

THE VIRGINIA TEACHER

VOLUME V

MAY, 1924

NUMBER 5

HOW TO READ PUPIL'S WRITTEN THEMES

THE only way to learn to play golf is to play—to go out day after day and knock the little ball around the field. Reading a textbook about golf does not do it; neither does watching experts at the game; although, no doubt, both these things help somewhat, though little. A careful analytical cross-sectioning and analysis of golf balls and golf clubs of every sort, cutting them to pieces and studying each constituent part, is a pleasant and maybe profitable *divertissement* for an expert between his rounds of actual play; he loves and can enjoy everything connected with his hobby, even rattling its bare bones. For a beginner, however, or a self-distrustful amateur, it would hinder rather than help, by making him conscious of too many things beside the main point of his game.

One cannot learn to play golf without practice, plenty of it. Practice alone, however, will not produce one's best game, even though it be indefatigable. There must be two accessory efforts, also persisted in. First, some one who knows golf pretty well—at least better than oneself—must travel with one and watch and criticize one's game. This need not be on every round; in fact, every round under criticism can, no doubt, be followed profitably by several without, during which the suggestions are pondered upon. Neither need the criticism point out *all* the things that one does not do well. When one isn't really very good yet, it is disheartening and confusing to face at once everything which a good player might truthfully say about one's game; it makes one want nothing else so much as to quit and go home, utterly discouraged. Secondly, one must learn to analyze—to analyze both one's own game and the performances of experts whom one may watch. The mere onlooker learns nothing, although he may be entertained; the ambi-

tious student penetrates beneath the spectacle to the elements which make it admirable.

The ideal teacher of golf does for his pupil three things. In the first place, he dangles before the beginner's fascinated eyes the possibilities of really skillful playing—the attainment of certain difficult goals with almost marvelous ease. In the second place, after this first stimulus has produced well-nigh a fever of protracted and repeated effort, he leads the pupil little by little to separate his play into its elements and be conscious of the part which each element—desirable or undesirable—has in determining the ultimate success or lack of success of the play of which it is a part. Thirdly, the ideal teacher of golf himself performs, at first slowly and then more and more normally, while his pupil discovers in this expert performance the elements which he has been taught to observe in himself and notes the difference between them here and in his own play. Then he can also watch, and profit from watching, other experts. Ultimately he can put, through painstaking effort and practice, what he sees in them into his own play.

As in Golf, So in English

The first lesson in the teaching of English composition is to read the above three paragraphs through thrice, and on the third round to substitute English Composition words for golf words throughout.

The present paper might deal with the first step mentioned above—that of *stimulus*; but it does not, and the order obtaining is deliberate. A later paper, or probably two more, will discuss theme subjects, theme assignment, and making pupils' writings stimulating, not a mere grind. The undertaking here is to help teachers to criticize themes so that each pupil may learn to analyze his own language for its elements of strength and weakness.

There is no value in theme reading in

and of itself. Very many teachers make theme reading a fetish, not an intelligently used instrument for educating pupils. The real problems connected with it are two: How can it be done economically? and, How can a teacher use it skillfully to help boys and girls to grow in power in the use of language?

There are two points of view in theme reading which are in practice rather necessarily separated. One is a look toward the language used, particularly to determine errors; the other is an inquiry regarding what ideas the pupil has expressed and how well he has said them. The first of these is ordinarily held by every teacher; the second, by every pupil. What the pupil cares about is, how well the teacher likes what he has said and wherein he has failed to express himself quite clearly. Theoretically, the teacher also cares for this; no teacher, being questioned, would deny that it is the main thing. But in practice the instructor usually sees—or, at any rate, leads the pupil to think that he sees—only lapses from grace in the use of conventions of language. Spelling, punctuation, capitalizing, paragraphing, and even much grammar, are to the pupil annoying trifles and to the typical teacher terribly important facts, mountains in the bulk of their momentousness, which he must impart, although he die from the intensity of the effort. The result of all this is that teachers and pupils ordinarily work at cross-purposes.

