



Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities

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There seems to be widespread agreement that--when it comes to the writing skills of college students--we are in the midst of a crisis. In *Why They Can't Write*, John Warner, who taught writing at the college level for two decades, argues that the problem isn't caused by a lack of rigor, or smartphones, or some generational character defect. Instead, he asserts, we're teaching writing wrong.

Warner blames this on decades of educational reform rooted in standardization, assessments, and accountability. We have done no more, Warner argues, than conditioned students to perform "writing-related simulations," which pass temporary muster but do little to help students develop their writing abilities. This style of teaching has made students passive and disengaged. Worse yet, it hasn't prepared them for writing in the college classroom. Rather than making choices and thinking critically, as writers must, undergraduates simply follow the rules--such as the five-paragraph essay--designed to help them pass these high-stakes assessments.

In *Why They Can't Write*, Warner has crafted both a diagnosis for what ails us and a blueprint for fixing a broken system. Combining current knowledge of what works in teaching and learning with the most enduring philosophies of classical education, this book challenges readers to develop the skills, attitudes, knowledge, and habits of mind of strong writers.

Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities Details

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Terry says

I digested most of this book on a cross-country flight, moving from chapter to chapter nodding my head in agreement. John Warner has written a book that will resonate with many veteran teachers, whether of college or secondary composition, especially those of National Writing Project experience. There isn't much that is revolutionary here; most of his thinking has been arrived at by other thinkers. But that is also part of his argument: we already know how to teach writing, but educational institutions insist on pursuing shortcuts that serve efficiency, not students (or teachers).

Part of his diagnosis that I found helpful is entitled "The Problem of Precarity." Teaching writing is a time-intensive, labor-intensive apprenticeship. As I look around at colleagues who are divorcing, in treatment for mental health issues, and struggling with second jobs, I appreciated Warner's framing of Susan Schorn's ideas around "Teaching in Thin Air." Professionals throw ourselves onto the Sisyphean challenges of our work, often at great psychic and personal cost, without the power to change the circumstances under which this labor takes place. We can not do our best work while so obviously over-burdened and under-compensated.

For a general audience, or for teachers new to the profession, this is a single volume that is reasonably well sourced and eminently quotable. Use this to build or shore-up your writing-instruction philosophy. For practical "how-to-do" ideas, there are many other sources (see *Write Beside Them: Risk, Voice, and Clarity in High School Writing* and *180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents* to start with).

J. Bradley says

This book is dead on about how we can teach writing better. If you teach writing, this is a must read.

Elizabeth says

As an avid reader of Warner's Inside Higher Ed column and as a writing instructor interested in critical pedagogy, I was not at all surprised to find myself wholeheartedly agreeing with all of the problems with writing pedagogy and practice that Warner details (from the actual assignments common in classrooms to far broader issues pertaining to the livelihoods of students and teachers). However, I was pleasantly surprised by the detailed solutions Warner provides -- particularly those that he's implemented in the classroom. The sample assignments and the broader impetus behind them are what distinguishes this book from other (accurate) screeds about the "trouble with writing/the academy today". They make me excited for Warner's forthcoming book about nonfiction practice and equally enthusiastic to recommend this book to colleagues.

Gregg says

John Warner takes the whole "Why can't kids write these days" and answers it thoroughly and convincingly. We're teaching them to write badly, he argues, and we need to stop doing that.

"We" is, of course, more than just that mean sophomore English teacher you had who hated you and made you feel bad about Prom. It's more than one school, even. It's a system that crushes individuality and thought in the name of conformity and nice-sounding phrases like "college and career ready," among other things. It's a system loaded with folklore about grading, assignments and the way kids learn that has absolutely nothing to do with the way kids learn. It's gobbling students alive, and it's destroying teacher autonomy as well. It's a handy scapegoat for politicians and wonks in "think tanks" tasked with dreaming up explanations of "kids these days" when really what they want the system to do is to produce drones for future employment, all while they bilk the country dry.

Warner walks through the paradigms of school and today's writing courses that do considerable damage. His prose is readable and engaging, but also sourced and informational; many of his observations will strike veteran educators and citizens who have been following all this as old news, but he still manages to make it urgent and timely. The book closes with several observations about how he's managed to move past the onerous conditions of a college with a predictably ill-funded first year composition program, and concludes with a measured plea for further thought and study. "Teaching and learning is complicated, context-dependent, and incredibly variable from one situation to another," he reminds/tells us. "We have misplaced our faith in fads that promise solutions, because to contemplate a world without solutions is too difficult to confront. We have attempted to systematize things (like learning) that are not systematic. We have neglected the human capital--the people who engage in the actual work of teaching. The evidence is overwhelming that we have been wrong in the way we teach students to write and think, but we shouldn't fall prey to thinking a simple course correction will lead to a solution. That mentality is what got us into this situation in the first place."

