

Episode 418: Preparing for Unit 8

Transcript

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, this month is April, which means if you're following the one a month schedule, we are in Unit 8.

Andrew Pudewa: That's good timing.

Julie Walker: Yes, so what I love about Unit 8 is this model, this essay model, is so flexible. You can do so much with this. I used this in my master's program for multiple papers. I taught this to my children, to the students I taught, of how to do various essays, argumentative essays, persuasive essay models, but we start with the basic essay model after completing all the units leading up to it. Which is why I think this model is so important to talk about, because I think people forget there's an end to keyword outline, telling it back, representing in Unit 2. We get all the way to Unit 8, and wow, that's where the magic really begins.

Andrew Pudewa: That is because if you look at how the units are divided, the odd numbered units—3, 5, 7—are on the narrative, creative, inventive side. And then units 4 and 6 are on the report, research-based collect up information presented side. And these really do come together in unit eight where you can approach it, let's collect up some facts and force ourself to have an opinion about these facts.

Or, oh, we have an opinion about something. Let's collect up information to support that opinion. So that's probably the biggest difference. Some people have asked me, what's the difference between a report and an essay? And I would differentiate and say, well, A report is pretty much limiting yourself to the facts that you find, hopefully from reliable sources, and are transmitted without a loss or degradation of accuracy.

But in Unit 8, you have to have some sort of added ideas, some commentary, some content, some opinion. In fact, I think that's pretty much the definition of an essay—is a short written composition generally expressing the ideas, beliefs, or opinion of the writer.

So this is where the two tracks come together. I would say this is kind of the climax of the nine units. And then we get into Unit 9 and that is maybe a little bit of denouement, a little after the climax content, but this is an objective. This is a worthy skill to have had a little experience with, if not actually a lot, because wherever you go, these structural ideas from the essay models are going to serve you well.

Julie Walker: Right. And of course, we are talking to you, our listeners, about the Teaching Writing: Structure and Style® teacher training course that goes through the nine structural models, as well as the many stylistic techniques that make up the structure and style syllabus. So Unit 8, we're quite a ways into this.

And typically at IEW, we don't necessarily recommend that students do Unit 8 assignments until they're about maybe fourth or fifth grade. So those younger students are probably not ready for this level of complexity.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and it all depends on the student and what's their level of experience, but if it's their first or second year, and they're 9, 10 years old, I think we generally say, make it through Unit 7 and then be good for the year. Take a little break and come back.

And of course the great thing about the nine units and going through them each year is that every time you hit that unit it kind of reminds you, Oh, I remember doing this a year ago, this writing from pictures business or this multiple reference fused outline thing. And so we really have all the building blocks in place. And so hopefully when they hit Unit 8, whether it is. At the end of the first year, almost the end of the first year in middle or high school, or if it's after a year or two of working up through Unit 7 and now this next year hitting Unit 8, 9, doing the whole enchilada, so to speak, they're prepared. They're well prepared with all of the skills and the facility with the basic structural ideas, top of clincher paragraph. Introduction, conclusion, and then you can, then you can refine it. You can, of course, expand the essay in various different ways. You can have different purposes, as you mentioned, descriptive versus expository, versus—I guess descriptive and expository are kind of the same, but—argumentative, persuasive, and then of various lengths.

One thing we should mention, because there are many people who have heard this idea and maybe even some of our listeners who are kind of afraid of this idea, and that is that five paragraph essays are a bad thing. And many years ago, I think at least ten years ago now, there was a very long 2,000 word blog post that was written, if memory serves, by the Chicago Teacher of the Year, Chicago Public Schools Middle School Teacher of the Year.

And the title of this blog post was something like, If you are teaching or writing five paragraph essays, stop it now. And he had, um, a very extensive argument as to why five paragraph essays were so awful and that you should never do them. His points were that they are formulaic and therefore, predictable, and therefore, boring.

They are, by their nature, redundant, and therefore, boring. They are not used in the real world, and then that's what teachers teach students, and that's the only thing students do, and it becomes this kind of cliched crutch, and then they go off to college, and the only thing they know how to do is write a five-paragraph essay. And this is all horrible, therefore, you should not do it. And there's a couple ironic things about this. In his 2000 word blog post, he used a very, very formulaic Aristotelian rhetoric-based model. I suppose, to kind of prove that you could write something with structure, and not a five-paragraph essay.

The irony is that the five paragraph essay came from the Aristotelian rhetoric model, and it's just in its simplest, easiest form for young children to figure out how to do it. The other thing about his article was he didn't actually suggest what you should do if you don't do a five paragraph essay. Well, so, that isn't terribly helpful.

