

Episode 417: Using IEW through the Years

Podcast transcript

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: So Andrew, do you want to know what our most frequently asked question is on our forums, on our Facebook pages, calls into customer service?

Andrew Pudewa: I'm guessing it's something like, “I heard about you guys, but I have no idea what you do or what to do, where to begin, what? who are you?”

Julie Walker: Well, we, it’s the “where to start question.” Yes. And because I think people kind of get the idea of Institute for Excellence in Writing. Oh, they're going to teach us writing. So what does that actually mean? English composition, not handwriting. Although we do have a handwriting curriculum.

Andrew Pudewa: We do have a handwriting little side product. That's pretty good. But yeah, I mean, we don't use the word *composition*. We do use the word *writing*, so that can be a little confusing, but I think once they read a little bit about what we do with Structure and Style®, it starts to make sense.

Julie Walker: And so we actually have a page on our website devoted to that. And we have a page for the schools. So full time schoolteachers. Where do I start with IEW? That URL is IEWSchools.com/Start. And it's a little different than the one on our main website: IEW.com/start. And I'm going to just basically tell you the difference.

So what we do on the schools division is we say, step one, connect with an educational consultant. Because they're going to help you understand your unique situation in your school and how to implement it in your school. Step number two is choose your curriculum. Step number three is get teacher training.

And step number four is celebrate success. So it's kind of a three step implementation program because the step four is just like, you're going to have results and we guarantee it.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and step one, connect with an EC. That's just so you don't get confused or lost or waste any time or have to buy something and send it back. We want people to have the best possible combination of materials. And training for their school. And honestly, there are different situations.

There's a small school with just a few teachers, there's whole districts, there's hybrid schools, there's micro schools. So fortunately we have a lot of experience in serving all types of schools and school organizations.

Julie Walker: And then the thing on the, we call it homeschool side, but everyone else, because it could be parents who are teaching their kids after school, it could be a tutor situation, it could be a co-op situation. It's the same three steps, only we cut out the first one. Because you can probably figure it out yourself.

You look at the curriculum, and we have two curricular options, video-based and paper-based. And there's a pathway to both of these. And then the second step is, get that teacher training, because for the best results, your students are going to do better if you yourself know the method.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. And then that pathway is very nicely shown in a graphic in the catalog. So anyone who doesn't have our catalog and wants to see it, well, get the catalog, look at it online, because I think it's pretty clear. You start here, do this first, then you can do this, then you can do that, or you could do that.

And so there are options within that. And like anything, the first year is always going to be—the newness of it can create a little bit of confusion or anxiety, but like I said on that video we made a long, long, long, long time ago, the hardest thing is just turn on the video and start.

Julie Walker: Start learning. Yep. Exactly. Well, and then the pathway that you talked about, one of the neat things about it is that you can, we use the term *parachute in* at any level. If you have a ninth grade student and they can't write a sentence or a paragraph, no problem. You can jump right into our system.

We've got materials for them that will meet them where they are. Or, if you are teaching in a school, back to that school thing, and you've got the situation where you've got new students joining your classroom, kind of the same idea, but, and this is where this podcast is going. I'm going to read you a question, Andrew, and you had, your response when I sent you this question is, we should devote an entire podcast to this

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. Can I interject one thing? As I've said many times. I really don't like the idea of grade levels because it, in people's minds, it just corresponds with an age. And we really try to say reading level rather than age. So if you did have a “ninth” grade student who could not write a paragraph or had never written a paragraph because of whatever reason, then it would be perfectly okay to start with something that was written at a lower level.

So it might look like the level B material, middle school reading level, but we don't put numbers or grades on anything. So it's okay. And it's always better to err on the side of starting with something that's a little simpler, maybe a little shorter, little less complicated. Complex so fast, and if that goes well, you can always speed up, but if you start and you've got something that's already too complex after the fourth or fifth lesson, that's not going to come out as well as it would if you simply moved back a notch. So, if everyone can when you're looking at this, just think more like reading level and that's a better clue than age.

