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## Bulletin 16 - English Composition in Secondary Schools: Correct English

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# *THE NORMAL SCHOOL BULLETIN*

OCTOBER 1, 1906

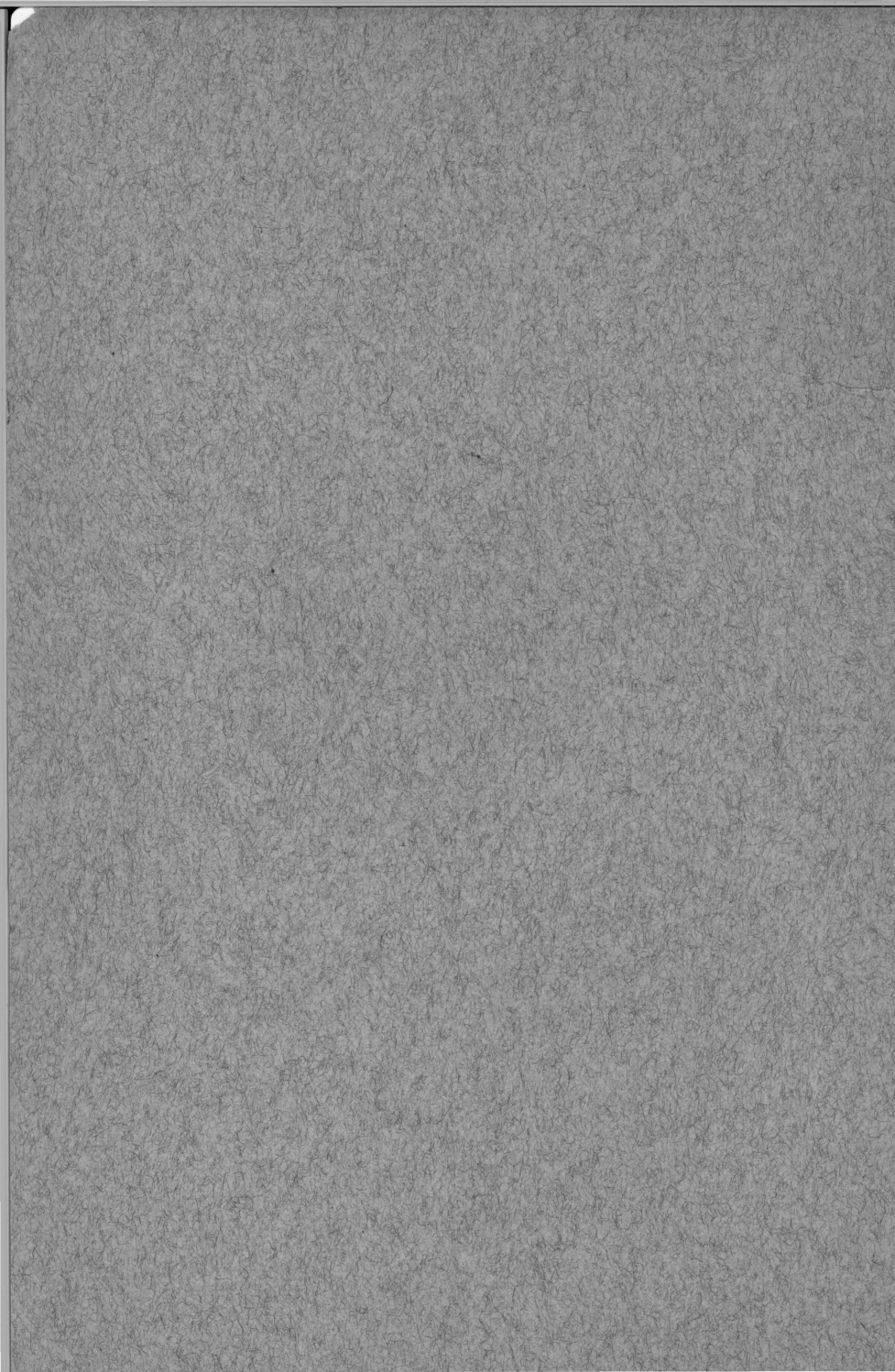


*ENGLISH COMPOSITION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS*

*Topic: CORRECT ENGLISH*

BY

*FLORENCE V. SKEFFINGTON, A. B.*



# NORMAL SCHOOL BULLETIN

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## *English Composition In Secondary Schools*

By FLORENCE V. SKEFFINGTON, A. B.

