



Mrs. Diane Smith teaches first grade at Coastline Christian Academy in Goleta, California.

CAPTURING THE HEART OF THE MATTER:

One Teacher's Journey from Intimidation to Implementation

by Janet Spitler

In 2017 Deedee Underwood, the principal at Coastline Christian Academy, contacted IEW®. She was finishing up her administrative credential program and needed to make a change that would benefit the whole school as part of her coursework. She decided to improve writing instruction across the grades. After considering her options, she chose IEW. We worked together to create an implementation plan that fit the teachers' needs and the school's budget. Diane Smith, their grade 1 teacher, won our hearts with her enthusiasm and desire to master this approach. She has become Deedee's right hand for all things IEW. Through their leadership, the Structure and Style® Writing Method is now used in nearly every classroom on their campus. I asked for the opportunity to sit down and ask Diane some questions.

How did you learn about IEW?

When I was teaching fourth grade, our grade 5 teacher piloted the program. I became curious when I would hear her talking about it at lunch. The terms she would use were intriguing: not just verbs, but strong verbs, not just adjectives, but quality adjectives. They were familiar ideas expressed in a new way. I wanted to learn more.

I asked Deedee, our principal, about it, and she shared the ten-minute overview with me. Instantly I was sold. I have taught in public and private schools for over thirty years. Since I was not a strong writer, I always felt ill-equipped to help my students in this key skill. So, I never stopped

searching for a way to improve my ability to teach it. In just listening to that overview, I could tell it was going to make a difference because it had all the little pieces, which fit together in the most comprehensive way.

Once you were sold on learning it, what was your first impression of the materials?

Actually I was intimidated by all the pieces. It didn't look like any other curriculum program that I had ever seen before. To be honest, the teacher-training *Seminar Workbook* was information overload. Since I wasn't learning it with a group, I had more freedom in the way I approached it, and I found an order that worked best for me. To begin learning it and teaching it, I relied heavily on the videos where Andrew taught the students. When there was a lesson that taught a new structure or stylistic technique, I would watch it and imitate exactly what he did. I admit I didn't understand why he would do certain things, but the kids responded and engaged in a way I have never seen before. Then I would watch the teacher course to fill in my understanding of how to adapt the lessons to decrease or increase the challenge and most importantly the why of everything. While the *Models for Imitation* gave me the details I needed to teach a lesson, the teacher course *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style®* taught me that what seemed like random little actions were intentional and purposeful.

Would you speak to the statement that our writing methodology is comprehensive and systematic?

Our grade 3 teacher made the comment that she has been teaching many of the

ideas instinctively already. I wholeheartedly agreed! Yet, this system has given me the consistency I expected of myself.

When I think of comprehensive, I think of all the details Andrew teaches. So many programs teach that all you need is a theme so that when you give the student a prompt, you have given them the context they need to write a story. There is nothing about how to actually put a story together or a report or your own thoughts. Andrew doesn't just tell you what to teach; he demonstrates how to teach it.

Another way Andrew has shaped my thinking is that he has a way of turning small, seemingly insignificant truths into profound statements to live by. I must admit I quote him all the time because he so simply but beautifully captures the heart of a matter.

- *Children learn to speak from what they hear.*
- *They will let you know when they are ready to work on their own.*
- *Children want to do what they think they can do and don't want to do what they think they can't do.*
- *When students are having fun, they learn accidentally on purpose.*

I have also appreciated the systematic approach of the method. First, I have a list of concrete skills in both Structure and Style that I teach in a specific order. Second, that order creates a pathway of development so that I always know the next step when my students are ready for it. Third, having concrete skills in a specific order allows to me recognize opportunities throughout the day to inject teaching moments into different subjects. However, I am not alone. My grade 1 students' desire to listen or look for a concept they are learning never stops. One day I learned that the students had complimented the music teacher for using the quality adjective *observant* when she was praising them. Another time one child pointed out that a word he chose for his key word outline (KWO) was the same word he chose as a dress-up. He was right! I love that the process is shaping the way my

students interact with the written word!

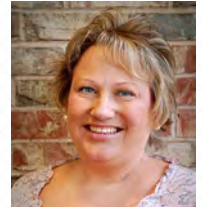
One of my favorite stories is when one of my students shared that he and his little sister were building a fort at home, and it wasn't going well. It just wasn't working. He suddenly realized that they needed a climax and a resolution to make it work! Because he was learning that a story comes together in the climax and resolution, he saw a connection between what he was learning about a story and their effort to build a fort. It is exciting to think about the future connections he will make as he continues to learn and grow as a communicator.

