

Concerning How to Study.



HERE are various types of students. There is the school-boy, crawling "like snail, unwillingly to school," who hails every public calamity as a possible holiday; the young aspirant for academic honors, talking in a nonchalant fashion of the late hours he keeps, and hinting how little sleep he can get along with; the life-long student, whose ever-craving never-to-be-satisfied ambition reaches out after all knowledge, and demands from Nature and Destiny their deepest secrets. The first type is without doubt the most plentiful, since all pass through that stage: here compulsion is the main-spring of the mental activity. The second type seeks knowledge for the sake of the honors and advantages resulting from its possession; while to the third knowledge is sweet for its own sake.

But in all these cases, knowledge is the object sought, whether the seeker realizes fully the value of the object or not. And how painfully slow is the process of acquiring that indispensable boon! The little larva that hops about from limb to limb, and swims through the air with so ease and swiftness envied, and vainly imitated by man, reckons the time given to its education by hours. Superior man plods painfully through years and years of study, and then is just beginning to discover how little he knows, and how seldom that knowledge can guard him from fatal mistakes. But how admirable is the final product! Man cannot fly, nor learn his lessons in an hour, but he can evolve from his laborious process of study inventions that can outstrip the winged winds in their flight, or tell the nations speak across estranging oceans.

If such have been the *results* of study, then the *methods* of study are worthy of consideration. To give a few practical suggestions along this line of methods is the purpose of this paper.

Method is essential. How common a sight it is to see a student poking and plugging, plugging and cramming, honestly endeavoring to wrest knowledge from those arid pages! But the result is very discouraging, and he comes to the conclusion that he was not cut out for a student. It is quite possible that the real explanation of this failure is to be found, not so much in inherent dulness, as in not having any method or system. Hence there is a great deal of misdirected energy expended, with discouraging results.

One very common reason why better success does not attend really honest effort, is that the student goes to work too much at random. He has no definite purpose in view in reading a book. He has no clear idea of what he may expect to find in that book. It is not reasonable to attack a book on Botany, Geology or Chemistry in the same way as that in which a novel, or a play of Shakespeare should be read. In Science, we look for facts, laws and principles, and every new fact, or every new principle, should be seized upon by the attention. That is our only reason for reading the book. But in reading literary productions, we do not look for facts, but rather for some thing to appeal to our experience and knowledge of human nature; to our sympathies and our humanity. These differences must be recognized, and our attention fixed upon the *purpose* of the book before us, or else we shall carry but little away from its perusal.

The attention must be kept fixed, absorbed in the subject. This idea of the necessity of keeping the attention fixed is a very trite one, but is not sufficiently put in practice. A few minutes are given to

the work in hand, but in too many cases the will power is weak, and the mind is allowed to drift. A very great help toward keeping the attention steadily fixed, is to mark significant and important passages (if the book happens to be your own, or to write a brief synopsis in the margin of an important paragraph, or to jot down a few comments, criticisms, or conclusions of your own. The mind cannot wander when such a plan is carried out. This plan is also of great advantage when the time comes for review. The eye is caught by the marks or marginal notes, and only the important parts of the book need be read, whereas if the marks or notes were not there, the whole thing would have to be read in review. The idea of marking and reviewing is of course more particularly applicable to text-books.

It is not usually a good plan to spend a whole evening at one subject, unless specially interested therein. It is better to spend half-an-hour on each of three or four subjects, than two hours on one subject. If a student makes up his mind, in sitting down to read, that he will drop that book in, say, half-an-hour, he will likely bring all his attentive powers to bear for that short time, and can leave the subject at the end of the time allotted with the consciousness of having done something definite. But if he pores vaguely over a book for two or three hours, trying conscientiously but unsuccessfully to keep the attention fixed upon the subject, he will rise from his chair dissatisfied and discouraged. Even though the task be self-imposed, short hours are, as a rule, preferable to long hours and frequent changes advisable.

Students, as a rule, depend too much upon assistance from lessons and lectures. They too seldom think of launching out for themselves. They like to be *sponsored*. They have a horror of the dark and won't step into it unless taken by the hand. It does not occur to them to go by themselves into "fresh woods and pastures new." They do not, in plain words, read ahead of the work in class, and depend entirely on the lesson to give them their first idea concerning a new principle. Now this is all wrong. The student who knows absolutely nothing about the subject of a lesson before going to the class is likely to take very little away with him. He has nothing in his mind with which the new material can be assimilated; while the student who has read something about it beforehand knows at least what are the difficulties of the subject, and is prepared to ask intelligent questions. Lessons and lectures, especially for advanced students, should be largely supplementary. To some they are all in all of their beginnings of knowledge.

Such a course is fatal to self-reliance and originality. Until a student can, without assistance, prepare himself for intelligent examination on a subject within the limits of his capacity, he has not attained unto the end aimed at in education. He must depend upon himself, and learn to think for himself, through life, and where can he learn this self-reliance better than at school or college? Learning to be self-dependent is like learning to walk. The first timid step should be taken when there is someone by to keep the toddler from falling. We are bound to make mistakes in our first attempts; they should be made where they can be best corrected.

The critical faculty should be developed, too, as early as possible and can be developed only by original, independent thinking. Criticism, by the way, is not fault-finding, but consists in weighing, testing, comparing, valuing. It implies simply clear and accurate thinking, and that is the last thing that some students could bear to do. We must learn not to take everything that we read as indisputable. We must learn that some statements, both oral and written, requires considerable qualification before being accepted. A mere cavilling and quibbling spirit is, of course, to be avoided. But let us learn to have opinions of our own, and to take the opinions of others at their true worth.

This article has been written to meet practical needs, and the ideas have been suggested by observation and experience. Though the treatment of the subject may be rather dry and abstract, practical and earnest students will, it is hoped, find something in it which will appeal to their own experience.