

BOOK REVIEW

Book Review: Aull, L. (2023). *You Can't Write That: 8 Myths About Correct English*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK; ISBN: 9781009231299

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Laura Aull's book *You Can't Write That: 8 Myths About Correct English*, by Laura Aull challenges the correct writing myths and their ideas, patterns, and implications. It discusses the misconceptions surrounding writing, especially in an educational context. Moreover, the book argues that education focuses too much on rule-based and formal writing instead of exploring the wide range of real writing people do every day, from texts and emails to essays and reports. Aull presents a continuum of writing styles, from informal texting to formal published work, emphasizing that writing varies by context and audience. The book identifies eight myths about writing, such as the belief that only one kind of writing is correct, that tests and schools must regulate writing, and that technology threatens good writing. These myths act like "glasses" that distort how we see language, making us judge more

and learn less. The author calls for an inclusive approach to teaching writing that values diversity and context over strict instructions.

This well-organized book has eight myth chapters: (1) Only one kind of writing is correct. (2) Schools must regulate writing. (3) Writing indicates natural intelligence. (4) Tests must regulate writing. (5) Most students can't write. (6) Writing should be mastered in high school. (7) College writing ensures professional success. (8) New technology threatens writing. Each myth chapter is organized into three parts:

- A. Context: how we got the myth. An origin story.
- B. Consequences: why the myth matters. Why we should care.

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C. Closer to the truth: how we move beyond the myth. Exploring language patterns.

The author presented a multifaceted approach to the integration of insights and methodologies from various fields, including linguistics, education, sociolinguistics, history, and cultural studies. The ensuing discussion outlines each myth and provides a summary of the myth chapters' main content.

The first myth, "you can't write that, only one kind of writing is correct," discusses the early stage of spelling standardization and the rise of usage guides. The chapter explains the harmful consequences of this myth, including making enemies of formal and informal writing and leading people to believe that correct writing equates to being a capable and good person. Furthermore, the author argues that we prioritize and moralize only the language use and culture of a highly limited mold; it reflects on how societal and educational systems favor a narrow, standardized version of language use, often labeled as "correct writing." This prioritization elevates one particular style of language—typically formal, standardized English—while dismissing or devaluing other forms of language that may be equally valid and meaningful in different contexts. Ultimately, the chapter calls for a language exploration mode, which recognizes that linguistic diversity reflects shared grammatical patterns and equal communicative value. This argument aligns with research showing how English-language materials often enforce narrow communication norms, as seen in analyses of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks^[1].

Building on the first myth's critique of how society defines and moralizes "correct writing," the second myth, "You can't write that in school or, school must regulate writing," examines how schools became central to regulating "correct writing" in English because, according to the writer, English has developed from being the language of law and commerce to the language of schools, and it is associated with success and mutual understanding and manifestly desirable for how it upholds high standards. However, the author stated that the teachers and students have abundant incentive to hunt for errors in correct writing. In this "language regulation mode," they do not have an incentive to explore what is grammatically possible and meaningful in a full writing continuum. The myth also positioned English as a unifying force and treated other languages as threats, reinforcing inequality—especially for immigrants, indigenous people,

and nonstandard dialect speakers. Aull concludes that true education should pursue the human rights of language diversity and language knowledge—more explicitly, a transparent exploration of the full continuum of writing—although this myth makes it possible for schools to regulate social and geopolitical concerns through regulating languages.

Aull stated in her third chapter, "You can't write that and be smart, or writing indicates natural intelligence," that correct writing is further limited and further empowered. Correct writing becomes a tool for ranking students and their innate ability. In the 19th century, figures like Horace Mann connected correct writing with moral and intellectual worth, using exams to measure and rank students. However, in the early 20th century, psychologists such as Cyril Burt, Lewis Terman, and Carl Brigham developed IQ tests that merged linguistic ability—especially formal written English—with supposed innate intelligence. These tests, including the Army Alpha tests, reflected racial and social bias, equating "good English" with intelligence and "errors" with deficiency. The consequences of this myth in tests include limiting how we understand intelligence, trusting tests instead of teachers, and trusting test results without understanding tests. Moreover, uniform tests and scales aren't fair, and they tell a two-dimensional story about writing. The author argues that writing is three-dimensional—social, diverse, and unnatural—and on a continuum rather than a scale.

"You can't write that on the test, or tests must regulate writing" is the fourth myth. Aull claims that standardized tests are necessary to regulate writing and ensure fairness and comparability in education. She argues that exam culture overshadows learning culture, prioritizing efficiency and sameness over variation. Furthermore, standardized test scores measure socioeconomic status, tests only test what is on the tests, and exam tasks solicit a narrow continuum of writing. According to Aull, genuine assessment should value authentic writing practice that reflects how people actually write and learn. True evaluation, the chapter argues, should aim to develop writers, not to regulate or rank them. Recent work on multimodal teacher feedback also demonstrates that evaluative language varies across feedback modes and can expand or restrict learners' opportunities to develop as writers^[2].

