A SCALE FOR MERIT IN ENGLISH WRITING BY YOUNG PEOPLE.

EDWARD L. THORNDIKE,

Teachers College, Columbia University.

An ideal scale for merit in English writing would consist of a series of compositions (1) which range from one that possessed zero merit to one that possessed the utmost possible merit, (2) whose respective amounts or degrees of merit were exactly known and whose nature was such that other compositions could be compared with them easily.

Such a scale would obviously be of great value to teachers, civil-service examiners, college-entrance boards, scientific students of education and any others who need to measure the merit of specimens of English writing in order to estimate the abilities of individuals or changes in such abilities as the result of mental maturity, educational effort and other causes.

The best service toward establishing such a scale is the provision of an approximate scale by the extension, amplification and refinement of which more and more adequate scales may be devised. In this work Mr. M. B. Hillegas and I are at present engaged. Certain results so far obtained are presented in this article, partly because of their intrinsic value, and partly because it will be of interest to the readers of *THE JOURNAL* to criticize them and so aid in the improvement of the scale.

The best introduction to what follows will be for the reader to himself make the following experiment:—

Examine the following specimens and rank them in order for what you regard as merit in English writing by young people. Number the worst specimen 1, the next worse 2, the next worse 3, and so on. Then let the four-inch line below represent the total difference in merit between the specimen which

you rank 1, or worst, and the specimen which you rank 18, or best, and place the letters designating your numbers 4, 7, 10, 13 and 16 at appropriate points, so that the distances between these points represent the respective differences in merit between 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16 and 18 in your judgment. Then decide what sort of English writing would possess zero, or "just not any," merit as writing by young people and locate this zero-point where it belongs on the line or an extension of it.

(a) When Sulla came back from his conquest Marius has put himself consul so sulla with the army he had with him in his conquest siezed the government from Marius and put himself in consul and had a list of his enemys printy and the men whoes names were on this list we beheaded.

(b) Ichabod Crane was a schoolmaster in a place called Sleepy Hollow. He was tall and slim with broad shoulders, long arms that dangled far below his coat sleeves. His feet looked as if they might easily have been used for shovels. His nose was long and his entire frame was most loosely hung to-gether.

(c) My dear Fred,—

I will tell you of my journey to Delphi Falls, N. Y. There is nice scenery along this route. The prettiest scene is in the gulf which is quite narrow, a small creek flows down it and the road follows along near its banks.

There are woods on either side, these trees look very pretty when they are white with snow.

In summer it is always shady and cool in them and the small fish may be seen darting back and forth in the water.

I hope I will have the pleasure of taking you over the route some time.

Yours sincerely,

(d) As we road down Lombard Street we saw flags waving from nearly every window. I surely felt proud that day to be the driver of the gally decorated coach. Again and again we were cheered as we drove slowly to the postmasters, to await the coming of his majestie's mail. There wasn't one of the gally bedecked coaches that could have compared with ours, in my estimation. So with waving flags and fluttering hearts we waited for the coming of the mail and the expected tidings of victory.

When at last it did arrive the postmaster began to quickly sort the bundles, we waited anxiously. Immediately upon receiving our bundles, I lashed the horses and they responded with a jump. Out into the country we drove at reckless speed—everywhere spreading like wildfire the news, "Victory!" The exileration that we all felt was shared with the horses. Up and down grade and over bridges, we drove at breakneck speed and spreading the news at every hamlet with that one cry "Victory!" When at last we were back home again, it was with the hope that we should have another ride some day with "Victory."

(e) The most popular man of Auburn was the preacher. Although he had a very small salary he was contented. The preacher was kind to everybody. Little children loved him. Old soldiers liked to sit by his fireside and tell stories of the battles, which they had fought in. The beggars who came to his door, although chided for leading such an existence, were always clothed and feed.

The preacher was always willing to go to the homes where there was sickness or death. Here he helped in all things that he could.

In the church he preached with unaffected grace, and all who came to scoff at him remained to worship.

The minister was a contented, simple and kind man, whom the people loved.

(f) As far as I can learn from the Essay on Burns, Mr. Carlyle considers that good poetry must contain the sincerity of the poet. The poem must show the author's good choice of subject and his clearness of sight. In order to have good poetry the poet must be familiar with his subject and his poem will show it.

The characteristics of a great poet, in Mr. Carlyle's opinion were sincerity and choice of subjects. A poet must be appreciative of nature and have a responding heart. Carlyle says a true poet does not have to write on subjects which are far away and probably come from the clouds. A truly great poet makes the most of subjects which are familiar to him and close to earth, as Burns did in his poems to the Field Mouse and to The Daisie.

(g) I had an early run in the woods before the dew was off the grass. The moss was like velvet and as I ran under the arches of yellow and red leaves I sang for joy, my heart was so bright and the world was so beautiful. I stopped at the end of the walk and saw the sunshine out over the wide "Virginia meadows."