And that can go the other way too. I mean, I've met 10 year olds who read and write circles around most middle school students. And so, yeah, in that case you could go up in complexity, but it's always better to err on less complexity and a little bit slower.

Julie Walker: Well, and I say at the beginning of every podcast, Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials which will aid them in training their

students to become, and we say it specifically in this order, confident and competent communicators and thinkers. And by going down, we're building those students' confidence so that they feel like they can do it.

That could be another completely different episode.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it is, on motivation. We've done several podcasts on motivation. You could link to those. All right. So what's this interesting email that you want to read to me?

Julie Walker: Well, it's very long, but I'm not going to read the whole email, but here's kind of the bottom line. This is from one of our listeners, Duffy, and she says, after three years of direct study and two years of using the techniques, I'm a little concerned that my daughter will get entirely bored (so she's in a hybrid school type situation) of repeating the structure and style for the next four years of writing. In other words, we have a pathway we can recommend which to do at each level and that can go on for six or seven years.

Andrew Pudewa: Where's the termination?

Julie Walker: When do we end with Structure and Style?

Andrew Pudewa: A pathway is only a pathway if it has an end the top of the mountain, you get to the lake, you're at your friend's house. You, you took a pathway. Where are you going? So it's a very good question. And I would go back to something I try to make very clear in the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*® seminar when we introduce the idea of stylistic techniques. And that is that this checklist, with its dress ups, openers, decoration, triples, whatever you got going. This is not a checklist that you would use and obey for life. This is not the formula for the greatest writing you will ever produce. This is a way to master a wide range of word usages and grammatical constructions and literary devices.

But there should be that goal of mastery. So the goal is to use the checklist and require everything in every paragraph of every composition with very few exceptions until doing the whole checklist has become easy, because that's our whole philosophy is EZ+one. Well, at some point you're going to get to it's all easy and there is no more plus one.

What do you do? And I say at that point, well, that's when you graduate from the checklist. Then you can use or not use the stylistic techniques. You can create variations on those stylistic techniques. You could go read your favorite authors and probably find some more stylistic techniques yourself to practice and use and make easy and build your repertoire.

That's really the goal—building the repertoire of ways to do things. But at a certain point you'd say, okay, I'm free of the requirement. I will now use or not use according to my audience, according to my goals, according to my personal preferences, according to the purpose of the assignment or the composition.

And so that's really the goal, is not to obey the checklist the rest of your life, but to graduate from it. And it goes back to that old saying. You have to follow the rules until you can, and then you can break some of them. Right? And we see authors all over the place do that. I'm sure Charles Dickens knew exactly what he was doing when he wrote the first paragraph of *Bleak House* and didn't use a single complete sentence in the entire paragraph. He was breaking a rule. Lots of times, all in a row, but for a very specific literary objective. And then in the next paragraph, whenever it is, he shifts over and starts writing in complete sentences

and you see, Aha! He was using that very austere fragment, compulsive fragment style to create an effect. So that's one thing to think about.

Julie Walker: Well, and let me just let me just speak to that for a moment because I don't want anybody who's listening to this say, "My student has gone through Structure and Style for two years, and therefore we're ready to graduate." I can't imagine many students who actually have mastered the entire checklist until they've gone through the Structure and Style syllabus three or four years. Because there's a lot of stylistic techniques and to master them means you do them without sounding too goofy most of the time.

Andrew Pudewa: Not goofy, you, you figure out a way to make it work

Julie Walker: So this is not going to happen the first or second year.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and I will interject here, I learned this system 34 years ago, almost, right? Over 30 years, I have been writing compositions for various purposes and reasons.

Julie Walker: Including our school magalog

Andrew Pudewa: And when I write the articles for the Magalog or some other magazine or somebody asked me, I don't have the checklist there.

I don't follow to be sure I've got all the dress-ups, openers, decoration, triple in every single paragraph of the thing. I notice, oh, I had three subject openers in a row. Can I flip a sentence? Can I stick in a prepositional phrase? Usually, that adjustment makes it better. But I will only do that if it really would make it better, but because I can do it so easily, I usually can make it better.

