

carded by the unusual. He knows now what he is doing and why. No longer does he merely work by rule but by inspiration and as a result his personal satisfaction has increased. When one becomes satisfied, or even approaches that state, one no longer will accept, even in his own work, the poorly and ill-done task.

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ENGLISH COMPOSITION: A BURDEN OR A JOY?

THE THREE objectives in teaching English composition, I presume, are that the pupils may learn to write with accuracy, with smoothness and grace, and with interest. The first, "with accuracy," is concerned with the mechanics of writing: grammar, punctuation, and the like. This aim should be attained by all. The second, "with smoothness and grace," is concerned with style, with transition from one sentence to another and from one paragraph to the next, with varying sentence structure, and with the plan of the composition as a whole. This aim will probably be reached by only a few. The third, "with interest," is concerned with the spirit and vitality of the writing and with the appeal which it makes to the reader. Every pupil should attain to some degree this aim of writing with interest. If accuracy is largely a matter of drill and care, if smoothness and grace are matters of constant practice, imitation, and skill, may I venture to suggest that writing with interest is largely a matter of motivation for which the teacher is responsible? This paper will attempt to discuss briefly two or three considerations for the motivation of composition in order that interest may develop both for writer and reader. Because different types of writing need different kinds of motivation, let us, for convenience' sake, divide composition into two classes: the first, the short theme in which pupils write about small objects or topics of interest in their environ-

ment and, the second, the longer theme which involves a larger preparation through study of books, through visits, and through class recitations.

To motivate the short themes which require observation of one's environment, the teacher needs to impart the spirit of adventure in the search for bits of interest. What fun to catch the expression on a freshman girl's face as she is shut out for the first time from the dining room! How lucky to see Sallie at the Post Office just receiving into her arms a long box marked "Fragile—Roses!" Never-to-be-forgotten that winter day which changed the wire fence around the tennis courts to feathery lace quilts of beauty! Luckily, the eagerness to find beauty is always rewarded. The teacher need be neither doubtful nor uncertain in her urge for the search, for beauty is always present in both people and nature. Aside from its use in composition, the value of acquiring this attitude of interest in looking and in finding lies in an enriched life. As an anonymous writer says in a widely known essay called "The Daily Theme Eye," "By training . . . the eye, we watched for and found in the surroundings of our life, as it passed, a heightened picturesqueness, a constant wonder, and added significance."¹

Once pupils are finding joy in discovering beauties, a teacher will never let them get away from the idea that finding something interesting to write about is the most important part of composition, without which nothing of value can be done.

In this observation type of writing the teacher must consider the length of the composition he asks the students to write. It seems that the movement for the four or five sentence composition in the grades is resulting in a tendency towards a one page composition in both high school and college. The advantage to the teacher in having one page to correct, instead of three or

¹Tanner: *Essays and Essay Writing*, p. 24.

four, is obvious; he has time to require more frequent writing. Moreover, a teacher can estimate a pupil's ability and find his mistakes in one page of writing just as well as in three. The greatest value, however, in the limitation to one page, is that the student may have time for frequent rewritings before he hands his composition to the teacher until he himself is satisfied not only that there are no glaring errors but that it is the best work of which he is capable. A higher standard may be set for the one page composition than for the longer theme.

Finding something interesting to write in a one page composition, however, needs along with it the ability to impart the find to someone else. Sometimes the "someone else" may be the school newspaper or magazine; more often, however, it must be the teacher and the class of composition writers. It is their attitudes and judgments which impel effort or create indifference on the part of the writers. Aside from sending out enthusiastic searchers for subjects about which to write, a teacher's first contribution is to make an assignment to call forth effort on the part of the student. This assignment should be considered a matter of enough importance to come first in the class period and to warrant the pupils' taking notes; it should be definite and detailed enough to avoid misunderstanding. An important part of the assignment should be the reading of one or two compositions of a nature similar to the one assigned which will set an ideal standard towards which the students may work.

A second contribution a teacher may make to secure greater interest and effort from his students is in the comments written on the compositions. Whatever he says should be encouraging and look towards improvement. He may point out weaknesses but never discourage; he may acknowledge good points and show the way to something better.

