

Ask Andrew Anything

Transcript of Podcast Episode 360

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 students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Andrew, Episode 360.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, it’s an even number. It’s more than an even number. It’s a multiple of ten.

Julie Walker: Exactly. And so we have several questions that you have not seen before because this is an Ask Andrew Anything episode.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it would be a rare case where you could come up with a question that I have never heard.

Julie Walker: This is true.

Andrew Pudewa: But I don’t know what’s on your paper over there.

Julie Walker: This is true.

Andrew Pudewa: We’ll go with it.

Julie Walker: And I have to hide ...

Andrew Pudewa: No, I can’t see that far away.

Julie Walker: Andrew and I sit across from each other, and oftentimes he can read upside down. Any good schoolteacher should know how to read upside down.

Andrew Pudewa: At this distance I’d need binoculars.

Julie Walker: Okay. Very good.

Andrew Pudewa: But I can read upside down.

Julie Walker: You can! So Tara asks, how can I use IEW programs to keep an exceptionally bright student engaged and busy?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, for a non-reluctant writer, you don’t have to work so hard on building the process because they get the idea pretty quickly. So you know, you may, depending on the

age of the student, spend less time on the Units 1 and 2; more time perhaps on the creative Units 3, 5, 7; get into the research; move outside the dictated source text for Unit 6; and get into letting them research what they're really interested in.

You know, I don't know boy or girl, age. But Tara, the mom, should be able to say, oh, all right, here's a few subjects that we could learn about that would really pique the interest and creative juices of this child. You know, and for a child who wants to write a book or something, and most kids who want to write a book want to write usually a fantasy novel. That would be about ninety-five percent of the time. Couple times I've met teenagers who want to write a historical fiction, which requires a little more research. You know, using our nine units gives all of the Structure and Style foundation.

And then, you know, the student could perhaps use an opportunity like the Write a Novel in a Month in November, whatever. Contests are very good: essay contests, story writing contests, poetry contests. You know, and then a high aptitude writer generally is also going to be a good reader. So you'd look at maybe some college classes maybe as young as fifteen or sixteen. And you know, our SSS Year 1 Level C is accepted as a college-level grammar and composition course by a couple universities. So we can link, I'm sure, to that information.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: Lots of opportunities. But mainly, you know, if you don't have to deal with the reluctant writer problem, you can graduate from the provided source texts into the areas of greater interest.

Julie Walker: Right. And Tara, I just want to remind you: If you listen to the intro to the podcast and don't skip it, our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials. That whole idea of methods – we have a method of teaching writing that once you know the method, you can use the materials that we provide. Or you can go off the page and as Andrew suggested, maybe find some more interesting things to write about for this highly motivated student. So learn the method with our *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* teacher-training course.

Andrew Pudewa: And then go win some contests.

Julie Walker: And then go win some contests. Absolutely. Let's see. Katrina, she's a schoolteacher. She asks the M question: motivation. How do you motivate the student who doesn't want to follow the key word outline or even copy it correctly when we work together as a class?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you can't really motivate a student externally. All motivation has to be internal. So there are environmental factors that you can create that may stimulate internal motivation, but you can't cheerlead a kid into working harder, honestly. External factors – one would be positive peer pressure, right?

So when kids in the class do what you like and what you think they should be doing, praise that to the high heavens. And when kids don't, ignore them. And then what happens is kids get bored being ignored. And they'll think, well, if I want to get a little attention here, I need to do what other people are doing to get attention.

So that's kind of a subtle but effective technique. Another thing is focus on the one-point improvement. You know, I learned this years ago from Dr. Suzuki: the one-point idea, which is you find one thing about the kid's writing that you really like. And you just say, "Wow, I really like _____." And even if it's "this word you used," right? That's one thing. It's a good word.

Or "What a great sentence!" And ignore everything else. I have said this before, I'm sure, on a podcast. But Plato wrote, you know, "That which is honored is cultivated." So you honor what you want more of in a student writing. You know, the third thing, and this would be kind of descending the level of effective techniques. But that would be using the grading system, which I always recommend would be *A/I*.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: So it's either accomplished, accepted, you're finished. You move on. Or sorry, you're not finished, and I will take extra time to help you complete this assignment the way ... You know, a child never wakes up in the morning and says, how can I irritate the adults in my life? How can I do worse? How can I not make my teacher and my mother happy? They don't think that way. The reason that a child is unmotivated generally has to do with just a lack of either experience or confidence or ability.

So you've got to say, okay, what can we do to build this student's information and experience? And that will build their confidence, and that will help them want to do more. And then hopefully they will.

