true of writing. In the first place there is a gift for writing; some people have it, and some have it not, and can never acquire it. We do not mean to say that every man, by dint of taking sufficient pains, cannot learn to express his thoughts—if he has any—with reasonable clearness on paper, just as every man can, with sufficient pains, acquire a handwriting in which a shall look like a and b like b; but we do deny that in most cases it is possible to accomplish even this without much time and labor. And we maintain that, just as in the case of music, this practical drill, to be successful, should be begun very early: instead of that the poor children at school are too often crammed with unintelligible grammars. The consequence is, as is only too well known to all college professors, that young men at college cannot even spell their mother tongue, much less write it; though, to be sure, as to spelling, it may be urged that ours is the worst spelled of civilized languages.

The difficulty is the same in both cases; to learn to play on that most complicated of instruments, language, requires long-continued practice. Now, what would a student at the Institute say if he were directed to attend assiduously to all his regular studies, and in the odds and ends of time be pleased to pick up the subject of mechanical engineering? And yet, this is the footing on which English studies have almost everywhere—in classical not less than in scientific colleges—been placed: the noisy discussion that is going on just now upon the subject shows that the public are waking up to the absurdity of the situation.

One half the difficulty in regard to composition arises from putting trust in futile and pedantic treatises on rhetoric. To try to learn to write by their help is like trying to learn behavior by reading treatises on etiquette. Good behavior is learned unconsciously by habitual intercourse with well-bred people. We do not mean that there are no rules to be observed, but we believe that the really useful rules of rhetoric may all be got into a very few pages. Then, it is absolutely necessary to remark that a man, in order to write, must have something to say, and in order to write well must be interested in saying it; which two rules are quite sufficient to condense what is commonly called "theme-writing." Theme-writing, as all who have had experience know, is the art of covering paper with unmeaning words. As regards the true art of composition it is emphatically how not to do it, and we are glad to see that Professor Hill, as the result of long and dire experience, expresses himself thus on the subject: "Under the most favorable conditions, the results of English composition as practiced in college are, it must be confessed, discouraging. . . . I know no language, ancient or modern, civilized or savage, so insufficient for the purposes of language, so dreary and inexpressive, as theme-language in the mass. . . . How two or three hundred young men who seem to be really alive as they appear in the flesh, can have kept themselves entirely out of their writing, it is impossible to understand."

"The style of a writer," says Goethe to Eckermann, "is a faithful representative of his mind; therefore if any man wishes to write a clear style, let him be first clear in his thoughts; and if any would write a noble style, let him first possess a noble soul." The essence of all true rhetoric lies in this brief saying. The secret of good writing is, first of all, good thinking. Students at the Institute have, unfortunately, little time for practice, yet the present writer does not often find much occasion to criticise the abstracts of their graduating theses, all of which he has the pleasure of reading. The reason is, that in them the writers are giving, in a brief and straightforward fashion, an account of subjects which they have thoroughly mastered. It might even be said that our whole course of study is, in one sense, a most valuable preparation for composition, because it is in every part the strictest and most rigorous discipline in the art of logical thinking. No doubt something more is necessary,—familiarity with other and quite different regions of thought, and especially the command of a good vocabulary; but there is but one way of attaining that, and that is through a real familiarity with good writers. This is a process which cannot well be hastened. To be a master of style one must get inside of literature, and that can be done only through much and long-continued reading.

It is noticeable that the most successful experiment which Professor Hill thinks he has ever tried is one of the simplest: it is the writing of papers, a page long by a class of thirty seniors in the classroom. "No manuscript is to be brought in, but students are advised to select their subjects beforehand, and to find out exactly what they want to say. . . . Having no space for prefaces or digressions or perorations, they usually begin at the beginning, and go straight