

**English Literature in the Lower Grades.****Letter Writing.**

BY ELEANOR ROBINSON.

The importance of instruction and practice in writing business letters need not be urged. It is fully recognized, I believe, that learning to write a good business letter is not only an end in itself, but may be made the means of inculcating business habits of promptness, neatness and accuracy. The only suggestion I would make on this point to the inexperienced teacher is, not to waste time on fussing over minor details and insisting on conformity to a rigid type. Let the general principle, that a business letter must be clear, explicit, and neat, be grasped; but so long as an address is given in full, does it matter whether it be written on one line or two? Or whether a colon or a comma and dash be put after the salutation?

The writing of friendly letters and notes should be begun much earlier than that of business letters. Fluency and ease can only be acquired by long and constant practice; moreover, little children will write with more freedom and individuality than bigger ones. If they do not begin to express themselves in letter writing until they are twelve or thirteen, the letters are likely to be stiff and self-conscious. This is a common fault with "school" letters, and quite naturally. No one can pour out his thoughts to a friend freely if they are to be scanned and corrected by a third person. But younger children have less of this constraint. They are proud of a letter and like to show it. I believe that nothing will take the place of a spontaneous, unrestrained correspondence between friends in early years, in making a good letter writer. Some people object that it is a waste of time for children to write to each other, and others that girls are apt to write silly letters. The silliness may be guarded against, partially at least, by a general oversight; not a rule that every letter should be shown, but an interest taken in the letter received, an occasional question, "What does so and so say?" a commendation of what is worthy and a habit on the side of the elders of reading aloud bits of letters that will interest others. Of course this is more a matter for homes and parents than for schools and teachers. As for the first objection, can that be a waste of time which gives training in an art that serves to bind together scattered members of families, to keep up friendships, and to bring pleasure to lonely lives, as letter writing does? The ability to write a good business

letter is recognized as an advantage in the business world, but how handicapped in social life is the boy or girl who cannot readily and gracefully offer or acknowledge a kindness or a courtesy, or explain a misunderstanding, in a letter or note. Selfishness and laziness are accountable for much neglect and discourtesy in regard to correspondence, as in all social intercourse, but want of practice is often at the bottom of it.

Let the little ones begin, then, as soon as they can write at all, to put their little story, or their good wishes, into letters. The first ones might be written to father or mother or some favored member of the family after a little preliminary copying of the simplest forms. The thought for others which should prompt all friendly letters may be suggested by the question, "What will they like to hear about?" A little bit of school news, a fact learned, or a success achieved, in two or three sentences at most, will do for the first letters. Then may come some home news sent to an absent relative, or friend; then the children may be paired off in couples, write to each other, and at the next lesson answer their letters. Birthdays may suggest an expression of good wishes. There is no end to the devices that an interested teacher may invent or copy to secure interest in the children.

With older pupils the connection with literature may be made evident. Robert Louis Stevenson, in his essay called "Truth of Intercourse," says that we do not realize that social intercourse depends almost entirely upon the difficult art of literature. That is, of course, upon our skill in expressing our thoughts with accuracy and delicacy. But, he adds that in speaking to each other, we have the assistance of the changing expression of the face and the varying tones of the voice to convey our meaning. In letter writing we have no such aid, and the difficulty of the art is increased and the triumph of a successful letter the greater. The necessity of training is obvious. The aim of letters of friendly intercourse is that of all the arts, namely, to give pleasure by the expression of ourselves; the letter writer has the stimulus of desiring to give pleasure to one particular person, perhaps one whom he dearly loves.

This idea of giving pleasure to one person should be kept before the pupil from the first. His thoughts should be as much upon his reader as upon what he is writing. This will give that personal, intimate touch that is lacking in a printed form or circular, and in many published letters of travel. Letters illustrating this quality should be read to the children on letter writing days. Leave the letters you