEARNESS AND FORCE.

WORDS.

1. Use words in their proper sense.

2. Avoid exaggerations.

3. Avoid useless circumlocution and "fine writing."

4. Be careful in the use of "not ... and," "any," "but," "only," "not ... or," "that."

4 *a*. Be careful in the use of ambiguous words, *e.g.* "certain."

5. Be careful in the use of "he," "it," "they," "these," &c.

6. Report a speech in the First Person, where necessary to avoid ambiguity.

6 *a*. Use the Third Person where the exact words of the speaker are not intended to be given.

6 *b*. Omission of "that" in a speech in the Third Person.

7. When you use a Participle implying "when," "while," "though," or "that," show clearly by the context what is implied.

8. When using the Relative Pronoun, use "who" or "which," if the meaning is "and he" or "and it," "for he" or "for it." In other cases use "that," if euphony allows. Exceptions.

9. Do not use "and which" for "which."

10. Equivalents for the Relative: (*a*) Participle or Adjective; (*b*) Infinitive; (*c*) "Whereby," "whereto," &c.; (*d*) "If a man;" (*e*) "And he," "and this," &c.; (*f*) "what;" (*g*) omission of Relative.

10 *a'*. Repeat the Antecedent before the Relative, where the non-repetition causes any ambiguity. See 38.

11. Use particular for general terms. Avoid abstract Nouns.

11 *a*. Avoid Verbal Nouns where Verbs can be used.

12. Use particular persons instead of a class.

13. Use metaphor instead of literal statement.

14. Do not confuse metaphor.

14 *a*. Do not mix metaphor with literal statement.

14 *b*. Do not use poetic metaphor to illustrate a prosaic subject.

ORDER OF WORDS IN A SENTENCE.

15. Emphatic words must stand in emphatic positions; *i.e.*, for the most part, at the beginning or the end of the sentence.

15 *a*. Unemphatic words must, as a rule, be kept from the end. Exceptions.

15 *b*. An interrogation sometimes gives emphasis.

16. The Subject, if unusually emphatic, should often be transferred from the beginning of the sentence.

17. The Object is sometimes placed before the Verb for emphasis.

18. Where several words are emphatic, make it clear which is the most emphatic. Emphasis can sometimes be given by adding an epithet, or an intensifying word.

19. Words should be as near as possible to the words with which they are grammatically connected.

20. Adverbs should be placed next to the words they are intended to qualify.

21. "Only"; the strict rule is that "only" should be placed before the word it affects.

22. When "not only" precedes "but also," see that each is followed by the same part of speech.

23. "At least," "always," and other adverbial adjuncts, sometimes produce ambiguity.

24. Nouns should be placed near the Nouns that they define.

25. Pronouns should follow the Nouns to which they refer, without the intervention of any other Noun.

26. Clauses that are grammatically connected should be kept as close together as possible. Avoid parentheses. But see 55.

27. In conditional sentences, the antecedent or "if-clauses" must be kept distinct from the consequent clauses.

28. Dependent clauses preceded by "that" should be kept distinct from those that are independent.

29. Where there are several infinitives, those that are dependent on the same word must be kept distinct from

those that are not.

30. The principle of Suspense.

30 *a*. It is a violation of the principle of suspense to introduce unexpectedly at the end of a long sentence, some short and unemphatic clause beginning with (*a*) "not," (*b*) "which."

31. Suspense must not be excessive.

32. In a sentence with "if," "when," "though," &c., put the "if-clause," antecedent, or protasis, first.

33. Suspense is gained by placing a Participle or Adjective, that qualifies the Subject, before the Subject.

34. Suspensive Conjunctions, *e.g.* "either," "not only," "on the one hand," &c., add clearness.

35. Repeat the Subject, where its omission would cause obscurity or ambiguity.

36. Repeat a Preposition after an intervening Conjunction, especially if a Verb and an Object also intervene.

37. Repeat Conjunctions, Auxiliary Verbs, and Pronominal Adjectives.

37 *a*. Repeat Verbs after the Conjunctions "than," "as," &c.

38. Repeat the Subject, or some other emphatic word, or a summary of what has been said, if the sentence is so long that it is difficult to keep the thread of meaning unbroken.

39. Clearness is increased, when the beginning of the sentence prepares the way for the middle, and the middle for the end, the whole forming a kind of ascent. This ascent is called "climax."