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info@IEW.com • 800.856.5815

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## Bad Writing vs. Bad Circumstances Completing the Checklist but Producing Bad Writing?

By Andrew Pudewa

Recently, a co-op teacher commented, “Help! My students are completing the checklist but producing bad writing! They may use an “-ly word” and check it off the checklist, but it’s not appropriate for the context, reveals a misunderstanding/ misapplication of the word, disrupts the flow of the writing, and just sounds unintelligent. I’m worried that we’re not only failing the students, but actually teaching them bad writing habits by giving them full points on the checklist when the writing is so awful.”

### What Are Our Goals?

From time to time, a plea similar to this is heard, and often carries with it an implication that the checklist is to blame for the “bad writing”—that the product might be better if the student did not suffer the burden of having to “force” the stylistic techniques into a composition. In some cases this may be true; however, we should first determine what we mean by “product” and what our real goals are, lest we prematurely judge a method or a child’s efforts. In conversations with parents and teachers about their reasons for wanting to teach writing, the most often heard phrases are: “I want him to be able to express himself...” or “I want her to be able to put her thoughts down on paper...” followed up by a close third, “I want them to be ready for college....”

If these are the goals—if this is the “product” we want, and we want to know if the Excellence in Writing approach will help us attain these objectives, we must ask: What are the proven results of consistent application of the Structure & Style program over several years? Well, the testimonials are impressive. Most notably, we receive frequent reports of attitudes transformed—reluctant writers into budding novelists, much to the amazement of parents and teachers. Additionally, we see improved scores on standardized tests among a general population of students trained in the IEW system. Often we hear news of students winning essay contests, receiving scholarships, and gaining university admissions, all attributed in part to their IEW experience. Lastly, we have a stack of messages from young adults themselves, pleased—even surprised—at their success in writing papers for college classes. The proof, as they say, is indeed “in the pudding.” Our approach works.

However, we still have the sticky problem of what to do about the difficult developmental phase during which younger children or inexperienced students produce writing that is clearly “not good.” With previous articles, we have addressed this question from two different angles, and reading them would provide an excellent background for this discussion; they are both available on our website:

[www.excellenceinwriting.com/article-list](http://www.excellenceinwriting.com/article-list). In “**Good Writing vs. Great Teaching**”, we

rebut the “Victorian Schoolboy” accusation—that the structure & style program creates superfluous, even ostentatious word usage when it requires more adjectives, adverbs, adjectival clauses, et cetera. We point out that our goal as teachers of young children or developing writers is not to carve them into 21st century journalists, but to give them the marble, the raw material of language and a love of words, from which their skills can be carved even more appropriately in the future. A second article, “**So... So... Awkward**” makes two points: Initially, that awkwardness in language is normal for young and adolescent students; and secondly, that awkwardness is normal for anyone trying to do something new (playing a new kind of piece on an instrument or trying a new technique in a sport). We must not be afraid of awkwardness. However, there is an additional aspect of this challenge we can consider now: the problem of teaching materials.

From the beginning, we at IEW have maintained that our primary goal, our mission, is the training of parents and teachers in Dr. Webster’s program. Initially, we had only one product, our video seminar for adults, Teaching Writing: Structure & Style (TWSS). For some, it was all that was needed; they learned the program and taught it with great success. Others required more help, so we produced sample student classes on video and a few sets of source texts to make the teacher’s life a bit easier. As more teachers and parents began to implement the program, sets of lesson plans evolved, were shared, and eventually became commercial products, which we now sell as part of the Student Writing Intensive video courses and the Theme-Based Writing Lesson series. While these curricular materials offer parents and teachers a savings in time and a shorter learning curve, they also create some inherent dangers, which can be summarized as...

#### **“The Workbook Problem”**

Have you ever noticed that the very word “workbook” is an oxymoron? Not only does it often not “work” well for a particular student, a workbook can do no “work” on its own. By its very nature, a workbook is an intrinsically flawed teaching tool, and will be effective only when the human teacher is successful in controlling it. The basic assumption upon which a workbook is structured is terribly disordered: that all students using the workbook need the same amount of practice, done in the same way, according to the same schedule. A workbook will continue on at its own predetermined pace, completely oblivious to the child, who may be bored to death with too much repetition or completely lost because of too fast a pace. Fortunately, most parents have enough common sense to intercede on behalf of the child, changing or even tossing ineffective curricular materials. The real problem occurs with groups.

Recently, the world of home education has exploded with co-ops, tutorials, two-day-a-week academies, **University Model Schools**, franchise-type programs, and online classes. While these options offer many advantages for students and convenience for parents, they can also create frustrations intrinsic to group instruction. This can be exacerbated when something as individual and subjective as writing is being taught in a group, using a set of lesson plans as if it were a curriculum to be obeyed. Very rarely do we hear of children “hating” their IEW classes, but when we do, it is inevitably the result of the teacher moving too quickly through the lessons, either because of a lack of training in our methods, a belief that they have to “finish” the book by the end of the school year, or a concept that everyone in the group has to do the same exact assignment and be evaluated in the same way.

