

## From Copywork to Composition Transcript of Episode 391

**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.

**Julie Walker:** So Andrew, I've been looking forward to this podcast because this is based on one of your conference talks.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Oh, so we have to take an hour and shrink it into eighteen and a half minutes.

**Julie Walker:** Well, yes, and I know that may be painful for you, but I never get to go to your conferences anymore, and so I just love hearing you speak at conferences. And so I'll just sit and listen and take notes, and you can give the conference talk. How's that sound?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, I don't have the powerpoint. So maybe I won't remember what I say.

**Julie Walker:** Well, this talk is called *From Copywork to Composition*, and so no, I'm not really just going to sit back. I imagine that I would be a really obnoxious person sitting in your audience because I would want to ask questions, and I get to do that here.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yes. And what's the subtitle?

**Julie Walker:** It's *Learning Writing through Imitation*.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yes, and that's important. Sometimes the subtitle is important because it gives context. And that's really what I'm trying to help people understand is the importance, the value, the necessity of imitation in learning any skill and applying that to the teaching of composition.

**Julie Walker:** Right, so this whole talk—*From Copywork to Composition*—this would be something that I would be curious about sitting in the audience is: when did you come up with these ideas, and why is this important to what it is you do?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well as many of our listeners know, my primary training is in music, so I was a full-time Suzuki violin teacher, and that's really my formal training is in music. And when I saw the Structure and Style program, 32, 33 years ago now...

**Julie Walker:** You must be old.

**Andrew Pudewa:** My initial thought was, well, this is a way to teach writing very similar to the way we would teach music. And the first steps are imitation.

And so from that point as I started to explain it to people, and when I started IEW in 94, 95 and did the Teaching Writing: Structure and Style seminar, I would always make the comparison that if we had taught music the way we've taught writing for the past few decades, it would be kind of like this:

“Okay? Sit down at the piano. I'll teach you the names and the notes and how to push the keys and the pedals and all that. But there is one little rule here. You can't play anything that anyone else ever played. You have to just make it up all on your own. Just be original, be creative.”

What level of musical competence would we get with that teaching method? And pretty much everyone agrees it wouldn't be that great. So what do we do in music? We say, play this. Play it exactly like me. Practice this. And do the next piece and the next piece. And it's very dictated. It's very controlled. And then after months or years, there's that foundation of basic skills.

And then on that we can talk about the creative elements. I. Improvisation or interpretation or composition, but we can't really have creativity without the basic foundation set by imitation. And yes, that's true in music. It's true in art. It's true in sports or dance or really any skill. So that's the core of the idea of this talk is to kind of simultaneously make an apologetic for imitation because it's kind of under attack in the modern world, and how does this apply to the teaching of writing on paper?

**Julie Walker:** I think about our business here and bringing on a new employee probably the first week or so, month or so, maybe even year. That's a lot of what they're doing is just watching what everybody else does and learning from them. And in some ways imitating what they're doing and until they have a real understanding of what it is we do around here, they probably have no business in making solid decisions. Right?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, and certainly people come with levels of experience that may help them be more qualified to do stuff. But yes, we have methods. We have SOPs, standard operating procedures, and we also have culture and that type of thing does need to be kind of absorbed.

But the whole idea of imitation has been very much frowned on in modern progressive education. So we see, oh, probably starting in the late sixties, early seventies, this kind of almost a prioritizing of creativity. If it's creative, it's good. If it's good, it had better be creative. And how dare you delegate exactly what to do because that's not creative. That won't promote creativity. And unfortunately this approach, this philosophy, it's kind of modern, has not served well the students or the schools or the parents or, or anyone in terms of especially this area of writing. And how many people have we met that said, “Man, I wish I had learned this Structure and Style thing when I was in school. I would've done better in college. It would make my life easier.” I even meet people who say, “This is going to help me write now, as a pastor in writing sermons in my ministry, in my work, in my master's program.”

