

Episode 422: Preparing for Unit 9

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: Whew, Andrew, we made it.

Andrew Pudewa: To what?

Julie Walker: To Unit 9

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, that's right. We're talking about Unit 9.

Julie Walker: We are. So, it's the end of the school year almost. Things are just wrapping up and we've got one more unit we would really like to have our teachers and teaching parents introduce to their students. But the good news, it's a lot of review.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, yes, I always look at Unit 9 as kind of the denouement of the nine units, with the climax being at Unit 8, and then Unit 9, you can kind of just relax a little bit. You're free of topic clinchers in the Unit 9 critique model. You can revisit some old stories if you want to, or pull out some new ones.

And it's one of those things that I would consider not the most important of the units, but certainly something that a lot of kids enjoy. And it points toward that higher level of response literature and literary analysis that a lot of people seem concerned with.

Julie Walker: Well, yes. A lot of English teachers, that was their background. They were trained in literature, and they want to start writing about literature. And we do, that's, that's what Unit 9 is, the formal critique, mostly about stories, although you have a model in our seminar workbook on doing a nonfiction critique.

So let's just start from the beginning. Without spending too much time, I love the way the units are ordered and that they make sense. They're building upon each other. So can you just speak to that?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and there's a variety baked into the system. So as I've said, I don't know that when Webster designed this thing, he actually knew how brilliant it was. And sometimes we do that. We come up with ideas and then years later we think, well, that was really good.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: And so with Unit 1 and 2, we are teaching people how to use keyword outlines basically. It can be a fiction thing like an Aesop fable, or a nonfiction thing about an interesting animal, blue ringed octopus or something weird. Unit 3, we are then retelling narrative stories. So we're in this world of fiction and storytelling and narrative sequence. And within that world, the kids can be creative; they can have elaborations or variations on stories.

Unit 4, we're back in the world of facts, collect up, organize and present. You can't just make up stuff willy-nilly like you could elaborate in a story. So, right there you see the contrast and the brilliance of the program because some kids really like the “make it all up and play with it” and be imaginative, and other kids are much safer not having to make stuff up and play with it and be imaginative. They would rather just do it. Tell you the facts and be done with it.

Unit 5, of course, is now there's no story, but there's a set of pictures and a methodology of thinking about those pictures, so using the litany of questions to come up with the content, and that's on the creative imaginative side.

But then you're in Unit 6, which is multiple reference summaries, research. And so now you're back in that discipline.

Unit 7, inventive writing, the blank page, the prompt, the write about whatever. That tends to be for a lot of people the objective, like we want our kids to be able to write about anything. And of course, we know that if you start the school year by saying here, write about this or that from your memory or imagination, some kids can, but a lot of kids are kind of dead in the water. “I don't know what to write. I can't think of anything.” But if you hit that unit seven in the spring, and now you've been through, especially units three and five, this process of invention. is not so overwhelming for most kids,

Julie Walker: Right. And in Unit 7 is where we introduce the introduction and conclusion paragraph.

Andrew Pudewa: Which then prepares us for Unit 8, which is really the blending together of collect up, organize, present facts, and tell what you think about those facts, what's your opinion or analysis. And we've talked about different ways to approach Unit 8 and the variations on the Unit 8 models.

Andrew Pudewa: So in Unit 9, you're coming back onto the fiction side, but you're keeping with the Unit 8 idea of tell what you think about something. So the basic Unit 9 is, first paragraph is background information. That's sometimes hard for people because—what's the background information? And we have some very good examples in the Seminar Workbook, some excellent examples in *The Magnum Opus Magazine* that contains student samples of Unit 9. All the theme-based books have the sample compositions, we call them exemplars.

They're not written by students, but they are written by teachers and adults to show here's how this would look in a pretty sophisticated or perfected form.

