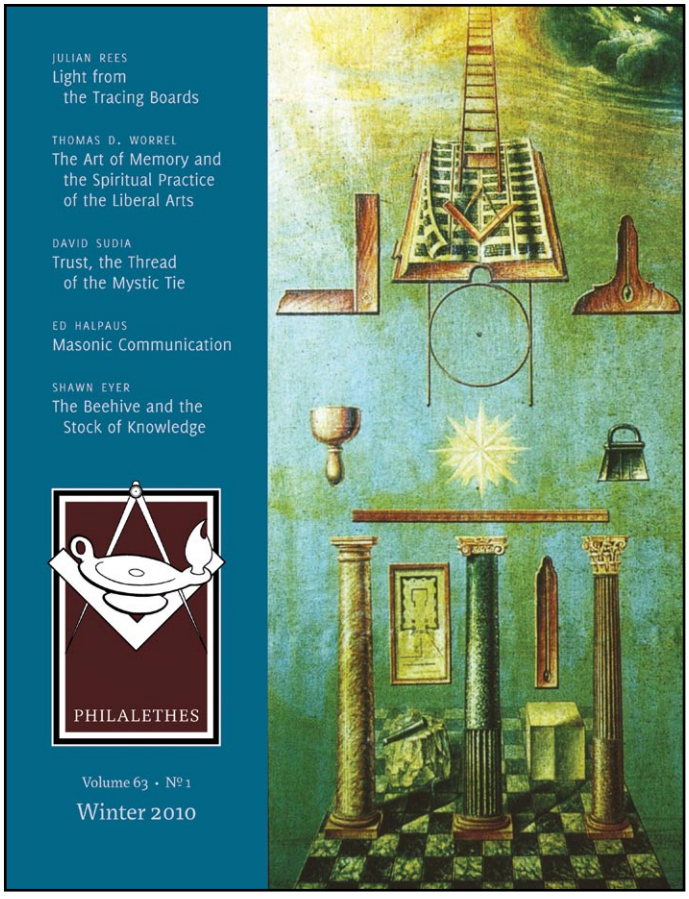
PHILALETHES
The Journal of Masonic Research & Letters
http://www.freemasonry.org

Sample Article from Volume 63 • № 1

Shawn Eyer

Writing a Masonic Paper

The renewed interest in Masonic education has created a demand for more research about the Craft. This concise article provides valuable guidance for the Masonic writer, whether preparing a talk for Lodge or for possible publication. From the selection of topics to the handling of references, Shawn Eyer stresses the importance of imbuing each paper with Wisdom, Strength and Beauty.



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Now that Masonic education is finally back in style, there is a growing demand for lodge talks, interpretive articles, and research papers among the Craft. But for one who has never worked on such a project before, where to begin?

Writing a Masonic Paper

WISDOM, STRENGTH AND BEAUTY AS A GUIDE TO PREPARATION

SHAWN EYER OFFERS SOME ADVICE TO ASPIRING AUTHORS WHO WISH TO WRITE ABOUT OUR ORDER'S HISTORY AND SYMBOLISM

One of the best ways to increase our store of knowledge is to engage in a bit of Masonic study. This is something that nearly anyone can do, given the support and encouragement — and not just do, but do well. Writing a Masonic paper provides an opportunity for us to:

- contemplate the ritual itself more seriously and thoroughly
- become more familiar with standard Masonic references (encyclopedias, monitors, interpretive works)
- converse with our Masonic peers for their insights
- and (most importantly) to better apply the lessons of Freemasonry in our own lives.

