

Letter to the Editor

Transcript of Podcast Episode 333

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

It is not very often, Andrew, that I get my name in print. I mean, I know that happens to you all the time, but my very first time of seeing my name in a newspaper was when I was ten years old.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you beat me. Congratulations. Was it ice skating related?

Julie Walker: It was ice skating related.

Andrew Pudewa: I had a good guess there.

Julie Walker: So I competed in a contest in Minneapolis, where I was born and raised, called The Silver Skates and the winners of the Silver Skates award ...

Andrew Pudewa: get a date with Hans Brinker.

Julie Walker: No, but we did get a ... I won a pair of skates. And so they wrote up our names in the newspaper. And there was my name saying that I won, but here’s what happened. They took pictures of the boys who won and not of the girls. So, I know, so sad. So this would’ve been over fifty years ago. I’m really dating myself right now. But I wrote a letter to the editor, and I complained about that. I said, “How come you didn’t include the girls’ pictures and just did the boys’ pictures?” And they published it. So that was kind of cool for me.

Andrew Pudewa: They published your letter.

Julie Walker: They published my letter to the editor of the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis.

Andrew Pudewa: The good old days when newspapers existed.

Julie Walker: Exactly. So that actually is our topic today, only something completely different. We’re talking about Letter to the Editor, but not for students to write letters to the editor, though we could do that. They could do that in one of the assignments for the *Structure and Style for Students* because students are invited to write a letter to a business, maybe a restaurant or ... but even a newspaper would ...

Andrew Pudewa: They can write a letter to anything.

Julie Walker: To you. A lot of the kids are writing letters to you.

Andrew Pudewa: It is kind of sad because local newspapers are rare. Even paper magazines are kind of rare. So the opportunity to write a formal letter and get it in print is much less likely than writing some kind of little comment on a YouTube video, which gets buried there with a thousand other comments. And nobody really cares. But you wonder if that desire to be able to say what you want to say to everyone isn't part of what's behind the success of things like Twitter.

Julie Walker: It's true. But now for something completely different because that is not really what we're talking about today. We're talking about the letter that writing teachers give to their students that the students in turn are to give to their editor.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. So it was originally kind of a play on words: here's a letter to your editor. And I think when I first came up with it, maybe people made the connection, but now there's no ... Nobody's aware of this idea of writing a letter to the editor, but we are keeping it alive in this different context. Because it touches on the problem of what is the role of an adult in helping a child become a better writer.

Julie Walker: Right. And so this ties in actually to your talk, "The Four Deadly Errors of Teaching Writing." So for our listeners that are not familiar with that talk at all, we'll put a link in the show notes, but can you summarize that?

Andrew Pudewa: That's a must listen. I mean that is the first thing I recommend to anyone I'm talking to who is wanting to learn about our philosophy and our approach, but the four deadly errors as are expounded upon in that talk: Number one is overcorrecting. Number two is withholding help. And then number three is unclear assignments because it's a form of withholding help.

And number four is over-expectation, but that first one is first because everyone has experience with that: overcorrecting. One of the things I'm trying to do is help mostly parents, who are involved with helping their kids write better, to give the right kind of—I don't know, I'd use the word *feedback*, but I would prefer—*editing help* so that it's beneficial but not burdensome to the student. And to do that, I think they want to understand the basic parameters. And so that's why I created this letter to your editor. So on the first week of a class, I will usually say something like, "Your assignment this week is to hire an editor." And then I give them some suggestions.

It could be mom; it could be dad. It could be an older sibling; it could be a friend. It could be a grandma or someone that is in your world that would be willing to read what you wrote and use their hopefully higher level of grammar and mechanics knowledge to fix anything that is needing to be fixed. But the guideline is don't try to make it good. Don't try to change it to a degree that it isn't what the child did. Make it legal and stop so that there's this kind of minimalist approach to editing. So that's kind of where I'm going with it.

Julie Walker: So one of the things that you said that I think is pretty foundational to what we do here is their first draft or their rough draft. So there's no such thing in IEW as a first and only draft.

Andrew Pudewa: We try to make that very clear in many ways on paper: No erasing; make a mess. Now what do you do with that? You know, often kids will re-handwrite it. And then I'm always saying, "When you re-handwrite it, that's when you would want to use a pencil so that in case you had a transcription error, you could fix that and not have to re-handwrite the whole thing a third time to get it to look pretty."

So really stressing the first time – I don't care what it looks like. I don't want it to look pretty. I would prefer that the student sacrifice a little bit of neatness for speed so they can have a better chance of the hand keeping up with the brain and not worry so much about spelling.

