

# The Intransitive *to Warn*

Telofy

1x4x9.blogspot.com

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The intransitive use of *to warn*—when no recipient of the warning is specified—apparently sounds odd to some native speakers in some contexts.<sup>1</sup> This document is a compilation of various scraps of data on the issue—focusing on current usage, recent history, and potential differences between British and American English—for anyone who is interested in this sort of thing. The absence of thesis and conclusion is intentional.

## 1 Corpora

The ultimate usage authorities for a certain dialect are its speakers, and corpora are the searchable aggregates of these people’s voices. Unlike dictionaries, however, corpora leave most of the interpreting to you. In that I will follow their example.

The query I used, `-[be] [warn].[v*] ,|. |of| against|that`, is optimized to exclude as many transitive constructions as possible, not to capture all intransitive ones. `-[be]` excludes passive constructions, `[warn].[v*]` matches all verb forms of *to warn* (`[v*]` specifies the POS tags), and `,|. |of|against|that` matches any of those five tokens.

`[warn].[v*]` also matches the potentially POS-ambiguous *warning*, relying completely on the corpus’s POS tagging to make the distinction. In order to confirm the plausibility of the results, I compared them to the results of `-[be] warned|warns|warn ,|. |of| against|that`.

I will not distinguish between intransitive and absolute (also called *elliptical*) usages of *to warn*, as I

see in this case no reliable way to make the distinction (save, perhaps, asking the speaker) and certainly none I could translate into a corpus query. Furthermore, absolute usages are extremely rare in any case. Absolute verbs are verbs whose objects are implied but not stated. Discussing *to remind*, Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage<sup>2</sup> gives an example from the The Times Literary Supplement of February 11, 1983: “Your correspondence ... reminds of a question.”

### 1.1 Corpus of Contemporary American English

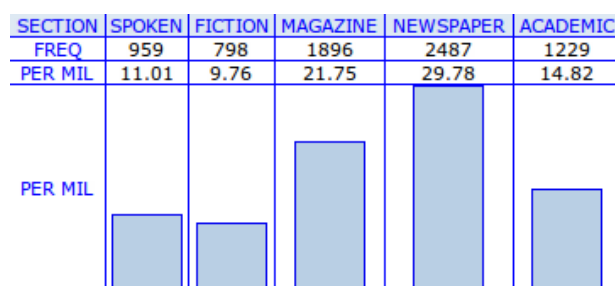


Figure 1: COCA genre chart

The Corpus of Contemporary American English,<sup>3</sup> COCA, “is the largest freely-available corpus of English, and the only large and balanced corpus of American English. It was created by Mark Davies of Brigham Young University in 2008.” It “contains more than 410 million words of text and is equally divided among spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts. It includes 20 mil-

1. Geoffrey K. Pullum, “Language Log » English grammar: not for debate,” 2010, <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=2623>; Ben Zimmer, “Language Log » Further ‘warning,’” 2010, <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=2625>.

2. Inc. Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (Merriam-Webster, 1995), p. 812, ISBN: 9780877791324, <http://books.google.com/books?id=2yJusP0vrdgC>.

3. Mark Davies, “Corpus of Contemporary American English,” 2010, <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>.

lion words each year from 1990–2010 and the corpus is also updated once or twice a year ....”<sup>4</sup>

On January 23, 2011, my query turned up 7,369 tokens, about 35% of the 20,918 tokens matching [warn].[v\*]. I manually checked 100 tokens out of a cross section of all years and genres, none of which was transitive. There are, however, infrequent constructions such as “When field reviews began in the 1990s, states were repeatedly warned that they were failing to comply with the law warnings that continue to this day.”<sup>5</sup> and “Lincoln warned that able organizer but dilatory strategist, General George B. McClellan, ‘Your enemies will probably use time as advantageously as you can.’”<sup>6</sup> that do slip through.

On the same day, my comparison query yielded 7,066 tokens, about 37% of the 18,917 tokens for warned|warns|warn. The difference of two percentage points (about 6%) is barely statistically significant, and probably negligible for the purposes of this investigation. Again, my hand-checked sample of 100 tokens included no false-positives.

## 1.2 British National Corpus

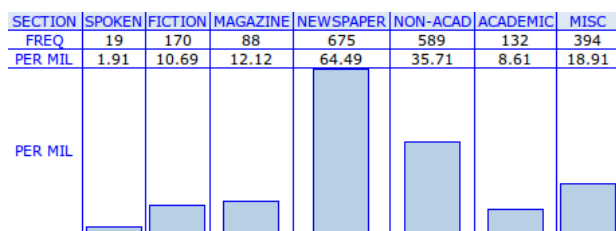


Figure 2: BNC genre chart

The British National Corpus,<sup>7</sup> BNC, contains about 100 million words of texts written between the 1970s and 1993.

In the BNC, the query yields 2,067 tokens, about 34% of the 6,134 tokens for [warn].[v\*]. (Excluding *warning*, as above:  $\frac{1,988}{5,587} \approx 36\%$ .) This time, however, the query tuned up one false-positive,<sup>8</sup> due to

a mistagged *warning* in the 100 entries that I checked manually.

Note that the genre balance of the BNC is not as even as that of the COCA,<sup>9</sup> hence the *frequencies per million words* rather than the raw frequencies should be used for comparisons of genres.

## 1.3 Corpus of Historical American English

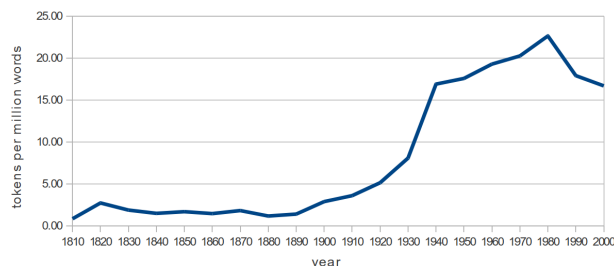


Figure 3: COHA, per year

The Corpus of Historical American English,<sup>10</sup> COHA, “is the largest structured corpus of historical English (or any language, for that matter).” It contains “more than 400 million words of text of American English from 1810 to 2009.”<sup>11</sup>

Here, the query yields 4,046 tokens, 22% of the 18,747 tokens matching [warn].[v\*], which is interpreted as warn|warns|warned in this corpus, rendering the comparison query redundant.

