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Writing in Response
Matthew Parfitt, Boston University’s College of General Studies

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Sixth Edition
Rise B. Axelrod
University of California, Riverside
Charles R. Cooper
University of California, San Diego

From Inquiry to Academic Writing
A Text and Reader
Second Edition
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April Lidinsky, Indiana University South Bend
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From the Editor

John Schilb

When I prepare an issue of *College English*, probably I linger over each bit of its prose much more than its average readers will. I brood about many a word and phrase, wondering if people will find them clear and appealing or call them obscure. Consider, for instance, a word that looms in each of this issue’s first three articles: *ontology*. If you’re fairly well-versed in philosophy, the term is unlikely to give you pause. But if you’ve never or seldom seen it, it might puzzle you, at least if it stood completely unexplained. Ultimately, I’ve decided that all three articles provide enough context for the word to head off befuddlement. If you decide differently—sigh—feel free to tell me. (Oh, heck, here’s the main definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “The science or study of being; that branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature or essence of being or existence.”)

This case reminds me that editing *CE* involves constantly making assumptions about what its readers will or won’t deem lucid, newsworthy, useful, and stylish. Inevitably our referees engage in similar guesswork. Here and in my final three issues, I’ll emphasize some things that I and our reviewers believe that you, and other members of *CE*’s audience, look for in its articles. Perhaps this information will help you if you plan to submit an essay to the journal yourself.

Along with most of our reviewers, I suspect *CE*’s readers wish above all that its articles will quickly set forth a significant claim, then elaborate it and support it. This conjecture of mine may strike you as actually an obvious fact. What author wouldn’t suppose that our audience wants arguments that are swiftly put, clearly important, and cogently spun? Yet, lots of submissions we receive fall short. In particular, they fail to make an evident claim. Or, they delay it for several pages, abruptly springing it after readers have probably given up hunting. My own spirit flags when, as often happens, a submission’s opening section announce merely that the author will “explore” or “discuss” a certain topic. And often the pages that follow are just random musings, tenuously held together by the Velcro of metadiscourse (“In the previous section, I said that . . .”; “In this section, I will review . . .”; “Later, I will return to . . .”).

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Conceivably, it is possible to construct an essay as a tightly-knit academic mystery story. This would be a text that hooks readers with an interesting, worthwhile question; carefully weighs various answers; and then climaxes with a particular one. But such a text demands a compelling, intricate structure that’s hard to design. To be sure, the average reader of a CE article won’t insist that its central claim burst out in its very first sentence. The opening isn’t normally expected to resemble Bill O’Reilly’s “Talking Points.” Nor must it be the blunt, mechanical execution of a *they say / I say* template. Still, an essay that soon declares, then develops, a consequential *stand* on a subject will seem a better fit for this journal.

When a CE submission holds off declaring its main claim, sometimes the delay results from too much personal narrative coming first. Many of the articles we publish do begin by recalling the experience or group of incidents that led the author to write the text at hand. Within limits, this storytelling can beguile readers, while also helping them see the article’s ties to real-life concerns. But more than a few of the manuscripts we receive go further. Some of the writers revisit their first years as a teacher; others resurrect their undergraduate days; others start closer to the present but minutely chronicle an entire semester—and all wind up with a long stretch of memoir rather than a provocative point. The latter needs to be their bigger goal.

Naturally, indicating the main claim’s import often entails relating it to previous scholarship. Indeed, authors may wind up delaying the claim because they feel they must review first everything published on their subject. This sense of duty is understandable—especially in the case of writers submitting parts of their dissertation, a genre historically required to survey established authorities. Still, many of the submissions we receive waste time by quoting or by otherwise citing everyone who’s ever addressed their topic. The aim should be to keep any panorama efficient. One way is to focus in the main text on only a few key figures, relegating others to parenthetical citations or endnotes. Another way is to quote quite selectively or perhaps not at all, relying instead on brief paraphrase. I may get in trouble for saying this, but here goes: rarely are scholars so eloquent that their own words must be repeated. Even epigraphs are rarely vital, and when they’re so dense that they must be explained at length, dropping them may be the wiser move.

I’m aware that what I’ve just said may lead you back to the word *ontology*. Did contributors to this issue, you may ask, really have to use it? Might not a plainer word have done the job? Perhaps you’ll find some assistance with these questions in this issue’s final piece, William M. Morgan’s review of recent books on style. Meanwhile, I’m aware as well that everything I’ve said here is a matter of debate. What constitutes the ideal article for this journal is something that its editors, readers, reviewers, and authors will speculate about—and, I hope, negotiate—for years to come.