Warner

Why They Can't Write

Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities

An important challenge to what currently masquerades as conventional wisdom regarding the teaching of writing. 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.

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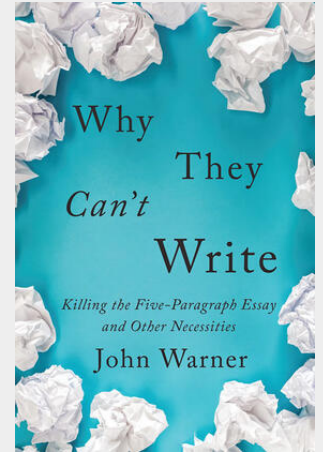
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