So we all kind of instinctively know that imitation is the best way to learn something, but a lot of us didn't get that in our own experience of growing up and being in schools in the second half of the 20th century or the early part of this century. That makes me feel really old.

**Julie Walker:** So in your talk, I know you, you pit two quotes against each other from two philosophers, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Mike Rowe.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah, Emerson was kind of the prophet of this new way of thinking. And I think he said, “envy is ignorance, imitation is suicide.” So, I mean, that's kind of, wow, what do you even do? Just go out and live in Walden and express yourself to the universe and be fulfilled. And how many people have failed in that regard?

Not to say that Emerson didn't have a lot to contribute, but that particular quote... And I think Mike Rose said, “Innovation without imitation is a waste of time.” And that makes sense. Like why would you try to do something without learning what people had done before and getting good at that? We also like the analogy of cooking, right? We've actually done podcasts on cooking.

**Julie Walker:** Yes, we have.

**Andrew Pudewa:** If you're learning to cook, what's the first thing you need? A recipe and sometimes even a video that will help you do that recipe in the best way. You learn recipe after recipe, and then pretty soon after you've made your whatever you're making your... in my case, like a lamb vindaloo. And you've followed the recipe. Okay, now maybe you can innovate a little bit, try a different amount of something, or add in an ingredient. Or take out an ingredient and experiment. But good heavens, without the starting point what would you do? So that's kind of my basic apologetic is to point out that the idea of imitation has been under attack in modern education. And we can help you reclaim not just common sense, but beyond that, a method of applying imitation in a way that gets you to where you want to go.

**Julie Walker:** Right. Well, I want to have you speak to this myth that somehow we're teaching plagiarism. I once went to, I don't know if I've ever told you this, Andrew, but my husband and I, we went to an art exhibit on forgeries and imitation of paintings. And basically the difference between passing something off as authentic versus just making a copy of it so that you can learn to do it. So I think of your example in your talk of the *Mona Lisa*, how many, they're not forgeries, they're actual work of artists learning how to paint like.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, and that's what DaVinci did to his student. Say here's a painting. Work on learning to copy this painting. He wasn't the only one years ago, I was in St. Petersburg at the Hermitage Museum and there was the Rembrandt Room. It was magnificent experience. They had the original *Prodigal Son* which I think is one of the greatest paintings of all time.

But there was also in the Rembrandt room, a bunch of paintings by Rembrandt's students who he had given masterpieces to work on copying. So all these knockoffs of various Rembrandt paintings were there as well. But no, nobody was trying to foist that off as their their own original work. It's a step in the process.

There's three kinds of plagiarism. There's literal plagiarism where the kid just cuts and pastes from Wikipedia and turns it in and says this is my paper. And no effort in reorganizing or representing or crafting that to a different purpose. And that's usually fairly obvious, and teachers will pick it up.

And of course now there's sophisticated software that teachers can use to determine if there's a high level of word repeat or something. And then flag it as possible plagiarism. So I think one of the great things about our system is it really makes that much more unlikely because after you've been teaching our system, well the checklist is so complicated that even if a kid did cut and paste from Wikipedia, they'd have to go rewrite a bunch of stuff to get in all the dress up openers, topic, clinchers, all

Then of course, there's academic plagiarism, and that has more to do with, "I'm claiming the creation or discovery of an idea when actually someone else did it first." And that's a tough world because everything has to come from. So who actually owns an idea? But, in the academic world, it could be research, it could be a line of thinking, it could be an area of research that was specific to someone else, and then you're using or representing that, but you're not giving them credit.

And that's why today teachers are, I would say, almost overly concerned with citing sources just to help students realize you have to give credit where credit was due. And then the challenge for the student is, well, is it general knowledge or is it specific and need to be cited, or is it some idea I actually think that I thought of? That's happened before. Someone has written something that they thought they thought of, and then it turns out that someone in the past thought the almost exact same, similar thing, but you didn't know that. So that wasn't really plagiarism.

