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Minimum Essentials

In

English Composition and  
English Literature

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## MINIMUM ESSENTIALS IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION AND ENGLISH LITERATURE

One of the most important contributions to our understanding of the teaching of English at present is that of the minimum essential. The minimum essential idea concretely stated is this: After the pupil has reached a certain point in his school work there are certain things which he can do and in which he needs no further teaching. To what extent this idea is practicable no one can, at present, state with certainty. It seems clear, however, that the idea is worthy, and that its general acceptance will do much toward straightening out certain difficulties in the teaching of English. At present the problem of the minimum essential presents two important subordinate problems. The first of these is, What can legitimately be insisted on as minimum essentials? The second is, How can we enforce the minimum essential when we have determined it? Or in other words, How can we be certain that our pupils have really mastered the minimum essentials before we pass them to a higher grade?

In regard to the first of these problems the following idea seems clear: The minimum essentials must stick very closely to the primary objectives in the teaching of English; that is, they must deal directly with effectiveness in writing and speech and with the comprehension of literature. In regard to the second problem, we can say this: **THE FINAL TEST OF WHETHER THE PUPIL HAS ACHIEVED THE MINIMUM ESSENTIAL MUST ALWAYS BE FOUND IN HIS WRITTEN OR SPOKEN COMPOSITION.** Tests and examinations undoubtedly have their place in revealing the special weak spots of a class or of an individual. They cannot, however, be the final measure of the pupil's attainment. That final measure must always be his composition work. Furthermore, **IT IS REASONABLY CLEAR THAT THE GREAT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ENFORCING OF THE MINIMUM ESSENTIAL MUST REST ON THE GRADES FOLLOWING THE ONE IN WHICH THE PUPIL IS SUPPOSED TO HAVE MASTERED THAT ESSENTIAL.** The teacher in those grades should reject absolutely any work in which the pupil fails to use the ability which he is supposed to

## JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

It can readily be seen that any set of minimum essentials must as far as possible be simple and must deal with points on which there is a general agreement. The following set seems practicable for the end of the Junior High School, that is, the end of the ninth grade:

*First:* The pupil should be able to write a composition from any of the subjects given in such textbooks as Ward's *Sentence and Theme*, or Lewis and Holic's *Practical English*. He should be able to write such a theme with no more difficulty than he would prepare any other lesson.

*Second:* He should avoid offenses against correctness which seriously interfere with the appreciation of his theme by his reader. These offenses may probably be listed as follows:

- A. In spelling, he should not misspell more than three words in the ordinary theme.
- B. In grammar, he should make no mistakes in the following points:
  1. The principal parts of the verb.
  2. The case of pronouns except in involved constructions, which will probably not occur in his themes.
  3. The agreement of pronoun and antecedent, with the exception of the indefinite pronouns.
  4. The agreement of subject and verb.
  5. The double negative.
  6. The use of such barbarisms as "Ain't."
- C. In punctuation, he should avoid those mistakes which seriously detract from the understanding or appreciation of his theme. He should understand:
  1. The use of the proper end mark for a sentence or for a group of words which can be a sentence. Certain people would phrase this as the avoidance of the run-on sentence and the comma blunder or the comma splice.
  2. The use of the period at the end of a sentence and the avoidance of its use at the end of a group of words which is not a sentence.
  3. The proper punctuation of the direct quotation.
  4. The proper use of the apostrophe.
  5. The correct use of the comma where its employment is vital to the meaning of the sentence. Such cases are not common in Junior High School themes.

*Third:* In oral composition the pupil must attain approximately the same standard as in written composition; that is, he must be able to stand up before his classmates and talk without embarrassment on ordinary subjects such as those given in the two texts already cited. In this composition he cannot be held to the same degree of grammatical correctness that must be required in written composition, but he should at least approximate it. He can be held rigidly to account for the correct principal parts of the verb, the avoidance of barbarisms, and the correct case of pronouns except in the matter of *who* and *whom*. In regard to pauses and inflection, which are the punctuation of speech, he should be required to avoid such mistakes as render his speech incoherent or



have attained in the lower grades. IF EVERY TEACHER IN THE UPPER GRADES CONSISTENTLY FAILS WORK WHICH FALLS BELOW THE MINIMUM ESSENTIAL REQUIRED FOR ADMISSION TO THAT GRADE, OR IF HE REJECTS SUCH WORK AND DEMANDS THAT IT BE REWRITTEN, THE MINIMUM ESSENTIAL IS ENFORCED; OTHERWISE IT IS NOT.

## SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

When the brilliantly successful or even the average pupil is ready to go from the high school into the college, he has progressed far beyond the minimum essentials of the ninth grade and has entered a new realm of thought and expression. Such is not the case, however, with his weaker companion who has acquired only the absolute necessities demanded for graduation from high school, and it is this latter class which we are considering. For this rather large group of students the minimum essentials can be only slightly in advance of those presented in the discussion above.

### COMPOSITION

Minimum essentials in English for graduation from high school and for entrance to college should be conceived and stated in terms of ability.

For rounding out his high school training preparatory to taking his place as a worker and as a citizen, the high school graduate should have (1) such knowledge of the structure of the English sentence and (2) such skill in expression and in interpretation of the printed page and the spoken word as will enable him to carry on intelligently a self-cultivation in the language adequate to meet the demands made upon him by his work and his citizenship.

For unrestricted entrance to college English the student should have (1) such knowledge of the mechanism of the sentence, including familiarity with grammatical terms, and (2) such skill in expression and in interpretation of the printed page and the spoken word as will enable him to acquire, with the assistance of teachers and texts, the advanced knowledge of the language and the advanced skill in its use which a college education demands.

For these two classes of high school graduates the minimum essentials are identical. Suggested details follow.

#### THE COMPOSITION OR THEME UNIT

The largest growth the average pupil makes in composition during his three years in the senior high school probably appears in his greater ability to collect and organize the material for simple themes. He must possess sufficient power of observation and of thought to supply the necessary material by his own efforts. More specifically, he should be able to prepare a unified and coherent paper of about six hundred words upon a subject which permits organization based upon time relations; that is, a simple narrative without plot, or a narrative and descriptive exposition, such as an autobiography or an account of a journey or of an incident in his own experience. In writing in answer to simple questions (as for example, "Why do you prefer football to basketball?") he should know how to organize his thought without conspicuous lack of clearness.

On a limited subject, then, with which he is familiar the student must be able, without special preparation, to write a paper the general thought of which is unmistakably clear, which is free from illiterate blunders and other mechanical weaknesses, and in which there is evidence of reasonable ability to make logical arrangement of material and to secure coherence among the parts.

In his daily use of the language, both in conversation and in recitation, he must be able to speak with clearness and without gross language errors.

interfere with the hearers' understanding of the composition. This includes excessive pausing at unnatural places and constant use of linking "ands" and "uhs." In pronunciation, which is the spelling of speech, it is not as easy to set a standard as in spelling, but probably the limit of three obvious mispronunciations in speech is as sound as three misspelled words in a written composition.

*Fourth:* In literature it is difficult at present to arrive at a minimum essential. Probably the best we can do under present conditions is to require that a pupil at the end of the ninth grade shall be able to read rather easily a book of the type of Kirk Monroe's *Camp Mates*, Altsheiler's *The Horsemen of the Plain*, or possibly Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.



#### THE SENTENCE UNIT

In writing, the student must habitually express himself in sentences. He will, by virtue of this ability, avoid the phrase fragment, the clause fragment, the bad loose or stringy sentence, and the choppy or primer sentence. He must also be able to recognize easily the bare framework (the unmodified subject and predicate) of sentences which he encounters and uses.

#### THE WORD-GROUP UNIT

The student must be able to recognize phrases and clauses and to distinguish easily between them.

He must be able to distinguish easily between independent and dependent clauses.

He must be able to see and to explain in intelligible terms group relationships within the sentence.

#### THE WORD UNIT

The student must be clear in his mind about the uses of single words in sentences, and he must understand the fundamentals of grammar, such as clause, phrase, subject, object, verb, and the eight parts of speech. The meaning of these terms must be so clear to the pupil that he can use them in discussing his own problems of sentence structure.

#### SPELLING

The student must be able to spell correctly and without assistance the words which he uses in his ordinary writing.

He must have been trained never to guess at words the spelling of which he does not know.

#### PUNCTUATION

The student must habitually use correct sentence-end punctuation. He must habitually make correct use of the comma (1) to separate clauses, (2) to set off parenthetical parts, (3) to separate the parts of a series, and (4) to compel a pause which the sense requires.

He must habitually use correct marks in direct quotations.