In view of the many articles on English in Secondary Schools that have already been published I feel scarcely warranted in adding mine, especially since the only originality I can claim for it is, perhaps, a redistribution of emphasis. Educationists are now agreed that the subject is of fundamental importance; that it should be taught regularly and systematically throughout at least three years of the high school term; that at the end of that time students should be able to write grammatically and to spell, punctuate, and paragraph decently well; that they should be regardful of such mechanical details as the placing and capitalizing of titles, the indenting of paragraphs, the leaving of proper margins on the page; that their productions should have some point and be fairly compact and lucid. Such modest requirements as these are too often not met, a lamentable fact well known to college instructors.

For a number of years the situation has interested me. In the best secondary schools the outlines for the work are comprehensive; the teachers are conscientious and in most cases adequately prepared. Then why do instructors in colleges so often find that they must lay the foundation as well as put up the building? I am not so presumptuous as to fancy that I can make an infallible diagnosis or offer a panacea. Some study of the case, however, has led me to attribute these ills to two fundamental facts, the lack of the right kind of interest on the part of the student and his woefully inadequate vocabulary. What these two insufficiencies themselves spring from and how they may be turned into sufficiencies, are the questions that I wish to discuss, hoping that I shall be fortunate enough to make some suggestions that will seem practicable and helpful to teachers in secondary schools.

By *right kind of interest* I mean to imply some zest in the work. To say that such a spirit rarely fires the youthful writer is no exaggeration to teachers of the subject. Who of them has not at times been mortally discouraged by the deep-rooted, almost instinctive dislike felt for it by their students? When, however, I notice the delight some of these same students take in other modes of self-expression, notably the different forms of manual training, so universal a distaste for this, the most individual and fertile of all such means, strikes me as unmistakably and astonishingly abnormal. And I am forced to conclude that the responsibility in the case lies mainly at the door of us teachers. We have failed to show our students the practical value of the subject, to develop in them enough skill in the use of tools to make work a pleasure; and our criticism has been oftener destructive than constructive.

Although English requirements in secondary schools are now generally satisfactory in theory, in practice the organization and accomplishment of the work give students quite inadequate notions of the close relation that *composition* holds

to their other studies, and its value to them as communicative beings. The conservative, and it must be admitted rational, method of assigning this work exclusively to the English department and there either treating it as a separate subject or arranging an alliance between it and literature, is adopted by all schools that attempt any kind of systemization. The reasons for this course and its advantages are manifest. It is my purpose, however, to call attention to certain misunderstandings that have naturally resulted. English composition has come to signify to students an unrelated system of work devised by pedagogues, only presumably for anybody's good; or a set of exercises required by unjust teachers and hence to be shirked whenever possible; or a something that is connected with success in the study of literature. To me the most serious abuse that such a point of view fosters is the tacit assumption that the ability to write correctly and effectively is of no special consequence in the mastering of any other subject (unless it be literature) in the school curriculum.

On reflection no one will deny that in English speaking schools this part of the work holds a unique relation to the whole, since it is the study of the medium itself by means of which in all their studies students must both acquire and express. A fair ability on their part to understand what others say, and in turn to express intelligently what they themselves have to say is as clearly necessary to any practical success in botany as in literature or rhetoric. The students in a way recognize this fact; but they hope to attain such ability by some happy though indefinite chance, and quite fail to comprehend that, for this very purpose English composition is a required subject on their schedule. And some instructors are as short-sighted as their students. I have heard teachers of science taunt the Department of English with the fact that certain young men could neither spell, nor write grammatical and lucid sentences. In some instances the Department was able to retort that those same

young men not only could but did write pretty good themes, correctly spelled and punctuated. The explanation of the apparent contradiction is obviously that the students had discovered in that school two accepted standards of adequacy in written work. Just as long as teachers of science, history, and the rest show unconcern and assume entire irresponsibility in this matter, students will fail to understand its significant connection with their other school work.