Julie Walker: Yes. I wanted to just segue briefly on this *A/I* idea because I know a lot of schoolteachers are thinking, I can't do that. I have to give letter grades to these assignments. And I kind of feel like we should devote a whole podcast to this idea of marking and grading, and what does it look like in a classroom.

But I just think: These teachers who are using our system are assigning a lot of work, a lot of writing assignments. And not every one needs a letter grade other than an *A* or an *I*. So it's entirely possible to follow your advice and still be able to come up with a letter grade at the end of the semester.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah you know, I was just talking to the headmaster of a school. And he told me that, very surprisingly and much to his chagrin, many of the teachers believed that they had to put two grades in a grade book (or obviously on an online system), but two grades in every subject every week.

Julie Walker: Oh, my goodness.

Andrew Pudewa: And he didn't know that they believed this. And he said, you don't have to do that. You know, yeah, we have to have grades. You know, we have to be an accredited school and do all that stuff, but you don't have to grade all that work. You can do a lot less. Now, some cases, maybe it makes sense. You've got a Latin quiz every week, or you've got a math test every week. Or I don't know. But with the writing, I would ... And if we do a podcast on grading, I would say in an ideal world ...

Julie Walker: Exactly, yep.

Andrew Pudewa: But if you think of it more like art or music, and you can compare students with themselves, not with each other and say, aha, this is improvement; you get an *A*, then that's encouraging to everyone, whereas if you say, well, your writing compared to someone else's writing – oh, sorry, it's not as good; you can't get an *A*. That's discouraging.

So I mean, it is a whole separate subject. But I do agree; it is difficult. Classroom teachers – if they use this method of trying to help everyone complete every assignment to a hundred percent level, that's hard work. But nobody signed up to be a teacher to have an easy life, right? People who signed up to be teachers signed up to have a hard life. So just do it.

Julie Walker: Okay. Let's see if I can come up with another question that will provide some great insight to our listeners. Here's one from Allison. She asks ... This is more about reading now than writing, and it's a little bit about motivation again. What suggestions would you give to a homeschooling parent whose son does not like to sit down and read? The hypothetical boy is eleven. He can read very well, but he does not enjoy it like his sisters did at his age.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, there are a lot of ways to think about this. One would be environmental. So if you're an eleven-year-old boy, and you have the option to do something other than read with your spare time, the odds are you would either play with Legos or do something with screens, right? Or you'd be outside running around, climbing trees, building forts, whatever.

So if you want to get a kid to read more, you have to create an environment where there's nothing else to do. I think that's why I did reading as a kid. There were no computers; there were no games. There was really nothing to do except look at the bookshelf and pull the encyclopedia off or start again for the third time on *The Hobbit* or whatever.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: So I think one of the hardest things about being a parent or a teacher in a school today is that kids don't want to read because there's so much more readily available, primarily screen-based entertainment. So if you wanted to motivate a kid to read more, you would eliminate screens from their life, which would be impossible.

Or you would simply very, very tightly regulate access to those screens. And one thing is you can never go backwards, right? So once you give a certain level of access to technology, you can't really ever take that away without full-out mutiny, you know, screaming and chaos. So you

know, I advise all parents: be very, very slow and conservative about giving access to technology, especially to boys.

And you know, that's tough because a lot of times, you know, the dad still loves to play video games. So it's like this thing that is normal. Another approach, of course, would be to set up a motivational system. Pizza Hut discovered this a long time ago. You know, read X number of books, and come get a free pizza. Now, I wouldn't recommend anyone eat anything from Pizza Hut from a nutritional standpoint, but I know that certain kids are motivated.

For example, I took one of my grandchildren to a convention in Austin where there was a big waterslide park. Well, he had to earn that through reading a certain number of books. And he's one of these boys who would absolutely be much happier doing anything except reading. But he could read. And he wanted to go with grandpa to the waterslide place on his first convention, right?

So that was a big carrot. And so he worked very hard. He accomplished the reading goal. And of course, the more you do it the easier it gets, and so that's better. His mother wisely also said, you cannot watch the *Lord of the Rings* movies until you read the books first, at which point he was determined to read *Fellowship of the Ring*. And he'd listened to it any number of times. But he launched in.

And you know, he was maybe knocking off two or three pages a day max because it was hard going. It was a little above him, but he was very familiar with everything, having listened to it so many times. And he actually had memorized some of the songs because the audio recording that he was listening to had the actual singing of the song. So when he got to the song part in the book, he was so excited because he had memorized the song part.

Julie Walker: So he didn't actually skip the songs like I did when I read the book?