I mean, you can go tell people what they shouldn't do all day, but if you don't give them some useful suggestions, what good is your diatribe? So I'm glad that I found that and that I read it and that I can counter it because I know I've talked to kids who went off to college and they got some professor or teacher who said, "If you turn in a five paragraph essay in this class, it's an automatic F. I don't want to see it. I hate that kind of thing." Okay, well, in that class, don't

do it. But that doesn't mean it isn't a useful thing to have learned in the past because it helps you understand a structure. If you don't understand a structure, how are you going to ever intuit new structures? How are you going to have variations on structure? How are you going to come up with organized writing? That's a rarity, though. I think these days, most high school and college teachers are pretty happy if they get students who can really string together five paragraphs that are in some way cohesive, connected, and organized. But I'm sure there's a wide, wide opinion about five-paragraph essays.

Webster obviously had no problem with it. And I will say, I dispute the premise that it is not used in the real world because I have seen it used in academic writing. In fact, I remember very precisely one of my daughter's commencement address when she graduated from the university, and I sat through the university commencement ceremony, which I try to avoid, and I hope I never have to do it again, but the speaker was someone I knew, and so I was rather excited to see what he would have to say.

And he used a very, very clear Super duper essay model. His subject was divided into three sections, and each section or area had three topics. And he had introductory and conclusion for each of those three areas, and a super intro and a super conclusion. I was mentally mapping this speech in my mind, and I thought, well, this guy is a widely published, highly regarded author, speaking at a commencement address for a well regarded university, using, basically, Webster's super duper essay model. So, yeah, it is useful. It is used in the real world.

We might make one, one distinction here, and that is the difference between a speech and an essay. In a speech, let's put it this way, in an article, in a composition, in an essay that you read. You can look at it, and in just a couple seconds, know how long it's going to be. And then you set yourself to read something that long, mentally. You also can kind of scan and see what are the topics that are going to be addressed in this article, which is what's recommended by Mortimer Adler in *How to Read a Book* is that you scan what you're going to read before you actually read it. So you have kind of a mental roadmap.

So in writing you can't really do that, which is why the introduction with the topics is so much more valuable than the listener can make the mental roadmap. So I would argue that you may or may not like a five paragraph essay as a turn in composition, hang on the wall and say, look at what I did, but to learn the structure is going to help you tremendously if you find yourself doing oral presentations or public speaking or speeches of that nature.

Julie Walker: Right. I'm wondering how many of our listeners who are new to our program had any concept of what you were talking about when you said super duper essay.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, part of what we do in this podcast is we just tease people with cool stuff so they want to learn more.

Julie Walker: So could you please just kind of break it down the basic essay and then some of the expanded models?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, sure. The variation. So the basic essay, five paragraphs, introduction, three topics, conclusion. And of course, in our teaching methodology, we require, if possible, strongly encourage, if we can't require, students to write the body paragraphs first, the conclusion next, and the introduction last. And I have well more than a decade of teaching

kids to do this. And, they pretty much all will agree, yep, that's a better way to do it. You get a better introduction because you know what you're introducing, it helps you avoid writer's block with the blank paper and, or the blank screen in most cases, and I don't know what to say first.

And so, Don't worry about what to say first, get your body paragraph meet, organized and written, and then you'll know, more likely, how to introduce that stuff. Now, that's good for 5 paragraphs, and of course, depending on the length of your paragraph, it could be good for anywhere 400 to 800 words or so, maybe a thousand, but who really likes reading 250 word paragraphs? I don't know.

But what if you need something a little longer? Okay. Well then, you move into the expanded essay. Where you now would have four or possibly five topics, four or five body paragraphs. That's also going to beef up your introduction and conclusion because you have to state those four or five topics in both places.

So that is going to get you up to on the low end 500 words for six or seven paragraphs, and on the high end, maybe a thousand to twelve hundred words. And so that's a comfortable range, and so you can flex it. Now, if you need longer than that, you can't just keep doing the add-a-topic trick, because you can't really—introduction, eight topics, conclusion. Nobody can keep all that stuff straight in their mind, which is of course why longer articles have sections or they have chapters or something like that.

One trick that works pretty well and sometimes it's perfectly appropriate because there are some topics where there's a lot of information, a lot of which seems interesting, important or relevant— So you can take one topic and break it into two paragraphs or what we call sub topics. So you might then have one topic. Let's say you're writing about a famous person and you have his, his childhood and, and education. That's kind of one topic, but you could divide it into childhood home life. and childhood education.

And that would kind of fit well. So it would be one topic, but you'd have a subtopic. And then you could find some other things that could be divided into subtopics. So you could theoretically have four or five topics, all broken into two paragraphs with subtopic. And so that would get you up to around 12 paragraphs, and that would still be manageable.

