

Podcast 463: Ready for Rhetoric with Tim Knotts

Episode Transcript

Tim Knotts: If you don't know how words work and how they're commonly used, which is really the way that the ancients would more talk about grammar, then you can't effectively choose the right words to convey your meanings to your audience.

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, you are a traveling man.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, and the season is just about to start up again this year.

Julie Walker: Yes. Yes. And you get to go places far and wide. And of course, when you go to places, it's so that you can meet new

Andrew Pudewa: I do meet a lot of people. It's one of the great joys of traveling. I'm a little tired of TSA, hotels, and really sick of restaurant food, but I like meeting interesting people.

Julie Walker: And we have on our podcast today, such a person that you met. Actually, I just learned you met him seven years ago at an HSLDA conference.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, well, I didn't remember that seven years ago, but I did meet him last year at the same HSLDA conference.

Julie Walker: And you came home from that conference and said, Julie, we need to get them on our podcast. I'm like, okay.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah,

Julie Walker: And here you are, Tim, so welcome to our podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: Tim Knotts from Connecticut, where it's probably a little colder than it is here, I'll bet. Welcome.

Tim Knotts: Thank you. Yeah, it's lovely to be here with you.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, tell our listeners the brief history of who you are and what's your background, how you got interested in classical education, rhetoric in particular. And then we'll go from there, and I have a couple questions I think that everyone will love to hear your answers to.

Tim Knotts: Yeah, it's hard to make it a brief story because it was one of those long and winding paths that many of us take to get from one place to another that we didn't anticipate arriving at. But I kind of really started down the path as a college student. I was getting my teaching credentials as a secondary educator in history and political science and found much dissatisfaction in my practicum teaching experience that led me to instead turn aside and go to law school.

After law school I practiced law for quite a while. We, my wife and I had some children and as we began trying to figure out what kind of education we wanted them to have, a friend of ours gave us a copy of *The Well-Trained Mind* and another friend a little later invited us to visit a Classical Conversations community. And through those things I really was introduced to a whole different way of thinking about education that I hadn't previously known. And through a lot of reading and chasing down people who know things to ask them what I needed to read next and where I should follow along to continue to learn and grow, I eventually arrived at the conviction that classical education is the best mode of education and sort of immersed myself in it.

Andrew Pudewa: What attracted you the most? Because you had young children, and so many people think of classical education as this thing you do in college where you read really hard books, and you have these Socratic seminars, and then you write these long philosophical type of papers. And so a lot of people when they hear classical education, they don't think, well, that's something you can do with six year olds.

And so what caused you to kind of see in what you read and the people you met, that moved you into this idea that, wow, little kids can do stuff and it's significant and valuable.

Tim Knotts: Well, two part answer to that question. First is, I saw older kids doing the things that you were talking about and said, I want my children to do that. And what do I need to do to get them ready to do that? That's part one. But part two—a lot of the foundation of a good classical education is having exposure to myths and legends and stories and fairy tales and fables and personal histories and the history of your people and your place and the freedom to play and explore and all of those things are the things that I knew just experientially were quality education and what is good and appropriate for young children to do. So I wanted to have that for my children. That they would have that, that appreciation for the things that build and are the fundamental roots of culture.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I think so many people maybe have had that experience and many people haven't, which is, walking into a class of teenagers, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and observing this remarkable high level conversation that they are capable of when their training is sufficient, when the environment is appropriate, when the tutor, the mentor, the teacher, has even a little bit of training and direction that way.

And it can just kind of blow your mind. Well, this is so different than what you kind of normally see in a—I don't know, I wouldn't call it normal, average, common—high school group. And there's something about that that's just profoundly attractive.

I gotta tell you a funny thing, Timothy. I was asking chatGPT about myself, right? Because you used to be able to Google yourself, but now you can have a whole AI tell you all about yourself. And the most ridiculous thing said, Andrew Pudowa is the author of *The Well-Trained Mind*. So, I asked, could you please cite your source on this? And it came back, immediately said, sorry, I was wrong. Susan Bower is the author of *The Well-Trained Mind*. It made me almost afraid, because the way in which those AI large language models respond as if they know everything, and this is the actual truth and fact. And if you don't question it, you could walk away believing completely wrong information.

And so, I think part of what we see a lot of in the classical and even in the not so classical, but just the common sense education revival is we really have to teach students to question and ask better questions and have, the buzzword is critical thinking, which I really don't like because it's overused and people use it, can't define it. But in this modern age of this artificial information, it's not just artificial intelligence. It falls short of that. It's artificial information and people are going to be so willing to believe. I mean, I might have believed it if I didn't know differently that I had not written that book, you know what I mean? Do you have any thoughts on how do we cultivate that? And I don't want to say skepticism, I guess healthy skepticism. But children today, they have to know you can't just believe everything a screen or even a voice tells you anymore,

Tim Knotts: Yeah. I think that's a perennial problem that's just been exacerbated or blown up by the accessibility of first Google, as you said, and then now even maybe more dangerously, artificial intelligence. They're fine as the sources for beginning an inquiry into something, if you want a quick survey overview, and then you're going to dig in and find out more. It can be a fine place to start, like Wikipedia used to be.