Julie Walker: Well, and I want to insert really quickly here, not all of our theme based books go all the way up to Units 8 and 9. Some of them stop at Unit 7

Andrew Pudewa: Right, the level A books, we stop at Unit 7, B and C of course go to unit 9. And so the first paragraph of the five-paragraph critique model is background information. And the best way to beef that up is give a little biographical information about the author. Now, some authors are pretty thin, like who knows what about Aesop.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: But others like Dickens, there are many aspects that you could add in. And so we, even in some of the theme-based books will provide some historical context there. You can also talk about the condition of the world when that story or article, or book, or poem, or whatever, was written. And then we have the body paragraphs, which really are the story sequence chart, at least in the fiction critique model.

Julie Walker: From Unit 3.

Andrew Pudewa: And so that's a good review. And the kids are, oh, okay, characters and setting, okay, problem development, okay, climax, resolution. You write it a little bit differently because rather than telling the story, you're telling about the story. But it is possible to use a Unit 3 assignment, tweak it a little bit, and make that the body paragraph of Unit 7 [9], if you wanted to do that.

The fifth paragraph of the Unit 9 is really where the students are going to say what did they like or dislike, what was well done or not well done, what was enjoyable or not enjoyable, what was meaningful or not meaningful in that story. And so here we see again sometimes, the kids have trouble coming up with that, but it's pretty easy to say, well, what did you like or not like? And start right there.

One of the things that I've noticed about Structure and Style[®] students is that as they work through the first year, and particularly the second year of using the style checklist. They will become, in a positive way, more critical about the things they read. And they will notice, well, does this author use a variety of strong verbs and quality adjectives? So they can comment on the vocabulary that's in the story. Does this author use a variety of sentence openers? And they can comment on the effect of the variety of sentence patterns. Does this author use any literary devices that we would find in our decorations and triples? So, as students become very familiar with the style checklist, They become more able to write a critique that would include a commentary on the author's style.

Also, one of the great tools, I see you just turned to it in the Seminar Workbook.

Julie Walker: Yes, yes.

Andrew Pudewa: The critique thesaurus.

Julie Walker: And before you explain what that is, I want you to tell the story about your daughter wanting to see a movie.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, yeah, yeah, that's an old story because that happened. This was actually one of the very first writing classes I ever taught to anyone, and it was my two oldest girls and a bunch of their friends, and they were all 9, 10, 11 years old. And so she had learned the Structure and Style writing system and all that.

And then we had gone to see this movie, *The Rocketeer*, and it was a pretty wholesome adventure movie at the time, and she really wanted to go see this movie again, and I was not particularly inclined to make that happen. But I thought, well, maybe we can milk this for a little effort. And I said, okay, well, if you would write a 5-paragraph critique according to this model, good enough for me to put in my newsletter—because I just started doing these newsletters, and I was trying to include a student writing sample in each of these newsletters.

Julie Walker: The beginning of the *Magnum Opus Magazine*, Andrew!

Andrew Pudewa: It was way back when the whole of IEW was me, myself, and I, and a little help from my family. So anyway, she wrote this thing and gave it to me and I was, I was very impressed with the quality of the writing. In particular, the vocabulary, and I'm reading it, and I'm thinking, how does she even know these words?

And then, I, and this happened actually sometime later, when I was teaching at TWSS, showing the critique vocabulary, and I kind of noticed, oh, that word in her critique of *The Rocketeer*, that came from this list. Well, that word also came from this list. And that word came from this list. And all of these words she had used that I thought were kind of above her general vocabulary level at 11 years old, 12 maybe by that time,

Julie Walker: I'm going to read.

Andrew Pudewa: where did they come from?

Julie Walker: I'm going to read. This is actually, if you have the *Seminar Workbook*, listener, you can find this on page 152. I'm just going to read the opening paragraph.

Andrew Pudewa: It's one of the few student samples that made it from the earliest days into this updated TWSS2 version. Go ahead.

Julie Walker: “The Rocketeer is one of the top. 10 full length motion pictures released in the summer of 1991. Because of the few moderately violent scenes it contains, this movie is rated PG and is not recommended for children under the age of 7. Bill Campbell, who plays the part of the Rocketeer, does an excellent job portraying a spunky air pilot in the late 1930s.

The soundtrack was captivating. Buena Vista's special effects were superb.” And then it goes, she goes on to now.