It seemed like going through a dark life or grave into heaven beyond. A very strange and solemn feeling came over me as I stood there, with no sound but the rustle of the pines, no one near me, and the sun so glorious, as for me alone. It seemed as if I felt God as I never did before, and I prayed in my heart that I might keep that happy sense of nearness all my life.

(h) dere teacher:

I like schol not like schol. that man other place like make work tools. Some day you say I rede

(i) First: De Quincys mother was a beautiful woman and through her De Quincy inherited much of his genius.

His running away from school influenced him much as he roamed through the woods, valleys and his mind became very meditative.

The greatest influence of De Quincy's life was the opium habit. If it was not for this habit it is doubtful whether we would now be reading his writings.

His companions during his college course and even before that time were great influences. The surroundings of De Quincy were influences. Not only De Quincy's habit of opium but other habits which were peculiar to his life.

His marriage to the woman which he did not especially care for.

The many well educated and noteworthy friends of De Quincy.

(j) They were in fact very fine ladies; not deficient in good humour when they were pleased, nor in the power of being agreeable when they chose it, but proud and conceited. They were rather handsome, had been educated in one of the first private seminaries in town, had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than they ought, and of associating with people of rank, and were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others.

(k) The passages given show the following characteristics of Fluellen: his inclination to brag, his professed knowledge of History, his complaining character, his great patriotism, pride of his leader, admired honesty, revengeful, love of fun and punishment of those who deserve it.

(l) Our school room is on the side of the school house and it is a awfully nice room and I like it because it is so nice and all the boys like it, there is a good

many pictures on the wall and there is a clock on the wall. We like this school room and come to school most all the time.

(m) Dear Sir: I write to say that it aint a square deal Schools is I say they is I went to a school. red and gree green and brown aint it hito bit l say he don't know his business not today nor yeaterday and you know it and I want Jennie to get me out.

(n) the book I refer to read is Ichabod Crane, it is an grate book and I like to rede it. Ichabod Crame was a man and a man wrote a book and it is called Ichabod Crane i like it because the man called it Ichabod crane when I read it for it is such a great book.

(o) I words four and two came go billa guni sing hay cows and horses he done it good he died it goon I want yes sir yes sir oxes and sheeps he come yes sir camed and goes billum gumun oomunn goodum.

(p) Advantage evils are things of tyranny and therē are many advantage evils. One thing is that when they oppress the people they suffer awful I think it is a terrible thing when they say that you can be hanged down or trodden down without mercy and the tyranny does what they want there was tyrans in the revolutionary war and so they throwed off the yok.

(q) I think the sunlight is very beautiful on the water, and when it shines on the water it is very beautiful, and I love to watch it when it is so beautiful. The colors are so pretty and the noise of the water with the sunshine are so attractive in the sunshine I wonder do other people love to watch the water like I do. I dont know as there is anything as lovely as the water waves in the sunlight of the glorious orb.

(r) I want to say it aint no youse they aint got no right and they aint got no man ban tan pan pan san san sen sen sun sun tun tun

This experiment is suggested primarily as the quickest and clearest introduction to what follows, and as of interest because it permits the reader to compare his own personal judgments with the average judgment (to be given later) of nearly two hundred competent judges. But I beg the reader, having thus made his independent judgments, to cut out or copy the blank on the opposite page and send it as directed.

The hypotheses upon which the scale is constructed are the following:—

1. Two specimens of English composition, A and B, are equal if, among competent judges, just as many judge A to possess more merit than B as judge B to possess more merit than A. If all judges are forced to express a preference, equality in merit means 50 per cent. of preferences. Specimen r is thus judged about equal to specimen s, being judged better 51, and worse 56 times by 107 judges.

I rank the specimens as follows:—

<i>a</i> is No.	<i>g</i> is No.	<i>m</i> is No.
<i>b</i> " "	<i>h</i> " "	<i>n</i> " "
<i>c</i> " "	<i>i</i> " "	<i>o</i> " "
<i>d</i> " "	<i>j</i> " "	<i>p</i> " "
<i>e</i> " "	<i>k</i> " "	<i>q</i> " "
<i>f</i> " "	<i>l</i> " "	<i>r</i> " "

I locate my grades 4, 7, 10, 13 and 15, and the point of just not any merit as English writing by a person in his 'teens, as shown below:—

Name,

Address,

Please send this, or a copy, to E. L. Thorndike, Teachers College, Columbia University.

2. The differences between C and D and between D and E are equal if, among competent judges, forced to express a preference, the per cent judging C to possess more merit than D equals the per cent judging D to possess more merit than E. Specimen d is thus approximately as far above specimen b as b is above k, 151 out of 180 judges calling d better than b, and 146 of them calling b better than k.

3. Within certain limits and approximately, the difference between F and G bears a relation to the difference between G and H, as shown in the following table:—

TABLE I.

The relation of the amount of difference in merit between x and y to the frequency of judgments that "*x is better than y*," only judgments "*x better than y*" or "*x worse than y*" being allowed.

