

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## WHAT IS BASIC ABOUT ENGLISH?

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Part 1 of 3

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### I. Introduction.

1. My reason for changing the title and theme of my address is that, on reading for comprehension and for appreciation, I have nothing to add to what I have already said in *How To Read a Book*. I am sure I don't have to explain that book to this audience. And I hope I do not have to justify it....I hope you all know, as well as I do, how complete and dismal is the failure of liberal education in this country—at both high-school and college level. I am sure you all weep, as much as I do, about the fact that few, if any, of your students can read better than sixth-grade children, or write well, or speak well, or listen well. They certainly do not know how to read a book, either for comprehension or for appreciation, either to receive instruction or to delight in beauty.
2. Instead of dwelling on these well-known and lamentable facts, instead of repeating the therapy I have prescribed in *How To Read a Book*, I am going to try to explain why liberal education has fallen to such low estate, how it has happened, and what can be done about it.
3. And central to my explanation is the peculiar status of the teacher of English. The history of the teaching of English reveals, I think, the gradual decay of the liberal arts and the progressive degradation of the curriculum to its present state.

- A. On the one hand, the teacher of English is the most indispensable man on any faculty, for he is the only one left who is at all concerned with the liberal arts as the disciplines which train a mind for the most characteristic function of human life—communication. With the progressive decomposition of the curriculum under the shattering impact of the elective system and the insidious encroachment of the sciences, especially the social sciences, upon the field of humane letters, the English teacher has become the last defender of the faith that something can be learned from books. I mean books—not textbooks; I mean great literature—not current journalism about current events.
- B. On the other hand, and paradoxical though it seems, the very reasons which make the English teacher the indispensable man are the reasons why English departments and English courses should be completely abolished as such. It is precisely because the English teacher is the last—and often a very frail—vestige of the liberal tradition in our education, it is precisely because he still cherishes literature and the liberal arts—though his devotion (under dire threats) is often secret and unconfessed—that the English teacher should commit academic suicide.
- C. I am not recommending suicide as an empty gesture or as an expression of despair. I am thinking of a militant martyrdom. My simple thesis is that English—its courses, teachers, and departments—should be abolished in favor of the restoration of a truly liberal curriculum in secondary and collegiate education. The English teacher should cease to be a separate academic entity, only on the condition, of course, that every other teacher would become a teacher of English, or, to say more precisely what I mean, a teacher of liberal arts; for my main point is that what the English teacher is now trying to do, often half-heartedly, often unwittingly, and almost always inadequately, should be done by the whole faculty in a curriculum which is not atomized into courses or made chaotic by departmental prerogatives. Only if it is thus done can what the English teacher is trying to do be well done.
4. Perhaps I have now explained my choice, as a title for this address, of the question, *What Is Basic about English?*
- A. In asking this question I am not thinking about the tragic possibility that English may be the only language left in

which civilized men can think and talk freely, even though that fact by itself would make it terribly basic. Nor am I thinking of the semantic invention known as basic English. I shall leave that sense of basic English to Mr. Richards.

- B. What I have in mind is simply this: that if one asks what functions the teaching of English performs in contemporary education the answer will show that these functions are so basic educationally that they cannot be performed well in a single course or series of courses which the natural and social sciences still permit to exist in an innocuous corner of the curriculum.
  - C. I shall, in short, try to argue that what is basic about English is not the English language, but language and all its arts; not English literature, but literature in all its forms and all its books. I shall try to persuade you that every English teacher who is not a traitor to the tradition he has inherited should become a fighting exponent of the curriculum which is now widely known as the St. John's curriculum—the curriculum which devotes all its teachers' and students' energies to the liberal arts and the great books. And, let me add at once, there are no teachers of English at St. John's, as there are no teachers of philosophy, or science, or history, because every teacher at St. John's is doing what the best teachers of English try to do and fail in doing simply because it cannot be done as an isolated and restricted part of a curriculum. It can be done only when the whole curriculum is devoted to liberal pursuits and humane letters and every teacher is a master of the arts, toward bachelorhood in which he is trying to help his students.
5. To say what is basic about English and to support my appeal that you abolish yourselves and become undepartmentalized liberal artists, I shall now proceed to show, if I can:
- A. First, how the liberal arts have suffered from having ceased to be the whole of liberal education and having become mainly the preoccupation of English teachers, their concern and almost no one else's;
  - B. Second, how the study of literature—and here I mean the reading of great books—has become a special privilege instead of a general vocation, as the result of its being left almost entirely to English teachers, for in their hands

literature has been reduced to belles-lettres, or, worse, to lyric poetry, or to poetry written in English.