Andrew Pudewa: And so that's the background information, and yeah, I didn't even edit that thing. I mean, she actually wrote it that way, and I was almost skeptical if she really wrote it, because it just seemed too good.

Julie Walker: The critique, critique thesaurus, just turn back two pages on page 150. It gives you words that you can use for the characters. Were they flat, round? Literature teachers, I know you're excited about that. We included that. Static, dynamic, were their types adventurous, tragic, comic, bumbling, retiring? This is such a great list for any writer to be able to pull from, and I like how you say, goes in the brain, down your arm. How do you say that, Andrew? When it becomes a part of who you are, when you start using word lists.

Andrew Pudewa: Right, well, you put it into your mind, and then you have access. So it, okay, I know what you're saying. So I would say whenever you have word lists available, whether it's on a piece of paper or on the wall, the word hops off the list into your eyes, into your brain, and out your fingers, and you can write something that you wouldn't have been able to write if you didn't have the list, but by coming off the list and through your brain and into your paper a few times, what happens? It gets stuck there. It gets built in.

And I think this was part of when I really started to see very, very clearly that a student can't really think a thought they don't have the words to think it in. So they might know words like exciting or interesting or funny or enjoyable, but that only gets you so far in an analysis experience. So I think this is one of the brilliant things that Webster came up with. I don't know if he just sat down and hammered it out one day, or if it was kind of the culmination of years of experience and other teachers input, but I have found again and again that this, as well as other word lists like kids get in our *Word Write Now* book, or in the resources that we make available with the courses that you're just really building vocabulary in the best possible way. And this would be a vocabulary that allows for this objectivity, this analysis, this critical thinking in the positive way, the critique idea. So, that's the Unit 9 five paragraph model.

I had the problem, though, of someone saying, but what if you want to write a critique of a nonfiction book.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: Now, in some cases, that might work because a nonfiction book, if it's well done and engaging, could have characters and setting, a problem to be solved, a climax and a resolution. But not all nonfiction books do that in that way. If you have kind of a biography, there may be a central problem that you could build that around. I'm thinking maybe the Wright brothers and flying, but in a biography you've got the life of someone. And so what I did was I said, well, let's keep the first and last paragraph, the background information about the book and the author and the time and all that. Let's keep the last paragraph, which is a critique of what was good or bad, what was liked or not liked, what was effective or ineffective about the whole book. But let's use the Unit 8 three topics idea. So, what were the three most significant events in this person's life that you gained from reading that

biography? And I would say that's the most common use of the nonfiction would be a biography. But you could also have a history of a war or you could even have a commentary on nutrition or something. And you would, it would be a great exercise for the student to say, okay, of all this information, what are the three most valuable topics to share with the reader?

Julie Walker: Right. And you said at the beginning, when you do a Unit 9, you don't have to do a topic clincher model for your paragraphs, but with a nonfiction, you would want to.

Andrew Pudewa: We do. Yes, we do. And so that's kind of a difference. And the reason is in the fiction critique model. It is the narrative. So you're going through time. I mean, a skilled student could make a topic-clincher work. I've seen that done, but it's not on the checklist. It's not a requirement.

Whereas when we go to the nonfiction, we really are more in the world of the essay and the topic-clincher works better and makes a lot more sense. So the nonfiction critique model is really just an essay about a nonfiction book, but we threw it in there so that you could see the similarities and use it in that way.

Julie Walker: Yeah, absolutely. It would work great if a college professor assigns a summary of this book. There's your five paragraph model to do a summary of a nonfiction book on, perhaps, nutrition, as you suggested.

Andrew Pudewa: A lot of people are still hung up with "Oh no, five paragraph models are archaic, they're formulaic, they are a crutch, they don't allow for whatever." But we've not found that. I have never ever heard a story of a student who learned doing Unit 8 and 9 with five-paragraph models. And then grew up and went to college and wrote a paper and got a bad score because of the way they wrote. Most kids by that time are smart enough to figure out, okay, well, how long does the professor want this thing to be? And how do I adjust a structure accordingly? And of course, we even have a system to help with that idea of translating number of words or number of pages into number of paragraphs, and adjusting. Most college teachers, even if they get a five paragraph format, generally they're grateful that it has an organization at all.

