

College English: Virtues and Vices for Inquiring Authors¹

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What follows are some rules of thumb for authors looking to submit their work to *College English* (although these suggestions are likely equally applicable to other journals). These are not hard-and-fast rules, rather, trends that have been noted among submissions. Good luck!

Virtues: From Invention to Revision

Deep grounding in the contiguous scholarship. Prior to drafting, read deeply in the contiguous areas of scholarship both in and outside your immediate argument. Keep an eye open for both the most important and most current arguments in your research area. “Map” where your essay will fall in this terrain, and make sure you provide this map to your reader. Don’t cite everything you’ve read, but do cite the scholarship with which your reader should connect your argument. *Remember: Editors need to understand how you appeal to their readers – and to whom they can send your work for review.*

Firm grasp of target venue. The most common mistake authors make in submitting to journals is not having a strong sense of their target journal’s interests, audience, scholarly interests, and disciplinary convictions. Please read the journal before revising for that venue! Skim and then dive into your target journal. First, scan the past two to three years of journal issues with an eye to genre and audience expectations. Then read deeply two to three essays whose structure seems to suit your own ideas. *Do not send your essay to a journal you have not read.*

An argument that advances the conversation. During pre-writing, figure out exactly how your argument advances what’s already out there and make sure this new knowledge is what provides the focus to your essay. Foreground this information for the reader in your introduction.

Fidelity to golden mean. When planning your essay, balance those specifics that allow you to illustrate your point / convince your reader with a broad perspective that allows you to connect with a wide readership. Make sure you’ve included evidentiary specifics that back up any assertions you make in your essay.

Attendance to the publication guidelines. Know – and use – the journal’s style guidelines. Adhering to these guidelines makes it clear to the editor and to your article’s reviewers that you’re writing specifically for this journal and that you’ve put as much time and attention toward understanding the publication venue as you want the journal to put toward attending to your ideas!

A thesis and “map” of the structure in the first 10% of the manuscript. Unlike a seminar paper – which the audience will read because she’s assigning a grade – or a conference presentation – where the audience will listen because you’re in the room – a journal article that does not clearly lay out its

¹ This document is a revision of “*The Writing Center Journal: Manuscript Virtues and Vices*” written with Lauren Fitzgerald during our tenure as that journal’s editors. I have revised here with her permission and thank her for the use of her work.

argument and structure early on will often lose journal readers. Indeed, even the most dedicated and generous readers who persevere when they cannot find a concise argument and structure are unlikely to be convinced by a manuscript that plays “what’s my thesis” or a manuscript in which they cannot follow the lines of the argument.

Strong scaffolding. Just as readers love a clear promise about what you will argue and how you will do so, they also appreciate when they can see the promise of the introduction fulfilled. Use scaffolding language, headings, and strong topic sentences to show tie back to the thesis. Remind your reader of the road map you’ve laid out and show them how each section of the manuscript builds off the last one and leads to the next. Topic sentences are most useful to showcase your assertions and mark the progress of your essay, so avoid using them simply to name or describe your sources.

Clearly earmarked contribution to the field. Make sure the reader recognizes early on what you’re bringing to the conversation. (Ex: “By thus juxtaposing Bean’s approach to write-to-learn with Gillespies’ conference strategies, we are confronted with a new...”; “This essay thus builds from Carino’s historical work to question the marginalization narratives established by North and MacCauley...”)

Manuscript Vices

Insufficient correspondence with the journal’s expectations. The most common reason an essay is rejected by *CE* is its inappropriateness to the rhetorical situation of the journal. This disconnect between an essay and *CE* can relate to topic (as with essays that focus on a single literary text without larger context) or that do not meet genre expectations (as with essays that are clearly seminar papers, course summaries, dissertation or personal reflections focused almost entirely on individual experience).

Lacking audience awareness. If a mismatch with journal expectations is the top reason for rejection, a lack of audience awareness would come in as a strong runner-up. Oftentimes, an essay that is “inward-looking” evidences this lack. Inward-looking means that either (1) the manuscript neither evidences a familiarity with the most current scholarly conversation on the topic nor argues from data beyond the anecdotal, or (2) the manuscript is focused on individual experience and opinion with little attempt to substantiate claims through evidence or to connect this singular perspective to the interests of the broad audience that comprises the journal’s readership.

Lacks necessary approvals. As a field, we are increasingly aware of the ethics of human subject use. If you use human subjects and did not receive IRB approval or exemption, *College English* cannot publish your work.

Getting lost in the sources. A common place for new authors to run off track is drowning their own voice with the sources they’ve read. Make sure you foreground your ideas, not the mass of literature that you’ve reviewed.

Neglecting “revise and resubmit.” One of the great disappointments of editorial work is that authors sometimes believe that the recommendation to “revise and resubmit” really means “reject and never revise.” Actually, it means that we like it so much that we want to read it again – so please DO revise and resubmit!