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Work Smarter, Not Harder

By Janet Spitler

We at IEW® have the honor of introducing our 2017 Teacher of the Year, Mrs. Andrea Pewthers. She teaches English and literature to middle school students at Mingo Valley Christian School in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I met Andrea at a teachers' conference in Dallas, Texas, nine years ago. Having learned about our writing method from a homeschooling family, she was excited to see our school materials designed for classroom implementation.

Not long after introducing our writing method to her students, she began teaching *Fix It!*, the IEW grammar program. While her story definitely earned our attention, it was a conversation with a few of her previous students that sealed the decision to honor her in this way. Read about the students on pages 44–46. Her story inspires purpose and confidence.

Andrea, the adolescent years often feel like hanging on during a long physical, mental, and emotional rollercoaster ride. Ethnicity, economic background, or academic aptitude does not seem to exempt young people from the ride. How does that affect your teaching?

It doesn't just affect my teaching—it shapes it. My goal is to give students control by teaching them that they have the power to choose words and ideas when the rest of their world seems out of control. The mantra in all of my classes is this: “Be purposeful in all you say and do!”

Teaching language arts skills is a daunting task because there is so much to do in so little time. How do you do it?

First, I remember that I receive students who have been taught English skills and that they will be taught English skills after they leave my classes. My job is to discover what they have retained, fill in any gaps, and prepare them well for what is ahead. My classes are only fifty minutes long, and I have to accomplish a lot in a little amount of time.

Since we know that our writing method and grammar program play a key role in accomplishing your goals, how do you fit it all in?

I do it by spiraling the language activities in *Fix It!*, *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style™* Second Edition, and my literature selections. What this enables me to do is

multiply the fruit in less time using every minute to its fullest. Even though I teach in a private school, my students' aptitude and exposure to language varies greatly.

Let's start where you start. What do you do first?

I start with *Fix It!* every morning. This approach to grammar instruction changed everything for me. Until I started using it, I was still struggling to make everything fit—even the writing method.

How do you explain our approach to grammar instruction?

The first thing I took advantage of is its ability to capture the students' attention. As they walk in the door, the next little piece of the story focuses them quickly. I think the real magic is that the process gives them the daily practice they need, but the story eliminates the boring experience of rote practice.

Another strength is that the different concepts such as dialogue are taught in context, so the students' comprehension of the rule increases. Rather than trying to apply the rules to arbitrary sentences, the cohesiveness of the sentences help the students understand the "why." When comprehension in context occurs, they connect the rules to when they are constructing the same sentence pattern. The editing process mirrors the writing process.

Another advantage is that *Fix It!* is especially strong in reinforcing common rules by revisiting them often during the year and over the course of each subsequent year. This enables me to track students' growth.

Throughout the year, the procedure is flexible enough to wean the students from finding errors with my guidance to finding the errors independently. I am able to wean them as quickly or as slowly as the class needs and can change it from year to year depending on that particular group of students. In the beginning, I guide the whole class. Then I remove myself and interject only when needed. Next, I have the students begin working in groups, and I check on them to see that they edit everything. By the end of the year, they work individually finding all the errors on their own. While the students work in groups or individually, I look for particular rules that are being broken or not applied and teach a little mini-lesson. My goal is for them to discover as many errors as they can in groups or independently without me hinting before I give them a mini-lesson in it. I have found that regardless of the ability the students had before they came to my class, this process works. It meets the students wherever they are and takes them farther.

How do you connect grammar and composition?

That's easy. The programs do it for me. In *Fix It!*, the students are introduced to the stylistic techniques they will use in their writing. The students are familiar with them long before we begin brainstorming choices to apply them to the writing assignments, but I still use the easy plus one rule (EZ+1) in the writing method. The grammar rules are immediately applied in their writing because they are in the habit of editing, so I don't have the problem of their not using what they know. I no longer need to create arbitrary lessons trying to make clear the connection between grammar and writing.

So, the style in Structure and Style is the bridge between our grammar program and our writing method. What about the structures?

The structures connect composition to literature. I have found that all of the structures address the different types of writing they do when responding to literature. Specifically, the questions in Unit 3: Retelling Narrative Stories and Unit 9: Formal Critique tie writing to reading. As the students' repertoire of questions develop throughout the units over several years, their ability to analyze a story develops.

It took me a little bit of time to customize the writing assignments to the structures and the literature, probably about three to four years. But now grammar, composition, and literature are woven together seamlessly. My students continue to accomplish so much in so little time. However, I know that if the literature I teach changes, I have the skills to adapt.

What advice do you have for middle school teachers just beginning to use Structure and Style or considering our grammar and writing programs?

When I started, I constantly had to remind myself that I don't have to be perfect. I can learn along with the kids. The first year felt awkward and unfamiliar, but practice and experience showed me the process works. Watch Andrew, and imitate him until you find your way. I highly recommend *Models for Imitation: Demonstrations in Structure and Style*. I also used *Speech Boot Camp* and other video courses because I decided it is okay to let Andrew be my substitute teacher sometimes. Plus, he captures the students' attention in new and fresh ways!

Finally, trust the system. There are so many character lessons that I used to manufacture, but this system teaches organically. Years have proven that after the students have my class for two or three years, they can be concise and precise in their word choices. They make deliberate choices in the order that they present their ideas, and they know how to interact with ideas and develop their own opinions. IEW has given me the opportunity to work smarter, not harder — something every teacher deserves.

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