But yeah, I mean, as a classicist. I think taking our cues from Plato is always a good place to go, and he would argue that information that's just a piece of knowledge. It's not the whole of it, right? It's the beginning of something. He would call it an opinion. I have an opinion because I heard someone say something or I read about it on the Internet. It doesn't become actual knowledge until it's somehow tied down either by testing it by experience or by testing it against common sense or testing against what other experts or people that you trust know to where it becomes sort of a weight of things instead of just a I read that somewhere.

Julie Walker: We spent some time recording a podcast, and we'll put a link in the show notes where Andrew, you talk a little bit about the dangers of AI and people believing that they actually came up with these ideas, and they didn't. And so I will just point you back to that. I loved your question, Timothy, what to read next. I love that you, as an adult, were trying to find someone to give you some ideas. And I know our listeners would be like, yeah, I want to see that list.

Andrew Pudewa: What's the pathway you walked?

Julie Walker: Right. But I also want to just kind of take a moment to have you share this idea of how to get ready for that. And I think, Andrew, you described the “that” is walking into a high school room where students can have intelligent conversations with each other and be intentional and care that they're learning something. And I think that leads us to really what we're talking about today is this idea of rhetoric. And what does that word actually mean?

Andrew Pudewa: What are its foundation? When does it start and what are its foundations?

Julie Walker: And how do we get our kids ready to have those conversations where they're not dependent upon chat GPT or any of these other

Andrew Pudewa: All right, Timothy, she asked you two big questions there.

Tim Knotts: Yeah, maybe more than 2. I had a really wise mentor who pointed out that there are many good and great books that are just not the right book for you, or at least not yet. And along the way, there are a lot of missteps. I picked up books that I saw someone recommend or someone recommended to me directly that I wasn't ready for yet. And it led to a lot of frustration and uncertainty about things. So there are books that are beautiful and good and really heavy and complicated that maybe aren't the best starting spots, but more of something to be encountered later in a journey of reading. So finding where you are and what is the next good thing is a very personal journey, I think, because if you don't have a background in education, there may be some books that would be great to understand first about education in general before you dive into the deep end of the pool about classical education. Or there may be books about child development, or a classical view of the soul, or maybe even other skill sets or basic information that are a gap. Because we all have them

Andrew Pudewa: Can you name a few of your ones that you would recommend in a quick elevator talk to someone who said, that sounds so cool. What should I read? And you got 20 seconds to give them a few titles.

Tim Knotts: Quick elevator speech well again for a younger family *The Well-Trained Mind* is a good introduction to a way to approach a classical education, especially younger children to prepare for that journey. As a more adult reader, Clark and Jain's, *The Liberal Arts Tradition* was very, very eye-opening to me and important on my own journey.

Not for maybe a beginner who's never read anything about classical education, but it's not that deep end of trying to read actual philosophy. Or maybe, again, something a little farther down the road David Hicks *Norms and Nobility*.

Andrew Pudewa: That's a pretty stiff book,

Julie Walker: I was just going to say.

Tim Knotts: That's definitely for the end of a journey, not the beginning.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah.

Julie Walker: Well, and I also can't help but think, Andrew, of our writing method and how we teach writing. We do take it down to that smallest step. Even starting as early as copywork, you keep promoting the value of copywork, but we eventually get into the persuasive essay and actually the classical arrangement model that we have in our *Bible-Based Writing Lessons* and a few other resources. So having that step by step, having that pathway, I think that's what we all crave. Like, tell me what to do next.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's interesting because all truth is God's truth. And you can find truth in many places. But sometimes it's confused with other things. But I think we have built on, to some degree, the phenomenal foundation that Maria Montessori set for how young children learn, continuing on with Charlotte Mason philosophy very much. Some people ask, is there a conflict between Charlotte Mason and classical? And I think the best answer is, well, if you look at classical and kind of reverse engineer it down to little kids, you'd end up with Charlotte Mason. Lots of memory work, time outside, literature-rich environment, not stressing so much about technical side of academics with young children, and I think that's one fear that parents have, especially if they have a child who's got a challenge like dyslexia, dysgraphia, ADHD, auditory processing. They would kind of think, well, there's no way my kid could do that level of rigor, whatever they perceive that to be, maybe they visited a classical school and went into the second grade classroom or something, the philosophical foundation is there. And then, moving forward.