(s) i from thre ours up in room on books and books care for childer tore a page and rite on them

Percentage of judges regarding x as better than y .	Amount of superiority of x to y , 100 equaling that amount which causes 75 per cent of the judges to judge x as better than y .	Percentage of judges regarding x as better than y .	Amount of superiority of x to y , 100 equaling that amount which causes 75 per cent of the judges to judge x as better than y .
50	0	75	100
51	4	76	105
52	7	77	110
53	11	78	114
54	15	79	120
55	19	80	125
56	22	81	130
57	26	82	136
58	30	83	141
59	34	84	147
60	38	85	154
61	41	86	160
62	45	87	167
63	49	88	174
64	53	89	182
65	57	90	190
66	61	91	199
67	65	92	208
68	69	93	219
69	74	94	231
70	78	95	244
71	82	96	260
72	86	97	279
73	91	98	305
74	95	99	345

For example, specimen h is judged by 80 out of 107 judges, or 75 per cent, to possess more merit than specimen r ; and r is judged to be better than specimen o by 76 of the 107 judges, or 71 per cent. By the table, then, h differs from r by + 100, and r differs from o by + 82; $h-r = 100$ and $r-o = 82$.

I need not here discuss the basis, in theory and experiment, for Table I. Common sense informs us that if J is judged better than K by 90 out of 100 judges and K better than L by only 70 out of 100, the difference $J-K$ is greater than the difference $K-L$. Table I informs us *how much* greater, supposing certain facts about the causation of individual differences in judgment to be true. On any defensible view whatever of these facts,

the table is approximately valid so long as we use it only to compare differences of about the same amount.

With 180 judges, the results were, for some of the specimens above:—

g better than	d, 142	or 79%;	g worse d, 38	or 21%.
d " "	b, 131	" 73%;	d " b, 49	" 27%.
b " "	k, 126	" 70%;	b " k, 54	" 30%.
k " "	q, 148	" 82%;	k " q, 32	" 18%.
q " "	a, 119	" 66%;	q " a, 61	" 34%.
a " "	p, 138	" 77%;	a " p, 42	" 23%.
p " "	n, 128	" 71%;	p " n, 52	" 29%.

The following relative differences calculated from Table I are approximately correct by any defensible method of calculation. One hundred equals the degree of difference noticed correctly by 75 per cent of judges:

g-d	= 120
d-b	= 91
b-k	= 78
k-q	= 136
q-a	= 61
a-p	= 108
p-n	= 82

The difference between n and zero merit is found, in a way that I shall presently describe, to be approximately 180. Sample m is on the whole regarded as of zero, or 'just not any,' merit as English writing by a young person.

In so far, then, as the judges are competent, the specimens a, b, d, and so forth have amounts of merit as follows:—

g	= 857
d	= 737
b	= 646
k	= 568
q	= 432
a	= 371
p	= 262
n	= 180
m	= 0

The location of the zero point for merit in English composition by young people is of importance in order to allow the '*times as much merit*' judgment. Measures of fatigue, practice or change of any sort will be greatly facilitated if we can so arrange the scale that 8, 10 and 12 on it mean twice as far from just not any of the thing in question as 4, 5 and 6—that 240 means twice as much of the thing as 120, three times as

much as 80, five times as much as 48. Hitherto no one could say with any assurance whether specimen g was two, ten or a hundred times as 'good' as specimen q.

I have located it approximately as specimen m on the basis of the judgments of (1) nine men of special literary ability, five professors of English, four being authors of standard textbooks on composition, and four men of marked general intellect and literary ability; (2) eleven gifted teachers familiar with secondary education, and (3) eight psychologists familiar with the significance of scales and zero points in the case of intellectual abilities and products.

Although no one person of these had any deliberate criterion for the point where positive merit just begins, and although one's first reaction to the request to locate such a point is to regard it as arbitrary, there is much agreement amongst individuals and almost perfect agreement in the case of the averages of the three groups.

Of the twenty-eight judges, two regard zero merit as something below the least meritorious specimen of the list, and five put it higher than specimen p, but three-fourths of the judges locate it as not lower than specimen o or higher than specimen n. The central tendency of the twenty-eight puts it at specimen m.

It is beyond the scope of this article to comment on any facts obtained in the course of the derivation of the scales. But it will interest students of individual psychology and of the teaching of English to learn that the worst writing actually found by us amongst our 5000 excerpts from answers to examination questions written by pupils in the upper grammar and high-school grades is, by our scale, little below 400. The best found in the same series is under 800. Zero merit being defined by the consensus of impartial experts, the best paragraph by a pupil in his 'teens is little over twice as good as the worst paragraph produced by any high-school pupil. To get grades from 400 down it was necessary to make artificial specimens. To write an English sentence that intelligently, tho' very offensively, expresses an idea of any complexity, means apparently progress nearly half way from zero to the limit of achievement for a pupil in his 'teens.