

Podcast 454: Structure and Style Tips, Part 2

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: That habit of being able to ask questions, hear the answer, and put it into a key word outline. It's just a world of difference.

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 part two of our tips and tricks through the nine units, and we're not talking about style at all, that's an episode for another day. But we ended our last episode with Unit 4, and I said at that time that there was another key part of Unit 4 that we didn't have time to

Andrew Pudewa: which was your marketing technique of keeping people in suspense.

Julie Walker: It's called a cliffhanger. Absolutely. Yes, absolutely. And that, of course, is our Topic-Clincher rule. And how important that is to EW. It's definitely a distinctive of what we do. So, just talk a little bit about if you are now... I mean, we're talking to experienced people. We're talking to people who know our method, who perhaps have used our curriculum for several years and now want to venture out on their own, and we want to give them some tips and tricks to be successful as they're going through the nine units.

You actually mentioned last week also something that I think is really important that we didn't mention. And that is this one a month schedule idea. We didn't actually say that this is a really good way to kind of gauge your system.

Andrew Pudewa: We make a pretty clear presentation argument for that in the TWSS, that you have nine units, you've got eight or nine months in a school year, and that going through these units one per month is a great way to plan. It's, I think, really good for kids, because what do kids love? Something new.

Variety. And so, okay, end of the month, new month, new unit. And they look forward to that. Whereas some other writing programs that we've seen, it's kind of like, well, you just keep doing the same thing month after month after month for the whole year. And anybody gets bored. Bugged down with that, the teachers and the kids.

So that variety and then Webster's brilliance, I don't even know if he realized how brilliant it was, but we alternate between the narrative, kind of creative inventive, content and then the report research essay. So, Unit 1 and 2 could be either Unit 3, stories, Unit 4, reports, Unit 5, Writing from Pictures.

Now you're on the inventive side. Unit 6, research, Unit 7, now pure inventive writing, the blank page, anything you want. Unit 8, now you have to combine, essentially, that skill of collecting up, organizing and presenting facts. to support an opinion that you have or to have an opinion about the facts you picked up and then Unit 9, finishing up with, response to literature, critiques, and that's on that side.

So some kids are happy in the world of facts, right? Don't make me. Be imaginative. I was one of those kids. And then other kids, they like Well, can we just make it wild and crazy and anything we can imagine? I don't want to be obedient to facts. That's too restrictive. So both of those are vitally important in the developing of good writers.

And so this alternating between the units, I think is just brilliant. And then next year, Come through and go through all nine units again, alternate back and forth, developing the strengths as well as the weaknesses, and the next year go through again, the next year go through again. And, and by then, they really have a good, strong understanding of how to do both well. They may still have a preference, but at least they have competency and mastery in both areas.

So, the topic-clincher idea, though, is, I think if I was on the street, and someone walked up to me and said, Hey, you're the writing guy, you know something about writing better, in three minutes, what's the best bit of advice you could give me to write better? I would probably try to explain the topic-clincher rule because that just helps to organize that writing. And even if you get a little off topic in the middle of the paragraph, if you end with a good clincher, the reader feels like, okay, I get that. I understand what it was about. And so the rule, of course, as most people know, is that the topic sentence and the clincher sentence must repeat or reflect two to three key words.

Now how to help kids learn to do that is our task. So if we accept the value of following the rule, then how to do it and then how to do it better. So, first thing is we try to help people learn this skill firsthand by doing all the practicum assignments in the TWSS. It's like anything—you're not going to teach something very well unless you've practiced it a bit yourself.

And so, starting in Unit 4, continuing 5, 6, 7, 8, we are requiring the teachers, especially if they want to do our instructor accreditation idea, to practice that rule. That's how you learn how to do it, and once you know how to do it, you can teach it much more easily.

A second thing is we have lots of student samples. We have the *Magnum Opus Magazine*, and we have vetted these compositions by students so that they do conform, maybe not perfectly, but pretty close to perfectly, to the models. And so, if you open up that *Magnum Opus Magazine*, and you go to Unit 4, you will see almost all the paragraphs there follow the rule, Unit 5, Unit 6.

