

## Episode 416: A Tribute to Dr. James B. Webster Transcript

**Andrew Pudewa:** Anyone who's benefited from IEW in any way has a debt of gratitude to Dr. James Webster.

**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:** Well, Andrew, on January 12th, 2024, we lost a legend.

**Andrew Pudewa:** We did. Yes. James Burton Webster, PhD.

**Julie Walker:** Yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Died at the age of 96.

**Julie Walker:** 96, yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And, to the best of my knowledge, with very little decline in the end

**Julie Walker:** Right, because you just saw him a few months ago.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I visited him in October before that January, and he was living at home. He was actually studying the Knights of the Round Table, and he had acquired somehow a round table and little figurines for each of the knights. It's a very beautiful little set.

**Julie Walker:** So Arthurian legend, Knights of the Round Table, oh I love that.

**Andrew Pudewa:** and then he had got Sir Thomas Mallory and a few other books, and he was trying to come up with something he was going to write about the Knights of the Round Table. and I never really got clear on what his goal was, but I knew he was frustrated with certain aspects of the legends. As an historian would be frustrated with differing accounts and that's the job is to sort through and find the most accurate, honest, truthful, honest.

Though most of us think of him as the founder of the Structure and Style® in Composition way of teaching writing, he was first and foremost an historian.

**Julie Walker:** Yes, I have in front of me his obituary that we'll of course link to in the show notes, and it mentions almost in passing this idea of he was the author of *Blended Structure and Style in Composition*, but then it goes on to talk about his distinguished career as a university professor and his fame in West African history.

And it's almost like, although we know that, we know that's a part of our story here at IEW, that doesn't seem to be the thing that we remember him for mostly.

**Andrew Pudewa:** No, I think I bought one of his history textbooks just out of curiosity.

**Julie Walker:** Sure.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And I slogged through a little bit of it, didn't find it terribly engaging, mostly because I had no background or real interest in the subject. But he was considered one of the world experts in the pre-colonial oral tradition of West African history.

And of course he lived in Malawi and Nigeria and taught a few different places, uh, for many years. And part of the thing I enjoyed, of course, were the stories that he would tell about his life in Africa and the kinds of, the way his family lived and his kids grew up there and the relationships and the people. And it would have made a good movie.

**Julie Walker:** Sure. I seem to recall one of the stories, and if you, if you recall this as well, Andrew, I'd love for you to tell it. Something about elephants. And I'm not talking about there are two kinds of elephants.

**Andrew Pudewa:** No, I don't remember any story. More he liked to talk about the hippos

**Julie Walker:** Oh, okay. Maybe it was the hippos.

**Andrew Pudewa:** They would just come, like, up on the grass in his backyard and, he would just sit out there and watch hippos in his backyard, and then they would go down to the river and go away. And, of course, we, we generally think of hippos as being dangerous

**Julie Walker:** Yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** They are almost solid muscle, if you look at it. But like everything, I think he said, live and let live. If you don't pester a hippo, it won't pester you. And he inspired me on many times to imagine traveling to these places in Africa, you know, to see what he'd seen and visit. But of course, you know, that was decades before.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I met Dr. Webster in 1990 when I was working at a small school in Montana. And one of the teachers at this school was Canadian and she convinced the school to send all of us the whole faculty. It was a very small school, so there weren't more than I don't know eight or nine of us, I think and my wife was would have been about seven months pregnant I think. And she was working for the school also, so we went up there and he was, I just calculated, the same age then when I first met him, that I am right now, so that's kind of a feeling of wow, life, life goes by,

**Julie Walker:** Yes it does. Yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** The way that course was set up, it was an eleven-day course and there was an A group and a B group and the A group was primarily working on the primary grades, right? First, second grade, reading and writing, blended sound sight program, mostly Mrs.

Ingham and Shirley. And then Dr. Webster, and he had an assistant at the time, they were working on mostly on the writing program.

So when you signed up, you could sign up for either the A or the B. And so my wife said, well, I'll do the A because I've got little kids, and I'll probably be teaching younger children.

And so I went with the B. And I remember he started his first lecture and my impression was he doesn't seem very happy about anything. He's just one of those people who smiles very rarely, and I guess I kind of made it a personal challenge to get him to smile. I've always had this belief that if you smile at someone enough, they will eventually smile back at you, no

matter how hard they try not to. And so it was drinking from a fire hose. And in that, the way that he used to do it in Girouard is he would teach the Unit one and two, note taking, using keywords from every sentence in the source text. And he used these “Tip Stories” that were about a monkey that his children had as a pet and they were somewhat fictionalized, I'm sure, but it was the story about this monkey that they had as a pet or just a hanger-around-er in their childhood when he was in Africa.