Even more serious than this misconception is the blindness of students in general to the peculiar value this work has for them as persons with ideas to impart. Such a condition is the result, among other things, of the teacher's failure to make them realize the close relation that should exist between spoken and written discourse. Most young people enjoy talking; few are cheerful under the ordeal of writing. Is not this because written composition usually signifies to them either the rehabilitating of some one else's opinion or the stating of what they think they ought to think on some topic quite outside the range of their spontaneous interests? Many students never learn that it is less profitable to explain how to build a battleship than how to train a bird-dog; to discuss some book they have never read than to describe a favorite nook in the woods or their grand-mother's kitchen. Further more, the standard of technique in written work often create a remoteness from every-day speech. Students, unable to discriminate values, flood their compositions with labored, often absurd, figures, startling conceits, vulgarities of humor and pathos, the whole couched in hackneyed, semi-poetical diction, because they have a hazy notion that they are expected to produce literature, something that transcends the natural record of ordinary experience as the celestial regions, the earth. Little wonder that vigorous youth takes scant comfort in this rarefied atmosphere! Wise teachers are discovering that the antidote is an increase of oral work in class, the use of the students' experience as the source of most of their themes, and the substitution of possible models for those that are beyond their ability.

I trust that no one will imagine that I am opposed to the use of literary masterpieces in connection with composition work. I appreciate fully the practical value to young writers of contact with them, both for thought and for beauty and rhythm of diction. I do not believe, however, in setting these up as models to be imitated. For such purposes it is much better to use the best compositions of the pupils themselves—some perhaps kept over from previous years, or a model prepared by the teacher for the occasion. The point is students should realize that this drill is not to entice them to produce literature, but to enable them to talk pleasantly and intelligently, to write letters that will entertain and predispose in their favor, and later, if necessary, to address easily and effectively school, congregation, jury, farmers' convention, missionary society, or whatever the circumstances of their lives may bring. When boys and girls believe that through to-day's drudgery they are laying up self-respect and power instead of humiliation and impotence, the battle has been half won.

Another reason why written discourse does not appeal to the student is because he realizes that he writes in a clumsy and ungainly fashion. No one feels much enthusiasm for a task which stimulates only his awkwardness. The young writer's awkwardness is natural enough, for he rarely identifies his tools as the very ones he uses so easily and profitably when he plays, or arranges for some practical joke, or persuades his comrades to join him in some pet enterprise. This failure in co-ordination also reaches back to that conviction of his that composition exercises have little in common with ordinary speech; and their *raison d'être*, if they have any such thing, is far removed from the sensible and very evident purposes of the latter. If we wish a boy to become facile in the use of a tool, we show him what it is good for and demand frequent, regular, and thoughtful use of it. For this reason I believe that if students are to ac-



quire any deftness in composition they should be required to do much more written work than the teacher even under the most favorable conditions is able to criticize.

Some explanation is necessary here to forestall two possible misapprehensions. Many teachers will say at once that such requirement is impossible because it demands too much of the students' time, and even if possible is undesirable, as students when they think their work is not to be reviewed by the teacher will write carelessly. In answer to the first objection, I wish to say that much of the writing should be done in class, necessitating no previous preparation. Such a procedure is, of course, liable to much abuse; its value may be entirely eliminated by an indolent, indifferent, or ignorant teacher. Facility in the mere spreading of ink on paper with scant or no regard for content and form is worse than bad; it is vicious. This result is, however, easily guarded against by the ready teacher. She will give the class definite themes to write on; and in a short open discussion unfold their possibilities and suggest several methods by which they may be effectively developed. Again, she will read to the class for fifteen or twenty minutes something appropriate and have them use the rest of the period in recording whatever thoughts may pass through their minds. The argument that the result will be mere structureless ramblings is not valid for this very informality is natural and appropriate for this style of composition. The writers will come to recognize the necessity for honest expression and will soon acquire some skill in transmuting thought into the written word. The second objection, however, that the students will form bad habits if they believe that their productions may escape all eyes but their own is, both valid and pertinent. Hence they should not for one moment be allowed to suppose that because the teacher does not return all their papers some are thrown unread into the waste-basket. No teacher who is not wickedly overworked need resort to this expedient.

The mere reading of compositions with a rapid estimate of their worth is a comparatively brief performance. Such hurried judgments, though necessarily subject to modifications and inadequate as a basis for final grading, are not valueless to the teacher. These running impressions, if we may so call them, will often balance and correct the more labored and mechanical weighing. Then, the teacher may in this work make use of the class. Students like to read each others' themes and will take some pride in leaving a short critical paragraph at the end of the paper for the author's eye—and the teacher's too, if she is wise. The knowledge that some one is going to read whatever they write is usually sufficient to keep the writers from slipshod methods.