If you can, do it, but don't stress on it. We can fix it later. And then the idea of double spacing so that you can make changes easily, and so your editor can make changes easily. And so it's a mess. Then you can re-handwrite in an erasable way or more likely type that second draft of things, and that seems to work so much better for everyone.

Julie Walker: So you mentioned spelling, and I just want to be sure we're not giving the wrong impression here. If a student is doing their rough draft and they don't know how to spell a word, is it okay for them just to kind of guess?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, *guess* is not a word I would use. And we are not at all promoting the idea of creative spelling so you just guess and then quit and say, "Yeah, I tried." And that's the end of it. No, what I'm usually saying is, as you're writing, if there's someone there to help you, or if you can take the time and try to find out how that word is spelled, do that.

But for young children or for kids for whom attention or time is an issue, it's okay to give it your best shot. Spell it the best you think you can, which is kind of like a guess, but I don't know. I think it's a little better. Give it your best shot, and then we'll fix it later.

So that idea of okay, it's a placeholder. I've even done things in my writing where I'm writing along. And I just at that moment can't quite find the word I want. And so I'll just leave a blank as a placeholder. And then maybe later on, the perfect word or the best word will come to mind. I can stick it in, or I'll go use a thesaurus tool and search it up and figure it out.

So there's that idea of not being attached to doing everything perfectly the first time so that, you know, that first time perfectionism is actually an enemy of good writing because you get very attached to the way you just did it so that you don't have to redo it or admit that there could be a better way, et cetera, et cetera.

And I think that most of us are pretty good at helping students get free of that perfectionism. But there is a kind of unspoken context that can contribute to that, which is you need to get your handwriting and spelling and your grammar and your composition all at once, which is unreasonable in so many cases.

Julie Walker: Exactly. I think of when you were talking about the perfectionist student. It requires a little bit of humility to allow an editor to give comments on your paper. Correct this

spelling. Correct this grammar. So what kind of things are you specifically asking an editor to look for in their writing?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, my basic ... And what I think I say in that letter is again, don't try to make it good; just try to make it legal. So if there is a missing or extra punctuation mark, put it in or take it out. If it's an incomplete sentence, make it into a complete sentence. If there is a totally goofy word that doesn't make sense, just cross it out, and put a word that does make sense.

And do the ... kind of like the minimum marking you can do to make the whole thing basically work. It's grammatically legal, and it pretty much makes sense to the degree we would expect from that age of student. But the thing is, don't try to explain either on paper or with your words, vocally, why you made all those changes.

Julie Walker: I love that line. So you have a specific line that you say to the students: the difference between an editor and your mother ...

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. And I point out: You can hire your mom to be an editor, but there's a couple things you may have to do. And one of them is help her understand the difference. An editor will kind of fix up your paper and make suggestions and hand it back to you with no lecture attached. And of course, a mom wanting to be helpful, wanting to teach, wanting to explain everything, will sometimes kind of set you down and "go over it," which for many kids, especially little boys, is kind of the death knell. Like, no, I do not want to sit here and go over it. A lot of times, well-meaning parents will say things like, "Well, this word doesn't quite work here. Can't you think of a better word?"

And of course, the kid's attitude is, "No. If I could've thought of a better word, I would've thought of a better word. If you don't like the word I picked, don't make me fish around for some other word. Just tell me what you like. Tell me what's better." And so that's part of the whole teaching process, is just this kind of making something correct, making something work is another bit of information.

And I, in the "Four Deadly Errors" talk, I point out that you can bang your head against the wall, trying to explain to a student: A complete sentence is a complete thought. And at the end you have to put an end mark, such as a period, and then the next one starts with a capital. I mean, you can explain that a hundred times and the kid still totally not do that.

But if you simply put on the paper: period, capital, period, capital, period, capital, and then they copy it over: period, capital, period, capital, at some point, whether it's the fifth time or the five hundredth time, you don't know, but at some point the child will make the intuitive leap and say, "Oh, this is one of those places where she's going to make me put a period and a capital." And so we are teaching, then, by what I would call example rather than explanation. And I do believe that in our American mentality, if you will, we default to the explanation first. And that's not necessarily the best way to help someone understand something.

I have experience, of course, living in Japan and understanding kind of a more—I don't know if you call it a Asian or Eastern approach—but a lot of times even in schools in Japan there

wouldn't be these long explanations. There'd just be example. Try it. Another example. Try it. Another example. Try it.

And in a way, that is more effective because the child then intuits the understanding and acquires the explanation internally rather than hearing it from external source again and again. I'm not saying there's no place for explanations, particularly if a student asks why something is the way it is.

