

Podcast 461: How to Think: What is Thinking

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: The smallest unit of concrete thought is a word. A word conveys a meaning. So, I could say, I was thinking about something. Or I could say, I was ruminating on. There's a different nuance there.

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, "IEW." My name is Julie Walker, and I'm honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: So, Andrew, our theme for this year is how to think.

Andrew Pudewa: Which seems dumb, because doesn't everybody know how to think?

Julie Walker: Apparently,

Andrew Pudewa: Can you not think? Is there anybody who can not think at all?

Julie Walker: I think we're always thinking.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, there's an irony to that, I suppose. And then there's whole groups of people who think, "Oh, if I could just not think for a while, then I would calm my spirit and connect with the universe" and all that. But...

Julie Walker: You can't even turn off your brain when you're sleeping because you're dreaming and you're thinking.

Andrew Pudewa: so the question isn't, do we think? It's how do we think? And of course there's so many modes of thinking.

Julie Walker: Yep.. And so since this is our theme for the whole year, I thought it would be good for us to be a little bit more focused on perhaps defining what we mean here at IEW, think,

Andrew Pudewa: So you want us to be thinking about thinking,

Julie Walker: my goodness, there's so many, this, this could be a really painful podcast to listen to.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh it will be, I have no doubt about that. But we can, we can narrow it down a little bit. Because we don't want to nullify or invalidate all of the non-verbal thinking

that does happen. And many people who are of an artistic bent do think in images and impressions, sensory impressions, and all of that.

And so that's all very important. But then there's the whole world, I guess, you would call of formal language-based thinking. And that's where we see artificial intelligence is coming in, which is the large-language models that are able to absorb huge quantities of language and kind of predict what words should be used to express a certain idea in relation to a certain question or other idea.

And there's the big fear, somehow, that we are going to abdicate our formal thinking to a better, more articulate machine model intelligence. And we reach general AI, and then we reach super human AI, and then we don't even have to do anything anymore except keep the sewers running. There's that line of reasoning. But we, of course, work with children. And children often learn what they are thinking by talking.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And you have grandchildren. I have grandchildren. Between us, we have many children. So we have a lot of experience. And what's the one thing children, most of them, not a hundred percent, but a high percentage of them, love to do whenever they get you alone. Or get you under their control.

Julie Walker: Show you what fun thing they can do, what they can learn, what they've learned.

Andrew Pudewa: Talk. They want to talk.

Julie Walker: They want to talk

Andrew Pudewa: They want to talk. In fact, I was writing with children and I said, do you want to listen to music? Do you want to listen to an audio book or do you just want to talk? What do you want to do? And it was a long drive, and they all agreed, let's talk. So there is that thing that happens when we speak that allows us in a way to know what we're thinking.

And I in my talk, *Cultivating Language Arts – Preschool through High School*, I point out. The huge importance of creating an environment for young children where it is easy, convenient, facilitated for them to talk a lot so they can hear what they're thinking. Then when we get a little bit older, we start talking all the time, sometimes just to ourselves.

Julie Walker: Yes, absolutely.

Andrew Pudewa: So that we can hear what we're thinking because you have this mishmash of stuff going in your brain all the time, feelings, physical sensations, um, recent memories from a minute or a day or a week or a year or a decade ago, and it's all just constantly floating around. And, it's that process of articulating in language an idea that we value so greatly.

Julie Walker: I love that talk. And I actually took some of those same ideas of that talk in the later years and months with my dad who was suffering quite a bit of dementia and just to get him to talk out loud. And he told the same stories over and over and over again. But I believe, and I've got no scientific evidence to demonstrate this, but I believe it helped him stay cognitive a little bit longer because I was there to talk to him or listen to him mostly.

Andrew Pudewa: Sure, no, I think there is plenty of empirical support for the idea that articulating ideas helps your mind stay active. In fact, many, many years ago I read a fascinating book, I believe it was called Aging with Grace. And it was a study of Alzheimer's in nuns.