He must habitually observe the simpler uses of the semicolon.

In general, he should punctuate intelligently enough to clarify rather than obscure the meaning.

#### READING: ORAL AND SILENT

The student must be able to read aloud written or printed prose, if the subject matter is within his comprehension, with such clearness of enunciation and with such inflection and pauses as will indicate that he understands what he is reading.

He must be able to read silently any simple prose and, with the prose before him, give evidence that he understands by answering questions on the subject matter.

#### USE OF THE DICTIONARY

The student must give evidence of having been trained in the use of the dictionary so that he can avail himself of its invaluable aid.

#### TYPES OF ILLITERATE BLUNDERS

The student must understand the nature and the sources of illiterate blunders, and he must habitually avoid them. A few such blunders are listed below.

Illiterate contractions and colloquialisms: *It don't* for *It doesn't*; *I ain't* for *I'm not*; *You ain't* for *You're not*.

Failure of agreement between subject and verb: *There was two planes in the air.*

Incorrect case forms of pronouns: *The job was too much for both Father and I.*

Of for have as a verb auxiliary: *The architect's drawing should of been followed more closely.*

Incorrect use of perfect tense for perfect participle, and vice versa, of irregular verbs: *The policeman seen enough to satisfy him.*

Unrelated or badly related participial phrases: *Closing the desk, his day's work was done. Slipping on the ice, his head was badly cut.*

Faulty end-of-line syllabication.

## LITERATURE

The reading and study of literary masterpieces has direct relation to language expression. Acquaintance with such masterpieces and their literary backgrounds has, also, great cultural value. But in view of the increasing diversity of subject matter in high school courses in literature, it seems unwise to make a statement of minimum essentials in terms of specific literary masterpieces. The student should have had, however, survey courses both in English and in American literature; he should have some knowledge of the really important writers, of their representative writings, and of their places against the backgrounds of their respective centuries.

It may be estimated that, as a minimum, a pupil should remember definitely (though not necessarily in minute detail) the substance of at least two plays of Shakespeare, four standard novels, two other books—biography, travel, science, history, or essay—and about a thousand lines of poetry.

He should be able to read a not-too-difficult poem, essay, short-story, play, or novel intelligently and with some degree of appreciation.

He may succeed in college work without having at this stage attained the invaluable power of appreciating the finer qualities of literature, but it is indispensable that he understand how to attack and master simple English prose even though it contains no narrative element—usually his chief aid in reading. He must be able to grasp the meaning, for example, of an expository chapter in a text book or an article in such a magazine as the *Scientific American*. With knowledge of methods of study that will enable him to comprehend the essential thought of what he reads, whether it be literature or the most utilitarian prose, even a very weak student, if persistent, may make profitable advances in higher education.

### SAMPLE TEST ON MINIMUM ESSENTIALS TWELFTH GRADE LEVEL

The test counts 100 points, divided for convenience as follows:

Spelling .....	20
Grammar .....	55
Punctuation, Capitalization, and Sentence Recognition....	25

The material, except for spelling, may be mimeographed or written on the board. There is as yet no provision for supplying printed copies. Such a provision remains as one of our problems if a uniform test proves to be desirable.



## SPELLING (20 points)

To the Teacher: Dictate the following list of words slowly, pronouncing each word distinctly twice. To get the score, count one point for each word correctly spelled.

beginning	business
their (the pronoun)	grammar
separate	later
too (the adverb)	usually
believe	principal (the adjective)
all right	receive
ninety	finally
benefited	government
immediately	activities
athletics	occurred

## GRAMMAR (55 points)

### I

#### *Sentence Structure and Parts of Speech*

#### A (5 points)

To the Teacher: To get the score, count one-third point for each blank correctly filled.

To the Student: From the five sentences below pick out the bare framework, that is, (1) the \*subject substantive, (2) \*predicate verb, and (3) \*the predicate adjective or predicate noun or the direct object. If (3) is lacking, write "none" in the blank provided for (3); if (3) is present, cancel the term not needed to describe it.

\*Unmodified subject" may be used instead of "subject substantive."

"Unmodified verb" may be used instead of "predicate verb."

"Attribute complement" may be used instead of "predicate adjective" or "predicate noun."

"Object complement" may be used instead of "direct object."

1. The children were unusually busy all that morning.  

Subject substantive	Predicate verb	Predicate adjective or noun Direct object
.....	.....	.....
  