## 1.4 Google Books Ngram Viewer

When the Google Books Ngram Viewer<sup>12</sup> launched in December 2010, it immediately joined many a linguist’s league of favorite toys. As the name suggests, it is not a feature-rich corpus, but an interface to a database of n-grams, series of *n* (currently one to five) words, gleaned from some of the 15 million books scanned by Google. And it is gargantuan: “The datasets we’re making available today to further humanities research are based on a subset of that corpus, weighing in at 500 billion words from 5.2 million

4. Mark Davies, “Corpus of Contemporary American English (Introduction),” 2010, [http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/help/intro\\_e.asp](http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/help/intro_e.asp).

5. Mitch Weiss, “AP IMPACT: Weak rules cripple appraiser oversight,” 2008, <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/x4.asp?t=4024646&ID=468017976>.

6. National Review, “Action This Day,” 1990, <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/x4.asp?t=2019848&ID=140203212>, 12.

7. Oxford University Press, “British National Corpus,” 1993, <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/>.

8. Scotsman, “World affairs material,” 1985-1994, <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/x4.asp?t=36866&ID=136584753>.

9. Mark Davies, “Comparison of BNC and COCA,” 2011, [http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/help/compare\\_bnc.asp](http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/help/compare_bnc.asp).

10. Mark Davies, “Corpus of Historical American English,” 2010, <http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/>.

11. Mark Davies, “Corpus of Historical American English (Introduction),” 2010, [http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/help/intro\\_e.asp](http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/help/intro_e.asp).

12. Google Books, “Google Books Ngram Viewer,” 2010, <http://ngrams.googlelabs.com/>.

books in Chinese, English, French, German, Russian, and Spanish.”<sup>13</sup>

Since the past tense forms of *to warn* are significantly more frequent than the present tense ones, I

opted to use separate graphs with differing scales. Note also that there is no way to exclude passive constructions in this search.

#### 1.4.1 American English Corpus

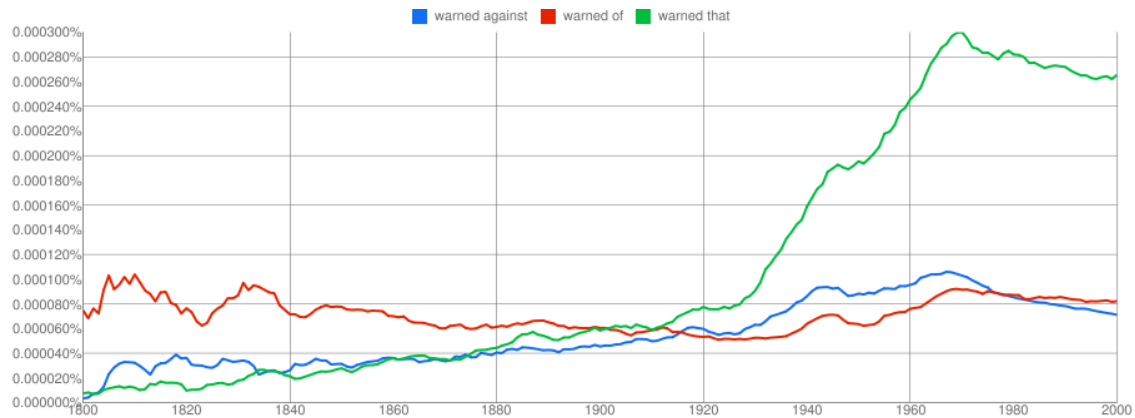


Figure 4: Past tense of *to warn* in American Google Books n-gram database

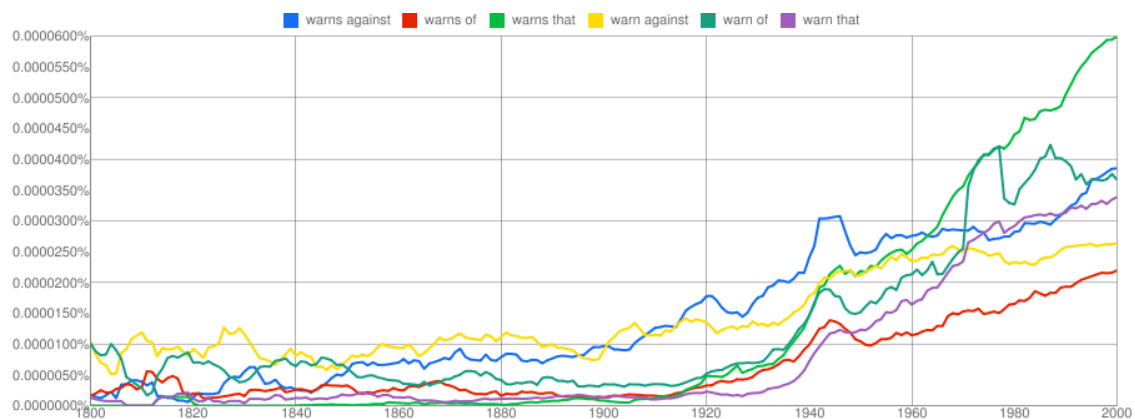


Figure 5: Present tense of *to warn* in American Google Books n-gram database

13. Alex Chitu and Jon Orwant, “Google Books Ngram Viewer,” 2010, <http://googlesystem.blogspot.com/2010/12/google-books-ngram-viewer.html>.