**Julie Walker:** It would be like us having a squirrel that visited our backyard, only in this case, because he's in Africa, it wouldn't be a squirrel. It would be a monkey.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I never really was clear what kind of monkey this was, but these “Tip Stories” he had written, and so we use these for the Unit 2. But then he would teach the entire stylistic techniques list all in one session. So you had to then your very first assignment, rewrite this “Tip Story” and fit in all six dress ups, all six openers, one decoration, and one triple extension in the very first assignment.

**Julie Walker:** Wow.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And I found it. you know, very interesting as an exercise, even overwhelming as it was, this kind of thing immediately appealed to me. And then through the rest of the two week period, we would get some lectures from Mrs. Ingham, and then more lectures from Webster, and then there was time to make materials.

**Julie Walker:** You said this whole course was eleven days

**Andrew Pudewa:** Eleven Days, yeah, eleven days. So, it was basically five days, and then a weekend off, and then four days plus travel.

**Julie Walker:** I see. Got it. Nine days of instruction. Oh my goodness.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And even so, you felt like that was more than you could absorb. And they did the Blended Sound Sight bus tour, at the end. This is one of the, the evening festivities where they would have the whole of Sound City on this big, big display and go into the gymnasium there at the Alberta Vocational Center. It was kind of like a college campus,

**Julie Walker:** I've actually been there.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Oh, that's right, you have. So you remember

**Julie Walker:** It's very, very, very far north.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Very far north.

**Julie Walker:** the sun bounced, it did not actually set while I was there.

**Andrew Pudewa:** the mosquitos are, are large, and the rooms were dorm rooms.

**And** they would have the big, big, big bus tour and he would be the narrator of the bus tour. So my impression was, wow, that's a marvelous thing they're doing. I learned a lot, came back. taught for a year using what I could of what I had learned of the Structure and Style. There wasn't a lot of well-organized material. Actually, there were no well-organized materials. In those days, there was the book, which wasn't even in the edition that we have now. It was kind of rudimentary. The source texts were kind of in the book, but kind of not.

There were a few mini books that he had made, and that was it. And so I somehow managed to stumble through that first year, but got really good results. I was impressed with the kids' writing. The kids were impressed with the kids' writing. The parents and other teachers were impressed. And so I thought, I really didn't know what I'm doing, but it worked. There must be more to learn. So I actually applied to go a second year and do the same course again. I think there were some other people that said they had come more than once, so it wasn't an entirely radical idea. And this time I went alone, left my wife with a baby and a couple little kids. And that's where I got a chance to talk with him a lot more one on one. I think the group B group was a little smaller. And I really worked on my papers because part of the deal was you had to write a paper for every single unit. And you had to do it basically overnight. And then he would mark every one of these things.

So my goal was to, of course, get 100%.

**Julie Walker:** Sure.

**Andrew Pudewa:** But I didn't necessarily do that. And he would, you know, be sufficiently gruff.

**Julie Walker:** Yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So I came back that second year and we had changed our situation. I was no longer working for the school, but I started teaching writing classes to my two oldest kids and their friends. And that was working really well. And I just thought, wow, this is, this thing is powerful. And I also remember, because of my background in Suzuki Method, realizing what he had created was essentially a Suzuki Method for teaching English composition. And I was very interested in how to apply Suzuki Method in other areas because Dr. Suzuki had always said it's not just about music, it's about everything. So I went up a third year, and when I told them I wanted to come, they basically said, well, if you're going to come, you might as well help us run this thing. So you can be one of our team. And, we'll pay you room and board.

So I went up a third year, and that's when I started to actually give some of the lectures.

**Julie Walker:** Oh, nice.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And I remember the first lecture I gave, I was very nervous. I'd done public speaking and teaching parent groups, so I wasn't uncomfortable. I was just nervous because he was sitting in the back, I won't use the word frowning, but certainly thinking, maybe?

**Julie Walker:** Do you recall what unit you taught?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yes, there's an irony to this. It was Unit 5.

**Julie Walker:** Oh my word, I thought you were going to say that.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Which always is my least favorite unit, and I don't know, like all mentors, he had an intuition about me, and I noticed this. Like Suzuki would say things talking to me as though he just knew me better than anyone and Glenn Doman was kind of like that. He just had this insight, and Webster was like that. He had this insight into my soul. So anyway, I did

Unit 5, I did it by the book, and we used the same picture that we used in the TWSS today, which is the

**Julie Walker:** Chicken and the hose.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Chicken pecking the hose, bird pecking the hose. And, you know, he gave me some very good critique points, very gentle, I don't remember what specifically.