Andrew Pudewa: No, he was so excited because he had them memorized, and so he could read them easily.

Julie Walker: Nice, nice.

Andrew Pudewa: So you know, there's that.

Julie Walker: Well, and I love that you differentiated right there – the difference between listening and reading a book because listening to a book is easy most of the time. Reading a book is harder. So this eleven-year-old boy, this hypothetical eleven-year-old boy – it's not just the content, but also the act of reading is important.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. The other trick I tried—and I'm not the only parent to have figured this out—is find a really interesting book. Read the first few chapters out loud, and then get “too busy.” And then leave it lying around. And there's a good chance that if it's an interesting enough book, that child will pick it up because he wants to know what's going to happen next. This is actually how my very, very, very dyslexic son read his first book.

It was *The Bark of the Bog Owl* by Jonathan Rogers, which is kind of a rehash of the story of David but in a fantastical (no magic) but kind of a borderline alternate world. And I just read the first few chapters, and then I went away on a business trip. And of course, I said, “Now don’t read it without me.” And that even sparked him even a little bit more. And by the time I got back, he was a couple more chapters into this. And it was huge, slow going for him.

Julie Walker: Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: But he was so interested because the book was well done. So that’s another strategy that can be used.

Julie Walker: Yep. Great. And we do have our recommended reading list on our website that will ...

Andrew Pudewa: “For Boys and Other Children Who Would Rather Be Making Forts All Day.” You know, the last thing I would say to a parent of an eleven-year-old boy is, don’t worry. If a kid doesn’t like to read at eleven, that’s probably more normal or average. And I’ve known lots of kids who didn’t read books when they were ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen. By the time they were fifteen, sixteen, they were voracious readers.

Julie Walker: Well, yes, and I think ... I know that you, of course, read all the time either by ear or by actually picking up a book and reading. My husband and I do as well. And when we were raising our boys, who are all now men, you know, they saw us reading either to each other or to ourselves. And when I go visit them in their homes right now, they’ve got books on their bedstand. They’re reading, and I love that.

So set a good example. Allison, I don’t know how much you’re reading, but that would be a good suggestion too, is to just model that reading is a good thing, enjoyable thing. All right. Angela asks ... Wow, there’s a lot of motivation questions here, Andrew. Maybe it’s this time of year, right?

Andrew Pudewa: I think it is this time of year. People get a little bogged down right before and right after holiday. Sometimes, not right after holidays, but I would say November and March are the tougher months for a lot of people. And I would say all children universally ... It is harder to motivate them now to do anything than it was when we were kids.

Julie Walker: Right? Yep. Yep. So many options to do fun and edutainment-type things where ... Yeah, okay. So Angela actually asked, how can we stay motivated—and I think she’s talking about herself as the teacher—in hard times, in educating our children?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it’s like going to the gym. You know, not every day is your best day. But you go, and you don’t decide whether you feel like doing something or not ...

Julie Walker: Sometimes it’s just show up.

Andrew Pudewa: ... because usually, you know, my attitude is if I feel like going to the gym, I should. If I don't feel like going to the gym, I should, you know. So it's kind of the same thing. Anything you want to do – I don't feel like doing school with kids today. I don't feel like going to work. You know, what do you do? So part of your ability to just keep on keeping on – that's going to transfer to the kids. But on the other hand, part of what demotivates people is feeling overwhelmed.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: So remember when you're homeschooling: If you get just a few good hours, that's fine. You don't have to do, like, a whole school day's worth of 8:30 to 3:30 of academics every day. I mean, no school actually does that because there's, you know, recess. And there's lunch. And there's, you know, logistical time. And there's downtime. And there's, you know ...

Even very effective schools – if you look at the total percentage of time that kids are actually reading, writing, doing math, learning stuff, it is a lot less, you know: anywhere from maybe ten to fifty percent, somewhere in that zone, depending on the teachers in the school and all that. So I think a lot of homeschool parents, especially if you're relatively new – you do have this idea that, oh no, we have to do school at home.

We have to mirror the schedule. We have to have the same level of perceived rigor. And it is okay to just do a couple hours of reading and say, okay, you know what? It's a beautiful afternoon. It's the middle of January, but it's sixty-five degrees. Let's go to the park. And have the freedom to do that. So it's as always: the virtue is in the balance.

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly. So this one has the motivation question in there, but it's more technical in terms of writing. Amanda asks, how do I encourage my kids to add more action?

Andrew Pudewa: Again, it's pretty hard to answer questions when you don't know the age or experience or aptitude or interests of a child. But generally if you say to a child, wouldn't you like to ... (fill in the blank), their response is no. In fact, I often have pointed this out to my wife over the decades. Why do you say, why don't you do something?