But if you're going for that level or longer, then you almost are forced into the super essay, where you basically have two complete essays, and a super introduction, and a super conclusion. Then each of those complete essays could be as simple as a five paragrapher, Introduction, Topic, Topic, Topic, Conclusion, New Essay, Introduction, Topic, Topic, Topic, Conclusion, or you could use an expanded essay, or expanded essay with subtopics, but you would have two complete essays.

Now this works ideally for subjects that kind of have two sides. So if you're writing an argumentative essay and you want to present both sides of an argument, then the super essay works very well. Lots of things divide into two parts quite easily. Wars, right? The causes of the war, the consequences of the war, the land battles, the sea battles, the brilliant generals, the not-so-brilliant generals, the weaponry at the beginning of the war, the weaponry at the end of the war; things change.

So, that would be a convenient way to deal with something in a bigger composition and still have excellent structures. And of course you're following it down so that each sub-introduction and sub-conclusion contains the attention-getting device, background information, listing the topics, and then the conclusion, restating the topics and saying of all there, what's the most important thing.

And then you just do that twice. So that would be the Super Essay Model, which at its shortest would have to be 5 plus 5 plus 1 plus 1–12 paragraphs. And in its longest iteration, you could probably get yourself up to 26 paragraphs, using the expanded essay with expanded topics, but let us think, God forbid, you should have to do something even longer than that.

Then you would go to the super duper essay, which Webster never made the distinction. He called him both super essays, but I thought, well, it's better to have a name that's different if it's a different model, which it kind of is. And of course, super duper sounds fun for kids, so I don't know that anybody actually ever called it this, except for me.

But this is where you would have three complete essays. So you would take your big subject, whatever it is. Divide it into three areas, and then each area would have its own introduction, body paragraphs, conclusion. So on the low end, you'd have 5, 10, 15, plus introduction, conclusion, 17 paragraphs. That would be the minimum for a super duper essay. And then of course, if you pulled the expanded essay with expanded topics, you could get yourself up to 38 paragraphs, I believe. And that would be a pretty big, monstrous thing to take off.

Julie Walker: One of the things that I want to comment on, you have to tell the last essay model.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, the behemoth essay. Yeah, this is definitely one that I coined just because I happen to like the word *behemoth*. But what if you really had to do a 20 page paper? What if you needed, what's that going to be, about 5,000 words? And there are many schools, and even some homeschoolers I know, and they'll make their kids do like a junior thesis of 10 pages, and a senior thesis of 20 pages.

Well then, you would go for three complete papers. So that would hit you at 5, 10, 15, 16, 17 on the one essay, 17 more on the other. And then you would have 34 plus a super duper intro and a super duper conclusion. You'd be at 36 paragraphs minimum, and if you needed to bump it up from there to get to your 5,000 word nut or whatever you're shooting for, you could do that.

So the great thing though, and what I hope all of our students get from however far they get into this, is that they internalize a sense of structure here. And then when they go take a class from someone else or go off to college or get a job and have to write something, they will be able to adjust a structure for a target length because that's really what it's about I would say in the “real world” is how long is this thing supposed to be? And then what's a structure that matches this?

And I have gone out on a little bit of an edge. I've actually had some people irritated that I said this. I like to point it out and whether you agree with it or not, or you think it's crazy religious idea of a religious fanatic. But if you look at natural creation, right, and you can just accept the fact that there is order and intelligence behind creation, you don't have to be a

religious person, but there is order in creation. And so if we look at it, it's really all a structure within a structure within a structure within a structure from the biggest we can see, like galactic structure and solar system structure to the tiniest we can see, which would be atomic structure with subatomic particles. And that's all we can see. It may go on past that into the invisible to us right now, but part of the cosmic creation. But it's all like that. So you have atomic structure within a molecular structure, within a cellular structure, within an organism structure, within an ecosystem, within a planetary, and that's the way creation is.

So when we write like that, and we have sentence structures within paragraph structures, within essay structures, within super duper essay structures, we're actually writing in a way that imitates the mind of God, if you will.

Julie Walker: I think we all crave order. I have a pretty messy desk right now. I'm spinning a few plates as usual, but I look forward to my Friday afternoons where I clean off my desk so that when I come in on Monday morning, it's a fresh start and I feel like I can tackle it.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, just, just so our listeners do not get an incorrect mental image, your desk comparatively is really not ever very messy.

Julie Walker: Well compared to yours Andrew it is messy because you are...

Andrew Pudewa: Oh no. I just hide my effluvia.

