

of boyish minds! They had looked out all the useless derivations that could be looked out. They knew that rage came from the Latin *rabies*, and was connected with the Sanscrit *rabh*; they knew that *treason* came from the French *trahison* and the Latin *tradere*; they knew that *deaf* came from the Anglo-Saxon *deaf*. In a word, they knew everything that it was no use to know. But the inferences that might be drawn from these pieces of knowledge, useless in themselves, had never for a moment occurred to them; and how to distinguish between what was useful and what was useless seemed a task that they had never thought of attempting. For a time I was utterly unable to account for the curious sagacity with which they seemed to scent out and investigate just those pieces of useless information that could give them the least possible profit and the greatest possible labour. At last it flashed across my mind that they were merely endeavouring to study English, in all honesty and simplicity, as they had been accustomed to study Latin. Their Latin training had taught them to consider the inflections and derivations of words, and construing, the great objects of a lesson. Construing there was none, and inflections very few; so they were forced to make the most of the derivations. As to analysing a metaphor, or explaining the force of an epithet, they shrank from such novelties with horror. Their business was with the words, not with their meaning.

There was needed nothing but a little tact and method to change all this. A few simple laws of derivation, diction, prosody, and logic, were laid down; passages were paraphrased on paper; questions were given in each lesson to be answered on paper at home; English verses were learned instead of Latin verses: the English lesson, like any other, had its competition and rewards. Thus, by degrees, a new tradition soon sprang up: boys began to see for themselves what were the points worth study of an English lesson, and how they were to be studied; and then it became possible to discontinue some of the paper work, and to diminish the number of questions of which notice was given. That similar, and, I hope, even more satisfactory results, may be attained in any school where English is systematically taught, I am confidently persuaded. We only want, as I said above, a little tact, a little method, and perhaps a little patience.

Hints on Composition.

[From the *Irish Teachers' Journal*.]

We have for some time past received communications from different sources, requesting us to devote a portion of our space to the above subject, with a particular reference to the wants of those preparing for Civil Service and other examinations. We have not been insensible of the importance of composition and essay writing, and we felt that it should be dealt with at some time or other in our pages. But we must confess that the difficulty of dealing with it in a satisfactory manner has caused us much misgiving. We must confess, likewise, that we have no hope of treating it as satisfactorily as most of the other subjects in our programme. In order to understand fully our views upon this point, it is necessary to consider the question a little in detail. In the first place, we must recollect that in composition there are two things to be considered, namely, the ideas themselves and the mode of expressing them. The ideas themselves are of the first importance; and as they are intimately connected with the mode in which they are to be expressed, the rules relative to the latter must deal more or less with the

subject matter. But composition refers to every possible variety of topics; hence the impossibility of treating it satisfactorily by the only means at our disposal, that is, briefly. Again, it has been often said that there is no single test so decisive of any man's capacity as to ask him to set down his thoughts upon any topic. Let us suppose that the person to whom this test is applied is allowed full liberty to select his materials; still his task is a very difficult one. He has in the first instance to select, compare, and combine these materials; and in the next place he has to express them in a suitable manner. Either of these labours is sufficiently arduous; but combined they are still more difficult. How much is the difficulty increased when no opportunity is allowed for consultation or for reference? At a competitive examination, the subject is given without any previous notice, and the candidate must find in his own mind his materials, and the skill to arrange and express them properly. To prepare our readers for these difficulties is anything but an easy task; and for this reason, that we cannot possibly make the conditions similar. We can give a question in grammar or algebra not unlike those likely to be afterwards given, and we can show afterwards how these questions should be answered; but we cannot take our readers unprepared by giving them a subject to write about, and see that they cannot consult books or friends while so engaged.

We make these observations because we wish to warn our readers beforehand that they must be prepared for shortcomings in our Lessons on Composition, and that they must bear with us accordingly; with the understanding, we will endeavour to do our best to aid and encourage those who wish to attain a correct and graceful style of expressing their thoughts.

Our preliminary remarks will have shown that the ideas to be expressed are the most essential in importance. In this, composition differs from other arts. A man may be a skilful cook without either meat or vegetables; he may be a good carpenter though destitute of a particle of wood; but he cannot possibly write a good composition or have any skill in the art if he has no subject matter at his disposal. It is a standing joke that French cooks can dress an exquisite dinner out of a pair of old boots or a few nettles; and in any case they can display their skill even with these unpromising materials.

But in composition the graces of style will not conceal poverty of matter; on the contrary, the latter makes the former repulsive. Sometimes a wealth of ideas may be conveyed in a homely or uncouth garb; but for this defect a remedy can be applied. "When the style is fully formed in other respects, pregnant fulness of meaning is seldom superadded; but when there is a basis of energetic condensation of thought, the faults of harshness, baldness, or even obscurity are much more likely to be remedied. Solid gold may be new-moulded and polished; but when give solidity to gilding?"

The first quality of style is perspicuity, that is the expression of our thoughts clearly and plainly. It is evident that the first step towards the attainment of this quality is to think clearly. A person may have full and clear ideas which he cannot express except obscurely; but no one can put before his readers or hearers, in a perspicuous manner, ideas which are to himself hazy and undefined. But a difficulty will be felt in this respect by the beginner, since his endeavours to *think* clearly will often be unsuccessful. Here the practice of composition must go hand in hand with the theory. A person often deceives himself with regard to the clearness of his notions respecting something which he has read; he may think himself fully master of the subject, until his endeavours to reproduce it upon paper show him the