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978-1-316-60374-1 - A New Manual of French Composition: For  
Universities and the Higher Classes of Schools

R. L. Græme Ritchie

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# A NEW MANUAL OF FRENCH COMPOSITION

FOR UNIVERSITIES AND THE  
HIGHER CLASSES OF SCHOOLS

BY

R. L. GRÆME RITCHIE

CAMBRIDGE  
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
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## P R E F A C E

The *Manual of French Composition* has had a long innings: twenty-six years and not out. It probably owes this happy fate to the quality of the English passages and their suitability for the purposes of French Composition, and seems therefore likely to retain its usefulness unimpaired. But many teachers who have worked through its two hundred passages ask for a further volume, on the same general lines.

The present work contains the same number of **PASSAGES**, including some sixty tried favourites taken from the now extinct *Supplement* of 1922. These two hundred passages have passed three tests which experience shows to be essential. However promising an English passage seems, it cannot be guaranteed suitable for the special purposes of French Composition till it has actually been used in a written examination and found to 'work out well'; thereafter discussed in class with interested and not easily satisfied students; and finally provided with a 'fair copy' which examiners and teachers, candidates and students can behold without shame or without indignation. The severest of these tests is the last, and we might have had to dispense with it in some cases but for the help of colleagues and friends.

The relative difficulty of the Passages is indicated by asterisks: \* Easy [Higher Certificate and Scholarship papers standard]; \*\* Moderately difficult [University Pass Examinations]; \*\*\* Difficult [Final Honours and the highest Civil Service Examinations]; \*\*\*\* Very difficult [More useful as Exercises than as tests in any of the existing Examinations].

While the 'fair copies' were being in the fullness of time achieved—they are published for the use of Teachers in a companion volume entitled *French Fair Copies*—we noted the 'points' brought out by each. They are classified and discussed in the **INTRODUCTION**. It thus deals not with difficulties which might conceivably occur in the translation

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PREFACE

of English prose into French, but with difficulties which do occur—and persistently—in our two hundred passages. But as these represent many different types and authors, and were originally selected for examination purposes, there seems little doubt that the Introduction gives the gist of the matter and contains the hints and the information most useful to a candidate confronted with any piece of English prose.

In alternate passages further and more direct help is given in NOTES.

An illustration of the principles followed in the choice of variants is given by means of a MODEL LESSON.

We are privileged once more to print MODEL TRANSLATIONS kindly written for us by distinguished French scholars. Some of the original contributors happily contribute again. The place of others is worthily filled by their successors in office, that of the late Professor Émile Legouis by his son. As a sign of the times, British scholarship is represented by two contributors, Professors A. J. Farmer and F. C. Roe.

To all these we would express our gratitude—as also to the scholars whose names adorn the companion volume which, but for their valued help, might never have reached a conclusion.

R. L. G. R.

*March 1941*

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## PRINCIPAL ABBREVIATIONS USED

<b>cp.:</b> compare	<b>poet.:</b> poetical
<b>esp.:</b> especially	<b>qqch.:</b> quelque chose
<b>F.:</b> French	<b>qqn.:</b> quelqu'un
<b>fig.:</b> figurative	<b>relig.:</b> religious
<b>freq.:</b> frequently	<b>sb.:</b> substantive
<b>gen.:</b> general	<b>s.v.:</b> sub voce
<b>intr., intrans.:</b> intransitive	<b>trans.:</b> transitive
<b>iron.:</b> ironical	<b>Var., var.:</b> variant
<b>Lat.:</b> Latin	<b>vb.:</b> verb.
<b>lit.:</b> literal, literally	<b>= :</b> equals, means equivalent to
<b>mil.:</b> military	<b>) (:</b> as contrasted with
<b>O.E.D.:</b> The Oxford English Dictionary	

**N.B.** Double inverted commas indicate erroneous renderings.

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

As an Academic exercise, French Composition is both a means of learning the language and a test of linguistic attainment.

As a means of learning French, it is of course only one among many: Grammar, Reading, Translation into English, Free Composition, Oral Work, Stay Abroad. Knowledge of French acquired by one means is improved and extended by others. The part played by Composition is to increase our *active* Vocabulary and make our knowledge of French more *precise*.

To know the meaning of French words and phrases and be able to recognize them when we see them is a passive art, highly useful for many purposes, but not for Composition. In that exercise we have to produce them ourselves—a much more exacting task. One might, for instance, have some difficulty in giving the French for ‘Pharaoh’, ‘the Rich Man in the parable’, ‘the Field of the Cloth of Gold’, ‘the League of Nations’ or ‘the self-determination of peoples’, but none in recognizing *le Pharaon*, *le mauvais riche*, *le Camp du drapeau d’or*, *la Société des Nations* or *le droit des peuples de disposer d’eux-mêmes*. If a student cannot produce exactly the French words or phrases required, it is often because he has not had occasion to use them himself. He may have come across them in his reading, but not *seen* them—till his French Prose is returned, with corrections. Then the scales fall from his eyes. He sees that *Pharaon* is the title of a ruler and not his name, that this particular ‘Field’ is *Camp* and not *Champ*. His knowledge of French becomes to that extent fuller and more active. If he did not know these words before, he knows them now. If he only half-knew them, he now knows them fully, and returns them to store, well overhauled and with the missing parts supplied. Henceforth they belong to his active vocabulary and are available for practical use. The number of words so treated is relatively

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small, because practice in French Composition must in the nature of things be limited. But the habit of mind so formed is afterwards applied in the acquisition of other words and in other domains of French study. The faculty of *seeing* words instead of merely glancing at them is indeed as essential for reading French properly as for writing it.