Then you bring the explanation, but we don't want to preempt that kind of discovery opportunity by overexplaining or depending on the explanation to solve the problem.

Julie Walker: Right. So I thought in the time that we have left, I would read one of these letters that is included in our *Structure and Style for Students* curriculum. And then maybe you could comment on why you said what you said.

Andrew Pudewa: Sure. And this is the one that I give them probably the second or third lesson, when they are now writing their first key word outline into prose.

Julie Walker: It might be the week after that, that you hand this out. Because their assignment is to first find their editor, and then once they have the editor, you say, now here's a letter to give ...

Andrew Pudewa: a letter to give to the editor. Okay. So I haven't read this in quite a while. So go ahead.

Julie Walker: Here we go. Dear Editor. Oh, at the top there's a place for the writer's name. So the student would write their name on there.

You know, so Noah would write his name on here. Dear Editor, Congratulations on being selected to edit the rough draft of the writing assignment for the writer listed above. Every good writer has an encouraging editor. This student is enrolled in my writing class, using IEW's Structure and Style writing program.

Andrew Pudewa: I think that the point there is to say congratulations on being selected. You know, most kids will default to mom, especially if they're homeschooled, but even so, I'm not assuming that. And the child is making the choice. So I think that's nice.

Julie Walker: This is also very important to have this letter to the editor idea for students in a classroom, because it will make the grading so much easier because you won't have to be looking for hopefully a lot of editing, like grammar and spelling.

Andrew Pudewa: I think so. You know, there's kind of two philosophies of classroom teacher. The one is we're basically afraid that if parents help kids, then those kids will have some kind of unfair advantage, or it's cheating, or they won't be learning, or the parents are doing the work for them.

And so their attitude is “Parents, stay out of it.” And then the other attitude, the one that I espouse is, “No. Teachers – they don’t have the time to do everything for all the kids in their class. Why not harness the available resources of a parent or relative or good friend, and let them carry some of the weight of doing the, you know, individualized feedback that is so time consuming, it prevents a lot of teachers from wanting to do writing at all. So I’m of the second group, which is I have absolutely no problem with parents helping their kids do the things that I’m asking them to do as a teacher.

Julie Walker: And there’s some specific things that ... what you’re asking to do. So let me just read on. Because this is a school paper, it is easy to be confused on the role of an editor. In order not to inadvertently discourage students who are just learning how to write well, this program’s editor job has two main distinctions. And I’ll read those distinctions.

First, the editor’s job is to simply correct grammar and spelling mistakes. You mentioned that. This course requires students to write quickly, hence the possibility of poor handwriting. Additionally, the course requires students to insert specific stylistic techniques, which may at times render a sentence more awkward than is desirable. Upon practice, students will become more eloquent in their writing. For our purposes it is better to undercorrect than overcorrect. So that’s stylistic techniques. Is there a better word than *because*? The student needs to put that *because* in there if they’re learning that technique. So you have to be careful not to edit out what we’re trying to put it in.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Which has happened when the parents really don’t understand the objectives of the program, especially if it’s being taught by a teacher, online class, classroom, something like that. So I mean ideally, all parents would watch the *Overview of Structure and Style*, and they would understand the reasons for introducing, practicing, requiring, and gradually increasing number of stylistic techniques.

Julie Walker: So Andrew’s talking about the two hours (actually a little bit less than two hours) *Structure and Style Overview* video, where Andrew is teaching essentially teachers, and we’ve ... It’s excerpted from the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* 14-hour course. We whittled it down just to a couple hours.

So you can get an overview of our writing method, of our writing system. And I think that that’s a link that we can make available to our listeners of our podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And we are also, of course, encouraging teachers to make that link available to the parents of the students in their class, wherever that is.

Julie Walker: Yep, exactly. Okay. So secondly, and I love this part. An editor should be compensated. You and the student should agree on compensation for your time. Compensation should ideally take approximately the same amount of time as your time editing, usually less than fifteen minutes.

Andrew Pudewa: You would hope so. Depending on the length ...

Julie Walker: It's true. Some ideas are cleaning, pulling weeds, or my personal favorite, a shoulder massage. Well, this idea of being compensated ...

Andrew Pudewa: Right. Well, I think it helps a lot in the formalizing of the relationship. So what I'm trying to do is encourage the editor, especially if it's the mother, to treat it a little bit more like an objective task—little less personal. Don't get, you know, emotionally involved with this. I think about when I write things, and I get them back from one of our editors, I appreciate the objectivity. And I appreciate the fact that there's no lengthy explanations. It's just, you know, here's a suggestion to do this better, or yeah, I flat out missed something that should be there (usually commas) because they're the most confusing for most people. Or I said something in a way that wasn't as clear as I thought.