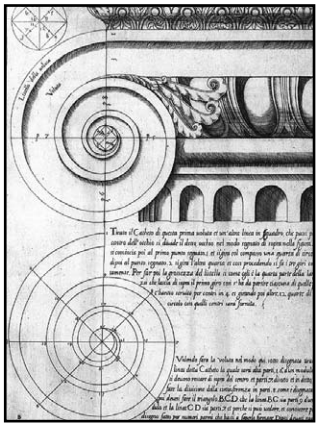
Although thousands of books have been written about Freemasonry already, we shouldn't worry whether there is anything new or valuable to say. Nor should one be distressed by claims that our work is self-explanatory and has no need of study or interpretation.[1] The opposite is true, and George Oliver got it right when he said that "we ought not to be contented with deriving one moral lesson from every single emblem depicted on our Tracing Board . . . [b]ut to consider each as a text on which to build a copious Lecture."[2] There is, in fact, no end to the delights of Masonic research.

As we resolve to begin such a project, let us remember that in the monitorial lecture of the First Degree, we are taught that it is "necessary that there should be Wisdom to contrive, Strength to support, and Beauty to adorn all great and important undertakings."

Since there is every reason to consider your research project as a "great and important undertaking," one might say that, in a sense, the tradition itself proposes a method for how we might approach the work of a Masonic paper. Let's take a look at how Wisdom, Strength and Beauty can be our "template" for excellence as we set off on our studies.

Shawn Eyer MPS is the Worshipful Master of Academia Lodge № 847 of Oakland, California, and the Editor of *Philalethes*.

WISDOM TO CONTRIVE:
FINDING & REFINING A TOPIC



Our phrase "Wisdom to contrive" evokes many things: knowledge, understanding, and creativity. Speaking traditionally, it refers to the Wisdom embodied in King Solomon. None of us have Solomon's great wisdom, but even so it is held out to us as an aspiration. In traditional sources, Solomon's wisdom enables him to judge with insight, to solve riddles and to gain insight into spiritual matters. All of these are tasks that we ourselves encounter when doing Masonic research.

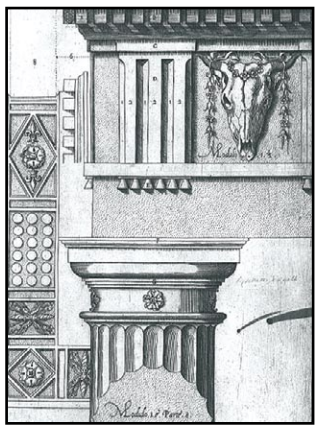
One of the first questions we ask ourselves is, "Where do I begin?" The Craft is a daunting subject: its ceremonies, history, symbolism, artwork and literature are truly a vast expanse, and one in which we feel we may become lost.

Follow your instinct and your curiosity. Next time you're at a ceremony, look around the room at the symbols. Listen carefully to the words. Think about your questions, and what naturally interests you. When we select our topic from personal introspection, that's when the work becomes the most meaningful. If the teachings of Masonry speak to us at all, they are capable of suggesting the topics we need to further explore at any given time. So do not select a topic; let the topic find you. It may be a word, a gesture, a form in the ritual. It may be a passage in a lecture, or symbol displayed in the lodge room. It may be something you read in a Masonic book, or something you have been wondering about for years. The topic will come to you.

From there, it may need a bit of refining. Often, early in our work, we may be attracted to topics such as "The Meaning of the Apprentice Degree." But a closer look will teach us more, so focus in on some specific symbols or moments in the degree you want to study. A strong focus will save us from being sidetracked. Be sure to mention your topic both to your assigned Mentor and to the Worshipful Master for their insight: they may assist you in refining it.

But won't a narrow focus be too restrictive? Ironically, this is far from the case! When the topic is too broad, like "Masonry's Impact on the World" or "Initiation in All Ages," our work becomes restricted by vague generalities. But when a topic is narrower, like "The First Test of the Apprentice Candidate" or "The Trowel as the Primary Working Tool," we can more profitably engage the topic. Subtraction opens up doors for us; it gives us room to express ourselves. This is one lesson we might derive from the working tools of the first degree: the Perfect Ashlar is created by removing excess material. Measure with the gauge, remove with the gavel. Consider that narrowing things down in the right way is actually a creative act.