Insure Co-operation

The first step in economical theme reading is to have the teacher and pupils co-operate, not thwart each other and be out of sorts and discouraged half of the time and nonplussed the other half. The flavor of theme writing and of theme reading is wrong if the finished product is to lead only to conflict and hard feelings. There is but one way to co-operate; that is to go yourself as far as is necessary to meet the other person. If you encounter him on the way, coming toward you, excellent! If you do not, go even to the far limits of his own territory. But when you have met and have been friendly, bring him back a part of the way with you—not through force, but through the gentle compulsion of great friendliness. Few teach-

ers of composition make sure that they are meeting their pupils on a common ground of co-operation.

An instructor does well who reads a theme chiefly to get the thing which the pupil intended to put into it. This may seem to be a loss of time and opportunity, but it is not; for it will win, ultimately if not at first, the pupil's interest and helpfulness toward the things which the teacher wishes that he had attended to. Most young people respond spontaneously to interest and liberality.

Read Themes Rapidly

The second step in economical theme reading is to read rapidly. Speed in reading is a habit; it can be developed. Teachers are, as a rule, too conscientious in perusing themes; they plod, because they are afraid of missing something—mostly, of overlooking one or more insignificant errors. One can race through a theme and get most of it. Many themes ought to be raced through, not "chewed and digested."

There is a tradition, venerable and hoary, about red-inking themes, in the text and in the margin, with specific symbols indicating the particular types of errors found. In the light of modern educational experience, this procedure is probably indefensible. There are three reasons. First, in effect it slaps the pupil in the face; the paper which comes back to him takes all his courage and enthusiasm away in the first lurid moment. To his mind the theme thus brutally marked has proved a failure beyond any redemption which he cares to attempt. I well remember a certain youngster in a certain classroom which I chanced to visit. He went forward to receive his theme from the teacher's hand. While he stood there at the desk he unfolded it and glanced down the page. "P-p-p-p-p," he articulated, half aloud; then, "I never could punctuate!" and threw the paper into the wastebasket at his feet. He had not even looked at the text except fleetingly, but only at the margin. Other pupils were throwing their themes away—and everywhere *do* throw their themes away—but not quite so openly.

Even if the child retains or recovers his courage and interest, he is confused by the multiplicity of the red-inking. All his faults

stare at him at once, in a kind of nightmare, not one of them distinct and separate enough to provide an easy point of attack toward improvement.

The conventional red-inking, in the second place, almost invariably means that the teacher has put too much time upon one paper. I myself, at any rate, cannot mark themes carefully, with symbols, in less than about ten minutes to each two or three-page paper. If the teacher accepts the burden of indicating every error, the pupil is entitled to assume that everything marked is correct. Consequently the teacher must be most painstaking and exhaustive. The effort required to be certain of completeness is very much greater than that requisite to mark only outstanding wrong usages. Teachers of composition usually waste time by taking upon themselves a heavier burden than necessary.

The third reason why red-inking with specific symbols is undesirable is that it prevents instead of stimulating the pupil's own thought about his language. Everything is pointed out; he views it passively; he is obliged to discover nothing for himself, or even to analyze what is brought to his attention. Some children do analyze, but that is in spite of the system, not because of it; their investigative curiosity cannot be thwarted. The aim of really good educational methods must be to develop independence—individual strength and initiative to discover and cope with difficulties. When a teacher specifically points out every fault in a writing, with a label characterizing it, he does what the pupil himself should do and could be taught to do.