**Julie Walker:** So Andrew, you mentioned Dr. Webster just now, of course, you mentioned Dr. Suzuki, and you mentioned Glenn Doman. And also we've had conversations in the past about your mentors and Anna Ingham would be one of them.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Mrs. Ingham, yeah, yeah, it's, it's really something I encourage young people is, you know, if you find a person like that, who's willing to invest in you and who you just feel like believes in you and sees you. Just take that and be blessed and learn as much as you can. I don't remember how many years total I went.

It had to have been at least nine or ten. Over that time, I started to have a genuine friendship. We would stay talking until later at night, and he kind of disproved the idea that if you smoke a lot, you're destined to die young, because he smoked a lot almost his whole life and still lived to 96. He hit the genetic jackpot.

**Julie Walker:** I was just going to say he picked the right parents.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And Mrs. Ingham lived past 100. His mother lived to 100. His grandfather lived up into that. So it's the family thing. They were teachers and they were long liv-ers

**Julie Walker:** Well, teachers, I'm looking at his obituary, and I don't think I realized how much of his life was dedicated to teaching. He taught at the elementary level for five years, secondary for six, and as a university professor for thirty-one years, twelve of them in Africa, and of course, we know that he also continued to teach by doing private tutoring for Chinese students that were in that area.

**Andrew Pudewa:** After he had retired from Dalhousie. Yeah, he was a consummate teacher. One of the stories that I used to really enjoy, get him to talk about, and many times I would say, You know, tell me more about that or I'd try to revisit his one room schoolhouse days.

**Julie Walker:** Oh yes,

**Andrew Pudewa:** Because I find this just so interesting. So he was born in 1927, and so he would have been in his late teens in 1944. He would have been 17. Now that was the middle of World War II, and Canada had, of course, joined England and was completely committed to the war. And so there was a shortage of men and a shortage of teachers, in Canada at that time. So he was living in Saskatchewan and he was drafted, I guess, by the state ministry of education or the school board of somewhere and said, we need you to go teach in this village out in rural Saskatchewan. And he was only 17. And he said, well, I'm only 17, because he was very tall. And I think he had, he had kind of done study at home for a couple of years of high school.

So, I guess technically he was homeschooled for a short time.

**Julie Walker:** Dr. Webster was homeschooled? What?

**Andrew Pudewa:** You know, in those days they just called it

**Julie Walker:** independent study

**Andrew Pudewa:** or distance education.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So, the guy basically said, Well, I'm just gonna put that you're 18 because we need you to do this. And so he went, and he took a six-week teacher training course over the summer. And then he started at the age of 18 or just under because his birthday is October, so he would have been almost 18. And he walked into this one room schoolhouse in this village in Saskatchewan. There were 40 some students, high 40s.

**Julie Walker:** Mm hmm.

**Andrew Pudewa:** A good number of the younger ones were European refugees who had fled Europe or escaped the war, and so they didn't really even speak English all that well, and it was a one room schoolhouse. So the youngest kids were grade one, and the oldest kid was one single girl in grade ten, who was almost as old as he was, and forty some of them with, get this: no electricity and no running water

**Julie Walker:** in northern Saskatchewan. in

**Andrew Pudewa:** Saskatchewan. So he would tell stories about when it was winter and it was dark, the kids couldn't see to read. He would stand by the window and read to them by moonlight or candlelight until it was light enough in the room for them to do their schoolwork.

The families would rotate hosting him. So he didn't even have his own place to live. He would be six weeks in one house, six weeks in a cot, in the back room of some other house, six weeks in, he said literally in a barn, but it did have a stove. The families would take turns sending food, and then the kids would have to make a wood fire in the stove in the schoolroom in the morning, and then they would heat the food, and they would all eat it.

And stories of older kids helping younger kids, and just the community aspect of it, and everybody knew what to do. And he did that for two years. And then the war was over. And so then they said, the authorities, whoever they are, Well, you, you're not actually qualified to be a teacher. You need to go to college. You need to go to the university.