STRENGTH TO SUPPORT:
SOUNDNESS, REFERENCES & STRUCTURE



Now that we have a topic, the next step is obvious. It's time to read up on it. There are thousands of Masonic books, and many of them will bear on our topic. The trick might be finding the right ones — not everything published on Freemasonry is true, or sound, or even sane. If we're new to the Craft it may be useful for us to seek advice from the Masonic formation or education director of the Lodge.

A logical first stop for any beginning Masonic work is at the reference shelf. Several authors compiled Masonic encyclopedias, and each of them has merit. The most influential and important Masonic encyclopedia is by Albert G. Mackey. W.∴ Bro.∴ Mackey took Freemasonry seriously as a spiritual and philosophical tradition. His encyclopedia is not entirely accurate (nothing of that length is), but generally speaking it's a great "first stop" for getting a sense of what the Masons who came before us had to say about a given topic.

Most of the other Masonic encyclopedists — such as Lenning, Oliver, Macoy, Woodford, Mackenzie and Waite — shared Mackey's perspective that Masonry was profound. In the mid-twentieth century another perspective emerged: that of Masonry as a merely fraternal and philanthropic organization. This school of thought has produced one Masonic encyclopedia (edited by H. W. Coil FPS), which is worth consulting for historical information, but which tends to state that certain symbols have only trite and commonplace meanings, or none at all.

From there, it's time to see if there are any books or respected Masonic periodicals which might have bearing on our subject. A visit to the Lodge library may be in order, and perhaps we will find ourselves investing in some new Masonic books of our own.

As we explore our topic and begin to write, we shouldn't be afraid to share our own perspectives even as we summarize the opinions of the Masons of the past. Our perspective today is vitally important, especially when it is properly informed by reference to the ideas that came before us and produced the Masonry we know.

AVOID USING INTERNET SOURCES

Warning: One cannot Google oneself to Masonic light. While some good Masonic information is available online, we need to avoid "junk-food" level information. There are websites everywhere that claim to offer serious Masonic information, but many are not actually as scholarly as they represent. Too many website citations can make any paper look less credible. We should cite printed sources whenever possible.

RECORD APPROPRIATE CITATIONS

A lodge talk is not an academic paper, and does not need to be cited like one. However, it is a good habit to cite the sources one has used. Of course all direct quotations must be cited in a footnote.

When papers are read in Lodge, of course, the footnote citations are not read. To do so would make the meeting tedious and distract from your overall message.

But for publication, sources are critical. One mistake Masonic writers often make is failure to include enough citations. When it comes to the "cold facts," remember that unless you personally witnessed something, you are reliant upon sources. And in the realm of opinion, if someone else has expressed a given point of view before you, you should provide a citation to that effect.

PROVIDE CONTEXT

Remember, when introducing a work or an author that may be unfamiliar to some members of the audience, always briefly state some context. Example:

Unclear:

The *Corpus Hermeticum* tells us that "The sun is situated in the center of the universe, and wears it like a crown."

Much Improved:

The *Corpus Hermeticum*, a collection of mystical texts from the late classical period which was highly influ-

ential during the European Renaissance, tells us that "The sun is situated in the center of the universe, and wears it like a crown."[99]

. . . with the footnote:

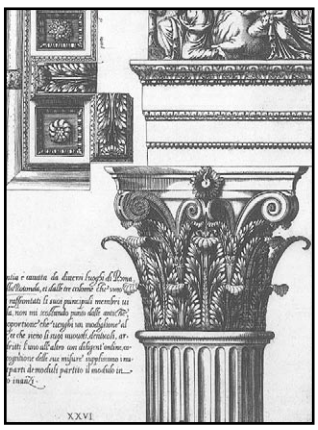
99. Corpus Hermeticum 16.7.

