for successful participation in the affairs of the world. Pouring information into them will not accomplish this purpose; teaching them to be clear in their own minds, to be articulate, will. The problem of clarification of concepts and of being a little more sure of the meaning of words and sentences before trying to communicate ideas is still as important as it was in Socrates' time, and the teacher of college Freshman English has the opportunity to attempt this task. Nothing in the whole so-called English curriculum is so important; no teacher in any course is more important than the one who first takes the incoming students and starts them out in their university work. We stand by the contention that much of the failure of students in university work comes from bad teaching in any of the classes of the first year in college just as often as from lack of preparation earlier. We must somehow convince instructors and administrators (and powers behind colleges) of two things: a teacher's job is to teach and colleges belong to students.

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERTS ON TEACHING COMPOSITION

GEORGE S. WYKOFF

You have been telling us from time to time that a knowledge of grammar has little, if any, relation to writing and that the content of a written paper is far more important than the mechanics of its composition.

What would you do if, as a teacher of composition, you received the following paper?

WHAT I LIKE AND DISLIKE ABOUT TEACHERS

A teacher has several qualifications to fulfill before he is liked and is suitable to everybody. One of the most important thing that teachers are judged by are

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2 This, a class theme, is a somewhat-worse-than-average example of the written work done by a certain percentage of inadequately prepared college freshmen. This per-
there clothes, and there general appearances. One never likes a teacher that his sloppy about his dress. The old saying is that one is judged by his English and appearance. Another very important qualification, I think, is that a teacher must have a pleasing personality always wearing a smile. Always looking on the brighter side of life instead of always finding faults; however I think that a student should be criticized and balled out occassily, but not consistently. Then after the teacher has collect the pupil I think he should forget about it and never hold a grudge against him.

There are another very important thing that a teacher should think about. That is that at one time he was in the same stage of learning. He must remember that he made some of the very same mistakes. I have had a quite a bit of experiance along this line. This semester when I came up here was the first time that I had ever look at a chemistry book. I had never studied any chemistry I had never hurt any lecture or anything. I happened to get an instructor that was one of worse instructor that I ever had. It wasn't because he didn't no his Chemistry, because you couldn't never find a question that he couldn't answer. It was just because he didn't know how to teach it. He was always look as if he was mad or sore at somebody, And when you would go up to ask him a simple question he would act snappy about it. Maybe it was simple to him but to one that didn't know anything about the subject, it was very hard. This is the biggest fault I think that a teacher can have.

Even skeptical composition teachers will not refuse to believe that this paper was written by a Freshman student in a university course in composition; nor will they believe that all the errors made were due simply to carelessness. The writer of this theme is a native-born American, of American parents, has had the usual twelve years of preparatory-school training, and is the graduate of an accredited high school. Perhaps his teachers followed your method of stressing content and letting the composition take care of itself; perhaps, in spite of his deficiencies, there were devious ways by which he received credit in his preparatory English courses. At any rate, he is now a Freshman in college, and his composition—and that of other inadequately prepared students—is a problem to his teachers of English.

centage varies from 0 to 2 or 3 per cent in colleges and universities with entrance requirements, and from 4 or 5 to 15 or 20 per cent in those which admit all applicants. Serious errors in spelling, grammar (especially in number and case), punctuation, and organization mar the work of these students. Fortunately, the greater percentage of college Freshmen write, in varying degrees, much better, although probably no teacher will admit that even so-called "adequately prepared" Freshmen need no further training in fundamental principles of expression.
Should we call this student in for a conference and say: "Your composition isn't very bad; you make certain errors which can be forgiven in the light of the content of your theme. As for this content, most of it is clear; however, some of your sentences have to be read a second or third time in order that their full meaning may be obtained. Your organization is quite good, although certain details might be added to round out your discussion. Therefore, we recommend that hereafter you pay slightly more attention to details, enlarging your list so that you may see more clearly what to include and exclude. If you do this, we can overlook any errors which you make in composition."