Because of what has just been said, it is very probable that the traditionally established detailed marking of themes is a procedure likely to be discarded in the best teaching. Three additional points might be stated briefly. The famous "Hopkins' Report"¹ has shown the physical impossibilities of marking *many* themes in this manner; if a considerable number of writings is had from pupils, the teacher must find some other way to criticize them. Further, it is observable that not seldom the teacher spends more time on a theme than does the pupil. Many a youngster writes rather carelessly, neglecting to look up matters which he suspects and might easily

correct for himself, because he thinks that the teacher somehow *likes* to make those corrections; "teachers of English are built that way," he remarks philosophically to himself. And, finally, the system does not *work*; it has been tried for years without achieving notable success. Altogether, there seems to be no reason to keep this way of reading themes unless positively no other can be found.

Knowledge is Power

The third step in economical theme reading is to know English so well oneself that no time is wasted in marking or pondering about language usages which are correct, although perhaps strange. Most young teachers and many others do not infallibly distinguish right usage from wrong. Their scholarship is inaccurate. I am not sure about the value of systematic grammar to pupils, but I am sure of its indispensability to teachers. Often, too, even when the scholarship is potentially sufficient, the attention is so little trained that the teacher cannot use what he knows. There is a difference between the ability to grasp English in an orderly, systematic presentation in a textbook, read perhaps under conditions permitting an unbroken train of thought, and the ability to pick quickly from a child's composition the slips from correct usage. I have known college seniors, under training for teaching, and some of them already experienced, repeatedly to pass by glaring errors (even after being warned) and to mark as wrong wholly correct language in the near vicinity. Yet every such student could pass a good examination calling for orderly statements of the points involved.²

Avoid Fads and Fancies

The fourth fundamental characteristic of the right reading of themes is the avoidance of whimsicality. One who has not observed will be amazed to be told what whims and fantasies regarding language many teachers of composition have. The stress is just as likely to be put vehemently upon some "pet peeve" as upon a barbarism. I remember one college professor, my superior in a composition course in a great university, who hated the word *forceful* with bitter animosity. Invariably he struck it out and substitut-

ed forcible. The same misplacing of the strong condemnation rests quite frequently upon *gotten* and the pronoun *I* at the beginning of a paragraph. I might mention a good many other pet school-teacher whims. The net result of having them running around loose is to decrease greatly the force of really crucial linguistic criticism.³

Remember that English is a Live Language

Closely allied with the point just given is another, difficult to state. All prospective teachers of composition should be well taught in the history of the English language. It is a grievous fact that at present few universities offer such a course, given in a manner to commend it to worth-while students. It is usually, if given, the pasture of the driest dry-as-dust fossil in the department, just before he is superannuated. Young teachers need a thorough and enjoyable grounding in the fundamentals of English; for, fifthly, good theme reading should recognize that a live language *changes*. Most teachers of English resist change in English usage, very strenuously. They offer themselves as a vicarious sacrifice to the juggernaut of inevitable linguistic change; but they do it without deserving credit, for most of them are ignorant of the fact that there is legitimately such a thing as linguistic change. A cynic is reminded of old King Canute, on the sands of the seashore, commanding the tide to stand back.

Many of the language usages of children are not so much incorrect as extremely progressive—perhaps, indeed, too progressive, for children must not outrun adults; an education which permits this would be rather ineffective; but, nevertheless, children's language is likely to differ from adults' in the general direction in which English is moving much faster than grown people, and teachers in particular, realize.

Teachers spend much energy trying to slow children down regarding this very legitimate tendency in their language. When, rather sternly (with that superior self-assurance which Wordsworth has portrayed so delightfully), the instructor commands the pupil to "look in the dictionary," the chances are about three out of five that he is using this great and good Bible of language as

a sheet anchor to hold back progress. Teachers are great conservatives. They cannot help it; all their training tends that way. But the result of this fact is that, regarding language, they work at cross-purposes with children. The adult is studied, confident, learned; the child is only instinctive, but he has on his side the great, intangible, irresistible soul of the language.

Perhaps most children speak two tongues—their schoolroom language, under the eye of the teacher (and possibly also at home), and their natural language, when free from this restraint. Teachers have observed this, but are wont to ascribe it to sheer perversity or, perhaps sadly, to insufficiently vehement instruction. Have you ever heard a boy on the playground and with other boys around, say, "It was I?" Being a boy, a real boy, he *couldn't*.

