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IEW: The Key to Success

By Pamela White

Forty years ago the better colleges did not have the writing labs that are a ubiquitous feature of college campuses today. Contrary to the pedagogy of the past few decades, students benefit from learning concrete and specific tools. The notorious failure in our national educational system to produce even competent writers, as well as the marked decline during that time in writing ability, should tell us something is not working.

I have now taught IEW's writing system to well over a thousand students, as well as discussed it with many parents and teachers who use it with their own children. The results have been consistently remarkable.

When I taught high school English at elite private schools long ago, I expended huge effort discussing aspects of strong writing without seeing the anticipated results in student writing. From the students' perspective, no matter how kindly I tried to couch my comments, returned papers carried with them the meta-message, "This is what you should have done to get an *A*." One of the keys to IEW's success is that it holds students accountable for very common sense organizational and stylistic techniques. They know in advance what is expected of them to earn an *A*, and they are empowered with concrete tools to achieve that goal.

Some have objected that IEW's system produces formulaic writing. That is true, but only at the beginning with weak and inexperienced writers. In their case, a formula is preferable to disorganized writing and dull style. As writers become more sophisticated, they move beyond the formula, partly because there are built-in levels of complexity to the stylistic tools.

A young student adds a *who-which* clause to her writing: *The wagon, which was red, rolled down the hill.* Bravo! She constructed a grammatical sentence. An older student gains the maturity to enclose worthwhile content in her *who-which*: *The red wagon, which my uncle handcrafted for my tenth birthday, rolled down the hill.*

Time and again, I have watched this transformation beyond the formula in student writing, but I may not have believed it if I had not seen it work. Voices that begin with

common features—adverb clauses, -ly adverbs, strong verbs, and quality adjectives, for example— after several years of IEW are startlingly transformed into unique voices with little in common with each other beyond hallmarks of superb writing. Once they master the tools, these writers soar.

IEW’s tools not only target style but structure as well, again providing levels of complexity that allow growth and sophistication through repeated practice. The topic/clincher rule is a case in point. It states: *The topic sentence and the clincher sentence must repeat or reflect two or three key words*, which students must also bold or highlight. While other writing systems ask students to end body paragraphs where they began by reiterating their main point, by bolding their key words, students are held accountable. This forces them to grapple with their topic idea—what are they actually focusing on in their paragraph?—and keeps their attention on their main idea, which discourages paragraphs from wandering off topic.

Yes, in the hands of weak writers, this topic/clincher will sound formulaic. In a paragraph about army ants, for example, a young or inexperienced writer might begin with “Army ants are amazing insects,” then give a few details, then end with “Army ants sure are amazing insects!” After the student practices the topic/clincher, however, he gradually learns how to deepen his topic and reflect the main idea rather than repeat it. “Efficient and considerate in traffic, army ants are amazing insects” begins the paragraph, which now ends: “Perhaps we humans would have more traffic relief if we studied the behavior of these fascinating creatures.” The student would bold “traffic, amazing insects” and “traffic, fascinating creatures.”

A related reason for IEW’s success is that it empowers students with confidence in their writing. I have had even naturally strong writers express enormous gratitude for IEW’s system for teaching them to understand what makes their writing successful and for giving them models to use for any kind of writing assignment.

Many times IEW graduates—including students whose natural skills are average—have reported back that their paper was the one singled out by a college professor as an example of how to write. Madeline, a junior in college, articulated how well IEW had prepared her over her peers:

Many times in my three years of college (basically any time I had to write a paper) I have been thankful that I was taught the IEW method of writing. I would write an outline first and then write a rough draft that could almost be a final draft. When I talked with my classmates about their papers, I discovered that they would write two or three, maybe even four, drafts of their paper before they were satisfied with it. I was obviously saving hours by planning and writing a good outline and implementing style into my paper as I wrote, reducing the number of drafts I needed. Even though the process of adopting the IEW style was sometimes difficult in the beginning, it was worth every hour I put into it as it has saved me so much time, energy, and stress in college.

Another objection I’ve heard voiced is that IEW’s system is complicated and intimidating

to parent-teachers. For those insecure about their ability to teach writing, this may seem to be the case. However, many parents who took the plunge anyway were grateful they did. When parents realize they do not have to watch the whole series to get started—indeed, we do not recommend that they do—and that they can take it one unit at a time, trusting that the system will get their children where they need to be by high school, they realize the program is not as time consuming as they initially think.

Of even greater help are the student-directed series (*Student Writing Intensive* and *Student Writing Intensive Continuation Course*), which teach the same concepts as the core program (*Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*) but to the student directly with built-in lessons parents can use. Many parents start with this and then discover that after using the program for a year, they can continue with the core program or use theme-based writing lessons. Once you have taught one of the units one time, it is so much easier the second time through. This also allows writing assignments to work across curricula, applying the models to what students are studying in other subjects.

The proof is always in the pudding. While college professors around the country are bemoaning the inability of students to write and to understand the written word, IEW students are CLEPping out of freshman comp. Even average writers who have learned IEW's methods have reported back that their papers are the ones their college professors laud as examples of how to write. IEW students themselves recognize—if not today, certainly by the time they are in college—what a difference IEW has made in their readiness for the rigors of college. From one student: “We are writing a paper on dialects, currently writing a KWO, although that is not what the teacher is calling it. Some students are confused because they’ve never had to write one before. She has had to repeat things about six times, and I know some of them still don't get it. I know I would be confused too if not for IEW!” Another student tweeted: “Thank you for IEW because now I can write rough drafts for five-page analysis papers in two hours!” Bottom line, IEW holds the key to successful communication.

Pamela White

Pamela received her Masters in English and A.B.D. from Vanderbilt University, where she taught freshman composition courses as a graduate student. Afterward, she taught high school English at private college prep schools and then worked as a freelance copy editor for several publishers, including Thomas Nelson. Now accredited by Institute for Excellence in Writing as an Accomplished Instructor, Pamela is the author of Fix It! Grammar. Having homeschooled and graduated her own children, Pamela currently teaches online for IEW and is the Department Head of Level C.

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