And then there's commercial plagiarism, which is, "I'm going to sell something that someone else created and not give them credit," and that can be criminal. But in terms of teaching, you know, rewriting things like Aesop's fables, or fairy tales or Greek myths. Well, people have been doing that for a couple thousand years, so practicing retelling information, it's not plagiarism at all. It's not even in any of those categories.

**Julie Walker:** Exactly. So Andrew, this idea of writing something. I know you've talked about this before, and I love how you say it, so I'm not even going to attempt to, but let me just feed you where you say, "You have to read something." You have to think of the idea, so I don't do it justice.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I came up with this model after realizing that most people's problem with teaching writing to children is they didn't understand how complex it is. And so thinking about this idea, in order to write something first, there has to be an idea. The idea can pre-exist inside your memory or imagination or outside your memory or imagination. So an example is if I said, "Write about the last trip you took with your family." That's you accessing your memory and imagination. If I said, "Write about the room we're in right now," you could look around and that would be immediate, right? But the idea has to preexist. If there's no idea, there's nothing to write.

So that's the first task. The second thing is that idea can preexist in words, or it can preexist more in sensory impressions. So if I said, "Write about your (well, you don't have one, but) your son's dog," you would have to rely on your visual memory, your auditory memory, your olfactory memory, your tactile and kinesthetic, hopefully not your gustatory memory, but who knows? You would have to rely on that for the information. It wouldn't pre-exist in words very much. I mean, you could tell me the name of the breed, but even the size, you've got to take that and speak it into existence.

Whereas if I said, well, tell me about a story you just heard or tell me about a podcast you just heard, well, that information pre-existed inwards. So to write something, you have to have an idea. It can preexist in the imagination or in an external, immediate way. It can preexist in words or in sensory impressions, but it has to exist.

Then however it exists, you, the writer, have to kind of respeak or speak that idea into existence, and then you have to hear what you said to yourself. And I point this out, a lot of times you will notice that children don't actually hear what they say. They're almost like two separate skills, and you have to practice actually hearing what you're saying to someone, but you have to speak it into existence and hear the words you said.

And for younger children, this is actually easier if they do it verbally. If they actually are using their vocal cords and their ears to do this. As they get older, it happens all internally. But you think, you write an email, you write something to someone, you write a little article, what are you doing? You're basically talking to yourself, figuring out what you're going to say, hearing it internally, and then holding that in your memory long enough to be able to go start getting the words on paper or onto a screen or whatever.

So with children whose memories are not necessarily as developed or matured, sometimes just holding an idea in the memory is hard when you're trying to go get the spelling or, or even how to make the letters information in order to write the first word of the sequence corresponding with the idea. And then you've got to go back to your memory and get the next word and then go get the information to get that and, and you might get three or four words into it and kind of forget the whole idea. And then what do you have to do? Go back to the beginning, find that same idea, speak it into existence, hear it, hold it in your memory, and continue the process. And a lot of people when they hear me kind of explain that they think, "Whoa, that is pretty complex."

**Julie Walker:** It's a wonder we can write it all.

**Andrew Pudewa:** It's a miracle. It's a miracle. And for children who have any kind of challenge, whether it's an auditory processing or maybe a spectrum issue or attention or a dyslexia or dysgraphia where the spelling information is scrambled. Or even just a concentration is being able to attend to one thing for a longer period of time. If kids have any of that going on? Well, it's amplitudes harder.

So how do we break this down? And what we have discovered is that the easiest thing is almost counterintuitive. It's easier to write about something immediate than something in your memory. It's easier to represent information that preexists in words than something that doesn't preexist in words.

So it actually would be easier to read a child in Aesop fable and ask them to retell it on paper than it would be to say, write about the last sports game you played with your friends. That's kinda counterintuitive because one of the things in the "How to Write" books is write what you know. But I would point out the How to Write books are all written for adults.

