

Why They Can't Write'

Author discusses his new book about “killing the five-paragraph essay” and other ways schools and colleges could do a better job of teaching writing.

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For generations, professors have complained that their students can't write. Do they know what they are talking about?

John Warner questions those complaints, arguing that faculty members frequently ignore the real challenges to teaching writing and the impact of poor instruction that many students receive. He also questions traditional writing instruction (before college and in college), the way standardized tests evaluate writing skills, and the reliance at many colleges on adjuncts to teach writing.

Warner, a [blogger](#) for *Inside Higher Ed*, discusses these issues in his new book, *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities* (Johns Hopkins University Press). Via email, he responded to questions about the book.

Q: Many professors complain that "students these days" can't write as well as did those of previous generations. Are these professors correct?

A: Both history and current research say no. Professors lamenting about student writing is as old as professors and students. In the book I have a quote from Harvard professor Adams Sherman Hill from 1878 complaining about his students “making blunders which would disgrace a boy 12 years old.” I imagine that Professor Og was rending his animal skin over Student Thak’s failure to properly etch the antelope glyph on the cave wall.

A comprehensive investigation of student-produced writing artifacts dating back to 1917 by Andrea and Karen Lunsford also revealed that the number of errors in student writing have been largely consistent over time. (Andrea A. Lunsford and

Karen J. Lunsford, "Mistakes Are a Fact of Life: A National Comparative Study," *College Composition and Communication*).

Q: Technology is frequently seen as the culprit. You don't support that view. Why do you think technology is blamed, but maybe shouldn't be?

A: In a lot of ways, this dovetails with the first question, in that if one believes that students are somehow defective (or more defective than previous generations) there must be a cause, and that cause is technology. It is tempting to look at students through the lens of defects because it puts the onus on them to somehow amend their ways, rather than doing what I believe must be done, which is to examine how we approach teaching writing from a systemic level. If anything, technology is causing students to write more than ever before. This smells like an opportunity to me when it comes to helping students learn to think and write in the ways we would like them to in academic contexts.

Q: The five-paragraph essay is widely taught in high schools everywhere, and its proponents say it teaches students basic skills of structure and argument. What's wrong with the five-paragraph essay?

A: The five-paragraph essay is more avatar for the problem than the problem itself. There's nothing troubling about essays with five paragraphs, but the "five-paragraph essay" comes coupled with some very troubling things. The primary problem is the practices which attach to the teaching of the five-paragraph essay, and the totalizing system of accountability which privileges the teaching of the five-paragraph essay. Prescriptive rules such as: a thesis must be the last sentence of the first paragraph, the last paragraph must start with "in conclusion" and restate the body paragraphs, and each paragraph should have between five and seven sentences do not help students learn the basic skills of structure and argument. They help them create what I call "writing-related simulations" which pass very basic muster on surface-level assessments, but don't actually help students learn to make better arguments or think in the ways we expect in college.

Effective argumentation is about learning to make choices consistent with audience, purpose and message (the rhetorical situation). The way the five-paragraph essay is employed as prescriptive practice actually prevents students from practicing those far more vital and complicated skills.

Q: You note that many colleges have adjuncts teach freshmen to write. What are the problems with this model?

A: By and large this means writing teachers work with the most students while having the least security, lowest pay and often substandard institutional support. The maximum recommended student loads for teaching writing according to disciplinary experts is 60 students per semester (three sections of 20). Adjuncts and other contingent faculty often are working with double or triple this number. (Some tenured faculty are as well, of course.)

If an institution claims it's important for students to learn to write while leaving contingent faculty with double or triple the maximum loads to do that instruction, they're either liars or hypocrites.

Q: Many colleges have been dropping the SAT/ACT essay as a requirement, a shift you have applauded. How should colleges evaluate the writing of applicants?

A: Les Perelman of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology argued that the best strategy for doing well on the original SAT essay was to "just make stuff up," and while the revised version is somewhat better, it's still a largely inauthentic task which does little to demonstrate whether or not students can think through writing, which is what I believe to be most important. At the same time, essays written from admissions department prompts also suffer from their lack of authenticity while being susceptible to "coaching."

My preference would be some kind of portfolio of student work which -- above all -- the student thinks best reflects not just their writing abilities, but their intellectual and creative preoccupations and passions. I want to see students creating knowledge in their writing -- why not ask them to show what they've been working on in this realm prior to college?

Q: What would be hallmarks of a good program to teach college students to write?

A: I would look at this on two fronts. One, what are the conditions that students and instructors are working under and are they consistent with what we know about the effective teaching of writing? We need reasonable class sizes, well-trained instructors who are given the time and resources to continue to develop

their teaching practices, and professional pay that allows for the establishment of a stable teaching force.

Two, we would look at how well students are able to transfer what they're learning in a first-year writing program to new and unfamiliar genres. My goal is to help students see through the lens of a writing "practice," where a task may be unfamiliar, but they have a flexible and robust process combined with experience in analyzing the rhetorical situation to solve that unfamiliar problem.

Writers of any kind are never going to be a finished product, so I want to see writers who can apply the past to the future, a future which extends well beyond school.

http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/01/03/author-discusses-his-new-book-how-writing-and-should-be-taught?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=05ec395b2d-WNU_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-05ec395b2d-199133009&mc_cid=05ec395b2d&mc_eid=6f67a838c9