

Of Studies

Francis Bacon

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was an English statesman, writer, philosopher and an early promoter of what we have come to call the scientific method. In 1597 he published the first edition of his “essays.” He borrowed the word *essay* from the French writer Michel de Montaigne. It meant an *attempt* or *trial*, somewhat like the fragments and proverbs that were popular at the time. He wrote a second edition in 1612 and published an expanded edition in 1625 from which the following essay, number 50, was taken.

Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability. Their chief use for delight is in privateness and retiring; for ornament, is in discourse; and for ability, is in the judgment and disposition of business. For expert men can execute, and perhaps judge of particulars, one by one; but the general counsels, and the plots and marshalling of affairs, come best from those that are learned. To spend too much time in studies is sloth; to use them too much for ornament, is affectation; to make judgment wholly by their rules, is the humor of a scholar. They perfect nature, and are perfected by experience: for natural abilities are like natural plants, that need pruning, by study; and studies themselves do give forth directions too much at large, except they be bounded in by experience. Crafty men condemn studies, simple men admire them, and wise men use them; for they teach not their own use; but that is a wisdom without them, and above them, won by observation. Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously [closely]; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention. Some books also may be read by deputy, and extracts made of them by others; but that would be only in the less important arguments, and the meaner sort of books, else distilled books are like common distilled waters, flashy things. Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man. And therefore, if a man write little, he had need have a great memory; if he confer little, he had need have a present wit: and if he read little, he had need have much cunning, to seem to know that he doth not. Histories make men wise; poets witty; the mathematics subtle; natural philosophy [science] deep; moral grave; logic and rhetoric able to contend. *Abeunt studia in mores* [Studies are transformed into manners]. Nay, there is no stond [obstacle] or impediment in the wit but may be wrought out by fit studies; like as diseases of the body may have appropriate exercises. Bowling is good for the stone [gall-bladder] and reins [kidneys]; shooting for the lungs and breast; gentle walking for the stomach; riding for the head; and the like. So if a man’s wit be wandering, let him study the mathematics; for in demonstrations, if his wit be called away never so little, he must begin again. If his wit be not apt to distinguish or find differences, let him study the Schoolmen; for they are *cymini sectores* [splitters of hairs]. If he be not apt to beat over matters, and to call up one thing to prove and illustrate another, let him study the lawyers’ cases. So every defect of the mind may have a special receipt.

Topics for Writing and Discussion

1. Bacon says that studies “perfect nature, and are perfected by experience: for natural abilities are like natural plants, that need pruning, by study; and studies themselves do give forth

directions too much at large, except they be bounded in by experience.” In other words, we need both knowledge and experience in whatever course in life we choose. Innate ability is not enough; nor is much learning. To put it another way, we need both book learning and actual experience; both book smarts and street smarts. Take the career (or one of the careers) you have in mind to pursue in college and write an essay on how both studies and experience will be needed in that profession.

2. In a famous classification of books, Bacon says: “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously [closely]; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.” Books, in Bacon’s day, were about the only means of acquiring a wide knowledge. Today, of course, the way people acquire knowledge has vastly expanded. In a short essay, take Bacon’s classification and apply it to one of the modern means of acquiring knowledge, perhaps one that you use, such as the internet, Facebook, or Twitter. Give examples and the reasons for your classifications.