If the teacher knows enough he will be less conservative than teachers usually are. He will read themes to find vital language, not bookishness. He will guide development, but will waste little or no energy trying to prevent it.

An aside—a remark not about theme reading, but about oral English—is that eighty percent of the school criticism of the *accent* of words is in the category just described. What teachers do not know concerning the tendencies of English regarding shift of accent is one hundred percent of the total truth.

Read a Group of Themes at a Time

The sixth remark about the reading of themes is that not one, but a handful, from each pupil should be looked at at a sitting. This suggestion brings forward complications, and most of these must wait for later treatment. The only important thing in theme reading is to learn, and to bring to the writer's attention, specific *habits* which are manifest. If an error occurs only once, it is negligible. If many errors occur only once, they severally are negligible; but probably their cause is carelessness, and that—or whatever the cause may really be—is a specific habit requiring notice. The teacher would only waste time by harping on the details which are the result of this definite cause and may themselves never be wrong again.

Habits cannot be identified from a single theme. Only when, at a sitting, the teacher finds the same misuses of language occurring in successive themes can he be sure that he is beholding what is not a mere careless accident. Teachers waste much time correcting accidents.

If, as is here suggested, themes be accumulated until there are perhaps a half dozen to be read at once, we shall seem to be in conflict with a thoroughly sound principle of teaching composition not here discussed—viz., that a pupil's interest in his writing flags quickly, and therefore, his theme should be read and criticized quickly—if possible within a day or two. Two answers to this objection are to be made. The first is that the present proposal contemplates very many writings from each pupil—eighty or more, perhaps, during a year; consequently the span of time required to accumulate five or six is much shorter than most teachers will suppose. In my own teaching I sometimes receive five or six in a week, and from most students that number during every two weeks of intensive writing. The wait is not so long that the pupil loses interest. But the second answer to the objection is to suggest that a very profitable use of the class hour, during a season of writing, is to give it entirely to hearing pupils read their own themes to the class group and receive verbal criticisms thereon, on everything which can be noted by ear. The teacher's criticism of the manuscript is then secondary, and, although looked forward to, can be postponed.

Use a Rifle, not a Shotgun

The seventh principle of good theme reading is to emphasize only a few wrong habits at a time. The teacher may, indeed, mark roughly—with quick strokes, connecting lines, carets, brackets, and circles—whatever errors he happens to notice. These sketchy marks become a challenge; they tell the pupil that something is wrong, but not *what*, and direct his attention to the places in his writings which require further thought. The teacher can mark them rapidly, for he makes no pretensions of noticing every error. Very deliberately he does not definitely describe errors, by symbols or otherwise. This both

saves his time and stimulates the pupil. The instructor may mark, in this easy running manner, all the errors he notes. He need not, however; for the important thing is to pick out and mark heavily a very few (perhaps three or four) prevailing wrong habits, toward the elimination of which—temporarily, perhaps, neglecting all else—the pupil is to direct every effort.

A child can pay close attention to, and eliminate, three or four bad habits at a time. To lay more than about that number before him at once is merely to scatter his effort and probably prevent any real conquest of anything.

Preserve Themes for Reference

The eighth matter to observe in theme reading is to keep all themes on file through at least a year, and possibly throughout a pupil's school course. The files should be accessible; vertical holders (taking all papers *flat*) are perhaps best. The pupil should carry themes away only for very limited periods, and should receipt for them. If habits are to be eliminated and other habits formed, only complete files of the writings afford the teacher the requisite information. Themes should not be given back to the pupil, to become his property, and they should not be destroyed.

It is not necessary for the teacher to read all writings. He will read what he can, and certainly enough to learn every pupil's habits. Upon request, he will read for content value any theme which he has not got to, and on which the author wishes criticism. All this is above board; there is no pretending to have read what one has not.

