

**Thomas Jefferson to George Wythe, February 28,  
1800, from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve  
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Leicester Ford.**

**TO GEORGE WYTHE J. MSS.**

Philadelphia, Feb. 28. 1800.

My dear Sir, —I know how precious your time is & how exclusively you devote it to the duties of your office. Yet I venture to ask a few hours or minutes of it on motives of public service, as well as private friendship. I will explain the occasion of the application. You recollect enough of the old Congress to remember that their mode of managing the business of the House was not only unparliamentary, but that the forms were so awkward & inconvenient that it was impossible sometimes to get at the true sense of the majority. The House of Repr. of the U. S. are now pretty much in the same situation. In the Senate it is in our power to get into a better way. Our ground is this. The Senate have established a few rules for their government, & have subjected the decisions on these & on *all other points of order* without debate, & without appeal, to the judgment of their President. He, for his own use, as well as theirs must prefer recurring to some system of rules ready formed, & there can be no question that the Parliamentary rules are the best known to us for managing the debates, & obtaining the sense of a deliberative body. I have therefore made them my rule of decision, rejecting those of the old Congress altogether; & it gives entire satisfaction to the Senate; in so much that we shall not only have a good system there, but probably, by the example of it's effects, produce a conformity in the other branch. But in the course of this business I find perplexities, having for twenty years been out of deliberative bodies & become rusty as to many points of proceeding. And so little

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has the Parliamentary branch of the law been attended to, that I not only find no person here, but not even a book to aid me. I had, at an early period of life, read a good deal on the subject, & commonplac'd what I read. This commonplace has been my pillow, but there are many questions of practice on which that is silent. Some of them are so minute indeed & belong so much to every day's practice that they have never been thought worthy of

being written down. Yet from desuetude they have slipped my memory. You will see by the inclosed paper what they are. I know with what pain you write. Therefore I have left a margin in which you can write a simple negative or affirmative opposite every position, or perhaps with as little trouble correct the text by striking out or interlining. This is what I have earnestly to solicit from you: & I would not have given you the trouble if I had had any other resource. But you are in fact the only spark of parliamentary science now remaining to us. I am the more anxious, because I have been forming a manual of Parliamentary law, which I mean to deposit with the Senate as the standard by which I judge & am willing to be judged. Though I should be oppos'd to it's being printed, yet it may be done perhaps without my consent; & in that case I should be sorry indeed should it go out with errors that a Tyro should not have committed, And yet it is precisely those to which I am most expos'd. I am less afraid as to important matters, because for them I have printed authorities. But it is those small matters of daily practice, which 20. years ago were familiar to me, but have in that time escap'd my memory. I hope under these circumstances you will pardon the trouble I propose to you in the inclosed paper. I am not press'd in time, so that your leisure will be sufficient for me. Accept the salutations of grateful & sincere friendship & attachment & many prayers for your health & happiness from Dear Sir yours affectionately.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In pursuance of this subject, Jefferson wrote Wythe:

Philadelphia, Apr. 7. 1800.

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I received in due time your favor of Feb. 22. & shall with pleasure assist mr. Marshall in the negotiation with mr. Lowndes, whenever desired either by Mr. Marshall or our executive.

I wrote you a troublesome letter sometime ago, & now propose some additamenta to it. It is with vast reluctance I do it, & would not do it, if hooks could furnish the information I want. But there are minutiae of practice, which are hardly to be met with in the hooks, & therefore can only be learned from practical men; & you know how destitute we are of such in Parliamentary reading at present. That science is so lost, & yet so important, that I am taking considerable pains, & shall pursue it through the ensuing summer to form a Parliamentary Manual, which I shall deposit with the Senate of the U. S. & may thence possibly get into the public possession. To this I shall not object, if I can be satisfied that what I shall prepare will be correct. On the contrary it may do good by presenting to the different legislative bodies a chaste Praxis to which they may by degrees conform their several inconsistent & embarrassing modes of proceeding. But there is but one person in America whose information & judgment I have sufficient confidence in, to be satisfied that what I may put together, would be rigorously correct: & he is so absorbed in other useful duties, more peculiarly his own, that I have no right to trouble him with helping me through mine. I can ask it only on the score of charity for which we are all bound to find time.—We shall probably rise the 1st or 2d week of May, after which I shall be at Monticello, where and everywhere it will give me the greatest pleasure to hear of the continuance of your health. May you enjoy it with many long years of life for the solace of your friends & service of your country. Adieu. Most affectionately.

Jefferson also wrote to Edmund Pendleton as follows:

Philadelphia,, Apr. 19. 1800.

Dear Sir,—My duties here require me to possess exact knolege of Parliamentary proceedings. While a student I read a good deal, & commonplaced what I read, on this subject. But it is now 20. years since I was a member of a parliamentary body, so that I

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am grown rusty. So far indeed as books go, my commonplace has enabled me to retrieve. But there are many minute practices, which being in daily use in Parliament & therefore supposed known to everyone, were never noticed in their books. These practices were, I dare say, the same we used to follow in Virginia: but I have forgot even our practices. Besides these there are minute questions arising frequently as to the mode of amending, putting questions &c. which the books do not inform us of. I have from time to time noted these queries, & keeping them in view, have been able to get some of them satisfied & struck them off my list. But I have a number of them still remaining unsatisfied. However unwilling to disturb your repose I am so anxious to perform the functions of my office with exact regularity that I have determined to throw myself on your friendship & to ask your aid in solving as many of my doubts as you can. I have written them down, leaving a broad margin in which I only ask the favour of you to write yea, or nay opposite to the proposition, which will satisfy me. Those which you do not recollect, do not give yourself any trouble about. Do it only at your leisure. If this should be before the 9th of May, your return of the papers may find me here till the 16th. If after that, be so good as to direct them to me at Monticello.

I have no foreign news but what you see in the papers. Duane's and Cooper's trials come on to-day. Such a selection of jurors has been made by the marshal as insures the event. The same may be said as to Fries &c. and also as to the sheriff & justices who in endeavoring to arrest Sweeny, the horse thief, got possession of his papers & sent them to the chief justice & governor, among which papers were Mr. Listoh's letters to the Governor of Canada, printed we know not by whom. We have not yet heard the fate of Holt, editor of the *Bee* in Connecticut. A printer in Vermont is prosecuted for reprinting Mr. McHenry's letter to Genl. Darke. Be so good as to present my respects to Mrs. Pendleton & friendly salutations to Mr. Taylor & accept yourself assurances of constant & affectionate esteem.