

John Warner, Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities (2018)

The writer's practice (pp 18-27)

"A writer's practice involves discovery, previously hidden things revealed by the doing. Some part or parts of what I am about to articulate about the specific characteristics of the writer's practice will be unknown to me as I first type these words introducing them. They will only reveal themselves to me as I write. This is not something mystical; it is merely a semi-organized, semi-systemic way of thinking." (18)

Writing is a practice. A practice consists of four things:

Attitudes: What does a writer believe and value about the act of writing?

Recognize that writing is difficult. It takes many drafts to realize a finished product. You're never going to be as good as you wish. Writing is a struggle for every writer, regardless of experience and regardless of past success.

Skills: What can a writer do?

A writer knows how to employ the writing process to conceive, draft, revise, and edit a piece of writing. A writer knows how to target a message to achieve a specific purpose when communicating to a specific audience. A writer thinks critically, assessing not only the impact of their message but also the messages of others that they may incorporate into their writing.

Habits of mind: How do writers think and what do they value?

Curiosity: the desire to know more about the world

Openness: the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world

Engagement: a sense of investment and involvement in learning

Creativity: the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas

Persistence: the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects

Responsibility: the ability to take ownership of one's actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others

Flexibility: the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands

Metacognition: the ability to reflect on one's own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge

Empathy: the ability to practice empathy in order to write in ways that engage and influence their audience

Truthfulness: the desire to be accurate and truthful

Complexity: the ability to be comfortable with ambiguity and complexity; even as we seek to provide definitive answers, writers must acknowledge the limits of all ideas

Knowledge: What does a writer know?

Writing knowledge is made up of (1) knowledge of writing, and (2) knowledge of the subject being written about. Building writing knowledge requires acting as writers do: engaging with all

dimensions of the writer's practice (see above). The only way to build knowledge is through exposure to the unfamiliar, building upon a foundation of knowledge you already possess, slowly and steadily expanding the frame of reference by which you can evaluate new information. Writing knowledge grows by writing about subjects with which you're already well familiar, writing in forms or styles you know, and addressing specific, known audiences.

Making Writing Meaningful by Making Meaningful Writing (pp 146-153)

Writing requires sufficient resources, time, and motivation to do your best work. The author of this book does his best work when he meets all of these criteria:

1. I am passionate about my subject and have the freedom to write about my interests.
2. I am knowledgeable (enough) about my subject.
3. I can easily access research or information I don't possess that may inform my writing.
4. I have sufficient (but not too much) time to engage in a writing process appropriate to the occasion.
5. I am sufficiently rested and mentally alert.
6. I have an audience potentially interested in reading my writing.
7. I have a deep understanding of the purpose of what I am writing, why I am writing it, and what effect I hope to have on the audience.
8. I am likely to learn something via the act of writing that I did not previously know.
9. I am backstopped by trustworthy colleagues who edit and review my work with an eye toward enhancing the message and purpose of my writing.