

* Special Papers. *

CORRECTION OF COMPOSITIONS.*

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I CONSIDER composition one of the most important branches of school education. Whether we judge it by its value for mental training, or by its usefulness in after life, we must certainly award it a high place, and if, in one form or another, the subject of composition were to appear on the programme of every annual meeting of this Association, I am sure it would afford plenty of material for discussion.

I have chosen this particular part of the general subject, because I want to consider, for a few minutes, that side of it which most closely concerns the teacher. I am sure you will all agree with me that skill in composition-writing can be gained only through long and patient practice. So far as Public School work is concerned, the study of the theory of composition must take a subordinate place. It should be taught incidentally in correcting the pupils' exercises. The aim of *Composition* is to do what *Grammar* was supposed to do, according to the old definition which some of us learned, viz. :—to teach the student to speak and write his mother tongue correctly. If the pupil while in the Public School gets the ability to express his thoughts with a reasonable degree of ease and elegance, he is in possession of an acquirement that will stand him in good stead, whether he goes to a High School, or out into the great school of the world, as do the majority of the pupils who have passed through the Public School. If he has this power of so expressing his thoughts, particularly if he has the power of expressing them in writing, you may be almost sure that he has got it by long practice. If he has got it in this way he has acquired something more; besides having greater freedom in the expression of his thoughts, he has more thoughts to express. Thought begets thought, and the very care and attention necessary to the proper expression of one, stimulates the pupil's mind.

I believe that practice in writing, even without correction, will do wonders in the way of giving the pupils ease of expression. There is a difficulty in the way of this, however; pupils will not, as a general thing, undertake composition-writing as an amusement. It is rather irksome at first, it must be confessed, even to those who by perseverance are able to write creditable compositions. And it is necessary to correct the exercises in order to stimulate the writers to do their best. The question then arises, how can we so arrange our work as to give our pupils practice in writing, and the encouragement we shall be able to give them after correcting their work, without laying an intolerable burden upon ourselves. The teacher, of all human beings, ought to be the last to shirk work, but he is under no obligation to seek the hardest method of attaining a given end.

Now, one way of saving labor in correcting the exercises is to prepare the way

properly for writing them. I shall, therefore, ask your permission to say a few words first on this preparatory work. It may seem not strictly to come within the scope of my subject, but really it does, for if the work the pupil has to do is carefully mapped out for him, that work when done can be both more easily and more efficiently corrected than if he is left to follow the leading of his own fancy. Do not misunderstand me, I do not advise you to give the pupil so much assistance that you leave no room for his individuality to show out in his composition. Try to keep the happy mean; give him such assistance as will prevent him from falling into some of the grossest errors, and yet leave him room to work. Teach him, besides, to regard the assistance you give him as a crutch to be laid aside when he can do without it. Gradually accustom him to do without this crutch, as he gets experience in writing, by giving him exercises in which he is left almost entirely to his own resources.

The first part of the preparatory work, evidently, is the choice of a subject. The teacher chooses this, and it is necessary that he exercise great care in so doing, for on the choice of a subject will depend to a great extent the character of the work the pupils will afterwards hand in to him. He must choose a subject that is within the comprehension of his class if he wishes the best results, one that they can grasp as a whole, not one which they can only flutter about and touch here and there. The subjects of *Truth* and *Honesty* and similar interesting abstract topics that were at one time the favorite themes upon which boys and girls in the Third and Fourth classes were asked to write, were open to objection, not because the young writers knew nothing of *Truth* and *Honesty*, but because they did not know enough to see where to begin. In fact, if we were asked to write a composition upon either of these subjects we should, I daresay, spend some little time thinking where *we* had better begin. But give a boy a subject that he can grasp; if he lives in the country, a subject connected with farm life, and with your help, that he may get his ideas into proper form, he will be able to write something that will be creditable to him.

Having selected the subject, the next step is to discuss it with the class, so as to direct them in the best way of dealing with it. But to discuss it intelligently it is necessary that both teacher and pupils shall have studied it. The teacher has outlined, it may be only mentally, the course of the composition. To get the pupils' cooperation he may, according to the nature of the subject, ask them to read at home, or during spare time in school, something that he indicates, or he may give them a few questions to think over, and to answer at the next lesson. When this arrives, let the pupils understand that it is a preparation for a composition which they will be asked to write. The teacher keeps his outline in mind, and keeps his outline in mind, the class so as to lead them to see the divisions of the subject, and these he also put on the board. His object in doing this is to enable the pupils afterwards

paragraph their compositions. But shall we expect boys and girls in the Third and Fourth books to paragraph their exercises? Certainly, for the ability to take a subject piece by piece, and deal with each piece in a separate paragraph lies at the root of future excellence in essay-writing. It is, besides, only by having the subject so divided that the teacher can correct the exercises to advantage. I don't mean that these young people are to be taught all the rules of paragraph structure. But by taking favorable moments during the reading and literature lessons, the teacher can lead them to see that prose writing is divided into paragraphs, and that each paragraph deals with one topic, which is itself a part of the general subject. It will be valuable discipline for them to form the habit of looking for the divisions of a subject, and they will learn to avoid the too common error of running one part of the subject into another. Their paragraphs may not be constructed in the best way, but improvement will come with time and practice.

Having reached the main divisions of the subject, the teacher will discuss each of these with the class. In the course of his discussion he will write under each division a number of headings, that the pupils may copy. In the case of pupils to whom the work is new these may have to be more than mere headings. The teacher must determine, from his knowledge of the class, how full he must make the notes he gives, and how much may be left to the pupil.

When this has been done, the work of preparation for writing may be regarded as finished, except that care should be taken to see that the pupils understand what may be called the mechanical part of their task. Let the teacher see that they know where to write the title, and how to use capitals in writing it, that they understand they are to leave a margin of generous width, that they are aware that each paragraph must begin a new line and that the first word must be written a little farther to the right than the first word of every other line. Attention to these little things before the composition is written, will make it more attractive in appearance, and will save much labor in correcting. When all preparations have been made, let the compositions be written either at home, or in school during some spare time. But wherever written, have them done with ink if possible, in a special exercise book, or on foolscap. For Public School work, I should prefer to have the compositions written in school, and in exercise books with ruled margins.

We now come to the work of correction. The first question is, shall the teacher correct all or only part of the exercises? To this, I think only a qualified answer can be given. Of course if the class is not large, and the teacher is not burdened with other work, it is more satisfactory to read and mark every exercise. But if the class is large, and the teacher's time is well occupied, it may be well to divide the pupils into two or three groups, and to examine the compositions from one group after one lesson, those from another after a second lesson, and so on. The teacher need not let the pupils know to which group they belong, and he had better not, lest some of those

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