They're not how to teach a child to do it. It's, oh, you want to write a story, a novel, a book, write what you know. Well that makes sense. But for a child, they don't necessarily know what they know.

That's why we often hear kids say, "Well, I can't think of anything." "But you just told me all this stuff about it." "Yeah, I know, but I don't know what to say."

Yeah, so we've solved the problem. We help everybody. One thing I do want to point out in the title *From Copywork to Composition*. Very often I meet a parent or a teacher who will say, I have this child. Let's say they're 9, 10, 11. That's usually the zone, sometimes older, sometimes younger. And he's really brilliant, and he can tell you all sorts of things. But then when he tries to write it down. He just can't do it. Well, there's that problem that I just explained with getting lost in the process, but there's also the problem of stamina, and I don't think that we've been doing a very good job at just training the muscles of young children for writing.

You know, like anything, you did sports in school. Anybody, if you, if you said, well, I want to go run a 5K race and you haven't done anything like that for a long time or ever, well, you shouldn't just go attempt to do that. You may die. You kill yourself. What would you do? You would run a little bit and then recover, and then do it again and recover, and then do it again.

And it's a little easier. You could add on a little bit more and recover and then do that again until it's easy. And then you could add up, and any human being, unless they have an actual injury or physiological problem, but anyone could, if they did it gradually work up to running five kilometers.

But You couldn't just do it tomorrow morning if you're not ready. And so I think about writing is, these kids, they can't do it because they don't have, in some cases the actual musculature in their body, their hand, their fingers, their arm, their eyeballs to do that.

Then we say, well, you should, well, that just doesn't work.

**Julie Walker:** Well, and you in the *Structure and Style for Students Year 1 Level A* class, and if any of our listeners have watched that course, you know the students probably watch it with them. Maybe what they don't know is you told some of those kids and some of those parents, "Your son needs to be doing some more copywork because he does not have the stamina to keep up with me in doing these keyword outlines."

And they did. And it was a remarkable improvement over the course of that year, among other things.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So many valuable things happen with just straight copywork. Here's some text, whatever you want, a fairy tale, a poem, some scripture, whatever you've got. First of all, it creates attention to detail. Because when you're copying, you're not having to know whether it's a capital or whether there should be a comma or an apostrophe. You're seeing it and you're doing it. And so it's creating this attention to detail that's going to be so important later on. The second thing is, is it's just building the stamina of putting words on paper, and you start with some reasonable number of words that you could accomplish in a reasonable amount of time. The third thing it's doing is it's patterning good language, right? So if it is correct English that you're copying from, as you're kind of running it through your consciousness, out your fingers and onto a paper, you are seeing and possibly reading the correct everything. And that's good modeling. That's imitation.

Maria Montessori knew this a long, long time ago, and yet, in our modern primary grades, it's pretty rare to find a first grade or second grade teacher who would do anything like this

because they've been kind of brainwashed into this whole writing is all about creativity and self-expression. And then the kids, they just don't have the musculature. They just don't have the stamina. And then they hit grade four, grade five, and they just, they can't do it.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So that's why, I'm very often having a conversation saying, well, have you considered just straight copywork? Then one step removed from copying the whole sentence is just copying the three words from each sentence and then launching into unit two of our system.

**Julie Walker:** Well, I want to just go back to unit one just for a second because that is the next step. It's not copying every word; it's just copying a few words. But way at the beginning you talked about speaking the words into existence. And that's a big part of unit one, is they're taking that keyword outline now and reconstructing those sentences out loud.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Exactly. So they're hearing what they were thinking, and they're going to have a better chance of writing it at that point.

**Julie Walker:** Then we could probably spend, oh, I don't know, 14, 15 hours talking about all the different units and all the different

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, that would be our TWSS course.