WITH STYLE, YOU'LL STAND OUT A MILE

Finally, if you are submitting your article to a journal, be sure to follow its chosen style. *Philalethes* has adopted the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and supplements this with special guidelines for Masonic writing available upon request. Editors appreciate attention to these details.

The careful use of good and relevant sources will lend real Strength to a paper on just about any topic. Let's make our papers and presentations strong, like the Doric pillars of the Parthenon, a temple of wisdom that, even in ruins, inspires and enchants all who lay eyes upon it.

BEAUTY TO ADORN:
POLISHING, FRAMING & STYLE



Though all of the classical orders of architecture are based upon the ratios of the human body and the harmonies of nature, only the Corinthian order actually includes shapes of life within it. What was abstract stone now bursts forth with living forms. Hard principle flowers into warm, delicate life.

Adorning our paper with Beauty follows much the same pattern. Although this is not a step common in academic writing, it is highly desirable in the context of Lodge talks and papers dealing with our ancient and gentle Craft. Our strong columns are best crowned with green laurel.

Beauty, like Wisdom and Strength, cannot be faked. The ultimate source of it is within us, and the best way to ensure that our papers are beautiful is to dare to reveal ourselves in them. Allowing our emotions to guide our writing, without permitting them to override the logical part of the discussion, is critical to taking any Masonic talk into that special zone where the "classroom" feeling disappears, and we feel (as we should) that we are all meeting on the level for the contemplation of the best and finest within the Craft.

But what should we do if that human side, our personal perspective, is too personal, or comes off sounding too self-absorbed—as anything introspective and contemplative can do? Simple: rely upon the words of others to communicate your message in those cases. After all, not every citation in our paper needs to be for the purposes of mere documentation of facts. A quotation can "document," so to speak, emotional and spiritual realities rather than facts. The interesting thing about a wonderful quote is that it allows us to say something grand without asking the audience to believe that we personally are "grand enough" to say it on our own authority. We can quote the Psalms or Ralph Waldo Emerson or Plato or T. S. Eliot in support and appreciation of beautiful ideas, without needing to actually be an inspired prophet, a mystic, a philosopher or a poet ourselves.

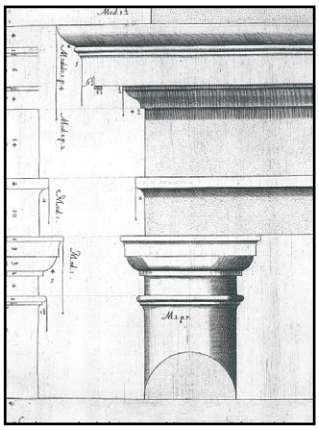
Such quotations can add luster, impact and wider context to our prose. Where can they be found? Masonic writers who are well known for their eloquence are William Preston, Albert Pike, W. L. Wilmshurst and J. F. Newton. And one need not limit oneself to Masonic authors. If a quote really fits what we are saying, it doesn't matter if the author is a Mason. The Masonic ritual itself quotes from the Bible, Josephus, Vitruvius and William Shakespeare.

SOME EXTREMES TO AVOID

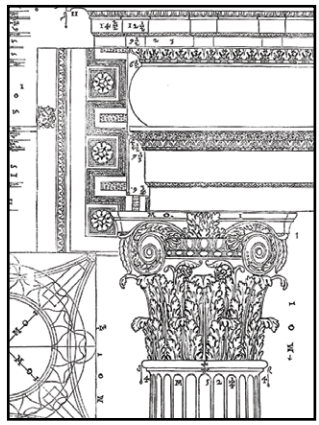
Of course, a large part of Beauty is understanding what not to do. The Greek playwright Euripides said that moderation is "the noblest gift of heaven."[3] As we work to subdue our passions and keep within due bounds, we naturally tend to avoid destructive extremes. In writing our papers and talks about Freemasonry, we can ensure better work by carefully guarding our writing from some immoderate tendencies that all-too-frequently hamper today's Masonic discourse.