Incompetence in composition is not always due wholly to lack of skill. Often boys and girls are commanded to write on subjects which presuppose knowledge that they either do not possess or can not communicate. If the first, they need to be enlightened; if the second, made ready. Sometimes it is best for the teacher to furnish the information; often, the writers themselves must gather the necessary facts. It is then seldom sufficient for the teacher to send them forth with only vague directions; she should state as definitely as she can where and how such facts may be got. This familiarity with some of the sources of information goes a long way towards making authorship agreeable as well as possible. Those others who already know something worth saying and yet are ignorant of that interesting fact, or lack initiative, are in as awkward a predicament as the first class. Such students need to discover themselves through class discussion and private conference. Furthermore, along with self-knowledge they need to acquire self-esteem.

But appreciation of the practical importance of this means of expression and some ease in its use are not sufficient to preserve interest in the face of unintelligent and needlessly irritating criticism. The clever, caustic comments of the

college instructor oftener than not amuse while they enlighten the young men and women in his class. The secondary teacher with college training, however, makes a mistake when she passes on to high-school boys and girls the brilliant, and alas, when not icy, burning phrases of her pet professor. Adolescence lacks ballast and a center-board to keep the craft steady and right side up. It is a season of conflicting motives and quick, unreasoned impressions. Youth is morbidly sensitive, easy to take offense, will nourish resentment, and is not clear-headed always to understand intrinsic values. The adult can appreciate the humor involved; not so the adolescent, who does not easily tolerate being made, as he is quick to fancy, the butt of ridicule. I once knew a boy of decided promise so outraged by his teacher's comparatively mild comments on his composition in the presence of the class that he dropped the course. The teacher was amazed and sorry. She had no desire to wound the boy, whom she liked and believed in; but she did not resist the temptation to indulge in witty sarcasm at his expense. Although she later made friends with him, she could never win him back to the work, which he steadily refused to take even on penalty of forfeiting his diploma.

Without doubt students' effusions often do invite the clever, cutting phrase and stinging rebuke; but ridicule and invective have never yet made the teacher's or the student's path easy. On the other hand, under sympathetic and intelligent instruction many students who enter the composition class convinced that they hate the work and can never do it to the teacher's satisfaction, soon learn not only that they are able to communicate their ideas by means of pen and ink but that they like the process. The teacher, while refusing to be satisfied with less than their best, remembers that their task is difficult and that the marshaling of words and sentences has for them something of the mysterious. Furthermore, this teacher exercises judgment in the standard by which she measures their work. This point has

been discussed above. I refer to it here to show its relation to method in criticism. The teacher who demands literary flavor in students' essays, and the other who is satisfied with honest and reasonably effective discourse will differ widely in the character of their critical comments. Present indications pointing to the survival of the second type encourage us to believe in its fitness.

In addition to being kindly and sensible, criticism should be moderate in quantity and specific in purpose. I know the temptation to let no error go unnoticed; but experience has taught me the folly of returning themes covered with red ink or blue pencil marks. The difficulty is in determining what to comment on and when, and what to pass. The individual teacher must devise her own scheme with an eye to the typical weaknesses of her class. The task is easiest naturally in those places where the English course from the primary years up is so planned that specific difficulties are treated progressively in the successive grades. If the teacher has decided to deal systematically with certain forms of error, she will comment on those forms only which she is at the time dealing with. Any instructor of experience understands that this statement is necessarily general, literally applicable only in that Utopian school where each student in the class keeps abreast with the requirements of the teacher's plan. It is, however, in all cases true in principle and furnishes a kind of compass on a sea of bewildering inadequacies and errors. Moreover, the literal adoption of the plan does not entail the subsequent ignoring of errors which the teacher has finished discussing. She can throughout the course continue to give short class exercises based on these particular weaknesses; before accepting a batch of papers, she can have the pupils, after exchanging compositions, correct each other's work. Her best opportunity to help the laggard comes when she confers with him privately. She can then give him certain exercises not required of the class; she can kindly, but authoritative-

ly, inform him that certain defects will prevent his passing; and best of all, by some happy inspiration she may say the word that will illuminate for him some phase of the subject.