Julie Walker: Oh, interesting.

Andrew Pudewa: This researcher had developed a relationship with a convent full of nuns over a long period of time, couple decades, I believe, and gained their trust, gained their respect, I guess, and ended up getting permission to do biopsies of brain tissue on nuns that had died.

Julie Walker: Oh, okay.

Andrew Pudewa: And some nuns developed Alzheimer's. Other nuns did not. Now, of course, there's a genetic component, but when you look at the brain tissue, you can see those brain tissue differences. And then he corresponded the symptoms of Alzheimer's with the brain, the physical brain, with what they had done all their life. And he found a few very interesting correlations. One is, there was a direct connection between the writing level of the nuns when they entered the convent. Right? So we're talking very young adulthood, right, nineteen, twenty-two, twenty-five, and they had to write a letter of their personal reasons for wanting to join a convent or whatever, and those were on file. So he had access to those letters, and he corresponded very clearly the sophistication of writing with which they were capable of at that time. and Alzheimer's symptoms at the end of life.

And the more sophisticated the writing, the lower was the showing of Alzheimer's symptoms or dementia tendencies.

Julie Walker: Interesting.

Andrew Pudewa: And in those sisters who even had the physiological, what do they call them, pits, and I can't remember, there's a, there's a term for what happens in the brain cells that is representative of Alzheimer's symptoms. They might have had the physical symptoms, but not the behavioral symptoms.

Julie Walker: Oh, interesting.

Andrew Pudewa: The other high correspondence was the sisters who had jobs that required them to use language in their continuous daily life. So those who were working in terms of, say, outreach or management or teaching or organizing, librarian, et cetera, had much lower

incidence of the nuns who had the more menial service-oriented jobs, which are of course important, but cooking, cleaning, things that didn't require that intensive level of daily language use over time. So, anyway, this, I think, was a very interesting study he did. I believe the book is still available. I don't remember the author. We can look it up.

But I think it does show, the more you think, the better you think, the more you work on thinking, the more you maintain those language based thinking skills into later life, the less likely you will be to move in the Alzheimer's direction.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: So of course, reverse engineer it. If you teach writing and people are better writers in their young adulthood, does that have a protective mechanism? Against dementia in later life? That's kind of the thought that I took away from that book.

Julie Walker: Yeah. So the importance of, wow, that just kind of makes me want to go out and be sure my writing is polished, but I do, of course, a lot of writing in my position, so maybe I'm good with that.

When I think about, there it is again,

Andrew Pudewa: We can't even have a conversation without saying, "I think." It's so interesting.

Julie Walker: It is, and Andrew, you've done so many talks on the importance of writing. I would like to hear what you, how you define thinking and to have you explain why so many schools find this critical thinking to be something really important, but they don't really know what it is.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I'm not sure that we can jump to the idea of critical thinking without looking at the idea of how language works first. So, probably the smallest unit of concrete thought is a word. A word conveys a meaning. So, I could say, I was thinking about something. Or I could say, I was ruminating on. I mean, it's kind of odd because ruminant is an animal that chews its cud. So when we say I'm ruminating, it gives this impression of chewing on something, of letting it sit for a while. There's a different nuance there. You could also say, the most important thing about something. Or you could say the salient points here. Salient is derived from salt. So, the thing that gives this idea an essential flavor is different than just saying most important.

So, what I have noticed with children is it appears that the more words they have, the more precise they can be in expressing ideas. So that smallest unit of thought is the word. And speakers of English are blessed with a huge mishmash of words from many different cultures and traditions and civilizations. We have Greek, we have Latin, we have German. The word *think*, I believe, comes from some variant of German, which itself had many divisions.

Anglo-Saxon, Hindi, who knows what else? And so, we have this richness in English, which can also be frustrating because it makes spelling really a bear. That's the first unit of thought.