Julie Walker: Yes. Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: Compared to the average student who kind of just meanders around.

Julie Walker: Trying to get the word count to meet the criteria. Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: So I really don't think it's a concern that learning a five paragraph model is going to handicap anyone anytime. It's a tool in a toolbox and you don't use every tool for every job, but once you know how to use that tool, then it helps you learn to use other tools more skillfully.

Okay. So some of our other tools then that we attached onto Unit 9. This is new. This is the result of what I learned in my experience of working with teachers and schools and parents

and needs from the kind of beginning of the TWSS to the point where we redid this in 2015. And that was the response to literature element, as well as the literary analysis essay.

So really, if we talk about Unit 9, now we're talking about critiques and writing about literature. And so these are not things that Webster came up with, but they are natural extensions. And for students who've been through the nine units in a simple form for two or three years, they are going to be really up for this challenge. And maybe not even two or three years. We included some of this in our SSS courses.

Julie Walker: Yes, we did.

Andrew Pudewa: In the second year.

Julie Walker: Yes. In Level B, Year 2, we definitely get to the Response to Literature. In Year 1 of Level C, we hit also response to literature, but then in Year 2 of Level C Response to Literature and literary analysis. So it was a great exercise for the students.

One of the things that I'd like you to comment on, Andrew, was, is the experience that a lot of students have. And believe it or not, I remember my fourth grade experience, going way back, of having to write a book report. I there was this little form we had to fill out. And I'm almost embarrassed to admit this, but I don't think my fourth grade teacher is listening to this podcast, but it was, describe a scene in the book, and I read the whole *Little House on the Prairie*, Laura Ingalls Wilder series, and I used that same scene in the book for multiple paragraphs, for multiple books, for multiple book reports, because I couldn't think of what else to write.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Well, book reports are interesting. I think a lot of people grew up with them. I think very few people liked doing them. I certainly didn't. You see a trend now of rather than a book report, let's do a variety of ways that we can re-present this book to the world, whether it's illustration, make an illustration, or I even saw, make an advertisement for this book, or retell your favorite thing from the book. I think that problem of book reports kind of came into existence because teachers needed a way to somehow verify that the kid had actually read the book, and so that was the origin of the idea.

But I always point out, to do a book report is almost the hardest writing task you could ask a child to do because the funnel is so wide. So if you think about the funnel, and I talk about this in the TWSS, Unit 1 and 2, it's no funnel. It's straight down. There were seven sentences in the original and maybe you have seven sentences in your retelling of that fable, plus or minus one or two, but it's straight down. There's no figuring out what to say or not say. With Unit 3, depending on the length of the story, that funnel starts to widen. And so if you have a two-page fairy tale or myth, and you're trying to retell that in three paragraphs, well, that's a little harder, because you can't tell everything.

Moving up to say a ten-page story, that can be really a challenge because so many more things happened. So many more things were described than you can possibly fit in three-paragraph retelling. So it becomes a summary or a shortened retelling intentionally. Then we get to unit four and six, the funnel is even harder because you've got facts and there's too many facts. And that's why we talk about a summary being you tell some of that,

but not all of it. You're some-aring, not all-aring. And then that Unit 4-6 progression goes into unit eight. 8, where you generally have too much information. But a unit 9, if you are dealing with a whole book, and for a kid this could be what, 100 to 300 pages, it doesn't even matter, it could be a short book of 70 pages, it's still a lot, and the funnel is so wide, and trying to figure out what to put in that is tough. That's why I suggest when you hit Unit 9, and our materials do this—don't start with a whole book. Start with a shorter story. Start with a shorter story, and then move to a longer story, and then maybe move to a movie, which is always a summary of the book it came from.

Julie Walker: Sure, sure.

Andrew Pudewa: And then if you've got any time or energy left over, maybe a book critique. But build up to that, because it's just so overwhelming. What can I possibly put in, and how much of it do I remember? And that's why I think this Response to Literature is so much more effective than most kind of book report forms that we've seen, because it is a structure. And we have three models, a four-paragraph model, a five-paragraph model, And a six-paragraph model.