## 1.4.2 British English Corpus

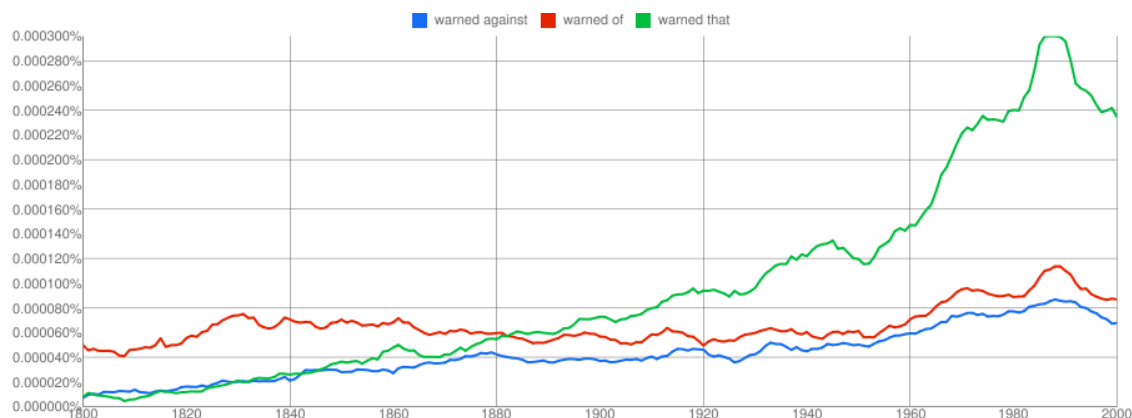


Figure 6: Past tense of *to warn* in British Google Books n-gram database

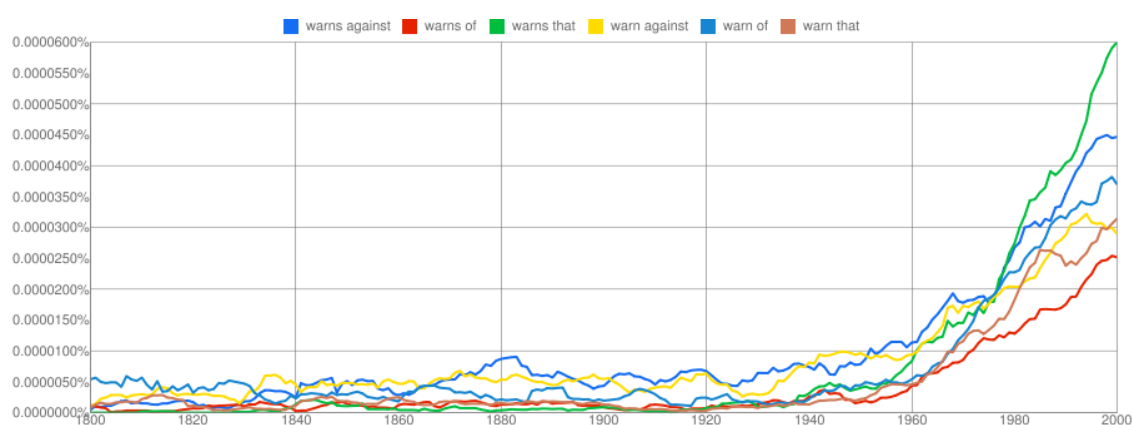


Figure 7: Present tense of *to warn* in British Google Books n-gram database

## 2 Great Authors

These are excerpts from books by people I hold in high esteem. (I have only read some of the books, though.)

Jefferson specifically warned against “banking institutions and monied incorporations” (what we would now call “corporations”) and said that if they grow, the aristocrats will have won and the American Revolution will have been lost. —Noam Chomsky<sup>14</sup>

She warned that launching an attack on Iraq would undermine counterterrorism efforts. —Amy Goodman and David Goodman<sup>15</sup>

She says that a possible outcome of the USA PATRIOT Act is “the criminalization of legitimate political dissent” and warns that it “grants the executive branch unprecedented, and largely unchecked, surveillance powers, including the enhanced ability to track email and Internet usage, conduct sneak-and-peak searches, obtain sensitive personal records, [and] monitor financial transactions.” (addition in original) —Howard Zinn<sup>16</sup>

Worse, a 1999 report had already warned that al Qaeda was looking into using planes as missiles with the intention of crashing them into government buildings. —Michael Moore<sup>17</sup>

While the army corps of engineers and others warned of the urgent impending danger to New Orleans and put

14. Noam Chomsky and David Barsamian, *Secrets, Lies, and Democracy*, Real story series (Odonian Press, 1994), <http://books.google.com/books?id=geqfAAAAAAAJ>.

15. Amy Goodman and David Goodman, *Static: Government Liars, Media Cheerleaders, and the People Who Fight Back* (Hyperion Books, 2007), ISBN: 9781401309145, <http://books.google.com/books?id=Jhju1Iw9KsoC>.

16. Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove, *Terrorism and War*, An Open Media book (Seven Stories Press, 2002), ISBN: 9781583224939, <http://books.google.com/books?id=7SoehfdinYMC>.

17. Michael Moore, *Dude, Where's My Country?* (Warner Books, 2003), ISBN: 9780446532235, <http://books.google.com/books?id=yJMwrKNrTsC>.

forward proposals for funding to reinforce and protect the city, the Bush administration, in every year since 2001, has cut or refused to fund New Orleans flood control, and ignored scientists' warnings of increased hurricanes as a result of global warming. —Jordan Flaherty<sup>18</sup>

Tufte's (2001) excellent book on chart design warns against a common error. —Chicago University Press<sup>19</sup>

Most of all, that earlier Silk would have prayed devoutly to the Outsider, though the Outsider had warned that he would send no aid. —Gene Wolfe<sup>20</sup>

Prudence warned against it as well. —Gene Wolfe<sup>21</sup>

Her voice told him, very sweetly, that he was welcome to leave a message after the beep, but warned that she hardly ever listened to them and that it was much better to talk to her directly, only he couldn't because she wasn't in, so he'd best try again. —Douglas Adams<sup>22</sup>

I remembered the previous owner had said a mechanic had told him the plate was hard to get on. That was why. The shop manual had warned about this, but like the others he was probably in too much of a hurry or he didn't care. —Robert Maynard Pirsig<sup>23</sup>

So, if evidence is such an intangible thing after all, why am I warning against new ways of interpreting evidence? —Douglas Hofstadter<sup>24</sup>

### 3 Etymology

The Oxford English Dictionary<sup>25</sup> writes:

Old English *warenian*, *warnian*, *wearnian* = Middle Low German *warnen* to warn, inform, Flemish (Kilian) †*waernen* to warn, put on one's guard, Old High German *warnôn*, *warnên* to warn, refl. to provide oneself, to take precautions (Middle High German, modern German *warnen* to warn; the Swedish *varna*, Danish *varne* are probably < German) < Germanic \**waranōjan* (-*æjan*), < \**war* to be cautious: see *ware* adj.

In Old English and in Continental Germanic this verb seems to have been to some extent confused with Germanic \**warnōjan*, cognate and synonymous with \**warnjan* to refuse, forbid, etc. (see *warn* v.2).

Among the twenty-three senses the OED lists are seven marked *absol.* and two marked *intr.* (5.e. has both labels, *absol. or intr.*), but none of these is likely to be of interest here, for the newest citation is from 1900.

**warn**, tr. v. — ME. *warnien*, *warnen*, fr. OE. *warnian*, *warenian*, 'to warn, admonish', rel. to MDu. *waernen*, 'to provide, warn', ON. *varna*, 'to admonish', OHG. *warnôn*, 'to take heed', MHG., G. *warnen*, 'to warn', and to OE. *wær*, 'aware, cautious'. See *ware*, 'alert', and cp. words there referred to. Cp. also *garnish*.  
**Derivatives:** *warn-er*, n., *warn-ing*, n. and adj., *warn-ing-ly*, adv.