2. A large gray horse with shaggy mane stood quietly in one corner of the pasture.  

Subject substantive	Predicate verb	Predicate adjective or noun Direct object
.....	.....	.....
  
3. During the campaign for membership every student was a willing worker.  

Subject substantive	Predicate verb	Predicate adjective or noun Direct object
.....	.....	.....
  
4. Every morning at seven the janitor unlocked the door.  

Subject substantive	Predicate verb	Predicate adjective or noun Direct object
.....	.....	.....
  
5. The basket ball team, accompanied by the coach, left on the twelve-five train.

- ..... 17. The surgeon took *them* into the next room.
- ..... 18. The girl wore a *very* bright shawl.
- ..... 19. The President spoke before thousands, *but* millions heard him.
- ..... 20. The janitor *locked* the basement door.

II

Miscellaneous

(30 points)

To the Teacher: Count one point for each blank correctly filled.

To the Student: Insert the correct words in the blanks below.

1. We (was, were) ..... on the sidewalk when the crash came.
2. The campaign (don't, doesn't) ..... seem to be taking hold.
3. The number of persons in the auditorium (are, is) ..... seven hundred.
4. Guides will accompany you and (me, I) ..... through the region.
5. The home team might (have, of) ..... won the game if it hadn't rained.
6. Why (ain't, aren't) ..... we better off today than a hundred years ago?
7. Nobody in the large crowd of bystanders (was, were) ..... hurt by the explosion.
8. The Chamber of Commerce invited the teachers and (we, us) ..... children to a banquet.
9. Four of (we, us) ..... boys started at daybreak for the lake.
10. The prices of farm products (varies, vary) ..... according to supply and demand.
11. As for Clem and the rest of (us, we) ..... fellows, it was pitch and toss.
12. The traveler, (who, whom) ..... they thought was Jones, perished in the storm.
13. You (wasn't, weren't) ..... there in time to see the first act.
14. The explorer, together with all his companions, (was, were) ..... lost on the ice.
15. There (was, were) ..... present a judge, a banker, and a labor leader.
16. Anyone would enjoy having it in (their, his) ..... home.
17. He (ain't, isn't) ..... ready to go yet.
18. Henry knew nothing of (this, these) ..... sort of horses.
19. It was either her sister or (her, she) ..... that I met at the party.
20. (Who, Whom) ..... do you eat lunch with at noon?
21. Almost any student can make (his, their, her) ..... own way through high school.
22. He was familiar with (those, that) ..... kind of peaches.
23. The class had (begun, began) ..... to understand the subject when the term closed.
24. As soon as the doctor had (went, gone) ....., the patient began to mend.
25. In mathematics the students (did, done) ..... high-grade work.
26. Last spring Nurmi (run, ran) ..... a mile in record-breaking time.
27. The body of King Tut has (laid, lain) ..... in the Pyramids thousands of years.
28. The superintendent (saw, seen) ..... the mayor about school playgrounds.
29. After studying an hour, the problem was solved. (Correct, incorrect) .....
30. Putting on his overcoat, the doctor hurried from his office. (Correct, incorrect) .....



PUNCTUATION, CAPITALIZATION, AND SENTENCE  
RECOGNITION (25 points)

To the Teacher: Count one point for each blank correctly filled. The material in the blanks to the left is the key for the scoring of papers. It will, of course, be omitted from the test as given to the student.

To the Student: In each of the following sentences there is an error in punctuation or capitalization. Correct it by writing in the blank space at the left