- C. In making these two points, and especially the first, I should like to comment on the rise of semantics, whether cultivated by philosophy or English teachers, as another indication of the demise of liberal education and as another instance of a wrong or inadequate remedy for bringing it back to life.
  - D. Throughout all this please remember that though I come to bury Caesar, I have also come to praise him. Although I ask you to immolate yourselves for your faults and your inadequacies, I also speak a panegyric for the valiant effort you have made to keep the light of genuinely liberal learning shining, however dimly, somewhere behind the bushel basket of the elective system.
- II. First Point: The liberal arts are three and one—an educational trinity which must function as a unity and should not be dismembered.
- 1. Explication of the point:
    - A. Preliminary naming: by the three liberal arts I mean the arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. (For the sake of brevity, I am omitting the consideration of that specialized version of these arts which belongs to the quadrivium—the liberal arts of mathematics—the grammar, logic, and rhetoric of mathematics, as a special universe of discourse.)
      - a) When the arts are thus named, the English teacher may suppose they do not all belong to him; for does not logic belong to philosophy, and is not rhetoric the province of that specialized fellow, the teacher of elocution or public speaking?
      - b) But suppose I were to name the arts, not in terms of their analytical principles or in terms of their fundamental rules of operation, but rather in terms of the operations they regulate according to sound principle. What would these operations be?
        - (1) They would be writing and speaking—the initiation of communication; and reading and listening—the reception of communication.

- (2) And, of course, I do not mean the arts of writing or reading poetry, or the arts of speaking or listening to political propaganda. I mean the arts of writing and reading anything, the arts of speaking about or listening to discourse on any subject matter.
- (3) Thus named you will realize at once, I hope, that all these operations fall within your province, even though you also realize that, as you usually deal with them, you unfortunately restrict them to certain very limited subject matters.
- (4) To the extent that you are concerned with these four operations, you are concerned with the three arts; and in so far as you are properly concerned with these operations, and with their arts, you should transcend every limitation of subject matter, for you should be concerned with every type and every phase of communication.
- c) But you may object that I have omitted the most important operation and the most essential of the liberal arts, namely, the art of thinking.
- (1) Let me reply at once that all human thinking is of two sorts: the sort which is involved in discovery—learning without the aid of teachers; and the sort which is involved in instruction—learning with the aid of teachers, who already know what the student must learn.
- (2) Although in the history of the race and its cultural growth learning by discovery must take precedence over learning by instruction, in the biography of any individual, learning by instruction is foremost. There is no point in any individual starting out to discover anything until he is well versed in what other men have already discovered and are prepared to teach.
- (3) The book which more than any other has misled millions of American teachers and distorted American education is Dewey's *How We Think*, for it is concerned only with learning by discovery and the sort of thinking that there goes on. But below the level of the university, apart from

men competent in scholarship or research, the major learning is by instruction, and the kind of thinking therein involved is inseparable from processes of communication.

(4) In so far, therefore, as I restrict myself to the basic education of youth—youth incompetent to discover anything by itself—I can say that there is no significant operation of thinking apart from such operations as reading and listening, writing and speaking, and there is no art of thinking other than the three liberal arts as arts of language or communication.

B. Now let me explain why the three arts are co-implicated—always interdependent—in all the operations of communication.

- a) There are three things involved in all communication, whether in initiating it or receiving it. They are language, thought, and the persons who think and discourse. (By “language” I mean any language, not just English; by “thought” I mean, broadly, every state of mind or soul, feelings, intentions, perceptive experiences, as well as ideas and intellectual judgments. And, let me add, there is a fourth thing which I did not mention because it is simultaneous with thought and speech—namely, the object referred to by both thought and speech.)
- b) The three arts get their distinction from the three aspects of every communication, just mentioned. Thus:
  - (1) Grammar is the art of ordering language to express or to receive thought.
  - (2) Logic is the art of ordering what is to be expressed in language or of judging what has been expressed, and here there is a limitation; for logic is restricted to the communication of thought in the narrower, or more intellectual, sense; and it must be completed by poetics as the art of ordering feelings and imaginations to be expressed, or of judging such expressions.
  - (3) Rhetoric is the art of ordering both language and thought in order to reach another mind or person

effectively; or, if you are the mind or person being reached for, rhetoric is the art which guides you in yielding or resisting.

- c) The three arts cannot be separated, for no one of them is sufficient to regulate good writing or reading. Each requires the supplementation of the other two; the three must interpenetrate one another; they are mutually supporting disciplines for the simple reason that language without thought is nonsense; thought without language is ineffable; and both without consideration or the human context in communication are lacking in direction. (Discourse is not simply rational, but social, for man is not just rational, but socially so.)
- (1) Not only are the three arts (of grammar, logic, and rhetoric) mutually interdependent, but they are also in a certain order. Considering the ends and nature of communication, rhetoric is the dominant art: it is the art of writing, not a phrase or sentence, but a whole composition, a whole poem, a whole speech, a whole book; it is the art of reading, not just a part, but a whole communication. The use of grammatical and logical techniques must be guided by ultimate rhetorical considerations—the intention of writer and reader.
  - (2) Of the two remaining arts, grammar and logic, grammar is ordered to logic when the intention is to explain or to instruct.
  - (3) In order to explain the ordering of the arts in their tri-unity, let me expand a little on the multiple dimensions of rhetoric and show you how these dimensions involve a diversity of logics and grammars.



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