In fact these personal talks are too valuable aids to class work to be neglected. By means of them the teacher can often convince the most skeptical boy that she wants to help him; she can make that keen diagnosis of his case—a most salutary thing—which she refrains from in the presence of his mates; she can suggest to him specific aids in overcoming his specific weakness; she can rebuke the lazy, encourage the timid, and commend the industrious. And she can in half an hour's conversation learn more of the student's predilections, environment past and present, and aspirations than she is likely to in a term of mere class-room acquaintance. This individual communion is far more wearing on a sensitive person than the congregational contact; and I doubt if it can be adopted to any extent and with the success it is entitled to when the teacher has more than twenty or thirty under her linguistic tutelage. Where, however, conditions permit, I should advise that the hours a week, which the school schedule allots to English composition be equally divided between class and individual instruction.

Some teachers never learn that criticism is not necessarily negative. It is a truism, and trite besides, to say that the child who hears nothing but *don't* is not likely to learn *do*. Enthusiasm and spontaneity, important if not essential elements in composition, are killed by a rain of negatives. It is true that certain improprieties are best treated briefly and incisively under the category of *don't*.

The indifferent and the wayward are never reached by such a method; and the conscientious are often discouraged. *Fault-finding* is certainly necessary, and woe to the teacher who dispenses with it. But appreciation should come first. In students' composition there will often be real humor, honest pathos, an interesting situation, a new point of view, an effective sentence, or a felicitous phrase. If none of these,

then, perhaps some improvement on former work, fewer misspelled words and ungrammatical constructions, not so many *and's* and meandering sentences. When all else fails, the determined teacher may yet be able to commend neatness of manuscript or niceness in mechanical detail. If the student feels that his work is not hopeless, he is by so much in a happier mood to be told of his faults. Instead of continually saying "Don't do this or that," ask the student to substitute a concrete for a certain abstract term in his theme, a specific for a general; show him how a sentence can be rearranged in the interest of clearness; suggest a different point of view; make him see that however clear his meaning may be to himself, if he wishes it to be equally clear to his reader, he must try again.

The teacher should not be, and rarely is she, the sole critic. The pupils, whether she wills it or not, are constantly condemning and praising; and if she is wise she will make use of these proclivities. This must be done with care, for it furnishes abundant opportunity for the youthful critics to indulge in pert smartness, or snub the unpopular student. Such open discussions require the steady hand of an intelligent leader. Yet when they are skilfully controlled, there is no exercise which gives more satisfactory results. Students are naturally and properly more impressed with the judgment of their peers than of their superiors. When a boy discovers that his class-mates are not interested in his story, can get no clear impressions from his descriptions, and are puzzled by his endeavor to explain, he concludes that it is necessary for him to do better. If, on the other hand, they praise his composition, no commendation from any other source can so sweetly flatter. One's teacher is above one, more experienced and critical; her standards seem unreal and often impossible. One's class-mates, however, understand and hence judge fairly. However much or little a teacher may be disposed to utilize this kind of criticism, she will find it impossible to interest her students in a stand-

ard appreciably above that which satisfies the majority of the class.

Yet the most enthusiastic interest avails nothing unless the writer commands an adequate vocabulary. The average student does not use more than 300 words, whereas 3000 furnish only a moderate equipment. It is, then, not strange that he so often finds himself either quite dumb for composition purposes or powerless to express his ideas with exactness. How to increase his vocabulary to working proportions is one of the instructor's problems.

The successful young writer will develop more or less a *word-sense*. Without going to the fine length of Stevenson's subtle discrimination, he will regard words as clothes for ideas and will feel that as such they must not hang loosely but fit snugly and become the occasion. Where the indifferent and in consequence, poverty-stricken author is content with "the man *went* by," the adequately equipped writer will really describe the man's movements by saying that he *ran*, *lounded*, or *limped* by. To the first, gray eyes are no more than gray; to the second they are steel gray, glass-gray, brownish or bluish-gray. The one sees a *house*, the other a *mansion*, or a *cottage*, or a *hut*. The one in the most prosy context will write *steed* for *horse*, *save* for *except*. The other senses the distinction between colloquial and literary, prose and poetic diction.