Again, the teacher may increase effort and interest by selecting in every set of

compositions the best four or five for an "honor" reading. Words of deserved praise from the teacher and from the class definitely pointing out good points go a long way in stimulating effort. Occasionally, the teacher may hand over to a committee, chosen from the class, all the compositions, unmarked, and ask the committee to select the best for the "honor" reading with comments as to the reasons for their selection. After several class discussions of this kind, when the teacher feels the class is growing in critical ability, a written criticism of a classmate's paper covering definite points is a good exercise.

The teacher of English composition will constantly be watching for new ways in which to secure greater interest and effort from his pupils. Some will be interested for one reason and some for another. Each teacher will for himself work out ways best fitted for the class he is teaching. Last summer before a class did any writing at all I used two simple experiments as a basis for motivation. A piece of chalk was given to every student and she was asked to list all the qualities of the chalk. In order to get long lists, the students looked and felt and smelled and even tasted the chalk. A piece of chalk will never be to them a common thing again. It acquired—as what will not?—a certain significance because of close scrutiny. The other experiment was recording all the sounds which came to a listening classroom. As the list grew longer, we were forced to the conclusion that concentration even on silence gets results. With these two experiments in mind, the first assignment for writing was made.

The long composition remains to be briefly discussed. Certainly somewhere in the term's work there should be room for one or two pieces of writing more scholarly and more sustained than the one page composition and long enough to have a developing plan, a beginning, middle, and end, a composition which the students might consider the climax of their writing. One such theme,

correlating with the work of another department, might be a paper on history or geography.

For a stimulating grand finale, however, I should recommend what is being done constantly in so many schools, a piece of socialized writing to be undertaken by the class. Oral speeches, suggesting subjects to write about, made for two minutes by each member of the class, might well take up two periods. When each student has had the chance to propose and defend the subject he has chosen, it is then time for the class to vote its choice. The subject, of course, should be important enough to deserve careful investigation and big enough to divide among the members of the class.

As soon as the class has chosen the subject, study begins. Instead of looking at this preparation work as wasted time from the point of view of English composition, the teacher would do well to recall the advice of Alfred M. Hitchcock in his "Bread Loaf Talks on Teaching Composition" when he says, "Accustom pupils, from the beginning, to regard compositions as, first of all, adventures in winning possession of subject matter—cargo getting. Emphasize getting, getting, getting—getting that one may really have something to give. Expression is important, but winning possession of subject matter comes first."² Books, magazines, encyclopedias, newspapers, pictures, and other material bearing on the subject are brought into the classroom; articles are read and summarized; clippings are made and pasted in note-books. If the nature of the topic allows interviews to be made, letters to be written, and visits to be made, so much the better. At the end of a week the class, presumably, has a general grasp of the subject matter to be covered.

A committee from the class may then be elected to submit to the class an outline

covering the whole subject, arranged so that a topic or a sub-topic may be chosen by, or assigned to, each person. The individual may then avail himself of the material already gathered on his particular topic and avail himself also of any other source of information. After having drawn up an outline which is accepted by the teacher, he is ready to start writing. By this time it is to be hoped that the student is so full of his subject that he is eager to express himself. As each strives to make his part a good bit of the whole, it is no wonder that he tries his utmost to make a worthy contribution.

The assembling of the finished parts and the method of putting together all the contributions may well be left to an editing committee. An added stimulus to effort would be to place a mimeographed copy in the hands of each student. Certainly the teacher should have a complete copy as a memorial of the best work of which the class was capable. I find my copy of "The Industries and Places of Interest Around Harrisonburg" done by a summer session class last year not only interesting for the information it contains but valuable as a suggestion and an urge to the next class which will undertake a co-operative piece of writing.

Suggestive lists of theme topics may be found in the following books:

The Teaching of English in the Secondary School. (Appendix.) Charles Swain Thomas. Houghton Mifflin and Co.

Essays and Essay Writing. (Appendix). William M. Tanner. The Atlantic Monthly Press.

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According to reports from the National Education Association, the average salary paid to educators in the United States is only \$1,275. Statistics show that the average income earned by all those gainfully employed in the United States is \$2,010. The average earnings for laborers in twenty-five representative manufacturing districts in the United States is \$1,309.

²*Bread Loaf Talks on Teaching Composition*—By A. M. Hitchcock. N. Y.: Henry Holt and Company.