Because buying organic has again become such a significant part of current American culture, journalist Steven Shapin, in his article “What Are You Buying When You Buy Organic?”, examines the true value of this trend and the complexity of the ethical issues surrounding it. Shapin encourages his readers to question the actual value of buying organic by examining the processes organic sellers use in growing and transporting their produce, giving the historical context of the organic movement itself, and considering the ethical dilemmas inherent in the mass production of agriculture.

Shapin maintains a fairly informal, though professional and informative, tone throughout the article, using second person pronouns and direct questions to connect with the reader and make the information relatable and personal. He maintains a conversational style through both his use of second person, and his use of contractions and occasional informal language. He also helps the reader relate to the topic by giving the proper context for the information by comparing Earthbound, the corporation he is examining, to more well-known ones that the reader is more likely to be acquainted with, such as Whole Foods. His conversational style and assumption of familiarity with organic products is particularly appropriate as he is writing for The New Yorker, and consequently an audience that may already be investing in organic produce.
Shapin organizes his article around a series of questions and concerns about the production of organic agriculture, most pertinent being the difference in taste between organic and conventional produce, and the moral issues surrounding their production – two of the main reasons why consumers are drawn to buying organic. He is skeptical on both fronts. He points out that concerns about pesticide are probably overreactions, because “freshness, weed control, and the variety grown may be far more important to taste than whether the soil in which they were grown was dosed with ammonium nitrate” (433). He goes on to give a summary of the history of pesticide use, the problems that have arisen from it, and the rise of the organic movement, showing that this is not a new issue or a simple one.

Ultimately, Shapin shows that, although many consumers believe that buying exclusively organic is the most moral option, the practical upshot is that it does not allow for the amount of food needed to provide for the growing population. He quotes Michael Pollan, a proponent of buying organic, throughout the article, both to critique and support him; on this issue, he points out Pollan’s shortsightedness, in that “[Pollan] doesn’t give much space to the most urgent moral problem with the organic ideal: how to feed the world’s population” (438–439). The distance between producer and consumers and the use of pesticides has become necessary in mass producing agriculture, but to fix this problem entirely is to prevent many people from having access to adequate food.

In the end, Shapin does not offer a solution to these issues, or even necessarily take a solid stance on them. What he does is highlight the importance of research, as well as the complexity involved in producing organic agriculture on a mass scale, showing that this issue is not a straightforward as many make it out to be. “Organic” does not always mean healthy and
moral. The difference in healthiness from pesticide-covered produce and organic produce is questionable. Additionally, for those who buy organic due to moral concerns, the production of organic agriculture is nearly impossible to do on a scale large enough to support the expanding population. Shapin begins by asking, “What are you buying when you buy organic?” He does not necessarily give an answer as to whether or not it is worth it, but he gives readers enough information to provoke thought and decide independently, encouraging them to look beneath the advertising hype and their own simplistic assumptions.