How much are you having to adapt the lessons to accommodate the needs of all your students?

I don't. Well, let me say that that is another joy of this approach to writing. The method itself contains the tools I need to adapt the lesson rather than my having to search for and put together strategies or resources outside the program.

It includes the scaffolding your struggling students need, but it also includes the information the advanced students need to keep moving forward. The students are not aware of where they are on the spectrum. They just know that they can

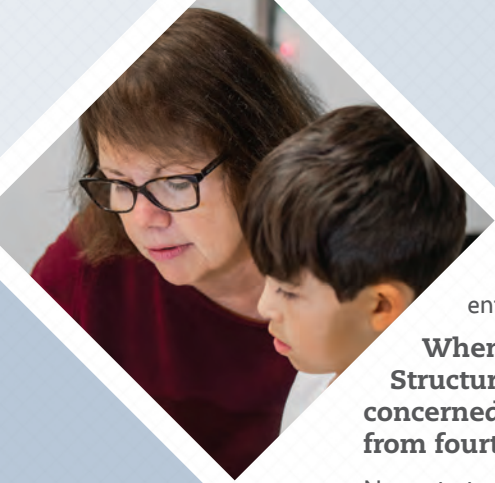
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do what they are being asked to do, and they approach it with enthusiasm and confidence.

When it came to teaching Structure and Style®, were you concerned about making the switch from fourth grade to first grade?

No, not at all. You have to remember that moving to the primary level is like going back home for me because it has been where I have spent the majority of my thirty years of teaching. First grade is my love language. I knew I was going to teach Structure and Style; I just didn't know what it would look like. While I assumed we would use the grammar terms such as verbs and exclamation points, I didn't in my wildest dreams imagine the children or I would use terms like key word outline or climax and resolution. The instructions did, so I did. And the kids use the terms as if they have been a regular part of their vocabulary for years!

Are the first graders engaging in the writing process as well as your fourth graders did?

Oh, yes, in some ways they are responding better. My fourth graders were a little timid at first because they brought to the table what they thought they could or couldn't do based on past experience. They had to work through that as they learned to trust me and the system. The first graders are little sponges because they have no preconceived ideas or bad experiences to overcome.

Since you are talking about the differences, how was your experience with the primary materials?

I admit I love everything about the primary tools. In the *Classroom Supplement and Lesson Plans*, the pacing chart shows me our year in two pages: from which poem we will use to when I will add a sticker to the writing toolbox. The lessons are clearly laid out and easy to follow. The extension activities help me build language skills all day long in every subject.

The posters are central to introducing grammar and vocabulary activities as well as supporting poetry memorization. The illustrations are beautiful. The children feel so grown-up because they are building a portfolio. They have embraced the responsibility of doing their best. Standing the

tri-fold toolbox on their desk, the students use the information as reminders of what they know as they write. It also helps create curiosity about what is to come. I just love how IEW has thought through every detail, and every piece has a purpose.


Because our approach to writing instruction is dependent on demonstrating the process, we have been told that our way takes too much class time. Why do you disagree?

How can you not take the time? Maybe our students aren't writing well because we won't accept that you can't just tell them what the process looks like. You have to show them. If I did everything Andrew told me to do in a lecture and made them work it out individually, these strategies would be as ineffective as everything else on the market is. Demonstrating the lessons was the power behind my learning it and teaching it. I am giving the students skills they will use for the rest of their lives.

Since your school has not been able to utilize our implementation coaches (on-site or any live training), how have you managed your learning journey?

Along with the initial video training, I have listened to just about every podcast that Andrew has published. I also asked my educational consultant lots of questions! The hard part is not getting personal feedback from an experienced teacher while I am teaching and learning. I am always wondering if I am missing something. If someone observed me, she might see something I am missing. However, there are many more resources available that I have yet to explore. The teachers here are a collaborative group, so we help each other learn more. For example, I coach the teachers who are new to Structure and Style, and the younger teachers are guiding us to all the online resources like the Checklist Generator™.

You have told me in the past that the interviews we have published inspired you. How would you want to inspire future readers?

No pressure! Seriously, I want to encourage you to trust the system. Don't dismiss it prematurely because it is worth every bit of the energy and time it takes to learn it. You will capture your students' hearts for language, and they will reap the benefits. 

[The method] includes the scaffolding your struggling students need, but it also includes the information the advanced students need to keep moving forward. The students are not aware of where they are on the spectrum. They just know that they can do what they are being asked to do, and they approach it with enthusiasm and confidence.

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