To support her previous ideas about exams, the author starts her next chapter with the fifth myth: "Chances are, you can't write, or most students can't write." Her statement

about this myth—where early college exam graders say students cannot write—really emerges when headlines begin reporting standardized test results. Consequences include that test results define writing and writing failure. The author argues that we make limited standards the same thing as excellent standards and think about writing in terms of control rather than practice. However, early exam reports were sometimes inaccurate, errors are changing but not increasing, and tests and scoring criteria are changing. Moreover, findings from EFL acquisition research show that young learners develop linguistic features gradually and systematically, challenging assumptions of deficiency^[3].

The sixth myth completes the previous myths: “You can’t write if you didn’t write well in high school; writing should be mastered in secondary school.” According to Aull, correct writing should be mastered by secondary school; however, this myth limits how we think about writing development. Moreover, it seems that sometimes we ignore important differences between secondary and college writing, such as how secondary writing tasks tend to be brief, persuasive, and rigidly organized, while college writing tends to be multistep, explanatory, and organized according to topic and genre. In my opinion, I agree with the author when she stated that writing development is a spiral rather than a line: it is ongoing, and not everything comes together at once.

In her book, Aull discussed the correct writing history, starting from how correct writing was taught and applied in school and university. “You can’t get a job if you didn’t write in college; college writing ensures professional success.” This is when the author moved to the bigger picture of correct writing. This myth was discussed when popular magazines and university presidents started selling the idea that a college education will lead to economic mobility. While in reality, workplace writing is a “sink-or-swim” process for many new workers, college assignments and courses are often limited to correct writing only. They are different worlds with different writing goals and tasks. Yet we can build metacognitive bridges between writing worlds by exploring writing patterns within and across them. We should prepare students for this diversity instead of teaching a single “correct” professional English.

The final myth brings a full circle to the first myth: “You can’t write that because the internet or new technology threatens writing.” According to Aull, and I agree with her

statement, it keeps correct writing limited. It puts correct writing at odds with informal digital writing, even when correct writing is critiqued for being stodgy. Correct writing can be controlled; however, informal digital writing is careless. Informal writing is not the same thing as careless writing, and it is both similar to and different from formal writing on the writing continuum. However, digital communication is part of the continuum of modern writing, not its enemy. Rather than destroying literacy, technology transforms how we write, read, and connect with others.

Aull’s book “You can’t write that” offers notable strengths, including its interdisciplinary foundation, drawing on linguistics, sociolinguistics, history, and education to explain how narrow ideas of “correct writing” developed. Her historical examples—such as the rise of Chancery English, usage guides, and early IQ tests—provide solid evidence that writing norms are socially constructed rather than natural. The book is also well organized, with each myth structured into “context,” “consequences,” and “closer to the truth,” making complex arguments accessible. Aull’s use of real writing samples from students and tests strengthens her claim that writing exists on a continuum. Despite Aull’s strengths in her book, the book has limitations; many of her examples come from U.S. and U.K. contexts, which may reduce its applicability in multilingual or non-Western educational systems; some of its recommendations for shifting to “language exploration mode” may feel idealistic for teachers who must still meet exam-driven requirements.

Overall, Aull’s book reflected a painted picture of correct writing. The myths explained, explored, and discussed how educators viewed correct writing politically, historically, and theoretically. Furthermore, Aull stated that English spelling is an awesome mess that must be memorized, and writing and spelling knowledge are not the same thing. Importantly, correct writing is explicitly taught and gets easier with practice: it is not natural, and it is not everyone’s mother tongue. Academic writing is complex, and neither skill-focused nor practice-based approaches fully capture this complexity. Also, tests are based on timed, limited writing tasks that do not represent untimed, varied writing tasks. Another significant phase of correct writing is that we don’t need language regulation first. And language exploration is second. And that is because (1) Writing is already diverse. (2) Correct writing rules are often confusing and vague. (3) Lan-

guage exploration means more writing knowledge. By the end of the book, my view of “correct writing” has changed. It made me realize that correct writing is less about clear communication and more about enforcing a specific, historically privileged dialect, therefore creating unnecessary barriers for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. I understood what exploring a writing continuum means: thinking about correctness in terms of what is possible and meaningful in a language, according to a range of contexts, tasks, purposes, patterns, and norms. Practically speaking, the book offers hands-on solutions for educators, students, parents, scholars and researchers for correct writing. However, it may not resonate with other writers and educators due to the fact that the myths are not based on diverse environments. As in myth 2, “schools must regulate writing,” this myth frames the schools’ role primarily through the lens of Western standardization. However, this myth made it too limited or culturally specific for educators where English is taught as a second language. But interestingly, it values changing the common approach to writing diversity. As the scientist David George Haskell said when asked about the future of nature. It is up to future generations, Hasell said, to decide if there was reason to hope. Our job in the present is to get to work.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language refinement and editorial assistance. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation, or generation of scientific conclusions. All AI-generated content was carefully reviewed, revised, and validated by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

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