However, I have, especially when we're making the SSS videos, on a few occasions, written a sample composition, wherein I followed the entire checklist just the way the students were going to have to—topic-clincher rules, paragraphs, everything. And what I have found is that I never get bored with that.

It's a game. It's a game I can play, and I can play it very well. And so I enjoy it. And while I'm not compelled to do it, if I choose to use the whole checklist, in a way, it makes it more interesting for me. And I don't think the product is less because I did that. I do have the problem that it takes more time. And I got...some kid will write me a letter and he'll use every single technique in all five paragraphs of his letter. And then I feel like, okay, I'm either going to write a very short note of about one paragraph, or I'm going to have to match him technique for technique. And do I have the time to do that?

But it's still a game for me, even after three decades of doing it. And I don't think there's anything wrong with that. So, I'm not sure that you can overdo it. Now, I'm not as likely as, say, a seventeen year old kid to get bored. I don't get bored. I can't think of the last time that I was ever bored. But I can understand how a student who did this for five, six, seven years would be like, yeah, okay, I know all this, so what should I do?

And so that's the question, is what do you do after you graduate from the checklist? Now, the structural models, I think there's enough variation and enough freedom. I don't see that as really a problem you'd get bored with. You're just going to start playing with it, and your Unit

3 narratives may look different than the three paragraphs you started with when you were in fifth grade five years

Julie Walker: yes, because even the seminar workbook actually gives many variations for each model.

Andrew Pudewa: Many variations, many

Andrew Pudewa: So the structural models, I don't think that's quite the same problem of, oh, I've been doing this forever and I'm tired of it, but the style techniques, I can see it.

Julie Walker: Well, and the structural models, I think that's why we get so many comments from parents or students who are now in college and their professors are saying, "Where did you learn to write?" Because these students have spent some time wrestling with these structural models, they can interpret the professor's assignment as, "Oh, that's a Unit 4. I can totally do that."

Andrew Pudewa: And see the podcast we did on unit eight to discuss some of those options.

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: I do think there are many interesting things which a teenager who's had, let's say, six years, consistently grades four through nine, for example. Okay, now this kid is 14, 15 years old. They, they've aced the system, they can churn it out, it sounds really good, now what, what can they do?

Well, I think one of the most obvious things is take a writing class from someone else, a completely different source. Maybe it's an online composition class from a college or university. Maybe it's a teacher who's teaching kind of advanced composition, and they don't know our system. Because that's when you can really test out your stuff. Right? Can I make this teacher happy? Can I do that assignment using the tools I know but not being handicapped or limited in that I have to force everything in every paragraph and do it in this exact way? So that would be the first thing I would recommend is take a class from someone else and see how well all your arsenal of secret weapons works.

And usually, what you said, the kids go off to college, the teachers don't understand. How did you learn to do this? "I don't know, my mom taught me or that's what we did in my school." Another thing that I think is very good is competitions. Get in an essay competition. And, the essay competition, unless it's ours, but there are a lot of good options and sometimes it's at a very high level, with a \$5000 scholarship.

Then you can have this idea of, okay, I am not going to be constrained by these checklists, but I do want to write the best possible thing I can to enter into this competition. Along with that would be get involved in public speaking. Get into a league, the debate league, or NCFCA, or STOA, or take a public speaking class in, in school, if you're in a school, and then try out your stuff, writing a speech which is a little different. When you're writing a speech, you're writing something that is meant to be spoken and communicated verbally with a wider range of expression that's possible with a real mouth and a real voice and a real body. And so, shift over to that genre.

Another thing I think is a very good thing, and we touch on this in Unit 7, which is author imitation. I love this. Read an author that you like, and try to figure out how does that author write? What does Dickens do to sound like Dickens? Or what does Hemingway do to sound like Hemingway? And then see if you can imitate various authors. That is tremendously valuable because then you start to really see the combination and permutation of the Structure and Style techniques, but in these great works that you can, you can understand them so much better.