Figure 8: Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Elsevier Pub. Co., 1967)

**WARN**, to caution against, put on one's guard. (E.) ME. *warnien*, *warnen*, Chaucer, C. T. 3535. AS. *wearnian*, *warnian*, (1) to take heed, which is the usual sense, Luke, xi. 35; (2) to warn, Gen. vi. 6; cf. *warning*, a warning, Gen. xli. 32. Cognate with OHG. *warnôn*, to provide for oneself against, used reflexively, whence G. *warnen*, to warn against, to caution against. Further allied to *beware* and *wary*; see **Wary**. ¶ Distinct from the AS. sb. *wearn*, a refusal, denial (Grein), an obstacle, impediment (Bosworth); the orig. sense being a guarding of oneself, a defence of a person on trial, as in Icel. *vörn*, a defence; cf. Icel. *varna*, to warn off, refuse, abstain from. Der. *warn-ing*. And see *garn-ish*, *garr-i-son* (for *garn-ison*). Also *fore-warn*, *pre-warn*.

Figure 9: Walter William Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford University Press, 1924)

18. Jordan Flaherty, Amy Goodman, and Tracie Washington, *Floodlines: Community and Resistance from Katrina to the Jena Six* (Haymarket Books, 2010), ISBN: 9781608460656, <http://books.google.com/books?id=bFS8XQLWD2QC>.

19. University of Chicago Press, *The Chicago Manual of Style* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), § 15.24, ISBN: 9780226104201, <http://books.google.com/books?id=5ojfQwAACAAJ>.

20. Gene Wolfe, *Exodus from the Long Sun*, Book of the Long Sun (Tom Doherty Associates, 1997), ISBN: 9780812539059, <http://books.google.com/books?id=EzshHAAACAAJ>.

21. Gene Wolfe, *The Sword of the Lictor*, Book of the New Sun (Arrow Books, 1991), ISBN: 9780099295402, <http://books.google.com/books?id=y3WLQAAACAAJ>.

22. Douglas Adams, *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*, Pocket Books (Simon & Schuster, 1991), ISBN: 9780671742515, <http://books.google.com/books?id=h7pjdEPBeGUC>.

23. Robert Maynard Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values* (HarperTorch, 2006), ISBN: 9780060589462, <http://books.google.com/books?id=KMRReyLPyXMC>.

24. Douglas H. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (Basic Books, 1979).

25. Oxford University Press, "warn, v.1 – OED Online," 2011, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/225791>.

26. Benjamin Eli Smith William Dwight Whitney, *The Century Dictionary: An Encyclopedic Lexicon of the English Language* (The Century Company, 1889), vol. 8, p. 6825, <http://century-dictionary.com>.

## 4 Modern English Dictionaries

The Century Dictionary (1889–1891) listed *to warn* only as transitive,<sup>26</sup> and so also Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (1913),<sup>27</sup> both of which can be searched at Wordnik.

Some two decades later, the Thorndike-Century Junior Dictionary recognized the intransitive use already:

**warn** (wârn), give notice to; put on guard against danger, evil, harm, etc. The clouds warned us that a storm was coming up. He warned the king of the plot against his life. *v.t., v.i.* 2.

Figure 10: Edward Lee Thorndike, *The Thorndike-Century Junior Dictionary* (Scott Foresman / Company, 1935)

But it does not seem to have made the cut in Webster's 1950 New Twentieth Century Dictionary:

**warn**, *v.t.*; warned, *pt., pp.*; warning, *ppr.* [ME. *warnien*, *warnen*; AS. *wearnian*, *warnian*; to take heed, *warn.*]  
1. To give notice to of approaching or probable danger or evil, that it may be avoided; to caution against anything that may prove injurious.  
2. To admonish; to expostulate with.  
3. To inform previously; to give notice to; to notify by authority; to summon; as, to *warn* soldiers to appear on parade.

Figure 11: Noah Webster and Harold Whitehall, *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (The Publishers Guild, 1950)

Webster's New World Dictionary, however, included it:

**warn** (wôrn), *v.t.* [ME. *warnien*, *warnen*; AS. *wearnian*; akin to G. *warnen*; for IE. base see *WARD*]. 1. to tell (a person) of a danger, coming evil, misfortune, etc.; put on guard against a person or thing. 2. to advise to be wary or cautious. 3. to caution about certain acts; admonish: as, you have been *warned* against smoking here. 4. to notify in advance; inform. 5. to give notice to (a person), as that he must appear at a specified place and time, or that he must stay or keep (*off, out*, etc.). *v.i.* to give warning: as, a rattlesnake *warns* before it strikes.

Figure 12: Noah Webster, *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Encyclopedic Edition* (World Publishing Company, 1951)

27. Noah Webster and Noah Porter, *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (G. Bell, 1913).

**warn** (wôrn), *v. t.* [ME. *wernen*, *warnen*, fr. AS. *wiernan*, *wyrnan*, *wearnian*. See **WARN** to admonish.] *Obs.* **a** To prevent; hinder. **b** To refuse; deny. **c** To forbid; oppose. *Obs.*  
**warn**, *n.* Denial; refusal. *Obs.*  
**warn** (wôrn), *v.*; **WARNED** (wôrnd); **WARN'ING**. [ME. *warn-en*, *warnien*, fr. AS. *warnian*, *warenian*, *wearnian*, to take heed, to warn; akin to AS. *wearn* denial, refusal, OS. *warnian*, *wernian*, to refuse, G. *warnen* to warn, ON. *warna* to refuse, and to Goth. *warjan* to hinder. See **WARNA** to refuse, and to Goth. *warjan* to hinder. See **WEIR**.] *Transitive*: 1. To put on guard; to give notice, information, or intimation, to beforehand (of approaching or probable danger or evil, or the like); to caution; as, to *warn* one of danger or against trespassing.  
2. To admonish; reprehend; counsel; as, you should *warn* him.  
3. To notify or apprise, esp. in advance; to make aware; to inform; to call to one's attention; as, to *warn* one of an advanced sailing; the clock *warned* them that their time was up.  
4. To notify or summon by authority; to command; bid to go or leave; as, to *warn* a tenant out of a house.  
*Our child did come before I was warned for the draft.* *H. G. Wells.*  
—, *Intransitive*: To give a warning; specif., *Dial.*, of a clock, to strike a (specified) hour or to make sounds preparatory to striking.  
**Syn.** — **WARN**, **CAUTION**. **WARN**, as here compared, is the stronger and more general term, and often implies admonitory notification; to **CAUTION** is esp. to put one on one's guard (against something) or to suggest precautions; as, to *warn* of impending danger, to *warn* one against the consequences of one's folly, to *warn* one off the premises; to *caution* one against unwarranted expectations, to *caution* one to avoid overheating. Cf. **ADVICE**, **REPROVE**.  
**warn off**. To prohibit (one) from advancing, trespassing, etc., by a warning gesture, notice, or order, or the like.