THE ARCHITECTURAL EXTREMES

Just as Wisdom, Strength and Beauty are aptly illustrated by the classic orders of Ionic, Doric and Corinthian architecture, our tradition also reminds us of two other orders: the Tuscan and the Composite. The Tuscan order, we are taught, is simplistic and unoriginal. The Composite is an amalgamation of all the orders, overly ornate and lacking in its own essential character. It's not hard to imagine these two "wayward" orders — as our Fellow Craft degree seems to represent them — as metaphorical descriptions of a Masonic writing effort that hasn't quite hit the mark.



A Tuscan paper could be one where there isn't enough there — not so much in terms of length, but of substance. Perhaps the author is simply summarizing some things he has read, but puts very little effort into interpretation. The paper may read a bit like an outline. It might be a good start, a good basis . . . but more effort will allow it to flourish. Perhaps it needs a more thorough grounding in reference to work that's already been done on the topic. Or perhaps we have written a good summary, but neglected to lend it the character of our own interpretations and feelings. The Tuscan pillar's simplicity is also potential . . . it could be turned into any other kind of pillar by the judicious use of the working tools. Keep working — soon we will have the paper we need.



A Composite paper might be one when too much is there. Perhaps themes arise and disappear; or the citations are overabundant and inconsistent; or unnecessary detail abounds, stifling the main narrative. A paper like this is definitely unsuitable for presentation in lodge, as it will be too confusing for the listener. Even for reading, it may be too bogged down. For such a paper we recommend the gauge and the common gavel. Chisel away: there may be an impressive Corinthian pillar under there!

While polar opposites on the one hand, the too-simplistic and the overworked styles actually have something important in common. As Masonry teaches, both the Tuscan and the Composite were unoriginal, "having nothing but that which is borrowed." Originality, *your own personal Masonic perspective*, is the breath of life within your paper.

Your brethren will benefit because it makes a paper more interesting to read or to hear. But you will reap the greatest benefit: a more personal application of Masonry within your daily life.

ABUSE OF MASONIC AUTHORITIES

An unfortunate trend in Masonic writing for the last half century has been the adoption of a condescending or dismissive tone of address in reference

to well-known Masonic writers of the past. This has worsened in recent decades, devolving into an open disrespect for many formerly treasured Masonic philosophers. The cause is partly that religious opponents of Freemasonry frequently cite the works of George Oliver, Albert Mackey, Albert Pike, J. S. M. Ward and W. L. Wilmshurst. Some brethren mistakenly feel that, in defense, we should disown these brethren and disregard their work as worthless or largely worthless. There has even been some revisionism, attempting to suggest that few people ever read these writers or that they were ever highly regarded in the first place.

These authors were human, and made mistakes — sometimes big ones. However, the popular approach of insulting the memories and the life's work of the Masons of the past is contrary to both sense and virtue. The works of these authors are not the "final word," but interesting words they are, and good brothers they were. Do not attempt to appear sophisticated by taking jabs at the experts of the past. This is the lowest form of Masonic discourse — if it can be termed Masonic at all.

AVOID RELATIVISM

It is true that we must all interpret Freemasonry for ourselves, and it is also true that all Masons "meet on the Level" of equality. There is no limit to the possible interpretations that Masons have for their Craft experience. However, in recent years it has become popular to somehow translate these facts into a conclusion that doesn't follow: that Masonry means "whatever we want it to mean," and that it has no meaning of its own, other than what we give it. This *directly contradicts* Masonry's claim to embody "wise and serious truths," as well as the notion of the Craft as a progressive science.

So we must not get pulled into the idea that Masonry is just a Rorschach test. Yes, by all means, we should read into it, permute it, explore it, imagine it, make it our own. But let's never forget that it claims to transmit symbolism of great importance. It challenges us: "Understand me!"