So then you have some examples to teach from. People who are using our theme based books, we have the exemplars that are the optional downloadable file. Not student samples,

but written by adults to say, here's a way in which this assignment could be done, and here's the topic-clincher.

The one teacher told me that she was just having a really hard time getting the kids to do this. So to model it very tightly, she, and these were young children, like fourth, fifth grade, she was saying, okay, so write your first sentence, write your paragraph, and then copy your first sentence at the end of the paragraph and then use a thesaurus and try to change one or two or three of these words so that it's not exactly the same, but it follows the rule.

And I think that's a very reasonable and solid way to go. And I try to read older books from time to time and what I've discovered is that some of these old authors, 50, 100, 200 years ago, they actually do this. You can find topic-clincher examples, not in every paragraph, but frequently in the writing of older-style expository compositions, chapters of books, whatever.

So I think a combination of. Hands on experience, examples, and then if you need to, just crank out a mechanical way to model it and have kids practice it for a while. And then they get the hang of it, and then they start to be a little more creative, have a little more variety, make the topic clinchers not quite so redundant or repetitive.

But it's better to have it be a bit creative, repetitive than to just end the paragraph and you're not quite sure what that whole thing was.

Julie Walker: Sure, exactly, good. So Unit 5 also uses the topic-clincher rule. Let's talk about Unit 5 a little bit.

Andrew Pudewa: Right, well now this is a shift, a big shift because now there's no source text. There's just a picture, or two, or three, which is kind of our text. So, starting spot is three pictures, three paragraphs, and there's no topic in terms of division, right? So if you're in Unit 4 and you're writing about something, a person, a thing from history, an event, a science thing, you can divide.

The subject into one or two or three topics, but with pictures, what is that? So another brilliant thing Webster did is he said, well, we're going to continue practicing this idea of topic clincher, but what's the topic of a picture? Well, it's what you see. The central fact, the thing in the picture, and then you have to ask all those questions like who's in that picture and what are they thinking? What are they feeling? Where are they saying? What are they doing? What happened before this picture? What happened after this picture? What's outside or invisible in the picture? So there's a lot of imagination involved, but you still have the structure of that topic-clincher that keeps the student, there's a unit of thought. And this is a little harder, but it can be done. And again the best way is, do it yourself. Do the practicum exercises in the chamber of SS, look at the student samples in the *Magnum Opus Magazine* or the exemplar compositions and be flexible.

The clincher sentence doesn't really have to repeat the same idea as the first sentence in the paragraph, but it does have to have two or three words that are the same or close in meaning,

synonymous, and it does something for the reader that makes them really feel comfortable. That was a unit of thought. And then move on to the next picture. What's the central fact? Write that out. And then when you get to the end, read that first sentence again and say, okay, What are a couple words that I can use in this sentence? Maybe make it a little bit longer. One trick that students sometimes figure out is that the longer the topic sentence is, the more options there are for words to grab and fit into the clincher.

And that's perfectly legitimate. Kids are pretty smart at figuring out ways to make the Structure and Style stuff go together.

Julie Walker: So talk about Unit 6.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, now you not only have one source with too many facts, you have too many sources with too many facts. So there's that added step. So with unit six, you're making source outlines from two or three or more source texts. Then you have this task of kind of scanning all of these facts in keywords and saying, okay, which ones are redundant, we don't need to use them twice, and what's a good logical sequence. What should go first? What's connected with that that could go second? What's connected with that that could go third?

And so this process of just learning how to organize more of a scattered source of ideas is very, very helpful, very useful, because that's kind of what we have to do in real life.

In fact, I think I told you this, but I was at a conference not long ago, and there was a mom who is a paralegal, I believe, or she's a legal person and she works for a firm and she writes. That's her job, and so they asked her to write a summary, essentially, of different opinions about a particular Supreme Court case and she thought I wonder if I could do a Unit 6. So she had these different articles that were commentary on this particular court decision. And she did that. She made a source outline from each of them and then looked at the whole thing and then fused them together to create the summary and the target length she had.