**Julie Walker:** Exactly. And of course that does get us all the way up to multiple paragraph compositions. Sure. So copywork to composition. It's a natural process.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And we've kind of having to skip a lot of the middle of this talk, but one of the things that I discovered is that in addition to using models and checklists, which is a form of imitation— here's the number of paragraphs, here's what each paragraph does here's the stylistic techniques. That's all there.

You can even go past that into the idea of I would imitate an author. I kind of stumbled into this by accident one year. I had done a session a long, long time ago. We even made a video a long time ago. We've since replaced it with better stuff, but it was called *Power Tips for Planning and Writing a College Level Paper*. And the idea here was when you go to college, don't try to write well; just try to figure out what the professor thinks is good and imitate that.

We know there've been actual studies done where the same paper was given to different professors and it received very different grades Thus proving that grading is quite subjective in the mind of college professors.

So if you want to get the better grade, don't try to do what you think is good writing. Try to figure out what the professor thinks would be good and imitate his or her style. That's kind of a difficult thing to do because you've got to find something that that professor wrote and then have tools to analyze it, and that's pretty sophisticated. So it wouldn't be a starting point to teach the skill, especially to younger people. So I thought what you would do is take things that are more different than professor's writing, such as different authors.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So the first time I tried it, I got a little piece by Mark Twain. It was just a little piece from Tom Sawyer. And then I got a little piece by James Finn Garner. He wrote the Politically Correct Fairy Tales series. It was very different. And I think the third

one I chose was a little piece by Hans Christian Anderson, which also is very distinctive in many ways. I took those pieces and I said, okay, what makes Twain sound like Twain? What makes Garner sound like Garner? What makes Hans Christian Anderson sound like Anderson? And we made a checklist specific to those things. I said, no, don't worry about dress ups and openers, or topic/clincher. Don't even think about any of that stuff. Just try to write something in imitation. Of one of these authors and whatcha going to write about, well, here's a couple Aesop fables, pick your favorite and then you do that.

**Julie Walker:** And we do do that in our Structure and Style.

**Andrew Pudewa:** We've done it ever since because it works so well.

**Julie Walker:** The kids love it.

**Andrew Pudewa:** The kids loved it. And I thought once you can imitate things that are very different, then you could imitate things that are less different and maybe get to the point where you could take three different college professors' writing and figure out what are the factors that make those different.

The thing I finish up with in the talk, kind of fun. This girl came up to me, she had just started college and she said, She didn't really know anything about what we do. Okay. She just knew that I was like the writing guy. And so she said, so, I'm in college now and I want to major in English and get a Master's in creative writing. I want to be an author. I just love writing and that's what I really want to do. What advice do you have for me?

And I thought, man, I would never want to do that. Okay. What advice would I give myself if I wanted to be her? And I thought, well, I would make a list of my ten favorite authors. Things I've read and I loved, and I would go to the first one on the list and I would try to figure out what does that author do that makes that author sound like that author?

And then I would just try to write stuff in imitation of that author until I thought I was getting pretty good at sounding like that author. Then I would go to the next author on the list and figure out that, and then try to imitate that author until I thought I could do it pretty well. And I would go to the next. And I would go through ten great authors until I could imitate all of them. And then I would try to do something unique or original. And she just looked at me mouth open, wide-eyed. And then when I finished talking, she said, "That is exactly the opposite of what my teachers in college say, which is, don't ever imitate anyone. And I realized right there.

That's a complete different way of thinking about acquiring a skill, and I'm pretty convinced my advice is better than all the advice she's getting in school.

**Julie Walker:** Well, and there's precedence for that, Andrew, as you, we talked about, the great artists, the great musicians, they all learn by imitation.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah. Sculptors. Athletes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So anyway, that's the preview of the whole talk.

**Julie Walker:** Right, and we will put a link in the show notes for the complete Talk listeners, so if you want to hear the whole talk, you can enjoy it yet again. So thank you, Andrew.



**Andrew Pudewa:** My pleasure. 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](http://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.