This interest in words rarely results from the study of groups of synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, or what not. A vocabulary is not acquired by mere dictionary contact. Real understanding of words comes through conversation and reading. The first can scarcely be regarded as within the teacher's sphere of influence; but the second will prove a valuable auxiliary. A certain amount of parallel reading is generally required of students in rhetoric and composition classes. This gives the teacher a chance to introduce them to much good literature. And if in their own creative

efforts they have begun to feel the need of a richer fund of words to draw on, she can easily interest them in the diction of the individual authors they are reading. This reading should be rather intensive than extensive. I do not mean that boys and girls should ponder every word in "Pride and Prejudice," "Vanity Fair," or "The Lantern Bearers," but they should read such as these with minds alert to connotations as well as denotations. To the person eager to enlarge his own vocabulary it is as pleasant as it is profitable to make a note of the word or phrase that seems to him especially happy, vigorous, or illuminating, this list to be meditated on, lived with until the words become a part of his mental furnishings ready for use when the occasion calls.

If a good text-book is in the hands of the students, it can be used to advantage in more ways than by going systematically through the section on words. In such a book there will be a wealth of illustrative selections, rich in felicitous and vivid diction. When the class is studying descriptions the teacher will point them to a few of the selections best adapted to show the ability of words to convey sensual impressions. Students who are groping for the words that will describe a certain landscape after a snow-storm will be interested in those some one else has used for the same purpose. I have seen a class when called on for such a theme scan with some eagerness the three or four paragraphs from "Our Village," in which Miss Mitford describes a walk one snowy winter afternoon. Usually the students find that some of her phrases fit their own landscapes, and always her use of simile and metaphor for this purpose is a revelation. When the class takes up narration is a good time to attend to verbs. This type of composition, together with exposition will emphasize in their minds the necessity for judgment in the use of conjunctive words. A very satisfactory exercise is for the instructor to furnish the class a dozen or more words to be used in a required piece of written work.



For example, the teacher calls for the description of some fairly pretentious building in the vicinity. She then writes on a board a list of such words as *facade*, *battlement*, *elevation*, *turret*, *buttress*, etc., saying to the students that the use of these words will increase the interest and vividness of their themes. The resulting compositions will be twenty per cent. above the average level of such work and the writers will have added some useful words to their vocabularies.

The most important point, however, is that students should be made cognizant of the inadequacy of their individual word supply as shown by their themes. When they begin to take stock they are likely to discover that a score or more words such as *old*, *large*, *nice*, *awfully*, *beautiful*, *fine* have become colorless and dingy through excessive and ignorant handling. There are few students who will not under such circumstances go to work at once to accumulate substitutes for these overworked terms. When commenting on compositions before the class the teacher will have many opportunities of showing the superiority of specific and concrete expressions over the general and abstract ones they are prone to use. I doubt very much if any permanent good accrues to young students from the study of primary and secondary meanings of isolated words. In connection with their own efforts at writing, however, it is fairly easy to interest them in the discriminating use of synonyms. For instance, when a student has described a typical encounter between a nurse-maid and the small boy in her charge, if the teacher returns his theme with the written query whether *recalcitrant* does not better than *stubborn* describe the strenuous infant, that author is likely to consult the dictionary with an interest that leaves a lasting impression. Under such suggestive comments the life history of words and the values of synonyms begin to assume importance in his eyes. When such interest is general in a class, it is easy enough to lead them through many pleasant paths of elementary phil-

ological study. But for the practical purposes I have been discussing it is more profitable to keep close to the students' own labors in composition, helping them to develop their vocabularies from within outward.

Much that I have suggested is easily put into practice in every school. There is no teacher who can not increase the amount of oral work done in class, or send her pupils to their own experiences for the bulk of their material, or co-ordinate the study of words with their reading and writing. In many cases, however, it is impossible to secure the practical co-operation of teachers of other subjects, or to demand a sufficient amount of written work from students, or to give them the necessary individual attention. These things can be done only when school faculties recognize the peculiar importance of this subject and school boards are willing to invest as much money in English as in Science.

## The School Calendar

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### Winter Term

*Twelve Weeks*

*1907*

*January 2, Wednesday*

*Entrance examinations and classification. Class work assigned at 9 A. M.*

*March 22, Friday*

*Winter Term ends*

### Spring Term

*Eleven Weeks*

*1907*

*April 2, Tuesday*

*Class work assigned at 9 A. M.*

*June 14, Friday*

*Spring Term ends*

### Summer Term

*Six Weeks*

*1907*

*June 17, Monday*

*Classification. Class work assigned at 2 P. M.*

*July 26, Friday*

*Summer Term ends*