And she said, it took a little more time to do that in the thinking and organizing part, but once she had it, writing it out was so much easier because she didn't have to then go reorganize larger chunks of prose. And so I was just tickled that the thing she had taught her middle school kid in our unit six was making her job as a legal writing consultant easier. So it really does carry over wherever we go. And that synthesizing of different sources of information is such a valuable skill in today's world.

And of course, Unit 4 and 6 are the building blocks for Unit 8.

Julie Walker: and we'll get together in a minute. So any important tips or tricks that you could say to an experienced IEW teacher who's used our materials in Unit 6,

Andrew Pudewa: Well, we have the mini books, elephant mini books in the TWSS. We have used the mini books in the Writing Source Packet.

Julie Walker: Part of Premium Membership

Andrew Pudewa: That's what Webster created, and one of the things I always wanted people to understand is, these materials are not supposed to replace the library. They're not supposed to replace the real world. They are supposed to be contrived to work to teach the process, so the student can understand the process, and then when they go and collect up information from messier, not quite so contrived, different source texts, they understand the process a lot better, rather than, "I've got all this information, I don't really know what to do first."

Webster found that in his day, pre-internet days, even university students would benefit from using encyclopedias because encyclopedias are contrived to kind of pre organize information and you can see the topics easily and there used to be all sorts of wild, different encyclopedias like whole sets of the Encyclopedia of music, the Encyclopedia of Judaism, the Encyclopedia of Asia.

We don't see this stuff much anymore because everything's gone digital, and it's all presynthesized for us. But what he found is that while those weren't primary sources, they were a great way to train his university students in this process of synthesizing and integrating and fusing together so that when they got to the primary sources, they had a better understanding of what they're trying to accomplish.

Julie Walker: Yep. Amazing. Okay. Unit 7—that's where most writing programs start and yet, here we are, what, seven months later, finally getting to real writing.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, the nice thing about Unit 7 is you don't have to figure out your sources, right? You don't have to prepare for that lesson nearly as much. What generally, we have tried to do is come up with some different kind of areas that kids could write about. And one of the things I've noticed is that if you just say, okay, you can write about anything you want, whatever's in your brain, what do you know? What do you like?

They will often choose things that are actually harder to write about. For example, pets and sports. Those are the two most common. The reason that's harder is because pets don't talk. There's not a lot of words connected with your pets.

You may know, okay, what's the breed of your dog and how old it is. But after that, you're really in this world of the experience of a dog, and kids don't think in words about that. They just feel the dog, they love the dog, they play with the dog, the dog licks them, they love this dog, but getting that...going back to where we started at the last episode, getting all of that memory and imagination into words—that requires vocabulary. And so here's where we see that the student with the more well developed vocabulary is going to be able to write about the dog, or the beach, or climbing a mountain, or their great aunt, or their favorite restaurant, whatever. They're going to have more words. And the more words you have, the better thoughts you can think. And so, that's where we often see that.

But the biggest benefit is if you've gone through Units 1 through 6, you are always writing from outlines. So, you have separated the complexity of what to say, and then how to say it well. And that carries over into Unit 7, and they get that habit of essentially taking notes from

their mind. Taking notes from their memory. Taking notes, I will say, from the brain, notes from the brain. And that just makes a world of difference. Because you want to write about the beach, if you just start writing sentences, you can bog down pretty quick, or you may get off into a rabbit trail that's not really connected with the things you're trying to say.

So the skill of subject and division: what are the things about the beach you can say, and then asking the questions. Who, what, where, why, when, how, what do you see, hear, smell, taste, feel. And then what's the significance of that? What's the best thing? The worst thing? Are there any problems? If there's problems, there's solutions. What's the meaning or value of it?

That habit of being able to ask questions, hear the answer, and put it into a key word outline. And then go write it out, where you can pay attention to your topic and clincher, your dress ups and openers, your vocabulary. It's just a world of difference to be able to write from an outline as opposed to just writing the first thing that comes into your head and then waiting for what comes next.