So this is why we believe that vocabulary is such an important part of a child's development. And how do children acquire vocabulary? Well, not through throwing words at them and giving them quizzes. I mean, there's some value to that.

Julie Walker: Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: But, and I was listening to Jordan Peterson just recently talk about this, how a word itself is not sufficient to convey an idea. The word has to be in the context of other words for more of the meaning, more of the idea to come through. So you could say pool, but what image, what, what do you get from that? It could be a pool of anything, what's the relationship to the pool? So then we move into phrases. *In the pool* is different than *next to the pool*.

Andrew Pudewa: or *beside the pool*, or *over the pool*, or *under the pool*, right?

Julie Walker: And I think about, just, I'm thinking of your Structure and Style for Students videos, and go back to the words, where you give them a list of synonyms for the word sad. And you go through the list and you have them say it the way it's supposed to be said. They do.

Andrew Pudewa: They absolutely love the connection between the physical expression and the meaning of the word. And so, say the word, moaned,

Julie Walker: Moaned. Cried.

Andrew Pudewa: shouted, or whispered. And kids just love that. I don't quite know why, but it's an absolute 100 percent winner of an activity.

Julie Walker: I know if there was a camera in here right now, you would see a goofy grin on my face because I love this too. It's just so fun.

Andrew Pudewa: But, so, vocabulary is mostly developed in the context. Which is why single word vocabulary tests are not going to be nearly as effective as reading good and great literature, stopping periodically, allowing the children that you're talking with, that you're reading to, or you're reading with, to feel free to interrupt you and ask questions. What does that mean?

And so then you have a phrase. Now that phrase gives more meaning to the words in it. But then that phrase is not necessarily a complete idea in itself. So, next to the pool, in the pool. Well, okay, but now what's the whole sentence? Right? I jumped in the pool. I floated in the pool. I threw my sister in the pool, right? So you add then meaning with sentences. And sentences are ancient constructs, right? I mean, we didn't invent the thing. It is a part of the

DNA that humanity has had since the beginning of recorded time, recorded history. And so then we have to have sentences. That's a more complete thought.

But that sentence does not. really exist in isolation, it has to have context. So there's the sentence before and the sentence after. "I was daydreaming about throwing my sister into the pool and I realized my parents might be upset about that." Right? So there's a logical progression that builds and happens.

And those sentences then have to go into paragraphs. And those paragraphs have a unity of thought. And then those paragraphs have to be in relation to other paragraphs. So when we're teaching a formal use of language to children, whether it is listening well, speaking well, reading well, or writing well, there's this formality to it that demands a higher level of sophistication, and that's where we're leading them, right? We're leading them into a higher level of sophistication. And I have very strong feelings about the shrinking vocabulary of modern people. At the risk of irritating my grandchildren, one of them in particular, I am frequently challenging his use of the word *like*. "And he was like, whoa!" Okay, stop. He was like? No.

And then you move from that, which is kind of an emotional, dramatic way of expressing, into a more precise. "He was stunned at what happened." That's a better articulation of an idea than "he was like, Whoa!" Do you see? And so the informality that language, the direction of informality that language is taking in modern use, I think is not conducive of clear, better, more concrete, more useful articulation of ideas.

Julie Walker: Yeah, I think about just having conversations with potential employees here. if someone were to come into an interview and explain what was the most exciting thing that happened to them at their previous job and they started with, well, it was like, whoa, we'd probably think, hmm, hopefully they have some better answers to other questions

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and part of it's habit.

Julie Walker: Sure. Absolutely.

Andrew Pudewa: All of us would do well, individually, as parents and teachers, to be more careful the way we speak. And I have tried very hard to eliminate that particular misuse of the word, *like*, from my interactions with people. I still fall into it, but that would be kind of an example of how precision in language is useful in a way that we might forget about on just a day to day, run through life, do whatever you need to do to get to the end of the day basis.