Figure 13: Noah Webster, *New international dictionary of the English language* (G. & C. Merriam Company, 1955)

**warn**, *wawrn*, *v.t.* to give notice of danger or evil to: to notify in advance: to caution (with *against*): to instruct, command: to summon: (with *off, away, &c.*; *lit.* and *fig.*) to bid, instruct, to go or to keep away: to admonish: (*obs.*) to forbid.—*v.i.* to give warning—specif., of a clock about to strike.—*ns.* **warn'er**; **warn'ing**, caution against danger, &c.: something that gives this: previous notice: notice to quit, of the termination of an engagement, &c.: summons, call: admonition: the sound accompanying the partial unlocking of the striking train, just before a clock strikes.—Also *adj.*—*adv.* **warn'ingly**.—**warning coloration**, aposematic coloration, such as the gaudy colours of some stinging insects. [O.E. *warnian*, *warenian*, *wearnian*, to caution (cf. Ger. *warnen*), and perh. in part *wiernan*, to refuse, forbid.]

Figure 14: William Geddie, *Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary* (W. & R. Chambers, 1959)

The British Advanced Learner's dictionary omitted it in 1961:

**warn** [wɔ:n] *vt.* (P 1, 3, 10, 12, 18) give (a person) notice of possible danger; caution against; inform in advance of what may happen; be a signal to. *He was warned of the danger* (i. e. told about it). *Tom's teacher warned him against working too hard* (i. e. told him it might be unwise). *Don't say I didn't warn you. We warned them not to go skating on such thin ice. He gave me a warning look.*

Figure 15: Albert Sydney Hornby, E.V. Gatenby, and H. Wakefield, *The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford University Press, 1961)

**warn** \ˈwɔ(ə)rən\ *vb* [ME *warnen*, fr. OE *warnian*; akin to OHG *warnōn* to take heed, OE *wær* careful, aware — more at *WARY*] *vt* **1 a** : to give notice to beforehand esp. of danger or evil **b** : ADMONISH, COUNSEL **c** : to notify or apprise esp. in advance : INFORM **2** : to bid to go or leave ~ *vi* **1** : to give a warning — **warn-er** \ˈwɔr-nər\ *n*  
**syn** FOREWARN, CAUTION: WARN may range in meaning from simple notification of something to be watched for or guarded against to admonition or threats of violence or reprisal; FOREWARN heightens the implication of notifying well in advance of impending danger or peril; CAUTION stresses giving advice that puts one on guard or suggests the need of precaution

Figure 16: Noah Webster, *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (G. & C. Merriam Company, 1965)

The British Fowler usage dictionary recognized it in 1965:

**warn** is ordinarily used transitively. But its intransitive use in the sense of giving a warning at large is now common in journalism. (*The Chancellor warned that more drastic measures might have to be taken. | The BOAC warned that more flights will have to be cancelled if the strike goes on.*)

Figure 17: Fowler's *Modern English Usage: 2nd Edition* (Clarendon Press, 1965)

**warn** \ˈwɔ(ə)rən, ˈwɔ(ə)n\ *vb* -ED/-ING/-S [ME *warnen*, fr. OE *warnian* to take heed, warn; akin to OHG *warnōn* to take heed, OE *wær* aware, wary — more at *WARY*] *vt* **1 a** : to put on guard : give notice, information, or intimation to beforehand esp. of approaching or probable danger or evil <by ... the display of a red lamp they managed to ~ the driver —O.S. Nock> <~ed them about the quicksand> — sometimes used with *off* <young folks are ~ed off —Theodore Dreiser> **b** : ADMONISH, REPREHEND, COUNSEL <~ed me not to be too eager —London Calling> <against such idiocy we are ~ed by an adage —W.F.Hamby> **c** : to notify or apprise esp. in advance : call to one's attention : make aware : INFORM <must ~ you that they're only my opinions —Richard Joseph> <the mounting heat of June ~ed us that the exposition would close its doors —Agnes Repplier> **2** : to notify, summon, or dismiss by authority : bid to go or leave : COMMAND <a corporal called ... to ~ him for Driving School immediately —Earle Birney> <heroes ... ~ed so imperiously out of her modern living room —Virginia Woolf> **3** : to prohibit from advancing, trespassing, or remaining by a warning gesture, notice, order, or device <lighthouses were built to ~ sailors off the rocky ... coast —Amer. Guide Series: Oregon> <~ed away an English vessel —D.E.Clark> <had been in the garden but an armed Partisan appeared and ~ed her inside —Milton Bracker> **4** : to relate or report as a warning, intimation, caution, or admonishment <the commission could only ~ to give chaos and war would result —R.C.Pollock> ~ *vi* **1** : to give a warning <their titles ... ~ of a meaning which goes behind story, people, even setting —E.K.Brown> <he ~s against ... a fatal illusion —A.L.Locke> **2 dial Brit**, of a clock : to strike a specified hour or to make sounds preparatory to striking

**syn** CAUTION, FOREWARN: WARN is a general term lacking specific connotation and varying in meaning from simple appraisal of something, with or without any possible dangers, to truculent threats of personal violence <the introductory music warns us that another enjoyable evening of television is about to commence —adv< I warn him that the sword I wear shall pink his lily-scented cassock through and through, next time I catch him underneath your eaves —Robert Browning> CAUTION may suggest a more formal, mild, well-meaning admonition, esp. against imprudence, carelessness, or folly <cautions his readers against the common error of looking to antiquity for knowledge —H.T.Buckle> FOREWARN is likely to be used in more specific situations and to imply warning of coming danger given in time to permit prudent defense and safeguarding <very likely the parson had reason for being mad ... there was a suggestiveness in the names of the acts which would have forewarned anybody —Margaret Deland>

Figure 18: Philip Babcock Gove, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary: of the English Language, Unabridged* (G. & C. Merriam Co., 1966)

Even as late as 1970, the American Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary (that is just its name) still omitted it:

**warn** (wôrn) *v.t.* **1** To make aware of impending or possible harm; put on guard; caution. **2** To advise; admonish; counsel. **3** To inform; give notice in advance. **4** To notify (a person) to stay, go, or keep: with *off*, *away*, etc. See synonyms under ADMONISH. [OE *warenian*, *wearnian*. Akin to *WARE*<sup>2</sup>.] — **warn'er** *n.*