We grant that this student will probably do no more writing than the usual routine writing done by the average American. Nor are there many of our students—fortunately better prepared for college English than this student—who plan to become celebrated writers. Their ambition in studying composition, and our ambition in teaching, is that their written and spoken English may be such that they can adequately and correctly express their ideas without worry about the manner of their expression and without fear that they will be pointed at as educated people who cannot speak or write reasonably correctly.

But let us suppose we do have in our classes students who give promise of becoming first- or second-rate writers for the reading public. Shall we advise them, too, to stress their content and to ignore their composition as of little importance, so that, if we ever find an incipient Hardy in our classes, he may someday, if he follows this principle consistently, write a description of some new Eustacia Vye in the following prose:

Eustaca Vie was the raw materal of a devinaty, on olympus she would of did well with a litel preperation, she had the passons and instincts; which makes a model Godess, that is: thoes which makes not quiet a moddle women. Had it be posible for the earth and mankind to be, entierly in her graspe for awhile; had she handeled, the distaffe, the spindel, and the sheers at her own free will, few in the world would of noticed the change of goverment, their would of been the same inequallity of lot the same heeping up of favors here, or contoomly their the same generosty befor justice; the same perpetal delimmas, the same
captus altercation of careses and blows; that we endure now. . . . In heven, she will proby set between the heloses and the Cleopaters.3

With some changes in expression, this is Hardy. The content is wholly his; does the method, the manner, of expression, of composition, make any difference?

Would you permit the same general theory to be applied to your newspapers, your books, your general magazines—even your own professional magazines? The books and articles that you now write do not bear you out. Nor do the complaints of professional people—engineers, businessmen, teachers of graduate and professional students, and the like—about the incorrect English of young college graduates. Nor does the careful elimination of compositional errors by professional writers, editors, and publishers. Nor the fact that many technical writers, including professors of education, depend on teachers of English or English tutors or editors to correct any compositional errors before their contributions are turned loose in cold print upon an exceedingly critical world.

Or do you maintain that you mean your theories about writing (which apparently include spelling) to apply only to the student? Perhaps grade and high-school teachers of English, more or less under your domination, have followed your methods not wisely but too well. Yet, surely, somewhere and sometime in the student’s life, must there not be an attempt to stress not only what is said or written but also how it is said or written? If you say no, we may see, in the not distant future, writing like that in the theme or the content-stressed paragraph adapted from Hardy appearing wherever pen or type is touched to paper.

And now about grammar. You tell us there is no relation between knowledge of grammar and writing. Naturally, we are puzzled, and as teachers of composition (who, to be frank, have very little real interest in composition except as it earns us a livelihood, while we do graduate work, get Ph.D.’s, write scholarly articles on abstruse literary subjects, and thus use composition-teaching as a stepping stone

3 Comparable examples of composition, actually written by students (even after university courses in composition!), are quoted by Professor William L. Prosser in "English as She Is Wrote," English Journal (Reg. Ed.), XXVIII (1939), 40, 42.
to something better, more interesting, and more profitable in the field of literature)—I say, as teachers of composition, it is only natural that we (possibly more in a spirit of sincerity than of irony) should turn to you experts for information about how to teach our courses.

If we are not to teach grammar, what are we to teach, and just how are we to teach students to write correctly? Would you have us, as some teachers do, tell our students that certain expressions are wrong; that they are wrong because we say they are; and that students shall avoid them because we say they shall? Do you believe that such methods would be successful? Don’t you think they are too obviously attempts to make ourselves tiny though absolute dictators in the compositional world? Certainly such methods are not scientific in a scientifically minded world, where, if things are wrong, there must be some principles whereby we can judge them to be wrong.

Have you advisory experts, despite your elaborate studies, made the necessary distinctions between “formal grammar” and what is called “functional” or “practical” or “usable” grammar—in other words, between grammar as an end in itself and grammar as the means to an end? (In this connection, you might read a very illuminating article on “Is Grammar Dead?” by Professor J. C. Tressler, in the *English Journal* [Coll. Ed.], XXVII [1938], 396-401.)

