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Many Paths, One Writing Method: An interview with IEW mom Lisa Averitt

By Kristin Boutross

Lisa Averitt lives in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, where she is a pastor's wife and mother of five. She has a BA in English and several years of teaching experience followed by sixteen years of homeschooling. Currently their children range in age from college to middle school. Lisa agreed to share some of her lessons learned, coming from a mother's and teacher's perspective during decades of educating.

You have quite a bit of homeschooling experience. Was that always part of the plan?

Yes. I don't think we really knew whether we would home educate all the way through twelfth grade, but we knew that we wanted to try it. We began homeschooling in Pennsylvania, which is a very regulated state in regard to homeschooling, so it was interesting to start there. Actually I first heard about IEW at a classical education seminar where there was a great deal of talk about Andrew Pudewa and his writing program. I remember thinking, "Oh, yes. This is really good: a method for teaching writing." After studying various resources, I knew we would be using it in the future.

Would you explain some details about your family's homeschool journey?

We started homeschooling using a curriculum that recommends many books for the children, so starting in kindergarten, I often read aloud to them. Honestly, the hours of reading together are some of our greatest memories. If you ask them, all of our children will say that. When speaking to our eldest daughter, she mentioned that hearing the classics, even though she was so young, impacted her ability to write later on.

However, we didn't end up homeschooling all the way through. We moved to Tulsa, and my husband took a pastorate at a church with a school; this opened up the possibility of enrolling our children. Hannah, our eldest, was in fifth grade, and we very much enjoyed homeschooling. Nevertheless, my husband was at a point where the church and the school needed to connect more; he was going to start teaching and coaching there. We had been impressed with what we had seen at the school (Mingo Valley Christian School, which uses IEW), especially in regard to academics, and it seemed like this would be a good fit. So, we decided to enroll Hannah for her seventh grade. It hurt my heart to walk out of that building. Tears were streaming. For both of us it was a long first day. I actually told my husband at the time that it was the wrong decision; it was just too hard!

But he suggested that we at least give it a couple of weeks. Although we are able to laugh about it now, it was difficult at first. Things did smooth out, and we sent all three of our girls to school in seventh grade. It turned out to be a wonderful second half of their educational journey.

With our boys we are doing some things differently. We decided not to put them in school for seventh grade. Instead, we enrolled them in Classical Conversations®, whose local communities offer support for homeschooling parents; classes are taught on a variety of subjects. The parent teaches at home during the rest of the week. Classical Conversations is one way to obtain accountability and some healthy evaluation from someone other than mom. The boys have also had opportunities to prepare and present speeches, which have been important experiences for them.

What is your experience with using IEW?

I'm passionate about IEW's writing method, and I can't imagine how much easier it would've been for me to major in English had I known of it. I honestly don't know how I was able to get by without the stylistic techniques and the structural units. Thankfully we've been blessed to use IEW's materials with our kids at home, and in our daughters' school the method is taught. The Structure and Style Writing Method has been impactful in many ways. Our eldest said it was as if Andrew knew exactly what she was feeling. There was this blank piece of paper, and she had to figure out how to get her thoughts on there. It was intimidating! Once she learned the method, however, her fear left. IEW's materials taught her to break down the writing process, making it understandable and doable.

Our second daughter, Rachel, was quite the opposite. She was filling notebooks with stories from a young age. For her the key word outline was huge. When she employed this tool, it helped her to structure her thoughts. The outline gave her a path to follow, if you will, that helped rein in her stories' plots to make them more interesting and concise.

It's also interesting that all five of our children, whether they watch a movie or read something, are able to say, "That was good quality" or "That wasn't good quality." Structural Units 7, 8, and 9 gave them practice at stating their considered opinions. As Andrew teaches, you can't get onto paper what's not already in your mind. The same is true for what we put in there. What we put in is what we will get back out.

Which IEW courses have you used?

We used the DVD-based *Student Writing Intensive* and the *Student Writing Intensive Continuation Courses*, along with *Fix It! Grammar*. Last year, my son did an online writing class with IEW. I never watched *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* although I should have, but I watched the courses right along with my students every step of the way. One thing that always amazes me is how much I have learned in homeschooling our children. This has been my real education.

What words of encouragement would you offer to fellow parents and teachers?

Fine academics can be offered in a variety of situations. The point of educating is to cultivate the heart of a learner in our students so that they develop beautiful character qualities and virtues as well as see the value of learning. Our mandate is to train up our children as mature adults, people who love God, love people, love truth, and who can articulate the truth when they speak and when they write. Through my own journey I've come to realize that the education of our students does not occur in a perfect world; most situations have a downside as well as inherent strengths. It's important to consider what resources are available (money, time, talent) and then to make a prayerful decision with our children's well-being in mind, knowing that education, whether at home or elsewhere, is the parents' duty. If we decide to enroll our children in a school environment, we are partnering with the school, not handing over the reins of our child's education. The school comes alongside of us, but we still hold the accountability.

What are some ways we can cultivate our young learners' hearts?

A first priority is praying and desiring the heart of a learner in a concrete, intentional way for our children. Second is modeling this for them. As parents we need to be asking ourselves: Are we engaging our minds, applying ourselves, and giving our best effort? Are we considering outcomes? Our example is powerful for our children. The heart of the wise seeks out instruction, and we can't expect or ask our children to be different than we are.

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