Figure 19: Funk & Wagnalls Company, *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (Funk & Wagnalls, New York, 1970)



**warn** (wɔrn) *v.* **warned, warning, warns.** —*tr.* 1. To make aware of potential or probable harm, danger, or evil; to caution. 2. To admonish as to action or manners. 3. To notify (a person) to go or stay away. Usually used with *off* or *away*. 4. To notify or apprise in advance. —*intr.* To give a warning. [Middle English *warnen*, Old English *w(e)arnian*, to take heed, warn. See *wer*-<sup>5</sup> in Appendix.\*] —**warn'er** *n.*

**Synonyms:** *warn, admonish, caution, forewarn.* These verbs mean to give a person advance notice of actual danger or of the possibility of danger, risk, or error. *Warn*, the most comprehensive, can refer either to giving specific word of impending danger or to counseling about something, such as a fault, trait, or circumstance, that could have dangerous or unpleasant consequences. The latter sense is basic to *admonish* and *caution*. However, *caution* is the stronger of these two in implying the act of alerting to danger or risk; *admonish* primarily suggests reproving for a shortcoming. *Forewarn* intensifies the sense of notice in advance and usually implies the presence of, or strong probability of, real danger.

Figure 20: William Morris, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (American Heritage Publishing Company, 1971)

**warn** (wɔrn), *v.t.* 1. to give notice, advice, or intimation to (a person, group, etc.) of danger, impending evil, possible harm, or anything else unfavorable: *They warned him of a plot against him. He was warned that his life was in danger.* 2. to urge or advise to be careful; caution: *to warn a careless driver.* 3. to admonish or exhort, as to action or conduct: *He warned his employees to be on time.* 4. to notify, apprise, or inform: *to warn a person of an intended visit.* 5. to give notice to (a person, group, etc.) to go, keep at a distance, etc. (often fol. by *away*, *off*, etc.): *A sign warns trespassers off private grounds. A marker warned boats away from the dock.* 6. to give authoritative or formal notice to (someone); order; summon: *to warn a person to appear in court.* —*v.i.* 7. to give a warning; caution: *to warn of further disasters.* [ME; OE *warn(ian)*; c. G *warnen*. Cf. *WARE*<sup>2</sup>] —**warn'er**, *n.*

—**Syn.** 1. *forewarn.* **WARN, CAUTION, ADMONISH** imply attempting to prevent another from running into danger or getting into unpleasant or undesirable circumstances. To **WARN** is to speak plainly and usually in strong terms: *to warn him about danger and possible penalties.* To **CAUTION** is to advise about necessary precautions, to put one on his guard about or against some circumstance or condition (usually less serious): *to caution him against trying to go*, thus emphasizing avoidance of penalties. **ADMONISH** suggests giving earnest, authoritative advice, exhortation, with only tacit references to danger or penalty: *to admonish one for neglecting duties.*

Figure 21: Jess M. Stein, *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (Random House, 1973)

The American Heritage Dictionary with its 1979 edition, of course, continued to include it:

**warn** (wɔrn) *v.* **warned, warning, warns.** —*tr.* 1. To make aware of potential or probable harm, danger, or evil; to caution. 2. To admonish as to action or manners. 3. To notify (a person) to go or stay away. Usually used with *off* or *away*. 4. To notify or apprise in advance. —*intr.* To give a warning. [Middle English *warnen*, Old English *w(e)arnian*, to take heed, warn. See *wer*-<sup>5</sup> in Appendix.\*] —**warn'er** *n.*

**Synonyms:** *warn, admonish, caution, forewarn.* These verbs mean to give a person advance notice of actual danger or of the possibility of danger, risk, or error. *Warn*, the most comprehensive, can refer either to giving specific word of impending danger or to counseling about something, such as a fault, trait, or circumstance, that could have dangerous or unpleasant consequences. The latter sense is basic to *admonish* and *caution*. However, *caution* is the stronger of these two in implying the act of alerting to danger or risk; *admonish* primarily suggests reproving for a shortcoming. *Forewarn* intensifies the sense of notice in advance and usually implies the presence of, or strong probability of, real danger.

Figure 22: William Morris, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (American Heritage Publishing Company, 1979), ISBN: 9780395203606

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of 1980, however, still omitted it. Since this is the newest Advanced Learner's Dictionary in my collection, let it be revealed that the current version, which is available online at [oxfordadvancedlearnersdictionary.com](http://oxfordadvancedlearnersdictionary.com), lists transitive and intransitive use side by side.<sup>28</sup>

**warn** /wɔ:n/ *vt* [VP6A, 14, 11, 15, 17] give (sb) notice of possible danger or unpleasant consequences; inform in advance of what may happen: *He was ~ed of the danger. We ~ed them not to go skating on such thin ice. You've been ~ed. He ~ed me that there were pickpockets in the crowd/~ed me against pickpockets. ~ sb off*, give him notice that he must go or stay away, eg from private property. **~ing** *adj* that ~s: *He gave me a ~ing look. They fired some ~ing shots.* □ *n* 1 [C] that which ~s or serves to ~: *He paid no attention to my ~ings. Let this be a ~ing to you*, Let this accident, misfortune, etc teach you to be careful in future. *There were gale ~ings to shipping along the coast.* 2 [U] action of ~ing; state of being ~ed: *You should take ~ing (= be ~ed) from what happened to me. The speaker sounded a note of ~ing*, spoke of possible danger. *The enemy attacked without ~ing.*

Figure 23: Anthony Paul Cowie, A. C. Gimson, and Albert Sydney Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford University Press, 1980), ISBN: 9780194311014

28. A.S. Hornby et al., *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2010), ISBN: 9780194799027, <http://books.google.com/books?id=4mWSSAAACAAJ>.