Even more frightening would be the case of someone having been recruited to “teach IEW classes,” given a stack of “History- Based Writing Lessons” books for the students, and asked to “teach it” in one hour a week for 28 weeks, without the benefit of the comprehensive teacher training that correct use of the materials presupposes. That would be a recipe for disaster. We believe such cases are rare, but as the world of “homeschool

classes” expands, so will the potential for such problems. Because of this, we recommend that parents who enroll their children in “IEW Classes” (or classes using IEW-published materials) be proactive: Sit in on classes when appropriate, encourage the teacher to participate in the IEW Instructor Accreditation\* program, attend the TWSS seminar (or watch the video course) as soon as possible, and don’t be afraid to help children as much as is needed. These measures will ensure the best results.

### **But What About the Bad Writing?**

Let us return to the “bad writing” problem as described above. Certainly, a mechanical, institutional use of lesson plans can contribute to this frustration (and intercession by a fully trained teacher is critical), but we must also consider the more concrete question of exactly how a good teacher can adjust the lessons appropriately and prepare the students for success.

When a checklist becomes burdensome, it is an indicator that too much has been introduced too quickly. As is clearly explained in our TWSS seminar, a new “dress-up” or “sentence opener” should be required only when what has been taught so far has become “easy”—meaning that the student can do it without much help and it doesn’t sound too goofy, most of the time. If a student complains that the checklist is “too hard,” what they are actually saying is, “You taught me too much too fast.” The wise teacher or parent should, at that point, hold off on adding any new requirements (or even cut back the checklist to the point at which it is “easy”), regardless of what the lesson plans or class schedule says. With less to be stressed by, the student is less likely to resort to “any old word on the list” and will be willing to take the time to search for a word that he really understands, or read over the sentence a few times to be sure it makes sense. If the teaching is done in a group, the checklists can be “customized” for individual students; this is the instructor’s job, and there is no rule anywhere that says all students in one group must have the exact same checklist. Likewise, a good teacher can take sharp students aside, quickly show them an advanced technique, and challenge them to try it in the next assignment, even though she may not show it to the whole class.

Additionally, the teacher must have the time to sufficiently prepare the students for success. Often, co-op style classes are so short there’s simply not enough time to do everything that should be done: Read a few student compositions (pointing out and praising good word choices and skillful usage), go over a bit of grammar, read and discuss the source text for the next assignment, introduce or review the model for the unit, preview some appropriate dress-up ideas, and revisit word lists—all of which will help reduce the “awkward/ bad writing” problem. Parents and teachers must insist that sufficient time be allocated to writing classes—if they expect to get the hoped-for good results.

### **Parents’ Role**

Parents must not be afraid to help, and teachers must not be unwilling to encourage the parents to help. “Withholding help” is one of the “Four Deadly Errors” (available as an audio download from our website), and adults who are afraid of “helping too much” are usually the victims of a system that was designed to compare children with other children by segregating them by age and scoring them by standardized tests. In such a system, if Billy’s mom helps Billy more than Mikey’s mom helps Mikey, then Billy has an unfair advantage over Mikey. And since there’s no way the system could get Mikey’s mom to help Mikey as much as Billy’s mom helps Billy, then the only way to objectively compare Billy and Mikey is to convince Billy’s mom to stop helping Billy. There, in a thumbnail version, is a picture of the exorcism of parents from institutional education over the past hundred years. It’s a tragedy in which we need not participate.

Truth be told, independence and ability never result from withholding help; independence always proceeds from reaching a critical mass of information, experience, and confidence. You can't help a child "too much," because they always tell you when they don't need help! Co-op and classroom teachers should strive to involve parents as much as possible, as they will be the ones who can best teach at the point of need, individually helping children better understand the words and idioms they may try to use, giving suggestions which will make the writing less awkward—both now and in years to come.

One final note: All of us, children and adults alike, use language according to our inherited sense of it. To write well, we must be saturated in excellent language and great literature. As explained in "**One Myth and Two Truths**" (again on the "article-list" page of our website), we may find that although we exert tremendous effort in teaching writing (hoping to get reliably sophisticated and correct English out of our students), we give short shrift to the building of that language database by failing to read aloud to our children and have them memorize language in sufficient quantity to have a rich vocabulary and be able to build correct and sophisticated sentences.

In conclusion, we must not be afraid of the awkwardness of young students, we must be sure that the materials being used are used correctly, we must have parents as involved as possible in the teaching and learning process, and we must understand that language input is every bit as important as output. It's a lot to think about, but we must attend to the good circumstances that will contribute to the good writing we want.

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