

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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WHAT IS BASIC ABOUT ENGLISH?

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- C. The most fundamental division which rhetoric considers is the division made by the difference between two intentions men have in writing: instruction and delight—to convey the truth or to create beauty. This is the familiar distinction between science and poetry, between intellectual and imaginative literature, between the use of language to express knowledge of reality and the use of language to create imitations of reality.
- a) There are, of course, subordinate distinctions. Thus:
- (1) In the intellectual dimension there is the fundamental division between the theoretic and the practical, the former aiming to convince about the truth, the latter directed to persuade in matters of action or feeling. There is, in short, a theoretical rhetoric as well as a practical rhetoric in the sphere of intellectual communication. Unhappily, many regard rhetoric as restricted to the practical, to problems of oratory and propaganda.
 - (2) In the imaginative dimension there are all the distinctions of poetry into epic, dramatic, and lyric, whether in prose or verse, and whether we call them epics or novels, dramas or plays.
- b) But, for our purposes, it is sufficient to point out that

these distinctions require us to cultivate two different sorts of grammar—a logical and a poetic grammar; they also require us to cultivate many different sorts of logic, each with an appropriate grammar, a theoretic and a practical logic, and within the domain of theoretic logic and grammar we must be sensitive to such varieties of logic as the historical, the scientific, and the philosophic.

- c) All this, I say, follows from a proper consideration of the liberal arts as united in a triplicate unity and under the aegis of rhetoric as concerned with the most fundamental canons of style, or, shall I say, the styles appropriate for every sort of writing, the styles to be detected by every sort of reading.

2. Consequences of the point:

A. I have said all this—much of which must be familiar to many of you—because of the educational significance it has. If what I have said is true, what follows for liberal education? What must be done to make youth competent as liberal artists and worthy of the B.A. degree in terms of the only relevant criterion, namely, that they know how to read and write? I enumerate only some of the more obvious consequences:

- a) None of the arts can be well taught merely as a science, having principles, or as a discipline, having rules, in separation from exercises in all the artistic operations, namely, in reading and writing, listening and speaking. (Thus, grammar cannot be well taught as a set of rules in isolation from the operations to be regulated, namely, writing and reading; this is even more true of logic. Yet much of our teaching is done contrariwise: students who have memorized grammatical rules cannot put them into practice, cannot detect simple and complex sentences, dependent or independent clauses, in difficult discourse; students who can recite all the rules of the syllogism cannot discover arguments and their relation in the reasoning of great minds, whose books they may be trying to read. Of course, much worse than this is the situation in our progressive schools where writing and reading are done in complete isolation from any acquaintance-ship with the rules of grammar and logic.)

- b) None of the arts can be well taught in isolation from the other two; for all three must be practiced simultaneously in reading and writing, speaking and listening.
 - c) None of the arts can be well taught if restricted to some limited subject matter, such as the poetic dimension of literature or the practical dimension of rhetoric.
 - d) Since the rules which govern any form of writing are the same rules which govern the reading of that form of literature, no student can learn to write well what he has not been taught to read well, and conversely; and here reading is certainly prior, in the order of learning, to writing, for reading is easier than writing, as listening is easier than speaking.
 - e) The practice of the arts requires worthy materials to operate on, for rules of art will not work on matter itself inartistically contrived. What I mean is that the greatest books in every dimension of literature must be the materials read if reading is to be well taught, for how shall anyone be able to practice reading, according to good rules, what was not written according to such rules; and, similarly, great literature of all forms must provide the models to guide the novice in practicing writing according to the rules of these arts.
- B. In the light of these five points—and there are many others—you can see how defective and even defunct the teaching of the liberal arts has become in our education because it has been relegated to English courses, almost exclusively, or because the arts have been separated by departmental divisions or divided according to mistaken notions about what is proper at different levels of education.
- a) Thus grammar belongs to the English teacher, whereas logic belongs—if it exists at all—to the philosophy department. As a result of this departmental separation both grammar and logic lose their artistic usefulness; grammar becomes nothing but a set of conventional rules of English usage; and logic becomes an abstract science which has nothing to do with the business of reading and writing.

- b) Furthermore, as falling to the English teacher, grammar is considered only, or primarily, in the dimension of poetic rhetoric, and all the grammatical problems related to logical rhetoric are ignored or inadequately treated.
 - c) Furthermore, grammar is primarily treated in relation to writing, if it is given any application at all; and it is seldom invoked in the reading of difficult texts as part of the business of interpretation and criticism.
 - d) Furthermore, logic, in separation from grammar, and as the special province of the philosopher, degenerates into a discussion of scientific method and ceases to be the basic discipline of writing and reading, not even of writing and reading philosophy itself, as the writings of most contemporary philosophers so painfully reveal.
 - e) Furthermore, rhetoric, in separation from both grammar and logic, and relegated to courses in public speaking, ceases to be the dominant art, regulative of all forms of intelligent communication, and becomes a minor appendix of the curriculum. It is rhetoric in its most degraded state—little better than elocution. And without rhetoric, the other two suffer! We deal with short passages, not wholes!
- C. Let me picture for you in another way the disastrous educational consequences which flow from the dismemberment of the trinity of liberal arts.
- a) First, the results of separating grammar and logic. (Equally bad results flow from the separation of grammar and poetics, but I shall confine my discussion to the first of these two separations, because the second is less drastic in English teaching.)
 - (1) Grammar becomes purely conventional instead of formal. It is English grammar instead of universal grammar—the grammar of any language. As a result, both teacher and student wonder why they are bothering about grammar except for the purposes of polite speech and superficial correctness by conformity to “good usage.” But usage is arbitrary in large part; and the rules of a purely conventional grammar lack the intelligibility

which belongs only to a universal grammar integrated with logic and poetics and subservient to rhetoric.