Confer Privately with Pupils

The ninth, and last suggestion about theme reading is to use the conference method in dealing with individuals. There is no substitute for it. Errors which are widely prevalent can be discussed in open class; most of the helpfulness, however, of a good teacher comes best in quiet talk, person to person, over a handful of themes.

The English teacher should be programmed so as to permit frequent conferences with every pupil. An administrative plan which

does not permit this is false economy. Of the two evils, too many classes, or too large classes, if a choice had to be made, I should unhesitatingly select the latter. The high school composition teacher should be programmed for four classes a day; this will keep him busier than any other teacher on the staff. A superior teacher who knows how—and the technique is very new—can instruct thirty or thirty-five pupils in a class, or 120 to 140 pupils in all. If the teacher meets five classes, the result, in my judgment, will be less satisfactory, even with the same number of pupils altogether. And a principal who programs a composition teacher for more than five classes a day, including study-hall and all other work, probably cannot under any circumstances have really good teaching. There is no opportunity, either in time or in free energy, for the individual contacts which produce the best results. A superior teacher caught in a system with such ideals had better move.

Golf is a great game—greatest of all when it is fun. There are a multitude of complicated habits to be attained before one's play becomes really expert, and some of them are trying to one's soul. But the ideal teacher—bless him—teachers them one by one so simply that they are easy to master; and while doing so, he never spoils the fun.

CHARLES S. PENDLETON

Reprinted, by permission of the author, from the *Peabody Journal of Education*, March, 1924.

¹*The Labor and Cost of the Teaching of English*. Committee report, National Council of Teachers of English, 506 West Sixty-ninth Street, Chicago. Price, 10 cents.

²Sterling A. Leonard, "How English Teachers Correct Papers," *English Journal* XII: 517-532 (October, 1923), gives much specific material on this point—typical of what every one engaged in training teachers of English regularly finds.

³J. Leslie Hall: *English Usage*, Scott, Foresman & Co., 1917, is a delightful storehouse of material of this kind, with 141 sections, each devoted to a particular "error." The book costs \$2.25; it is worth \$225 to a teacher who would keep out—or climb out—of deep ruts. It is a very valuable offset to Woolley's *Handbook* and its kind, which, although valuable tools, are as arbitrary as could be, and sometimes fall into the very error here stigmatized.

VIRGINIA'S PROGRESS IN THE CURE AND PREVENTION OF TUBER- CULOSIS

IN the days of our grandparents or great-grandparents tuberculosis was considered hereditary and incurable. The man who had this disease thought he was doomed to die and that nothing could be done to help him. The doctors, knowing no more about the disease than the people, had their patients put to bed and shut away from air and sunlight. This of course hastened their death. People naturally thought the disease was hereditary when whole families were dying from it one after another.

It was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that a glimmer of light appeared with Pasteur's discovery of bacteria and fermentation. A little later Koch discovered methods of growing, isolating, and studying germs. In 1882 he isolated the tubercle bacillus. He grew the germ in his laboratory, inoculated guinea pigs with these laboratory-grown germs, and produced the disease. He had learned what caused tuberculosis, and the beginning of how it was spread.

By this contribution to scientific knowledge, Koch gave us the weapon with which to conquer tuberculosis; and during the years that have followed many doctors have devoted their lives to the study of the disease. We have learned that tuberculosis can be prevented and can be cured.¹ No longer are the tuberculosis patients put to bed and shut away from sunlight and air to die. No longer are the children of tubercular parents expected to have the disease just because their parents have it. We are told that thousands who in the days of ignorance would have contracted the disease, now stay well; thousands, who probably would have died, now live.

Death Rates in Virginia

Virginia is making material progress in the reduction of deaths from tuberculosis. Dr. W. A. Plecker, State Registrar, states that

¹*Virginia Health Bulletin*, No. 4, April 1923, State Board of Health, Richmond, Va.