

FRONTISPIECE

THE LITTLE KNOWN STORY OF HOW THE TEACHING  
OF WRITING WENT OFF TRACK IN THE UNITED STATES

Cambridge, Massachusetts.



F. J. CHILD  
The Father of  
the College Essay

**T**HE YEAR IS 1851. Francis J. Child, Harvard professor of Rhetoric has just returned from an exhilarating three-year leave of absence spent studying drama and philology at the Universities of Berlin and Göttingen. Compared to Harvard, German universities are temples to the creative intellect. Professors there do not have to lecture on Classic Oratory and Forensics, subjects students preparing to be theologians and lawyers have grimly ground away at since the Middle Ages. At German universities, being a professor means you get to conduct pioneering research the way the Brothers Grimm do. There, professors hand the scut work over to lowly graduate students.

Upon his return, Child announces to Harvard that unless some changes are made in what and how he teaches, he will be departing for Johns Hopkins, which is just opening its doors, the first American university based on the German model.

Harvard hastily kowtows to Professor Child's demands. The mandatory composition course he detests is no longer part of the curriculum. In its place: English Literature, a brand new course of study. It will draw upon a required reading list of fifty books, which under Child's successors A.S. Hill and Charles W. Eliot become known as "The Harvard Classics." The arrangement frees Child to devote his energy to his academic passion: the cataloging of English and Scottish ballads.

Still, how to guarantee that incoming freshmen will be able to write clearly and concisely if Harvard no longer teaches courses in rhetoric, oratory, and English composition? In 1874, an ingenious pass-the-buck solution evolves which other colleges hasten to adopt, and which remains in place to this very day:

"...each candidate for admission will be required to write a short English composition, correct in spelling, punctuation, grammar and expression, the subject to be taken from one of the following works: Shakespeare's *Tempest*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Merchant of Venice*; Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*; Scott's *Ivanhoe* and *Lay of the Last Minstrel*."

*Already knowing how to write becomes a prerequisite for admission.*