1. the word after which or in which the error is made,
2. the correct mark of punctuation (where the error is one of punctuation), and
3. the next word (when necessary to make the correction complete.)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>walk; let's or<br/>walk. Let's<br/>women's</i> | 1. I'm so tired I can hardly walk let's rest awhile.<br>2. When Edward Bok was editor of a prominent women's magazine, he determined to improve American cities. |
| <i>European</i>                                   | 3. Since the war, conditions in european countries have been unsettled.  |
| <i>wasn't<br/>slowly and</i>                      | 4. The Ford racer wasn't ten minutes behind its rival.<br>5. He read the last page slowly. And laid down the book with a look of disappointment on his face.     |
| <i>rookies. Not</i>                               | 6. "About face!" he shouted to the squad of rookies, not a man stirred.  |
| <i>tools. It or<br/>tools; it</i>                 | 7. The workmen laid down their tools it was their first stop since daybreak.   |
| <i>, which</i>                                    | 8. Mountain sheep which are becoming rare in the United States, are still found in Colorado.   |
| <i>Taft,</i>                                      | 9. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, former President Taft then administered the oath of office.   |
| <i>interurban,</i>                                | 10. One may travel from Fort Dodge to Des Moines by interurban by steam railroad, or by automobile.  |
| <i>Syracuse,</i>                                  | 11. Since the war American earthenware has been manufactured at Syracuse New York.   |
| <i>act,</i>                                       | 12. When the curtain rose on the last act Charles stepped quickly upon the stage.  |
| <i>coach, because</i>                             | 13. There was no opportunity to consult the coach. Because at that moment he was somewhere in the audience.  |
| <i>fast, seeing</i>                               | 14. Robert thought fast. Seeing that the entire responsibility for the success of the play was now on his shoulders.   |
| <i>driver,</i>                                    | 15. "How can we go on," queried the driver "without repairing the lights?"   |
| <i>horses,</i>                                    | 16. "You hold the horses Henry," he went on, "while I set the brakes."   |
| <i>here. We</i>                                   | 17. The senator spoke as follows: "I am glad to welcome you here." "We shall now proceed with the exercises of the day."   |
| <i>"Hurrah!"</i>                                  | 18. "Hurrah," shouted the crew as the boat slipped off the sand bar.   |
| <i>been?"</i>                                     | 19. "Come here, Fido," called the lady. "Where have you been."   |
| <i>sell,"</i>                                     | 20. "The suits I sell, responded the clothier, "are the best on the market."   |
| <i>me?"</i>                                       | 21. "Why did you leave me," complained Mary. "I wanted to go with you."  |



- States,* 22. Although Lincoln held the high office of President of the United States he never abandoned his homely ways.
- Antelopes,* 23. Antelopes mountain lions, and grizzly bears were once numerous in the United States.
- its* 24. Society often misunderstands it's great men.
- "Don't* 25. "Dont fail," said the teacher, "to check your paper before you turn it in."

## BRIEF REFERENCE LIST

No bulletin concerning English work would be complete without reference to outstanding professional periodicals. All teachers of English will find genuine helpfulness in THE ENGLISH JOURNAL, the official organ of the National Council of Teachers of English, published by the University of Chicago Press. To the elementary school teacher THE ELEMENTARY ENGLISH REVIEW, published at 7450 Woodward Avenue, Detroit, offers definite help and stimulation in dealing with the many English problems of the early grades. This journal may well be recommended to the teachers of all grades. Iowa English teachers are especially interested in TRI-STATE NOTES, published at the University of Minnesota by the English Associations of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. It furnishes a clearing house of ideas and teaching devices and a bulletin of activities of the three states.

Below is a very brief list of a few types of suggestive reference material which may be useful to the less experienced English teacher.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Bulletin (monthly) .....                                      | Illinois Association of Teachers of English.                                  |
| English Bulletin (quarterly).....                             | New York State Association, (West High School, Rochester, N. Y.)              |
| Home Reading List.....  | National Council of Teachers of English (506 West 69th Street, Chicago.)      |
| Senior High School Home Reading List}                         | Iowa State Library Commission.  |
| Junior High School Home Reading List}                         |   |
| English Grammar Drills on Minimum Essentials .....            | Holliday and Camenisch—Laird and Lee.   |
| Minimum Essentials of Correct Writing..                       | Carpenter, Carver, Mausby and Knott — Harcourt, Brace and Company.            |
| The Little Grammar.....                                       | Cross—Atlantic Monthly Press.   |
| High School English Book.....                                 | Hitchcock—Henry Holt and Co.  |
| Lewis and Hosié's Practical English for High Schools .....    | American Book Company.  |
| Junior Highway to English.....                                | Ward-Moffett—Scott, Foresman and Co.  |
| Sentence and Theme, Revised.....                              | Ward—Scott, Foresman and Co.  |
| What Is English.....  | Ward—Scott, Foresman and Co.  |
| Scales  |   |
| Thorndike—McCall Reading Scales (Grades 3-10).                |   |
| Nassau County Supplement to the Hillegas Scale (Grades 4-10). |   |
| Trabue Language Scales.....                                   | (Grades 2-12.)  |
| Sixteen Spelling Scales.....                                  | Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City. |

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