Because the kid's response is because I don't want to, because of this impediment, because blah, blah, blah. Never say that; it's the wrong mentality. If you want them to add in more whatever, then just do it. Edit their paper, and make it better. And let them copy it over. And they will get this sense of, oh, that's better. That was cool. That was interesting. But you know, I think we do—and this would get back to this idea of process over product—we've talked about that many times.

However Imperfectly. We get very attached to the product. This is the story the kid wrote. This is not as good or interesting or mature or elaborate or eloquent or whatever as I had wished it would be. Therefore, I have to somehow make this child make this thing better. Don't look at the product. Say, okay, we're done with that.

Now when we do the next thing, how can I infuse some ideas here that may or may not catch. And the result will be ... Possibly, the child will use one of those ideas, put it in this new assignment, and it will be one little notch better or make you a little happier than the previous one. But I think we get very attached as parents and as teachers, too, to the product and thinking somehow if I can make the kid improve the product, he will have learned something. She will have improved, whereas really if you're just cultivating the writer and ignoring the product, you end up with a better product in the end. But it takes a little bit of faith as most things in life do.

Julie Walker: It's true; it's true. And I'm just reminded again that our writing system, our writing program if you want to call it that, does require—shocking—a lot of writing. And so what you write today is going to be improved upon when you write another assignment next week because there's a writing assignment every week in our program.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and you know, it may or may not be improved upon week to week because you know, a child may really like imaginative stuff and do the last assignment of Unit 3 and get really excited about telling the story and being creative and imaginative. And then he goes to Unit 4, and it's something he didn't know anything about. And he's not all that interested.

It was kind of like anything. You don't always get better week after week, right? I don't always push more weight at the gym than I did yesterday or the week before. But you're a little higher and then maybe not. But then you get a little better and then maybe not. But there's that curve that if you look at the average, it's always kind of on the improvement. And this isn't hard because kids are always getting better and smarter and more competent, more able and expanding their vocabulary. And if you're doing it right, they should sense the fact that, wow, what I wrote now is so better than what I wrote six months or a year ago.

Julie Walker: Yeah, sure.

Andrew Pudewa: Don't fall into the trap of comparing everything week to week.

Julie Walker: That's really good advice, Andrew. Thank you. Okay, I have a question from Cindy, also a classroom teacher: how do you manage EZ+1 in a classroom where students move at different paces?

Andrew Pudewa: That is again, echoing the fact that if this is not easy. It is not easy for a teacher with a wide range of aptitudes to do EZ+1. But you didn't sign up for an easy life. You signed up for a very challenging career. And if you don't want it, go find something better to do. But essentially, you know, even if the kids are all born on the same day, and even if they all went through the same grade 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 together, you would still have, because of neurology and home life and environment and everything, different levels of reading, writing, and general aptitude in that area.

So possibly the thing to do is kind of take the group and say, okay, there's this certain number of kids that could go a little faster. Maybe it's one or two or five. And then there's a certain number

of kids that are really kind of struggling with the added complexity. They're complaining about the checklist.

They wish they didn't have to do it. And maybe there's one or two or five or seven. And then there's that kind of group in the middle. And so you know, you can acknowledge this. And then individually or in a small group, say, you know, "Hey, Sally and Joe and Pete, I want to talk to you guys. All right? I'm not going to show this to everybody else, but here's the next technique. You can try it; put it on your checklist. It would be super cool, right?"

Well you know, those three kids are going to be excited, right, because it's the special thing, and they get to try it. And then when they do it, and if you read their paper to the group, which I recommend you do occasionally, you can point out and say, whoa, that's the next technique on the checklist.

Wow. Fantastic. Right? So they're all happy. And then the middle group is hearing that thing that you're going to introduce to them today or next week or whatever. You can also go and go to your lower end, if you will. And take those few kids and say, you know, I think for you guys if this seems a little too hard, it's okay.

Let's just cross off a couple things from this checklist, and don't worry about it. And you tell me when doing these three things is easy or four things or whatever. And then you tell me when you're ready to add on the next thing because I don't want anyone to be overwhelmed. Right? And if you need any help doing these techniques, just come and ask me. I'll give you a few ideas, right?

And that – it gets down to the problem of age segregation in classrooms where we all think that every child should be doing exactly the same thing in exactly the same way because they happen to be approximately the same age. So you know, even if you're in an age-segregated classroom, and you can kind of get back to, I guess, the one-room schoolhouse ideal to some degree: that everybody could be working at a different level at least in the writing business or at three different groupings. Then you can apply this system. But the EZ+1 in a group of twenty some, thirty kids is not easy for the teacher even though it is best for the students.