But let's kind of expand out now into this idea of critical, because what is critical thinking? Well, criticism is a form of comparison. You can't critique something unless you have other things to compare it with. You can't critique a movie if it's the only movie you've ever seen, right? Which is why movie critics or music critics or book critics, what are they always doing?

They're comparing things with other things. So this tool of comparison, which is fundamental to thinking, improves the more we have things to compare it to. So, if you know a lot about art, you can go to an art museum, and you can have thoughts about a painting based on your experience of hundreds or thousands of other paintings. Teachers are basically helping children learn how to do this, comparing word usages with others, comparing images that come through writing with others, and that refers, of course, back to last year's theme, the "Furnishing of the Mind." If you're not well furnished, you have little to compare. The fewer words the less precise your thinking can be. So I would say building this skill of comparison is at the core of critical thinking.

People want to jump all the way to political or social ideas. "Here's what somebody said. What do you think about that?" Well, number one, you have to know what the words mean. Number two, you have to put them all in the context of what that person was talking about, which is why we see soundbites and presidential debates where the answers are limited to ninety seconds or something as being really very superficial and frustrating to people who want a more complete development of ideas.

And that takes more work. It takes attentiveness, which most of us have seen decline in the past few decades. We don't seem to value attentiveness as much, but that's what it takes to really be able to compare something with something else. And then you can compare ways in which people say things. You can compare the... and this is where people want to jump to, the authority by which they say that thing.

So, where did that statement come from? Well, a lot of us don't even know where our own statements come from because it's a mishmash of ideas. So, that's why I think when we train students, from the very beginning, looking for the best possible words, looking for sentence, phrase and clause, and sentence and paragraph structures that frame those words in the most precise way, the most effective way, in the most poetic and elegant and winsome way possible, we respect that. If we don't respect it, then we're already gone. Basically, we're in the pop culture world, and we're never going to get out of it. But hopefully, the people who listen to us are in this world of believing that there's importance. That ideas have consequences. I think there was a book by that title.

Julie Walker: Well, and I think about, I keep saying that, but I'm so mindful of that. Of course, our pathway and the stylistic techniques and the structural models that we use to teach students, one of the things that it requires is a lot of exercises, a lot of, a lot of writing practice, from the very basic keyword outline, choosing words that will help you remember what the sentences were about, all the way up to this more, as you were describing, critical analysis of literature, that pathway.

If you don't practice that enough, you're not going to know how to move on to the next step.

Andrew Pudewa: right? And it parallels any skill that you want to have, whether it's in the world of physical activity, like gymnastics or dancing or music or art or cooking. I mean,

anything we do well is based on having all sorts of little pieces in the right order, in the right. Arrangement, which is the term for structure in the five canons of rhetoric, right?

Arrangement. And so, people have looked at our approach, uh, with children. The thing that comes to mind immediately would be the banned words list, right? And so we start out and say, okay, now we're going to play a game. You can't use the word *said*. So now you have to find a different word. Well, what if you don't know any different words? Well, here's a list. Let's try to define them. Let's use them in context. Let's act them out. Let's vocalize. Let's build in this larger set of options and force the kids to try and access those things. And some people will say, but the good authors, they use the word *said*. Yeah, of course they do.

But they're beyond it. You see, whereas with kids, what we're trying to do with the banned words is sensitize them. Number one, there are options. You don't have to use the only word that comes to mind first. And I know that I've gone through and looked at a word and thought, Are there better options for this word? And then maybe I find one, maybe I don't, and I leave the word *good* or *said*, well, but at least I went through the process of saying, is that the best one in this situation?

Julie Walker: Exactly. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: And so that's why, always reminding people that with our, the way we do things, it's process. We are trying to help them expand the process of accessing words, forming ideas, making them concrete and recording them in this very formal, semi permanent, permanent way. And I love this quote I have a whole talk on it now called *Full, Ready, and Exact*.

And that's from the Francis Bacon quote, "Reading makes a full man, speaking makes a ready man, but writing makes an exact man."