**warn** /wɔːn||wɔrn/ v 1 [Wv4;I0;T1 : (of, against), 5a;D5a;V3] to tell (of something bad that may happen, or of how to prevent something bad): *to warn (someone) (of danger/against danger)|to warn someone against doing something|to warn someone not to do something|He warned (her) (that) he couldn't afford to marry her.|A red warning light flashed on and off.|He warned the firm that more oil would be needed that year* 2 [T1] to give knowledge to (often officially) of some future need or action: *If you warn the police when you go away on holiday, they will watch your house*

Figure 24: Paul Procter, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Longman, 1984), ISBN: 9780582555433

**warn** (wɔrn), v.t. 1. to give notice, advice, or intimation to (a person, group, etc.) of danger, impending evil, possible harm, or anything else unfavorable: *They warned him of a plot against him. She was warned that her life was in danger.* 2. to urge or advise to be careful; caution: *to warn a careless driver.* 3. to admonish or exhort, as to action or conduct: *She warned her employees to be on time.* 4. to notify, advise, or inform: *to warn a person of an intended visit.* 5. to give notice to (a person, group, etc.) to go, keep at a distance, etc. (often fol. by away, off, etc.): *A sign warns trespassers off the grounds. A marker warned boats away from the dock.* 6. to give authoritative or formal notice to (someone); order; summon: *to warn a person to appear in court.* —v.i. 7. to give a warning; caution: *to warn of further disasters.* [bef. 1000; ME warnen, OE warnian; c. G warnen. Cf. WARE<sup>2</sup>] —**warn'er**, n.  
—**Syn.** 1. forewarn. **WARN**, **CAUTION**, **ADMONISH** imply attempting to prevent another from running into danger or getting into unpleasant or undesirable circumstances. **TO WARN** is to speak plainly and usually in strong terms: *to warn him about danger and possible penalties.* **TO CAUTION** is to advise about necessary precautions, to put one on one's guard about possibly harmful circumstances or conditions, thus emphasizing avoidance of undesirable consequences: *to caution him against driving in such weather.* **ADMONISH** suggests giving earnest, authoritative advice with only tacit references to danger or penalty: *to admonish a person for neglecting his duties.*

Figure 25: Stuart Berg Flexner, *The Random House Dictionary of the English language* (Random House, 1987), ISBN: 9780394500508

**warn** (wɔrn) v. **warned**, **warn-ing**, **warns**. —tr. 1. To make aware in advance of actual or potential harm, danger, or evil. 2. To admonish as to action or manners. 3. To notify (a person) to go or stay away: *warned them off the posted property.* 4. To notify or apprise in advance: *They called and warned me that they might be delayed.* —intr. To give a warning. [Middle English warnen, from Old English warnian. See **wer-**<sup>4</sup> in Appendix.]

**SYNONYMS:** warn, caution, forewarn. These verbs mean to give someone notice of and put the person on guard against actual or possible danger or risk. Warn, the most inclusive, implies well-timed notice that causes a person to be alert, vigilant, or wary: "My father was warned by the neighbors that we were in great danger" (W.H. Hudson). Caution often suggests a warning that calls for the use of circumspection or prudence, as in avoiding unpleasant consequences: *The Secretary of State cautioned that terrorism would be countered by retaliatory action.* Forewarn intensifies the sense of advance notice: *Forewarned is forearmed.*

Figure 26: Anne H. Soukhanov, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Houghton Mifflin, 1992), ISBN: 9780395448953

**warn** /wɔːn/ **warns**, **warning**, **warned** ◆◆◆◆◇  
VERB  
1 If you **warn** someone about something such as a possible danger or problem, you tell them about it so that they are aware of it. *When I had my first baby friends warned me that children were expensive... They warned him of the dangers of sailing alone... Analysts warned that Europe's most powerful economy may be facing trouble... He also warned of a possible anti-Western backlash.*  
2 If you **warn** someone not to do something, you advise them not to do it so that they can avoid possible danger or punishment. *Mrs. Blount warned me not to interfere... Children must be warned to stay away from main roads... 'Don't do anything yet,' he warned. 'Too risky.'... 'Keep quiet, or they'll all come out,' they warned him... I wish I'd listened to the people who warned me against having the operation... Mr Lowe warned against complacency.*  
3 If someone says to you '**be warned**', they are advising you to be cautious, because there are risks that you may not have thought about. *But be warned: this is not a cheap option.*  
**warn away.** If you **warn** someone **away**, you tell them to go away or to stop doing something because of possible danger or punishment. *Soon an official appeared to warn them away... Analysts warn us away from drawing any conclusions.*  
**warn off.** If you **warn** someone **off**, you tell them to go away or to stop doing something because of possible danger or punishment. *The police warned the intruder off... He pressed for a full investigation, but was warned off... He spends his spare time visiting schools to warn pupils off drugs.*  
V n that  
V n of/about  
V that  
V of n  
V n to-inf  
V with quote  
V n with quote  
V n againstn/-ing  
V againstn/-ing  
CONVENTION  
PRAGMATICS  
PHRASAL VERB  
=warn off  
V n P  
V n P from n/-ing  
PHRASAL VERB  
=warn away  
V n P  
V n P n/-ing  
Also V P n (not pron)

Figure 27: John Sinclair, *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary* (HarperCollins, 1995), ISBN: 9780003750294, <http://books.google.com/books?id=TcIUAQAAIAAJ>

**warn** /wɔːn||wɔrn/v [I,T] 1 to tell someone that something bad or dangerous may happen, so that they can avoid it or prevent it: "Be careful, the rocks are slippery," Alex warned. | **warn sb about** I warned him about those stairs. | **warn (sb) of** You were warned of the risks involved. | **warn sb not to do sth** I warned you not to walk home alone. | **warn sb (that)** We warned them that there was a bull in the field. 2 to tell someone about something before it happens so that they are not worried or surprised by it: Can you warn your mother you're going to be back late?  
**warn sb ↔ against sth** phr v [T] to advise someone not to do something because it may have dangerous or unpleasant results: Her financial adviser warned her against such a risky investment. | **warn sb against doing sth** The police have warned tourists against going to remoter regions.  
**warn sb off** phr v [T] 1 to tell someone to go away or not come near something, using threats: The farmer waved his stick in the air to warn us off his land. 2 to advise someone to go away or to avoid something: **warn sb off doing sth** I tried to warn her off going out with him.