Julie Walker: It's so often that journaling and that kind of idea, which is not necessarily a bad practice for adults, but to use that for a child. I think I would just say to the teacher who's wanting to branch off from using our materials where we have prompts for our Unit 7, we're giving them more direction of what to write about than write whatever you want and giving them that instruction in that video or in that theme based book. If you're doing this on your own, don't think that Unit 7 is journaling. It is, there is a structure, a structural model.

Andrew Pudewa: The journaling idea is What did you do in your life? What's going on? What are you thinking or feeling about? And it's just very hard to be objective about all that because it's just happening in you. So I don't know, spontaneously and in a somewhat disorganized way.

So when I create a new talk for a conference or convention season, I always create a couple new talks. I do that, I actually will make a list of things that I should talk about, and then add a few words to each of those, and then usually think about it for a while, then I'll pull in some more examples and add that in, and I'll get from a simple outline to a more complex outline. Kind of rehearse the thing in my brain for a while, and then I'll go back to the simple outline and use that as notes for the talk, and then very often, that ends up becoming an article that someone around here forces me to write.

Julie Walker: Usually me.

Andrew Pudewa: So it's a way of distilling and organizing and remembering the things you want to say about something.

Julie Walker: Okay, Units 8 and 9. Can we wrap it up with those two units?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, sure, Unit 8, in a way, is those skills. So, if you look at Unit 4 and 6, it's how to collect up, organize, and present ideas with some level of accuracy and eloquence. And then in Units 3, 5, 7, particularly 7, we're learning how to think about stuff.

And it's in Unit 8 where, by definition, you need to have an opinion. You need to tell what you're thinking. But very often, and we see this a lot of popular blogging is people are just saying whatever they think without much to back it up, to support it. So Unit 8 is really getting us into this whole world of rhetoric, where there's the ethos, pathos, and logos, there's the integrity, or the truth of what you're saying, then how do you say it in a way that it connects with people's hearts or emotions or real life, and then the logic that you have.

And that's a process that you kind of have to go through when you start down the path of becoming an essayist. For younger children, it's generally easier to say, here, collect up some facts, now tell what you think about these things. And they may not think anything about them, and that's okay. We force them to do it by saying, well, of all that you said, what's the most significant thing and why?

Julie Walker: And I love that formula right there because everyone can answer that question. You were at a meeting yesterday, and you went around the room and said, tell me what was the most difficult thing that happened to you and what was the best thing? And that instantly forces you to give an opinion. So easy.

Andrew Pudewa: And then you can move, hopefully, as students, middle school, high, they will start to have opinions about things, but now you have to teach them to support their opinion with examples and evidence and facts. Because an opinion without support well, that's just obnoxious. So this pathway of developing an essay, so I talk about this in the TWSS and how you get there.

And we tend to start with easy things to collect up: facts, animals, that's easy, kind of hard to have an opinion, but you can force it, people, events, and then you move into issues that require kind of an analysis where there may be conflicting facts or conflicting information, and you present both of those, and then would argue as to why one had greater weight than another.

The great historian, Hilaire Belloc, made a statement in a book he wrote, I thought was very, very significant. He said, "It is the historian's duty not just to report the facts, but also to prioritize those into what is more important for the reader." And I think we've got to a point now where we see a lot of people are pulling out various facts that are not really the most important or significant things in terms of the big picture and then people get distracted. So, an example, you could go into depth about Thomas Jefferson owning slaves. That is not the most important thing about what Thomas Jefferson did in his life, right? And yeah, it's there, and it's worth addressing perhaps, but you don't do that to the exclusion of all of the other valuable contributions he made...

Julie Walker: Louisiana Purchase

Andrew Pudewa: to the country that we have today. And so I think this is an opportunity, when you're teaching Unit 4 and 6 and in Unit 8, is to understand that we have as writers a responsibility to frame those facts in an authentic prioritization for our ends. And hopefully those ends are guided by integrity and a desire to grow and learn and benefit in the best way we can. And that's just, that's a lifelong process. But it's nice to be able to start that process of learning how to do that with middle school aged children.