Julie Walker: Well, I want to talk about just my own personal story about this. What I love is these structures are based on the paragraph model, but we often don't get assignments in college. Like my MBA program, we never said, write this number of paragraphs. It was always number of words or number of pages, right?

And so you teach how to convert that into paragraphs, and we'll put a little link to an image in our show notes so that you can see that formula. But I applied that formula to a paper that I was writing, and it turned out I got to do a super essay. So I am excited because I have a lot to say about this topic. Well, I started planning it out, and I kind of used a Unit 6 model, fusing information, along with a Unit 4 where I didn't fuse information and I kind of put it together and I started. And I started writing and writing, and I'm writing, and I realized that I underestimated the word count per paragraph that is my average. And I went way over, and I had to figure out how to cut content, which is a lot easier, honestly, than trying to add more content without having to go back to research, but Dr. Passwater was happy that I was able to cut enough content so that he could wrangle that paper and give me an A.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm sure did get an A on every paper you wrote. But I would say that trick of being able to translate—most college assignments are number of pages. So you've got to be able to translate the number of pages into the number of words. And then you have to translate the number of words into the number of paragraphs. And then, once you know how many paragraphs you want. You just make a little skeleton and start collecting up the information and hang the meat on the bones and then pretty soon you just start writing sentences.

Julie Walker: meat, and in my case, a lot of fat, too, that I was able to trim off. So, yeah, so flexible. Like I said, I love this model. I'm glad for our, probably about fifth grade is when our curriculum starts introducing the Unit 8 models. We get more into the persuasive and some of these other models higher into high school.

And of course, I would be remiss if I did not mention one of our newest courses, *University-Ready Writing*, where it is preparing students for university level writing. And we definitely camp on the we don't call it unit eight in that course, because *University-Ready Writing* does not require any prior knowledge of our structural models or our stylistic techniques, but it does spend quite a bit of time unpacking and talking about what we would call a unit eight assignments that a lot of essay writing, that's what you're doing in college.

Andrew Pudewa: One of the challenges that most teachers have when they hit Unit 7, 5 paragraphs or Unit 8, 5 plus paragraphs is how to add enough content to the introduction and the conclusion to frame it well. One of Webster's kind of ideals—and this is not an absolute rule, but it is kind of an ideal in his mind—is that in your writing, your paragraphs should be approximately the same length.

Julie Walker: I heard that from my university professors as well.

Andrew Pudewa: And so, unfortunately, what can happen, especially in the beginning of a book, Unit 7 or 8 with the five paragraphs is they get these three big, beautiful body paragraphs with research, and it's all great. And then they just don't know how to do an introduction and conclusion. That's more than just a short little grocery list of the topics in the body.

And that's why I believe for teachers, the *Seminar Workbook* is a phenomenally valuable resource because we have curated essay examples that do, I believe, a good job of showing how you beef up the background information, how you use various attention getters. How you can, rather than just listing three topics, make a sentence about each of those topics.

And then in the conclusion, of course, the goal is to add in what you think about all that information. That's where you articulate your opinion, and we, of course, help students start learning to do that by saying, of all that you said, what's the most significant thing? And why? So if you study our Unit 8 in the TWSS, or if you watch me teach it on the SSS, or if you read theme-based writing books that have Unit 8s in them, that's the challenge.

And I think the best way to learn how to teach it better is by examples. Another source we should recommend to people totally free is the *Magnum Opus Magazine* because in the *Magnum Opus*, it's all student writing, but it's pretty competitive because we only put the best samples we've got in the magazine and they are organized by unit. So if you're teaching through our syllabus and you really would like to have a good Unit 5 sample, you can use the Unit 5 from the *Magnum Opus*. If you want a Unit 8 sample with good introduction and conclusion, you can go straight to that in the *Magnum Opus Magazine*. And we have all the back issues available online. So, I often reflect on the way Webster did teacher training. He didn't spend a lot of time explaining how to do stuff outside of the context of reading and commenting on samples. And teaching by example, using samples, reading together, having a conversation about that sample—really, that's the best way to model the trickier part here of the introductions and conclusions.

Julie Walker: Well, we have to have restrictions on our writing so that we don't go too long and probably on our podcast as well.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, constraint always helps with creativity. But I think of all the units and all of the student samples that we collected for the *Seminar Workbook*, I thought the Unit

8 examples at the various levels from the little Caroline and her captivating cartoons, grade 5 all the way up through upper high school, were well done by the students and very useful for us now and for future teachers.

Julie Walker: Well, listeners, good luck with Unit 8. I hope you have a super duper resourceful and excellent week as you consider going deeper and knowing that they're going to take this skill that you're teaching them off into college and into. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: 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.