And the editor is suggesting, what she ... She uses the word *recast* the sentence. So I appreciate that. And I don't feel kind of this weight of I'm wrong, or I failed, or I did a stupid thing again, or a lot of feelings that younger kids can get when there's an emotionally attached correction. Whereas, and I point that out in the "Deadly Errors" talk: Kind of shift the word from *correcting* to *editing*. Correcting implies wrongness; editing implies there's one right way to do something.

In writing there's always many, many right ways to do something, good ways to do something. You're striving to find the best for that purpose. And it shifts that from the mom being kind of like in opposition to the kid, like: "You did this wrong, and you have to redo it" to, "Hey, let me serve you. Let me help you become the best version of yourself on paper here," to steal the words of Matthew Kelly.

So it creates that alliance rather than that opposition. And I have had many, many parents tell me that just listening to that part of that talk was so profoundly helpful in changing the relationship and thus the motivation and the overall environment in which their kids are doing writing.

Julie Walker: What you are describing is my story, Andrew. It's how I came to learn about IEW and love it because I was fighting with my oldest one, who was a good writer. But I, too, am a good writer, and we had arguments about what is and what isn't good writing. And the checklist made it much more objective. And the whole process of editing versus correcting was just very freeing, and he was more inclined to write more frequently because he wasn't getting the lectures or the arguments.

And I was more inclined to, just like you said, give him more writing assignments because it was easy to grade, easy to give him feedback in an objective way. So, oh, let me finish this letter. Okay. Gotta end.

Andrew Pudewa: Everyone wants to know.

Julie Walker: If you choose to accept this task ... I guess they still have an out, huh? I encourage you to relax; enjoy reading what the student has written, and simply mark any obvious errors. Then enjoy your shoulder massage, weeded garden, or cleaned area of the house.

Thank you for your willingness to help young people become better writers. And this is signed, “Warmly, Writing Teacher.” So this isn’t signed by you. This is supposed to be signed by whomever is teaching this class whether in a co-op, whether in a classroom. But the student, then, now is making this more formal.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. And you know, we do hear occasionally of a situation where for one reason or another, usually... I would say most commonly the reason is mom’s first language isn’t English. And so, you know, a mom who gets this and says, I don’t really ... I’m not confident enough in my written English to be sure that that’s right, that that’s good enough.

So you know, in that rare case I will often say: Well, how about dad? How about an older sibling? Or how about a grandparent? Or how about just a friend who is a native speaker and would feel confident? You don’t have to have an English degree.

You don’t have to know a whole lot because we’re looking at a fairly low level, especially in the elementary and middle school grades. Almost anyone who’s kind of been through school with probably a little bit of college or the equivalent would do this okay. And you know, I think we’ve all had the experience of writing something and then just looking around. Usually it’s my wife. You know, in the early days of IEW we didn’t have employees; we didn’t have consultants.

We didn’t have editors. It was me and my brain and whoever’s brain was around that I could opt in for free, which was my wife. And it was funny because I noticed that she wanted to be a mom on me. So she would read my article and make marks. And then she would expect me to listen to her as she explained why she made the marks she made.

And I’m just saying, I don’t need the explanation. Give me the thing, and I will go and decide whether I like your suggestions or not. And I also point out to the kids that you have an editor. And that editor is on your team to help you produce the best version of what you’re doing, but your name is on the paper.

So you are ultimately responsible for the final product. You’re not responsible to have done every single little bit of the whole process alone in isolation, but you are the one who does decide. Do I want to accept that change or not? And you don’t have to accept every change that comes from the editor.

You could challenge it. Well, you could, I mean, a child could actually say, “Why did you change this word? I really like this word.” And then there’d be a conversation, and maybe the child’s explanation of why they like that word is sufficient to let the editor, mom, helper say, “Okay, then I accept that. I agree with you. Leave it.” And so I think it’s good for whoever’s doing the editing to realize that, yes, you’re helping, but the child himself, herself ... It’s their name on it. They get the final say on the changes made. And then that orders all the relationships, I would say, beneficially.

Julie Walker: Well, we will post this letter on the show notes so that our listeners can maybe download a copy of it.

Andrew Pudewa: And you know, it comes in the SSS materials, but it's equally as useful for someone using a theme-based writing lesson book or teaching in a classroom with other source texts or whatever. So yes, let's make it available. And if someone doesn't like this letter, they could copy, paste, and edit the Letter to the Editor so that it was edited in the way that the teacher wants.

Julie Walker: There you go. Sounds great. Well, this has been very helpful, Andrew. Thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: All right. Well, thank you.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: Would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.