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Dear Colleague:

Sooner or later we have to read student term papers and, alas, they are often a trial to the spirit. Let us be frank and admit that many papers written by senior scholars are a similar trial. The papers are barely coherent. Their authors have no sense of craftsmanship. If the papers were some kind of physical structure they simply would not stand up: whether conceived modestly as a cottage or ambitiously as a skyscraper they will fall--they end up the same height, flat.

To my surprise, I've found a way to say something good about shoddy work. Rather than say that a paper is incoherent, say that it is penetrated by reality. It is the admission of the real world into a product of thought that makes the product seem unwieldy and illogical. A bad poem is penetrated by the real sentiment of the bad poet--smudged as it were by his hot little hand. A good poem, by contrast, is a crystalline structure that excludes extraneous reality. A perfectly logical work excludes reality too. A mathematical demonstration, for instance, is a thing of beauty in its own right, like a crystalline poem. All the arguments are tightly linked to each other; nowhere will one find loose ends and jumps in reasoning that, like ill-fitting windows, allow drafts from the external world to enter. We ought to be grateful that scholarly papers are logically unsound; after all, they are supposed to net the real world, not exclude it. When I reexamine my own papers on geomorphology, one paragraph after another, I must admit that the logical links between them are specious. At one time I would have been distressed by these gaps. Now I know that without the gaps I would have written a limpid poem or a work on logic, not a scientific paper with its unavoidable pollution by facts.

If what I have said is disconcerting, consider the analogy of written works with built forms. In architecture the inverse relationship between logic and reality is easier to accept. Think of London. Its streets, crescents, alleys, mews, etc., lack logic: they are not integrated into any rational system. Yet we all think of London as a very human place, a city that accommodates the real world, that is, the messy experiences and needs of the people who live in it. By contrast, a planned city like Canberra is a translucent work of art--its street patterns clearly exhibit rational design--but the result, predictably, is the exclusion of reality. Canberra is nearly unliveable; it has the highest suicide rate among cities in Australia and its residents escape to Sydney to touch base with the real whenever they can.

Best wishes,

*E. J.*