AVOID ABSOLUTISM

On the other hand, it is critical to avoid statements or implications that our work interprets Masonry "once and for all." While few authors state it that explicitly, it can come across in their work through phrases like "this can only mean" or "the true meaning." When symbolism is being discussed we should always leave room to include further insights, and even in discussing historical facts, we should avoid claims of establishing "proof."

Avoiding absolutism doesn't mean we need be timid and apologetic for every opinion we offer. But we should use phrases like, "it may well be" and "wouldn't it be astonishing if" when offering our own original views or when endorsing those of others.

By imbuing our papers with heartfelt commentary, by enriching them with fitting quotations, by honoring those brethren who came before us as is their due, by finding the mean between the cynical and uncritical approaches, we will surmount our massy stone pillars of wisdom with the lush green of the forest — with the Beauty that attracts the soul and cannot be ignored.

WHEN THE PAPER IS COMPLETED

Once a paper is fully crafted, it is time to share it. If it doesn't deal explicitly with the private ritual work, it can be shared with the whole world. If the paper is suitable only for Masonic consideration, then it is best if it is presented orally before a tiled gathering of Masons.

DELIVERY IN LODGE

Submit the paper to the Worshipful Master for his consideration and let him know that you are ready to present it to the Lodge at his pleasure and convenience. If he is agreeable to the idea, he will schedule an appropriate time for the delivery.

In addition, many jurisdictions feature Masonic lodges that were formed for research only, and do not confer degrees. These research lodges may welcome your work.

PUBLICATION

Philalethes is happy to consider your submission, and there are several other Masonic journals and magazines that might be interested in your completed article. Study the format of each publication carefully when deciding where to submit your work. As always, consult with the editors.

THE INTERNET

If your paper deals only with historical or monitorial material, or if it is suitably discreet regarding esoteric matters, it may be appropriate for it to be shared over your lodge's website, or via the sites of various research organizations.

RETURNING TO THE NORTHEAST CORNER

One of the great pleasures for anyone who has crafted a Masonic talk is that moment when the Worshipful Master calls him to the northeast corner of the Lodge and joins the brethren in rapt attention as the reading begins. We have labored in obscure quarries, and now we are bringing our best results up to the sun. We should deliver our paper as we imagine Hiram might deliver a precious ashlar to his King. Now our effort becomes part of the life of the Lodge, helping every brother present to form a deeper understanding of the chosen topic. Warmly anticipate the discussion that will surely follow, and the additional light that will be gleaned from the insights and reactions of our fellows. This is one of the work's great rewards. As Bronson Alcott so fittingly expressed:

> There is a magic in free speaking, especially on sacred themes, most potent and resistless. It is refreshing, amidst the inane common-places bandied in pulpits and parlors, to hear a hopeful word from an earnest, upright soul. Men rally around it as to the lattice in summer heats, to inhale the breeze that flows cool and refreshing from the mountains, and invigorates their languid frames. Once heard, they feel a buoyant sense of health and hopefulness, and wonder that they should have lain sick, supine so long, when a word has power to raise them from their couch, and restore them to soundness. And once spoken, it shall never be forgotten; it charms, exalts; it visits them in dreams, and haunts them during all their wakeful hours. Great, indeed, is the delight of speech; sweet the sound of one's bosom thought, as it returns laden with the fragrance of a brother's approval.[5]

NOTES

1. See Henry Wilson Coil, *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia, Revised Edition* (Richmond, VA: Macoy, 1995), 158, where in speaking of the Masonic lectures, Coil claims that: "The work is 'parrot' talk and requires no understanding of substance, if, indeed any attempt to philosophize would not be disastrous. [. . . T]here is only one official interpretation or meaning, that being the very lectures [themselves] . . . ."
2. George Oliver, *The Symbol of Glory: Shewing the Object and End of Freemasonry* (London: Richard Spencer, 1850), 155.
3. Euripides, *Medea* 636.
4. A. Bronson Alcott, "Orphic Sayings." *The Dial* 1 (1840): 85–98; 89.

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