- (2) Logic becomes a purely formal science instead of a useful liberal art. It degenerates, as we have seen, into symbolic logic or logistics, which has absolutely no relation to anything. Even though logic be mastered as it is taught in philosophy courses, such mastery means nothing in the way of liberal discipline, any more than the mastery of the rules of a game would be significant if the game itself were never played. The student does not become a better reader or writer, a better interpreter or critic, a better thinker, a more orderly mind.
- (3) The quickest way to establish both of these foregoing points is to indicate the parallelism between the basic grammatical units (units of discourse) and the basic logical units (units of thought).
 - (a) The parallelism is: words and phrases—terms or concepts; sentences—propositions or judgments; paragraphs—syllogisms or arguments.
 - (b) Now the fundamental fact here is that there is no one-one correlation between the two sets of units. Thus, one and the same term can be expressed in various words or phrases, and one and the same word or phrase can express various terms; similarly, a single English sentence, especially if complex or compound, or both, does not express a single proposition but a whole series of them, and so forth.
 - (c) Now the separation of grammar and logic prevents the student from being able, in reading, to come to terms with an author by penetrating beneath his language; he may know all about propositions and arguments but he won't be able to find any when he is reading a book; and if you ask such a student to write a series of propositions he will give you some half-formed or overcomplicated sentences in

an undisciplined effort to express his thoughts.

(d) When I say that college graduates cannot read or write I am simply pointing to the fact that they have no effective discipline in either grammar or logic, either none at all or, what is almost as bad, the inadequate sort which comes from the departmentalized functions of English and philosophy professors. This is easily tested: ask a college graduate, as I have done when he gets to law school, to find the separate propositions in a single sentence or their connection in a paragraph; ask him to translate what a sentence says into another sentence saying the same thing but in different words; ask him to explain what an argument means by pointing to the objects or experiences which the words refer to.

(4) What I have here said mainly concerns the writing and reading of intellectual literature, theoretic or practical; but the same holds for the reading and writing of imaginative literature in any of the forms of poetry; for even though grammar and poetics both belong to the English teacher he deals with them separately—so pervasive is the atomization of everything into separate courses, given by specializing professors.

b) Second, the results of separating rhetoric from grammar and from logic. Here I do not speak of the separation of rhetoric from poetics, for the opposite has taken place: in so far as rhetoric is not just public speaking, it is reduced to a concern about poetic style.

(1) Let me begin, therefore, by commenting briefly on the notion of style. Style is the most general rhetorical fact. But as treated by teachers of English, style is restricted to the consideration of poetic excellence: to effectiveness in the field of imaginative literature.

(2) As a result, our students, if they are taught to be sensitive to, and critical of, whole literary works at all, have such sensitivity developed only with

respect to belles-lettres, and sometimes they are so specialized as to be trained in the appreciation of lyric style and not even dramatic or epic composition. Certainly they have no training in the analysis of expository works as wholes, no sensitivity to excellence in logical, as opposed to poetic, rhetoric. They would not be able to tell you the difference between the style of Plato and the style of Euclid, or why the Platonic style is more suitable to the matter which St. Augustine expounds than to the matter of Galileo, who tries to use that style; or why the Euclidean style is more suitable to the matter of Newton than to the matter of Spinoza, even though the latter also tries to use Euclidean style.

- (3) Furthermore, if rhetoric is treated in the logical dimension at all, it is concerned with oratory, or practical discourse, and even here the effectiveness of oratory is not made intelligible in terms of its grammatical and logical aspects, for rhetoric as customarily taught by English teachers is taught apart from logic and as a course which comes much later than grammar.

D. I conclude, therefore, that the liberal arts have fallen on evil days as the result of curricular arrangements which separate them into departments which prevent them from being taught properly and which give to the English teacher an impossible task—impossible even when the English teacher somehow realizes what it is, and even less possible when the English teacher does not know the burden which has been unintentionally imposed on him.

- a) Anyone will see this at once by considering the educational work done by the Greek sophists and philosophers, the Roman grammarians and rhetoricians, the medieval masters of the liberal arts, the Renaissance humanists—in each case dominating the whole of basic education—and then comparing the work now being done by English teachers in their little corner.
- b) And if such intuitive perceptions have no authority in this day of educational tests and measurements, I suggest a test which will show the enormity of the failure in its full extent. Students have been tested on

their ability to read sentences and paragraphs, and on such tests we all know that the average high-school graduate is not much better than a sixth-grader, that the best high-school seniors are less than reasonably competent. But all such tests, even though they reveal educational failure, are much too easy. Test the best high-school graduate or, for that matter, the best college graduate, or even the candidate for the Ph.D. on his ability to read a whole book intelligently—and let the book be a great book worthy of the effort—and you will be able to measure in no uncertain terms how complete today is the failure of liberal education.



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