And that author imitation, I think there's, there's so much that can be explored in that direction. Poetry would be another thing that's going to really press and stretch your limits as to how you would use words. And so study different poetic forms and practice poetry. I saw a very good movie recently. I mean, technically it was okay, but I enjoyed it. So to that degree, it was good. It was about Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. And his wife died in a very sad accident. Her dress caught on fire, and she essentially burned to death. And he tried to save her and he got terribly burned in the process and he just stopped writing.

Here's the most famous poet in the English speaking world, probably in the whole world by that time, and he was so devastated by the loss of his wife. He didn't write anything for a long time. The movie is called *I Heard the Bells*, which is the first line of the first poem that he wrote when he started writing again after his wife died. But his daughter made a joke and, and someone said, your father's a writer. And she said, no, he's a poet. What's the difference? One rambles, the other rhymes.

Julie Walker: Oh, that's funny.

Andrew Pudewa: And I thought that was, he probably said that I think it authentic. But there's a skill in poetry that's going to refine wordsmithing to a degree you really won't get any other way. So, poetry is an excellent thing. And there are some novel writing curriculums, both online and published. If you've got a student who's very good, usually they'll be the ones who say, I want to write a book. Okay, let's help you do that. What a great project for your sophomore year of high school, if you're so inclined.

And now you're off checklist. Just show your stuff. Try what works. And, so those are a few options.

Julie Walker: Well, and Andrew, do you know what class I remember taking in high school those many, many years ago?

Andrew Pudewa: I was not there.

Julie Walker: You No, you weren't there.

Andrew Pudewa: I do not remember.

Julie Walker: We definitely went to different high schools, but it was preparation for college testing and some of the things that you mentioned. I thought you could totally make a course out of this and, and you spend that semester applying for scholarships with essays, or doing competition, doing competitive writing, enrolling in essay contests. Or we have a course on introduction to public speaking you could do, and so I guess what I hear you saying is this particular school, if they feel like their students are getting a little too much Structure and Style, take a break. But I do like the idea to come back before they go off to college, consider

the *University-Ready Writing*, because we want to give them the best opportunity for success at the collegiate

Andrew Pudewa: It's a good refresher. So, I, I think, though, the case where you have a student that did consistently six years of Structure and Style, well done, mastered the checklist. I think that's less common than we might think because most schools and most class groups, what happens is people come and people go, right?

So you may have a class, and a third of the kids, this is their sixth year doing it. But two thirds of the kids—they've only been doing it three years or two years or no years, and they're right there in the beginning. So that's at the point where you really would like to be able to differentiate and say to some of your students, "Okay, here's what you guys should go do. I'll help you when I have time, but you're pretty much on your own and we're going to be sure that everyone else gains the skills that the rest of the students have." And age-segregated classrooms where kids are coming and going, it's a difficult situation. No one's going to argue that it isn't a challenging dynamic.

And perhaps there are alternatives to that, but "we don't necessarily have them or we can't change the infrastructure of our school to divide kids differently. We're going to keep them in nth grade and, and try to both challenge, give freedom and cover the basic things you want everyone to have."

And if a kid's in high school at 17 and they're totally bored because they know everything, they should just quit high school and go to college or quit high school and get a job. That'd be my opinion. But of course, I have some radical opinions.

Julie Walker: Yes, yes, you, you often do, but I think the advice that we've given today will be very applicable not just to this listener, but to many, many listeners who are wondering the same question, when to stop with Structure and Style, because we go all the way up. We go K 12 and beyond.

Andrew Pudewa: And that's because most kids are coming in around grade 4-5-6, sometimes 7-8, sometimes just to high school. And we do know that for almost everyone, you want at least three good years. And four is even better. And six is not gonna kill you. But, you know what would be interesting is to pull a few of the kids we know that went through four or five years. And now, see, what are they doing as young adults, and to what degree did that prepare them well and assist them? To what degree did they find something they didn't learn and had to? And was it easy to learn that new thing and apply it, or do they wish they'd had something different? I mean, it'd be a good research project.

Julie Walker: Sounds like a good idea. Well, thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, well, thank you.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.