So as usual, the first step towards fixing the problem is *understanding* the problem. That means making this book widely available, not just to teachers (who will be understandably cheered and vexed at the airing of views they'll see as strikingly obvious) but to administrators, politicians, members of the community, journalists and anyone else with skin in the game (meaning "everyone"). Warner joins a chorus of voices like Mike Rose, Mark Edmundson, Paulo Freire and Martha Nussbaum, calling for a process-based approach to education that celebrates thought and achievement over standardization and arbitrary top-down yardsticks. The real work, as usual, will be in the dissemination of these views and the slow, agonizing march towards improvement. Let's get to it.

Ashley says

This is one of those books where I just nod along as I agree with most everything. The bulk of the book is a wide-reaching screed about the state of education, though, and less a specific guide for more innovative methods for teaching writing. I would have liked a bit more practical advice and examples of the kinds of assignments Warner uses, but these are limited to about a quarter of the book.

Susan Blum says

The ways we teach writing are ineffective and, worse, produce phobias and truly terrible writing. Warner shows how to do it instead!

Mrs. Krajewski says

I'm in love with this book for such a wide variety of reasons! Author John Warner starts by showing his readers where the real problems in education are, with a focus on education folklore. I have noticed so many of these problems myself, so these chapters reaffirmed some of what I've seen throughout my short 17-year career. In the second half of the book, Warner shares ways to get around those problems and still engage and motivate students in the classroom. He shares some of his assignments, which really got me thinking about research and writing in a whole new way. (I may use a few of them too!) I loved his chapter on grading, for I'd love to get rid of grades altogether. At the end, there are close to 20 pages of footnotes with all the research that back up his claims. I know I'll be referring back to this book for years to come.

Ietrio says

Another small intellect finding the universal solution.

The observations are quite right. And they are common on all media. No contribution here.

The solutions are in the range of older conservative gentleman who believes that his mediocre life is somehow a virtue. The system will be the same. The guardians of the system will be the same. Yet sprinkling some pixie dust here and there will dramatically change everything.

Jean-Marie says

Yep. I was nodding in agreement with each turn of the page. I think Warner and I only deviate in opinion in one area: school. 8 years ago when my daughter's kindergarten principal said to me, "If you think you can do better," I decided I could and have been homeschooling ever since. Warner's philosophy on school is more of a Sheryl Sandberg "Lean In" approach. I get it. Many of us must lean into this broken system, so this is the best we can do. However, one bad teacher or one bad year, especially in K-12, can do so much damage to the confidence and competence of a student. I'd like someone with Warner's passion and expertise to offer advice to parents on how to navigate the broken system. That aside, there are some great writing exercises and reflections in the book that can be used for all ages. I see myself trying them with both my 6th and 9th grader. I would definitely recommend "Why They Can't Write" to my homeschooling community, which often falls prey to the ease and promise of ineffective cookie cutter curriculum. When given the freedom to educate children, too many parents and teachers alike fall back on what they know rather than what's proven to be effective, or "folklore" as Warner puts it. I always felt that if teachers were given the mission to teach only one or two kids with their current class plans and curriculum, everything they do would change. They would realize how much time is wasted on nonsense and busywork instead of core reading and writing. More than anything else, students need the freedom and opportunity to read and write as much as possible with

mentors to guide them.

Erin Hutchinson says

I was already on board with many of John Warner's ideas about education reform, but his ideas about teaching writing were mostly new to me. I really liked his emphasis on "process, not product" and his model of designing writing prompts. Lots of teaching inspiration here.

Mrs. Hrubik says

Nonfiction/Professional: This book about the teaching of writing is really about so much more- from the state of education, to ways it can be changed. While writing is the focus, any educator would benefit from reading this. There were so many interesting points...some I agreed with and others not so much- but still interesting and eye-opening.

Heather S says

Absolute Truth

I have read many books on writing, but I have rarely agreed more with what an author was telling me. This book makes it clear why students are struggling with writing and what can be done about it.

Shawn Towner says

I think I would have appreciated this before I went back to grad school. Having read all sorts of writing research, there's not much new here for me. But that also means that I'm not really the audience for this book. There is a huge disconnect between the research world of academia and the pedagogical reality of K-12 education. For a reader who's unfamiliar with writing research or the policy statements of NCTE, CCCC of the WPA council, this book could be eye-opening. I think it would make a great professional book club selection for teachers and administrators, as a lot of the book deals with education and schooling in general, with writing and the five-paragraph essay serving as examples of the counterproductive norms of standardized education.

Jarrett Neal says

This is an okay monograph. I appreciate what Warner has to say about the many ways both K-12 and postsecondary education are making writing so frustrating for students. He included some of the exercises and pedagogies he employs in his own class; they were quite useful. Yet I found this book to be digressive. Warner continuously launches into one diatribe after another about topics related only tangentially to student writing. I was expecting a book more grounded in rhetoric and composition studies. Also, his own writing

style is problematic to me, especially his use ofss single-sentence paragraphs. Overall, this is a sound yet unsophisticated book.