Julie Walker: So, Andrew, you may not know this, but I was recently in Astoria, Oregon. And Astoria, Oregon, is the place in the United States history, and this goes back to Thomas Jefferson. Yes, he owned slaves, but he commissioned Lewis and Clark to go on this great journey, and he had with him a woman who was very important to their success, Sacagawea, and a black person. And those two people were part of them deciding, they voted. So this was the first time that women and blacks were allowed to vote in a decision of whether or not to go back right now or to hunker down for the winter. So, let's not, as you say, distort history. It's a terrible thing, slavery, of course, but at the same time, in a way, Thomas Jefferson sanctioned this opportunity for more rights to the oppressed at that time.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And I think a lot of people are concerned about kind of a revisionist history approach that distorts priorities for particularly for children who need to get first things first before they can get into the minutiae of other things. But that's just one example. So I think when you get kids and you help them collect up facts and say, okay, of all that you said, what's the most significant or important thing, that question, and the habit of asking that question through writing is teaching a thinking skill that is of lifelong value. And that is something you have to learn to do on your own. Otherwise, what happens is you will kind of just accept whatever comes to you without asking the question. What's the most important or valuable aspect of that? And I think this is one of the great dangers of chatGPT and AI. I know we're going to do some podcasts on this in the future. If you ask it to write something for you, it's depriving you of going through the process of discerning, of distilling.

Julie Walker: You're talking about Unit 8 and this kind of takes us back to Unit 6. I have had the privilege of writing a lot of the Unit 6 source texts for the various publications that we have. And every time I just, I'm so excited about this over dinner, I'm sharing with my husband, did you know that the Mayflower, they couldn't even stand up right in that boat.

It was so short. And I learned so much and of course not everything could go in the source text because. I had to limit, but at the same time so rich and if we had let AI write that article for us, I would not be the person I am today because of that.

Andrew Pudewa: You would not have learned what you learned.

Julie Walker: true. It's true. So Unit 9, any pithy comments to talk to these teachers who are trying Unit 9 on their own for the first time?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, in Unit 9, it's using that same idea, but now with stories. So you retell the story, and it's a Unit 3 sandwich. So you have an introduction with background stuff,

and you retell the story, and then in the concluding paragraph of the 5 paragraph model, which is a start, beginning of writing about literature, but then you're going to say, okay, in this story, what was the best or worst thing about it?

And that can range from the message of the story, the style of the story, the impact of the story. And for kids to think about what they've read is sometimes hard because they're not in the habit of that. They're in the habit of just read the story. Oh, that's fun. Read another story. Oh, that's fun. Just hear another story and just absorb.

And that has value too, but to try to bring in this kind of required opportunity for objectivity is a good starting point for what they may have to bump into later on, which would be response to literature or literary analysis, where you're not supposed to just tell the story and what you think about it in a simple form, you have to dig in and ask some harder questions about the characters and the theme and the message and all that.

So I think Webster had a remarkable way of creating a fairly simple model to start the process of teaching the more advanced thinking skills that he knew he would want his students and others to develop over the course of their schooling years. And I have come to the point kind of with all the units where I've realized that the ability to use a source text and to think about it and to articulate that, it's fairly mechanical. And yeah, you could, you could get AI to do it for you. But the skill of doing it is what really allows you to look at a situation in the world and have that more concrete, objective understanding and formulating opinion and supporting an opinion and being ready to engage in meaningful dialogue with other people who can do that and, , I would mention, I know we did a podcast with Scott Newstock and *How to Think like Shakespeare*. One of the most notable things in that book was the value that people in Shakespeare's time placed on discourse as a means to personal growth and social harmony and the development of society. We seem to see discourse kind of not being as engaging intellectually as it has been in the past. And all we would have to do is compare, say, a presidential debate from today with a political debate from as recently as 40 or 50 years ago. And then compare that with, say, 150 years ago or 200 years ago.

And I think almost all thinking people would realize that we would benefit from more thoughtful, engaged, informed discourse. And I would argue the best way to help our kids move that direction is through the teaching of writing.

Julie Walker: Wow. Well, thank you, Andrew. I hope, listener, this has been helpful for you as you consider the possibility of maybe going off on your own and teaching your own lessons, not using our materials. But of course, we are always here to help you on your journey toward better listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking.

Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you, Julie.

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, 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.