And these came into existence originally because I was doing some work with a school district. And this particular school district was trying to be a really good school district. And so they had their own standards that were beyond their state standards. And one of those standards was for children to be able to read a story and write about it, a response to literature, only they were starting in fourth grade.

And so the problem here was that they would let the kids read the story and then the kids would write about it. Well, there were basically two things that happened. Kids who would just retell the story. And, that wasn't the task, therefore they didn't do well. Or the kids who had no idea what to do, and they didn't do well either. So this poor district, and the schools I'm working with within the district, they had created standards that, in my view, are kind of inappropriate to the age and maturity of the student, but I couldn't change that. All I could do was figure out how to help them.

So, what we did was we created three models. One for 4th grade, one for 5th grade, one for 6th grade. So, the problem the students were having was they wanted to tell the whole story, or they didn't know how to write anything because they didn't really know what they were thinking about the story. They were just experiencing it. Both of those did not score well on the district rubric, which was trying to get the kids to talk about their thoughts,

Julie Walker: Their response,

Andrew Pudewa: Their response to reading it. So, we started with the three paragraph model for the youngest students in fourth grade. One paragraph was the introduction, which had the background information, very similar to the critique. The second paragraph was the story sequence chart. So it was the Unit 3 model or the body paragraphs Unit 9 model shrunk into one paragraph.

And so basically you only have one or two sentences to say characters and setting, problem, plot or problem, conflict/resolution. And that was actually a very good exercise, to be able to

take a story and shrink it down into one paragraph, summary, and then the third was an analysis topic. And they got to choose to analyze the characters or the message and theme.

And then we created a list of questions that the kids could ask themselves to do a character analysis. So what are some of the qualities that this character has? And then we actually gave the teachers a list of character qualities, both positive and negative—industriousness versus laziness or charity versus selfishness, et cetera. And let them scan the list and say, okay, which words on this list would match this character? Kind of like a Critique Vocabulary idea, the Critique Thesaurus, only very specific to character development. And then what motives did this character show and how did this character change? What effect did this character have on other characters in the story? What did this character learn? So a simple list of about five questions that a student could ask and hopefully get an answer to at least a few of those questions and write a whole paragraph analyzing the character in the story. And so that was the three paragraph.

Then in fifth grade, we added a conclusion. So it was the introduction, the summary, the analysis paragraph, which could be either main character, message, or theme. Or the setting and mood. So we added in another option and a conclusion.

And then the goal, of course, was the full five-paragraph version that we were trying to get the 6th grade to understand, which was introduction, Story sequence in one paragraph and two analysis topics, and it could be the main character, the message or theme, the setting or mood, or the style of the author. And so they could choose two of those four, write two paragraphs for the body that were in addition to the story retelling, and then the conclusion.

And I don't know how well this worked. I believe that the school district was very happy with the improvements that they saw over time. I really didn't get a chance to see a lot of the samples, and I kind of felt a little frustrated because, first of all, I didn't know how well this was going to work, and I felt like, you're just teaching to the test. And what are you going to sacrifice in other things if you get too attached to the test scores that you're going to get back on this response to literature prompt? Fortunately, the teachers understood our program by then, and this was really a refinement and an option for the fall. And I think I even said, if you need to skip unit eight and nine to do this so you get better scores, but don't skip other units. Don't be jumping to this thing in November because you're all worried about your standardized tests in April.

Julie Walker: You got to build that foundation.

Andrew Pudewa: So, we did that, and then of course we had along with the *Teaching the Classics* product and literature teachers and high school literature teachers wanting to have a literary analysis. And this was not an area where I had much experience at all, but we drew from the wisdom of the syllabus, the Structure and Style, and some good input from literature teachers. And so we came up with a five-paragraph literary analysis essay.

And, here you're basically saying a thesis. You have an assertion that you're making about something about this piece of writing. And again, it's easier to use something shorter. It's easier to use a short story or a poem rather than a whole book.