For Composition purposes, to know a French expression may be useless unless one also knows it precisely—the exact words and their order, their spelling and gender, the way in which the expression is used, its literary value and its force. The right word with the wrong gender may be worse than useless. In Composition, incomplete knowledge may be more dangerous than ignorance.

Composition thus encourages us to continue amassing language material in quantity, but at the same time to keep an eye on the quality. It gives us practice in manipulating language material ourselves and skill in performing what is before all things a work of precision. It is not an end in itself; it is an aid to something higher, to a full, precise and active knowledge of French.

As a test of attainment in French, Composition reveals strength and weakness as no other exercise can. Quantity and quality, information and skill, vigilance and readiness all come up for judgment. In examinations Composition is well known to be the most searching part of the French papers. No single test is of course perfect, but within its own limits Composition is the least imperfect—and the least ‘subjective’. The candidates who do best in it are those who have the soundest knowledge of the language. There are so many opportunities of making elementary errors that unsound knowledge is inevitably exposed over and over again, and any system of deductive marking which leaves the best French scholars with high marks, automatically leaves the less good with extremely few. No doubt positive marks can be gained by meritorious translations of occasional phrases. But in examinations Composition is in essence a negative art—like the art of war in the field, where the best general is he who makes the fewest mistakes.

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To improve one's marks in French Composition it is therefore necessary to improve one's knowledge of the language, but more particularly as regards active vocabulary, exactness and the avoidance of error, i.e. to learn more French, learn it better and learn to write it more carefully. How to achieve these three results is a subject too wide for treatment here and the methods, moreover, are too well known.

There are, however, some aspects of French study which concern Composition more closely than others, and these are considered in the Introduction. The material utilized in it is mainly drawn from the Passages for Translation—a method which has a three-fold advantage. It reduces to practical dimensions what is a formidable, and would otherwise be an unlimited, undertaking. It provides help in the translation of every passage in the book. And it encourages—and rewards—re-reading and consultation of paragraphs whose purpose is to be generally helpful. Except in the annotated alternate passages—and even in them very sparingly—no direct references to the Introduction are given. Discussion of the difficulties, and hints and guidance as to their solution, will be found in the four chapters into which they naturally fall: I, Descriptive Vocabulary; II, Homonyms and Synonyms; III, Grammar; and IV, Style.

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## DICTIONARIES

### FRENCH-FRENCH

E. Littré, *Dictionnaire*, 4 vols. and Supplement.

Still indispensable: contains a vast number of well-chosen examples from classical authors, with references. The material, however, is not very well arranged, and as a rule time is required to find exactly the information sought. There is an *Abrégé* by A. Beaujean (Hachette).

*Dictionnaire de l'Académie française.*

Contains well-chosen phrases, exemplifying the correct usage of words.

Hatzfeld, Darmesteter et Thomas, *Dictionnaire général de la Langue française* (Delagrave).

The examples given are few, but carefully selected; the etymologies suggested represent the results of modern scholarship.

Bescherelle, *Dictionnaire national de la langue française* (Garnier).

Contains many words too recent for inclusion in Littré or Hatzfeld.

*Larousse du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Larousse), 6 vols. 1928.

[An *encyclopaedic* Dictionary.]

### ENGLISH-FRENCH

Harrap's *Standard French and English Dictionary*, Part II, edited by J. E. Mansion (Harrap), 1939.

Extraordinarily complete, up-to-date and accurate.

Ch. Petit, *Dictionnaire Anglais-Français* (Hachette), 1934.

Excellent and full.

Gasc's *Concise Dictionary*. New Edition with an enlarged Supplement and revised Introduction by J. Marks (G. Bell and Sons), 1938.

Useful as a convenient small-size Dictionary.

### FRENCH-ENGLISH

Harrap's *Standard French and English Dictionary*, Part I, edited by J. E. Mansion (Harrap), 1934.

Indispensable; supersedes all existing French-English Dictionaries.

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**Excellent selective Dictionary.**

Professor F. Boillot, *Le vrai Ami du traducteur anglais-français* (Presses Universitaires de France), 1930.

**[Deals fully and amusingly with Homonyms.]**

## GRAMMAR

R. L. G. Ritchie, *Nelson's French Grammar* (Nelson), 1936.

## STYLE

Antoine Albalat, *L'Art d'écrire en vingt leçons* (Colin), 1899;  
*Le Travail du style* (Colin), 1903.