We teachers of composition willingly admit that memorizing lists of useless or even useful grammatical terms will never aid a student in his writing. Why bother, for example, with such terms as “concrete nouns,” “abstract nouns,” “indirect objects,” “nominative or objective cases of nouns,” “syntax,” “parsing,” “inflection,” “conjugation,” “factitive adverbs,” “adverbial substantives,” and a host like them?

Why not apply this test: The grammatical terms that students should know—are they such that by using them the student will be able to avoid the more serious errors that most people object to; are they such that clearness is better attained by their application; are they such that the more commonly accepted rules of punctuation (which, after all, are only devices for clearness in writing) may be better or more easily understood and applied?
For example, how can we teach students, unless they know grammar, that certain expressions are incorrect and sometimes very offensive? To the student who wrote the theme given above could we not say that knowing grammar would eliminate his more serious errors. For example, if he knew thoroughly singulare and plurale, he would not write “several qualification” or “one of the most important thing.” If he understood and applied his knowledge of agreement in number of subject and predicate, he could avoid “one . . . are” and “there are another thing.” Application of knowledge of participles and tense and voice formation would never permit “are judge,” “had look,” and “was look.” And knowing phrases, clauses, and sentences would prevent the use of a phrase for an independent clause or statement or of two complete sentences as one sentence.

Or are we, when we thus try to teach students what expressions are incorrect and why, merely wasting our own and our students’ time and accepting our salaries either for useless labor or under false pretenses?

We, too, have found numerous examples (how numerous, their percentages, and their significance we leave to your statistics) of two very puzzling phenomena, in the explanation of which we humbly offer certain hypotheses for your consideration. Some students write very clear, correct, and emphatic compositions; and yet these same students are unable to recognize common grammatical terms or even to define them when they are mentioned. Our theory is either that these students have been very fortunate in having read widely and have learned to write by absorbing unconsciously the principles of correct grammar without having learned the terminology of these principles (a method, incidentally, which many students are unable to follow) or that these students have learned, at some time, those principles, have applied them, and, having made their application a matter of habit, have forgotten their names and write without consciously thinking of them—just as all who do much writing no longer think specifically of such terms as “subjects,” “predicates,” “number,” “tense,” and the like, when they write.

On the other hand—and this is the second puzzling phenomenon—there are students who know the names and definitions of grammatical terms, who can point out grammatical errors in others’ writ-
ing, but who seem completely unable to apply this knowledge to their own writing. It is these students about whom we teachers of composition are in some concern. The problem here seems more a psychological than a compositional one—the practical application of knowledge. Perhaps by constant exercise and by our showing the utility of these principles in practice, such students may be taught to apply their knowledge.

Or perhaps we are all wrong, in this matter and in many others. If so, we humbly sit as disciples at your feet and humbly (and sincerely) ask that you will give us the benefits of your wisdom and your experience concerning what and how we are to teach.

And if, between you as educational experts and us as composition-teachers, the difficulties are in misunderstanding one another, the fault is not entirely ours. Some of you, at least, have been reckless in your statements about content-versus-composition and about grammar-versus-writing, without adequate qualification and explanation; and we, on our part, have understood your statements perhaps too literally. That a knowledge of usable grammar is not entirely useless in writing we assume from certain chapters in *An Experience Curriculum in English*, a report which some of you helped to prepare. We should like to see further research made on the relationship between usable or practical grammar and writing.

But as teachers of English we naturally cannot be expected to do such research. Our main interests—we are constantly told—are, or should be, literary history and literary criticism; and teachers of composition are, and can expect to be, only pedagogic pretenders, academic proletarians, section hands, doers of drudgery, and unhappy, disillusioned men and women, without hope of professional or financial reward (see Oscar James Campbell, "The Failure of Freshman English," *English Journal* [Coll. Ed.], XXVIII [1939], 177–85). If, despite such a present and future, we take our compositional tasks seriously and try conscientiously to help our students improve in their writing, we must, in sheer desperation (if you will pardon a left-handed compliment), look to you, and to you only, for guidance and assistance in the solution of our compositional problems.