Julie Walker: Yes. And you wrote an article for our 2025 Magalog "Writing Maketh an Exact Man," that we'll link in the show notes. It's so good. A lot of our staff members have, it's now posted on our website so that everybody's having access to it and they're all commenting on how much they appreciate it. One of the things that you referenced in that article that I was kind of alluding to, this idea of practicing. If we become lazy and if we allow AI to do our writing for us, we're ultimately not developing the skills to think. And so therefore AI is now doing the thinking for us. And that's where the, that's the danger.

Andrew Pudewa: that's the danger. The critical thinking component is probably most misunderstood by translating that idea into "question everything." Right? So that makes you a critical thinker if you question everything. But that's, you can't really question everything unless you have, again, the information to compare the thing you're questioning.

So if you want to be able to understand and compare and have a critical thinking about current events, you have to have some knowledge of history, otherwise your criticism is just just foolish, whining, emotionally based, rather than being able to say, well, this happened

then, and this happened then, and this happened then, and here were the circumstances that were similar or different. How does that relate to right now?

And so I think that's why we tend to respect people who carry with them the tradition of knowing history or knowing philosophy or knowing science or knowing literature because that knowledge base is what enables them to articulate more useful thoughts than someone without the knowledge base. And I believe this is another danger of the high tech approach to, "I don't have to really know stuff because I can just go find it. I can just ask my phone, chat GPT, and it will give me everything."

But then you've got the danger of discerning whether what it's giving you has a good foundation or not? You don't know. We don't know unless we do know. And so I think that's why there's kind of a swing back. We see this, of course, in the classical education world, the charter schools, the Catholic schools, the Christian schools, the homeschoolers who are drawn to a better study of everything, rather than let's jump in and know how to use technology so we can answer all the questions that we don't have yet.

Julie Walker: Right. So this year we've got, of course, the luxury of spending several months talking and thinking about this idea of how to think. I would be remiss if I didn't refer our listeners to an article that you wrote...

Andrew Pudewa: A long time ago...

Julie Walker: A long time ago in 2008, "How to Think." "But I don't know what to write. How many times have we heard those words from a frustrated student? Of course, what he's really saying is, I can't think of what to write. Or even more bluntly, I can't think."

So I love that you say, thinking is a learnable, teachable skill.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and back to Jordan Peterson, he is very much in favor of learning to write well. He was talking about grading his students papers. And what's that about? What are you trying to accomplish when you read a paper and in his words, 95 percent of which is just useless. But when you see that one clearly articulated thought.

You want to honor that, you want to praise that. And he follows that thing I've said many times on our podcast, quoting Plato, that which is honored is cultivated. And I just love the way he talked about, I wish he would come on our podcast, but he talked about, that's what you want to do, not just in teaching your students, you want but in cultivating all of your relationships is you want to acknowledge and honor and appreciate the level of behavior and articulation of ideas and relationship that is good, that is fundamentally good.

If you want politeness, you acknowledge and honor and cultivate and encourage that. And if you just keep criticizing things without being able to compare something that is good with something else that is good, then how do you know if it's good? Those are the questions he

addresses. And I think we are, we're set up well with our Structure and Style approach, with our vocabulary development, with our grammar.

And that's a whole nother excellent way that we could dive into this question of thinking is what's the relationship between the study of grammar and the articulation of ideas. Because if grammar falls apart, then the consistency of articulating and understanding falls apart and then we don't understand each other and then what happens?

Julie Walker: Right. Chaos ensues. And on that happy note...

Andrew Pudewa: Well, this is just part one of many parts, I'm sure. But I would commend people to really spend some time contemplating—another synonym for think—the importance of the words and the way that we use words when interacting with our children, our students, our colleagues, everyone. Because it will lift us up if we are intentional in this way. And I don't think there's much advantage at all, other than maybe in a superficial economy of time or energy, in being careless in the way we speak.

Julie Walker: 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, 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.