**Julie Walker:** So I wonder if that year was included in this little biography of his life, it doesn't sound like it is.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I don't know. I'm not sure. We'd have to do some research and math to figure that out and maybe talk to one of the family members. But he he told me and that what really stuck with me said that that was one of the easiest. I think he said it was the easiest teaching job I ever had because everybody knew what to do and nobody pestered me,

So, you know, if a 7th grade kid had a problem, the natural thing to do would be to go to an older student in the room. And if, you know, if a grade 3 kid had a problem, he'd go to a grade 5 or 6 kid and get help with it, whatever it was. And the oldest girl was pretty much as smart as he was, so she was almost like the co-teacher, only she had to also do the 10th grade schoolwork.

And he said that was, it was pretty easy because everybody knew what to do. There were lots of things they could do together. The students would overhear each other's lessons, and there were no behavior problems and if someone had a problem, they helped each other. Then he went to the university for two years, got a teaching certificate or credential and then he taught grade 5 in Vancouver.

And he said that was the worst teaching job.

**Julie Walker:** Okay.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Because there's all these kids, they're the same age, if one of them has a problem, they all have a problem, and none of them can help each other at all. And so he told me a little bit about how he tried to institute this system of having kids in charge.

So that if you were doing your writing and you had a question or a problem or you finished your paper, the first thing you'd do would take it to another student who was appointed by him, and if that student couldn't help you, you'd go to another student, and if that student couldn't help you, then and only then would you pester the teacher.

So he tried to kind of recreate a hierarchy that was natural to a mixed-age one-room schoolhouse in an age-segregated classroom in Vancouver, and he confessed it didn't work as well. And I have a large pile of notes that I took from a long couple days conversation that we had where I went through each year of his life and where he was teaching and what he was teaching and what were the best things. He loved music. And drama and basketball. He was tall.

**Julie Walker:** Okay. And

**Andrew Pudewa:** So he would always do plays, and he was always get the kids playing music. He really valued music and drama as being vital to the well being of a class of children. And I think that carried over. At Girouard we would have these little skits, and of course we had the big Blended Sound-Sight thing, the bus tour, and there were always these ways to...

He really reflected Mrs. Ingham's mirth. Mrs. Ingham was pretty much always smiling, always laughing, always had this happy thing to share. And Webster's pretty much always pretty crabby, but in a way like the moon, he reflected her sunlight, and it came through, his mirth. I think of all things, he had, and this is what Suzuki had as well, he just had this faith in people, faith in me, faith in other people who came. And yeah, he'd complain about someone being stupid like we all do. But in particular, he believed that every child could learn to write well, that there was no reason that every child couldn't become good. Some might become better. But everyone could be good, and that's, I think, what drove him to take all of the ideas.

I actually have a story collected up for almost every single unit, like how Unit 3 came from, Mrs. Ingham's Story Sequence Chart she showed him on a, on a napkin at dinner at Thanksgiving. How Unit 4 came from having the need to get kids to write about stuff to learn it.

One funny story—It was high school, and he was teaching, but he was the youngest teacher in the school, and the province instituted the sex ed curriculum. And of course this is

conservative Canada 50s, nobody wants to talk about this. And so all the older teachers said, well, you're young, and you're a boy, you go teach the sex ed to everybody.

Well he didn't want to do it either, but what he discovered is that he could simply have them summarize from the textbook and then he could read their paper and discover if they had understood what the textbook was telling them correctly. And if not, he could just change the paper and edit it for them and hand it back and have them copy it over.

So that they didn't actually have to use any of the words that would have made everyone very uncomfortable in those days.

**Julie Walker:** So he just taught a Unit 4 and the students applied it and learned.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Unit 5 was comic books. Kids were smuggling in comic books, and so he had to confiscate the comic books. And one day he thought, if they like these things, why not have them write about it? So he cut the comic books and pasted the papers onto a cardboard and said, here, write a story about this and came up with this idea that three paragraphs was a good length because it mirrored the science experiment format.

He actually kind of developed Unit 6 when he was teaching in the university because in those days, libraries would have very large collections of encyclopedias. And so he would teach them how to go to one encyclopedia, like the Encyclopedia of Africa, and find something, and go to another encyclopedia, like the Catholic Encyclopedia was a huge, massive world history level thing at the time.

And how to use two or three or more encyclopedias to fuse together information to write about something.

Unit 7, of course, the creative writing. He called it creative writing. And he was very good at that. He was very imaginative in many ways. And he grew up writing the formal essays. And so that's what they were going to do. And he didn't really, I think, realize the power of what he was doing until he went to Africa and stayed there and taught there for 12 years. Was it 12 or 16?

**Julie Walker:** Well it says here that part of his time, 12 of those were, yeah, 31 years teaching at the collegiate level, 12 in Africa.

