



Institute for
Excellence in
Writing

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What is IEW? Method not Madness

By Andrew Pudewa

Most everyone has an opinion about what good writing is. It's concise. Correct. Detailed. Winsome. Engaging. Organized. Clear. And most of us can judge to some degree whether what we read meets these rather vague criteria, though we tend to do so in reverse, more easily criticizing what is not concise or correct, what is disorganized and unclear. Countless trees have been converted into books attempting to describe this ephemeral ideal of "good writing," although instructions on exactly how to do good writing always seem to be harder to grasp. Unfortunately, just talking about what good writing is doesn't automatically result in an ability to do it.

Therefore, our more important question is this: How do we equip students with the tools that will allow them to better attain the somewhat hazy goal of writing well? One popular modern idea is probably true but simplistic: "One learns to write by writing." This concept, however, unless augmented, easily leads to a modern madness—rejecting methods built on tradition and instead emphasizing spontaneity and self-expression prior to building a foundation of basic skills. This clearly doesn't work as can be seen from the steady decline over the past four decades in the writing competencies of American students.

So what are these skills? They were identified long ago by the ancient teachers of rhetoric, and they haven't changed since: Invention (what to say), Structure (how to organize it), and Style (how to say it). What we do at IEW is nothing new, and that's good. We don't claim to have some brilliant and original way of teaching writing. (And by the way, I would be wary of anyone who does make such a claim.) We use an organized and proven method for teaching these basic skills, and because it works, students with a few years of IEW training generally fare far above average in their university classes and professional pursuits

The structural units of our syllabus are relatively simple patterns for organizing different forms of compositions. They are easy to teach and easy to practice. This is a form of imitation, a discipline which lies at the foundation of learning any art well, whether music, painting, dance, or writing. Following our system, teachers or teaching parents work through nine structural models over the course of a school year, at first providing source texts and content but gradually weaning the student towards original "inventive" writing. Then the next year, the sequence is repeated, only with different content appropriate to slightly older and more experienced students. Continuing this for a third and maybe even a fourth year, students are able to internalize a sense of structure in

composition. Then, with mastery established, students will experiment with the combination and permutation of those learned models to skillfully organize their writing for other purposes.

The style techniques, however, are introduced not by schedule but by mastery, and they are cumulative, meaning that students continue to use and refine techniques they have already learned while practicing a new one. The checklist grows slowly and powerfully over time, eventually enabling students to use a wide range of grammatical patterns, descriptive vocabulary, and literary devices with confidence and ease. This method of cumulative practice, sometimes referred to as “mastery learning,” is at the core of high-level artistic competence, where basics are practiced again and again until they become effortless, even second nature. Then and only then are new techniques introduced, tried, and practiced, adding to the repertoire of variety in written expression.

The process of invention, or coming up with content, is also taught in a gradual and effective way. Rather than beginning with the blank page and its consequent problem of “I don’t know what to write!” students are given the opportunity to develop a most important thinking skill (and life skill)—how to ask good questions. And again this is taught through modeling and imitation. In Units 1 and 2, the question students must ask is simple: “What are the key words in this sentence?” Simple, but it is a question, and the student must engage. In Unit 3, the questions get a little trickier: “What are the key elements of this story?” Unit 4 requires the question “What are the most interesting, important, or relevant facts here?” And in Unit 5: Writing from Pictures and Unit 7, students must now, without an outside source text, contrive the questions and discover answers. This creates a gradual and effective pathway for developing the skills necessary for invention.

With growing competence in organization, variety of expression, and effective thinking habits, students come to know more and more what to do and how to do it well. Their writing improves. They experience success. So, let others fling ink on paper or pixels on blogs trying to define good writing; we will continue to coach teachers and parents in using our organized method to train up excellent communicators and thinkers.