Julie Walker: It's true. It's very, very true. Francine asked, how do I become more dedicated to reading to my children?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I think you would look at the impediments, right? The reason that someone doesn't do something that they think they should do is because there's some obstacle or impediment or burden. I know a lot of parents have said to me, well, when I try to read to my kids at night, I just get sleepy, and it's so hard.

And this happened to me last night. I was reading to my wife; it was ten o'clock, and I was just falling asleep. And I finished the chapter, and she says, well, read another one. And no, I'm done. Okay. Well, so shift the time where you do that. I know a lot of people and kind of in the Sarah Mackenzie, Pam Barnhill network that are saying, do the reading out loud first thing in the morning.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: Right? Then you're awake; you're alert. You can drink all the coffee you want without it interfering with your, you know, circadian rhythm later in the day. And for a lot of people that's hard. But if you shift over and say, well, this is the most important thing I could get done in a day, okay. Then it becomes the priority. And you just say, okay, the first hour or forty-five minutes or forty minutes or twenty minutes or whatever, that's what we're going to do every day.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: So that would be the best strategy. You know, the other thing is, you know, just move it up on the checklist of important things. If you're uneasy about spending the first forty-five minutes of your day reading to them because there's all these other theoretically more important things to do, well, okay. Do the theoretically more important thing. But move that reading earlier in the day. And you know, worst case scenario – set yourself a goal. And say, okay, when I finish reading this book, my husband has to take me on a date.

Julie Walker: Oh, I like that one a lot. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And then the husband, of course, is always looking for an opportunity to take his wife out.

Julie Walker: Of course he is. Well, and I think kind of one of those lower your expectations. Reading out loud doesn't need to be a big, long, hour chore. It can be fifteen minutes a day. I think Sarah Mackenzie, our friend at Read-Aloud Revival, talks about that fifteen minutes a day. You can get through a lot of content in fifteen minutes a day.

Andrew Pudewa: You can. Yeah. All right. Anything else?

Julie Walker: Okay. I have another schoolteacher. I love that more and more schoolteachers are asking us questions.

Andrew Pudewa: It's so wonderful. And you know, I did a school professional development recently, which I haven't done for quite a while. And it was just so encouraging to my soul to be in a room with twenty really dedicated, focused, caring, excited teachers. And this school, you know ... I think the whole school – they just had this culture of we really care.

And when you have peers that really care, it's easier for you to be a teacher who really cares rather than, you know, you're in a school, and half the teachers just doing time, waiting to escape, retire. They don't care. It's harder to be your best in that environment. So I was just so encouraged by this school. I actually agreed to go back.

Julie Walker: Aha. I saw that on your calendar. Well, Terry – she is getting ready to do Unit 5. And she says, when writing an event description for Unit 5 ... So Unit 5 is our Writing from

Pictures assignment, where they're looking at the picture and seeing what they see in the picture. Her question is, are students allowed to write in the first person?

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. My answer to pretty much any question would be yes. And the reason is on the creative Units 3, 5, and 7, I am really into the “hands on Structure and Style; hands off content.” Now, you might say that writing in the first person is a Structure or Style element, but it's not really on our list of stuff.

So follow the model. Follow the checklist. And within that you can do pretty much anything you want. I like it when kids come up with this idea of writing in first person because it's different. And it's particularly different than, say, Unit 3, where you're kind of retelling maybe a fable or a fairy tale or some story that is kind of ... you kind of feel forced into telling it in third person.

But when a child gets an idea: ooh, “I” could imagine myself in this situation – I just love that. You could even go the opposite way and say, hey, why don't you all try writing in first person for this Unit 5 assignment? So you know, I think the main thing is, especially for Unit 5: Don't stress about doing it a right way. Any way you do it will probably work almost all the time. And even if it doesn't work, somebody's going to learn something, and it doesn't matter because you're going to throw it all in the trash anyway eventually.

Julie Walker: There's our process versus product conversation again. Well, we love your questions, listeners. Please keep sending them in to podcast@iew.com. Truth be told, we did not get to all the questions today, Andrew. But either we'll save it for another episode, or one of our customer service team members will answer this. No question goes unanswered. If you ask a question, we will answer it.

Andrew Pudewa: Even, like, really stupid questions?

Julie Walker: We have answered ... You have answered some really, I'm going to say *interesting* questions.

Andrew Pudewa: There are no stupid questions.

Julie Walker: No stupid questions. So again, thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, these were good ones. 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.