Figure 28: Della Summers and Adam Gadsby, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Longman, 1995), ISBN: 9780582237513

**warn** (obj) /ˈwɔːn, \$wɔːrn/ v to make (someone) aware of a possible danger or problem, esp. one in the future • *Scientists have warned that further extremely high winds are likely.* [+ that clause] • *We were warned not to eat the fish which might give us a slight stomach upset.* [T + obj + to infinitive] • *Have you warned them (that) there will be an extra person for dinner?* [T + obj + (that) clause] • *I was warned against/off going to the east coast because it was so full of tourists.* [T] • *There were signs warning of fog as soon as we got onto the motorway.* [I] • *This particular curry is extremely hot – you have been warned!* [T] • *“Has anyone told you about Paul?” “Yes, I have been warned.”* [T] • *Put that ball down and come over here, Laura – I’m warning you (= I will punish you if you do not!)* [T]

Figure 29: Paul Procter, *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), ISBN: 9780521484695, <http://books.google.com/books?id=0tWRQgAACAAJ>

**warn** (obj) /ˈwɔːn, \$wɔːrn/ v to make (someone) aware of a possible danger or problem, esp. one in the future • *Scientists have warned that further extremely high winds are likely.* [+ that clause] • *We were warned not to eat the fish which might give us a slight stomach upset.* [T + obj + to infinitive] • *Have you warned them (that) there will be an extra person for dinner?* [T + obj + (that) clause] • *I was warned against/off going to the east coast because it was so full of tourists.* [T] • *There were signs warning of fog as soon as we got onto the motorway.* [I] • *This particular curry is extremely hot – you have been warned!* [T] • *“Has anyone told you about Paul?” “Yes, I have been warned.”* [T] • *Put that ball down and come over here, Laura – I’m warning you (= I will punish you if you do not!)* [T]

Figure 30: *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (Cambridge University Press, 1995)

Merriam-Webster’s *Dictionary of English Usage*,<sup>29</sup> freely available through Google Books, says:

Use of warn as an intransitive verb is common and widespread, although it is actually a fairly recent development. It seems to have originated in American English in the early 20th century. American Dictionaries have recognized the intransitive warn as standard for many years, but several prominent British dictionaries continue to omit it, suggesting that it may occur less commonly in British than in American English. (On the other hand, Sir Ernest Gowers noted in his 1965 revision of Fowler that “intransitive use ... is now common in journalism.”) Few commentators have warned against its use. Those who have would revise the preceding sentence so that warned has a direct object, making it something like “Few commentators have warned their readers against its use.” Such revision is unnecessary and may even be awkward or misleading in contexts where the warning is directed generally rather than to a specific individual or group.

“... which warns of the approach of spring” —Mary Austin, *Starry Adventure*, 1931

29. Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage*, p. 947.

“But he warns against what he thinks might well turn out to be a fatal illusion” —Alain Locke, *Key Reporter*, Autumn 1951

“Often in the years that followed, Gottwald warned against the rising tide of Fascist parties” —*Current Biography* 1948

**warn.** Traditionally only a transitive verb (*she warned them of the danger; I shall not warn you again; we warned her to be careful what she said; etc.*), warn, since about the beginning of the 20c., has also come into common use in a narrow range of intransitive constructions. Examples: *The Chancellor warned that more drastic measures might have to be taken; The BOAC warned that more flights will have to be cancelled if the strike goes on; (headline) Shadow minister warns against education cuts.*

Figure 31: Henry Watson Fowler and R. W. Burchfield, *The New Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, 3rd Edition (Oxford University Press, 1996)

**warn** |wɔːrn| ▶v. [reporting verb] inform someone in advance of an impending or possible danger, problem, or other unpleasant situation: [trans.] *his father had warned him of what might happen* | [with direct speech] *“He’s going to humiliate you,” John warned* | [with clause] *the union warned that its members were close to going on strike.*

■ give someone forceful or cautionary advice about their actions or conduct: [trans.] *friends warned her against the marriage* | [with obj. and infinitive] *they warned people not to keep large amounts of cash in their homes* | [intrans.] *they warned against false optimism.*

▶warn someone off tell someone forcefully or threateningly to go or keep away from somewhere. ■ advise someone forcefully against (a particular thing or course of action): *he has been warned off booze.*

—DERIVATIVES **warn·er** n.

—ORIGIN Old English *war(e)nian*, *wearnian*, from a West Germanic base meaning ‘be cautious’; compare with **WARE**<sup>2</sup>.

Figure 32: Elizabeth Jewell and Frank R. Abate, *The new Oxford American dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2001)

**warn** /wôrn/ ► *v.* [*reporting verb*] inform someone in advance of an impending or possible danger, problem, or other unpleasant situation: [*trans.*] *his father had warned him of what might happen* | [*with direct speech*] *"He's going to humiliate you," John warned* | [*with clause*] *the union warned that its members were close to going on strike*. ■ give someone forceful or cautionary advice about their actions or conduct: [*trans.*] *friends warned her against the marriage* | [*trans.*] *they warned people not to keep large amounts of cash in their homes* | [*intrans.*] *they warned against false optimism*.

► *phrasal v.* □ **warn someone off** tell someone forcefully or threateningly to go away or stay. ■ advise someone forcefully against (a particular thing or course of action): *he has been warned off booze*. ► Old English *war(e)nian*, *wearnian*, from a West Germanic base meaning 'be cautious'; compare with **WARE**<sup>2</sup>. —**warn-er** *n.*

Figure 33: Erin McKean, *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, Volume 1 (Oxford University Press, 2005), ISBN: 9780195170771, <http://books.google.com/books?id=4oeQgAACAAJ>

(The American Heritage Dictionary and the Century Dictionary and several more can be searched at Wordnik.<sup>30</sup>)

At the time that I write this, February 21, 2011, Wiktionary lists four citations for intransitive *to warn*, among them one from a 1526 translation of

Bible verses Galatians 11, 9–10 by William Tyndale: "then Iames Cephas and Iohn ... agreed with vs that we shuld preache amonge the Hethen and they amonge the Iewes: *warnynge* only that we shulde remember the poore." The Oxford English Dictionary describes this usage as absolute.

The entry in the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary,<sup>31</sup> which cites one intransitive example ("This won't be easy," he warned.), looks similar to the one in the American Heritage Dictionary, but in Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary<sup>32</sup> there are a few more examples, among them the following intransitive uses: "The company has warned (investors) that its profits are likely to be lower in the coming year," "The book warns about/of the dangers of not getting enough exercise," and "She warns against making changes too quickly."

Originally, I wanted to close with a funny remark on an anagram of *warn*, but the only one I could find is *rawn*, a term for "[t]he roe or ovaries of a female fish (or shellfish)".<sup>33</sup> If you can think of a good closing remark or if you have found errors in this document, please leave a comment on my blog. Thanks for your interest, and I hope you had a seizure amount of fun reading this.

30. American Heritage Dictionary, "warn – definition and meaning from Wordnik," 2000, <http://www.wordnik.com/words/warn>.

31. Merriam-Webster, "Warn – Definition and More from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary," 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/warn>.

32. Merriam-Webster, "Warn – Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary," 2011, <http://www.learnersdictionary.com/search/warn>.

33. Oxford University Press, "*rawn*, *n.* – OED Online," 2011, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158711>.

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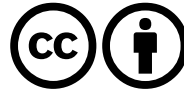
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