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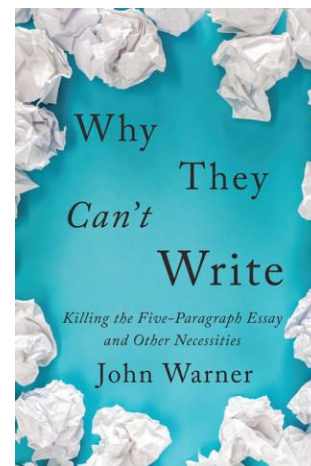
Warner, J. (2020). *Why they can't write: Killing the five-paragraph essay and other necessities*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

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In *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities*, author John Warner addresses the perceived decline in writing skills among college students and recent graduates. Warner challenges the widely held belief that this issue results from a lack of rigor or the influence of technology. Instead, he argues that students simply follow the training they have received. The book sheds light on the reasons behind this perceived crisis and offers potential solutions to improve writing abilities of students in higher education.



John Warner is eminently qualified to write this book. He is a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, a contributing blogger for *Inside Higher Ed*, and an editor-at-large for McSweeney's *Internet Tendency*. He is also the author or coeditor of seven books, including *The Writer's Practice: Building Confidence in Your Nonfiction Writing*. Currently, he teaches creative writing at College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina.

The book is divided into four parts: “Killing the Five-paragraph Essay,” “The Other Necessities,” “A New Framework,” and “Unanswered Questions.” These sections address topics such as the rules of good writing, students' self-concept as writers, writing experiences, the process of writing, and increasing challenges. Warner begins by discussing the problem of precarity in higher education, highlighting the challenging working conditions faced by many writing instructors, like limited resources and heavy teaching loads. He emphasizes the need for adequate resources and support to teach writing effectively. Throughout the book, Warner explores various challenges faced by students and teachers, including the issue of grammar, the role of education fads, and the importance of teaching writing as a reflective practice.

Warner addresses the perceived decline in college students' writing abilities, highlighting the academic writing crisis. Education researchers and educators should care about this book because it sheds light on the reasons behind this decline and

challenges prevailing beliefs about the problem. The author, who has significant experience teaching writing, offers potential solutions to improve the situation. This is valuable for scholars and professionals in the field of education, as it provides practical strategies and insights into addressing this so-called writing crisis.

The book challenges the role of education fads and misleading perceptions about the influence of technology on students' writing abilities. By unraveling the root causes of the problem, researchers and educators can gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of writing instruction and the importance of a more meaningful and engaging approach to writing. Furthermore, the book emphasizes the need for a shift in the education system, moving away from rigid formulas and imitation of writing towards focusing on authentic writing experiences. For scholars and professionals in education, this book critically examines current practices and calls for a more student-centered approach to writing instruction.

Warner's real-life illustrations and scholarly discoveries furnish a thorough panorama of the prevailing concerns as the book unfolds. The concluding segments of the book provide practical approaches and counsel for reshaping writing instruction. This arrangement of the content empowers readers to grasp the backdrop, the challenges, and the feasible remedies in an organized and lucid fashion. The author advocates assignments that involve extensive research, allowing students to dig into complex topics and develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter. This approach encourages critical thinking and engagement with a variety of sources. Assignments that involve collaborative writing projects promote teamwork and communication skills. Students can work together to create cohesive and well-structured pieces, emphasizing the importance of collaboration in the writing process. He also suggests incorporating multimedia elements into writing assignments. This could include projects where students create presentations that integrate text, images, and possibly video, fostering a more dynamic and engaging approach to communication.

Warner provides a practical approach to help students develop their writing skills. He emphasizes the importance of experience, analyzing the audience, and careful planning and execution. By encouraging students to understand the form and function of different writing genres, Warner aims to foster their writing practices through reflective thought. He urges teachers to adopt a similar approach and engage in reflective practice to improve their teaching continuously.

To support his thesis, Warner shares personal anecdotes from his teaching encounters, presenting scenarios in which students grappled with composing coherently, notwithstanding years of formal education. His central proposition is that writing instruction must prepare students for writing beyond the traditional practices, like the "five-paragraph essay" and other standardized assessments and rigid writing prompts that undermine creativity, critical thinking, and genuine engagement with the writing process. He asserts that educators need to be more creative in their teaching, regarding the traditional use of a comprehensive and inquiry-driven approach to writing instructions. Warner promotes critical thinking and creativity in writing by encouraging students to engage with the rhetorical situation and understand the purpose and form of different genres. This approach

aligns with current pedagogical trends emphasizing experiential, student-centered learning, and reflective practice.

One of the book's notable strengths is Warner's deep understanding of writing instructors' challenges, particularly those in precarious employment. His insights into the struggles of balancing workload, limited resources, and the necessity of professional development shed light on the systemic issues contributing to higher education's writing crisis. Warner's proposed solutions, such as providing adequate resources and empowering teachers as professionals, offer a valuable framework for improving the teaching and learning of writing in universities. Not only that, but he also lays the foundation for a revolution in education: "This book questions and confronts the values that underpin some of the historical and contemporary approaches to how we educate students. *A Nation at Risk*, *No Child Left Behind*, *Race to the Top*, *Common Core State Standards*—for much of the last thirty-plus years, we have sought a top-down solution where the 'best' approach can be imposed and adopted nationwide."

One area of concern for the book is the limited exploration of the impact of technology on writing skills. While Warner acknowledges that technology is often blamed for declining writing abilities, he dismisses this notion, arguing that students follow the training they have received. However, the influence of cell phones, social media, and online communication platforms on students' writing habits and linguistic abilities is worth a deeper examination.

Overall, *Why They Can't Write* provides a thought-provoking analysis of the writing crisis in higher education. The book is appropriate for its intended audience of students and educators as it sheds light on the reasons behind the decline in writing abilities and offers practical strategies for improvement. The author's expertise and experience in teaching writing lend credibility to the content, making it relevant and valuable for those in the field. By questioning traditional techniques and endorsing a more captivating and learner-centric methodology, Warner encourages readers to reassess their methods and play a role in fostering a beneficial revolution in the realm of writing education. Warner's emphasis on experiential learning, critical thinking, and reflective practice aligns with modern pedagogical approaches. However, the book would benefit from a more extensive exploration of the impact of technology on writing performance.

About the Reviewer

João Fernando Rossi Mazzoni is a PhD candidate in entrepreneurship at Baylor University. Originally from Brazil, he is an economist by training, aviation lover by heart, and he sees education as a tool for economic, social, and philosophical growth.





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