Julie Walker: Well, and that's a great way to introduce the concepts that the students can then transfer that to a longer piece of work that they no doubt will have to take in their comp one or comp two class in college.

Andrew Pudewa: For a while, I kind of just didn't want to go here, but I have come to understand much like I did with Unit 5 and pictures that I was never really thrilled about in my youth, that the skills of writing about literature—although to many kids and to many of us, I would throw myself in that category, who cares—Right? Who really cares about this character and what they thought. It's fiction. It's not real.

Julie Walker: but we can learn so much from it.

Andrew Pudewa: The thinking skills that are developed in the literary analysis activity will apply to real life and world analysis. And if you can understand a character in a story, you're more likely to understand a character in your life or in politics or in the world that you live and to say, aha, I understand this person now a little better because I have developed some of these analytical thinking skills, the questions cross apply. And that's the bottom line.

And so I had an interesting question recently. And I've had this question more than once, but the question was “my 11 year old boy does not see why he should learn this stuff because he's planning to be a software engineer like his dad.” And okay, I'm fine with that. And of course software engineering is a field that's probably going to work better and pay off more than literary analysis teaching, which is really the only thing you would do with that skill. I suppose there are people who write blogs and there are still a few people who do book reviews for newspapers although I haven't actually seen a newspaper for quite some time.

My point to that mom was mostly, Yeah, you may not use the skill, this specific task based skill when you grow up and do whatever you do in life, but the thinking skills you develop as a result of doing these tasks, that will carry over into people management, it will carry over into marketing, it will carry over into organization. It will carry over into working with a team and understanding your coworkers. It will carry over into really understanding the relationships in your life. Like, I mean, we have this idea that somehow the things we learn in school have to be applicable to the job we're going to do in life, and that's just not true at all, and it shouldn't be the focus of what's education about—is understanding humanity better.

And so, That's why an 11-12-13-14 year old boy who wants to become software engineer or a Navy SEAL, whatever his little dream is, if he can get into literature and do even very simple process of writing about literature, whether it's the critique, whether it's the response, whether it's the analytical essay, that's going to just carry over and make him a better thinker. And to some degree, a better problem solver in all of life. And I guess that's the main thing.

And I would even say I'd throw in the whole idea of like, well, we're not going to have to write much cause we're just going to be able to have chatGPT write all of our technical stuff. And that may be true, but if we aren't gaining the value of doing the thinking that's necessary to produce the product. We're not going to be the best that we can in no matter where we are. And so there's going to be people who just let chatGPT do their thinking for them, and then there's going to be the people who can do a critical analysis of chatGPT.

Who would you rather be?

Julie Walker: Right, exactly. Well, Unit 9, check done next. What is next, Andrew, after Unit 9?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, for most people, summer, right?

Julie Walker: Right, and then we start over again.

Andrew Pudewa: We go back and build on the foundation a better continuation. Yeah.

Julie Walker: and we do spend a whole podcast talking about IEW over the years and how to, and why, more importantly, why to continue going through the nine units year after year, and it's such a great foundation.

Andrew Pudewa: And why it really doesn't get tedious or boring. It's not as though you can't learn something that you had learned and learn it better. I'm always reminded of the story of John Wooden, the coach of UCLA basketball. He was like the greatest coach of all time, at least some people would say.

And what did he do at the first practice of every season, how to put on your socks. Right? 100 percent of the players, he sat them down and said, this is how you put on your socks. If you do it right, you won't get blisters, and your feet will do better, and you'll be a better player. And if you do it wrong and you get blisters, it doesn't matter how good you are, you're going to be handicapped. And we see that in, in things like martial arts. You go into a practice, what do you do? Basic stuff. My years with Dr. Suzuki in Japan, we'd sometimes spend two hours of a group class playing four measures of a Book Two piece of music.

Why? Because you can always do a simpler thing at a higher, better level, which then brings up the level of everything else you're going to do on top of that. But that's for another podcast.

Julie Walker: That sounds great. Well, thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: It's always a pleasure, Julie. Thank you.