**Andrew Pudewa:** he may, that may have been part, I think he went back for some more years in Africa. But, it wasn't until he came back from Africa and started teaching at Dalhousie where he discovered, well, these students just don't have the writing skills that they should have as upper level kind of almost Ivy League qualified Dalhousie students. So that's when he started to integrate all of the writing ideas that he had come up with over the years and used in Africa at the university level.

And then Mrs. Ingham, uh, began teaching the Blended SoundSight. Actually, she began teaching the Blended Sound Sight courses while he was still in Africa. So he would come back for the summers and help her with these courses and that would have been in the 70s.

**Julie Walker:** So they both had a program. Hers was called Blended Sound Sight Program of Learning. His, he must have borrowed from her title Blended Sound.



**Andrew Pudewa:** *Blended Structure and Style in Composition*. Yeah, so the blended idea. And so he was helping her, and then I guess he started teaching and putting all these handouts into a book, and that became the first version of the book, and then other people contributed, and then I came along and I asked him, I said, Well, you know, I think I could teach this in the States, particularly in the homeschool world, which where I was living at the time.

Do you mind? And he said, no, of course not. You know, it's whatever you can do, go do it. And so he had the attitude, I think, that I have had, which is, you know, freely have I been given, freely must I give. That doesn't always work on a business model where you're trying to, you know, expand your reach.

And one of the sad things I would say is that as Mrs. Ingham aged, and Shirley aged, and Burton aged, and the whole team, it shrank every year. And at its largest, you know, whole school districts would insist that all new hires would go take the summer course. And I think the last time I was there, I don't know, there probably weren't more than 40, 50 people.

**Julie Walker:** I was at the very last one in 2007.

**Andrew Pudewa:** You were at the last one?

**Julie Walker:** yeah, they tried to do it again, but just didn't have the staff or the interest.,

**Andrew Pudewa:** They weren't marketers. They were just

**Julie Walker:** They were just teachers, yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And there was this big shift to around the time that computers became available and people had their own printers, they were still telling everybody to stay up all night and make stuff with poster board and construction paper and felt pens and yardsticks. And the newer wave of teachers did not like that level of personal effort required.

**Julie Walker:** Yes, but the heart and soul of Dr. Webster and Mrs. Ingham and that legacy truly was whatever we can do to help you become successful teachers. That's really what they wanted.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, and I brought him down for what I call a Writing Educator Symposium. The first one was in Tacoma, Seattle, I think that was '04.

**Julie Walker:** That was before I started working for you, so yeah, it would have been right about that time.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And I have pictures of that time, and I posted on Facebook a picture of him teaching at that event. And I realized that he would have been 80 years old at that event, close to it, maybe 81. And he looked so good, and he was so sharp, and he could teach all day. And I guess I wasn't as aware of what happens to a lot of people around 80 years old because it wasn't particularly spectacular to me that he was doing this. In retrospect it is. What was spectacular was Mrs. Ingham, who is 15 years older than he is that came down at 90 something to teach with us.

**And then** then we did another one in San Diego in 2007,

**Julie Walker:** And then one more in 2012 in North Carolina.

**Andrew Pudewa:** In North Carolina, that's right. Oh, I remember that. That was a long flight.

Yeah, I think that was the last time he came to the States. I went on a trip with him to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, one time. He used to love, in the winter, as a lot of Canadians, who have the means, he liked to go down to Mexico for a few weeks, so I flew down and hang out with him for three or four days and experienced his Puerto Vallarta life there. I just look back and all of the conversations, the things I was able to remember or write down, and all the things that I don't remember and write down, in addition, of course, to all of the phenomenal knowledge of the system that he had created, that I continued to grow and expand.

And we worked on a lot of projects together, the Bible-Based Writing lesson book. He was part of that. Deep into a poetry. Spelling. Of course, we did the spelling together in 99. He flew down to Montana. We recorded that in a basement studio somewhere. And so it's a great pleasure to be able to reminisce. It's a great privilege to have had a friend, and hopefully he is able to see even more powerfully the extent of his contribution to me and through me to you and your family and all of our families and all of the families that now know. Anyone who's benefited from IEW in any way has a debt of gratitude to Dr. James Webster.

**Julie Walker:** Can I read the last couple sentences from his obituary?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Please do.

**Julie Walker:** “A prolific author and one of the architects of blended site method of learning. Burton continued to publish in his retirement. May Burton rest in eternal peace, his legacy enduring through the minds of the countless individuals he inspired and the positive changes he brought to the realms of academia and those he loved. He will be greatly missed.”

**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.