So Timothy, are you still lawyering now or? Are you doing something else? Are you lawyering on the side? What, how are you using your education and time? And how old are your kids?

Tim Knotts: I am not practicing law. I gave that up a while ago. I now write curriculum and try to write on the side some interesting articles and things now and then. I am a co founder of the New England Consortium of Classical Educators, which is a four year old endeavor up in the New England area to support classical education in our region. And we can talk some more about that, because Andrew, you and I have something to share about that. And my children are 16, 14, 12, and 10 years old.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, you're right in the thick of it.

Tim Knotts: Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: golden years,

Tim Knotts: We are playing with all the, all the different things with our family right now. And it's good. Starting to see some of the fruit of the early and middle years of an education

with our 16 year old, and she is starting to flourish in some ways that show me that there were some good decisions made along the way.

Andrew Pudewa: That's such a delightful time and it's, I think, reassuring for younger parents or parents whose kids are younger to hear stories of how other people's teenagers are turning out well, or then they become young adults and they thrive in higher education or whatever they choose to do. So you're probably in the great position to share and write more.

So people do tend to, I think, maybe fall into, or their introduction into, the trivium is the grammar, logic, rhetoric, and some people have kind of taken Dorothy Sayers idea and attached ages to that, so kids are in, quote, the grammar stage or, quote, the logic stage or dialectic and, quote, the rhetoric stage.

And I've always had a little bit of an issue with that because all three of those things can be taught, should be taught to children of all ages, but it looks different, you know. The way you teach grammar to five, six, seven, eight, nine year old children is mostly, I think, and what Dorothy Sayers was referring to in the "Lost Tools of Learning" essay, is about furnishing the mind, the memory, memorizing those Latin paradigms, memorizing lots of poetry, building the vocabulary, building the patterns of syntax, And then as they get a little older, then you can start identifying parts of speech and the rules that govern their behavior and kind of explaining the mechanics behind the language they're already familiar with.

And then of course, grammar can be studied, well, forever. I mean, it's kind of an infinite thing like math. You could just keep studying grammar your whole life if you wanted to, so there's not necessarily an end to it, but then it does kind of phase out.

Same thing with logic. You look for opportunities to teach some logical processes to young children. And then again, you can study logic till your whole life. There's no end of that. And then rhetoric, we tend, people tend to think, Oh, that's a high school level thing.

But my interest is really, What's the runway into good rhetoric? If you want this high school student to shine in rhetoric, what are the components of rhetoric? We know the five canons, but, but the five canons isn't necessarily kind of a plan for developing those skills rather than, I mean it could be and maybe more needs to be written and said about that. But if you would maybe reflect on that idea that that this grammar, logic, rhetoric are really not age categories so much as integrated skills that you continue to refine and practice.

And then what is the best preparation for rhetoric when you have children that are younger than that typical age that we would label them by Sayers' paradigm, rhetoric-age students?

Tim Knotts: Yeah, I mean, you're totally right that grammar, dialectic and rhetoric are, they're arts. There's something much bigger than the modern subject matters that we tend to pigeonhole students into studying. They're also not ages, or even stages, though I think Sayers was on to something when she was pointing out that there are things about them that are compatible or maybe easier to approach at certain

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, definitely. Definitely.

Tim Knotts: But yes, I think ultimately the best preparation for being a rhetorician is to become a good grammarian, and a good dialectician or logician. If you can't do those things well, then I think you have no hope of becoming a good rhetorician. If you don't know how words work and how they're commonly used, which is really the way that the ancients would more talk about grammar, then you can't effectively choose the right words and combinations of words to convey your meanings to your audience, which is fundamental to a rhetorician.

As to logic or dialectic, if you don't wrestle with the ideas and how they connect together and how you can show a progress or progression from one idea to another idea to finally a conclusion that you want your audience to follow along with you, then you actually have nothing valuable to say to anybody when it comes to rhetoric.

So I think grammar and dialectic are your pathway to rhetoric, or at least to the doorstep of rhetoric. But you're right too that there are things that you can do with a younger student that will ease them into that study of rhetoric when they arrive there. I mean, we all know, show and tell as a little kid or some kind of getting up and presenting in front of your peers in a classroom or at a co-op or wherever there's opportunity. And you practice the canon of delivery by standing up straight and by looking at your audience and by speaking clearly and at an appropriate volume level and not fidgeting with your body. Those are all things, micro skills that can be practiced with young students that will prepare them to become a better rhetorician when they are asked to stand and deliver an actual speech during a speech and debate competition or delivering an assignment they've been given.

Andrew Pudewa: Or arguing in front of the Supreme Court someday.

Tim Knotts: Yeah or standing and delivering a stump speech as a candidate.

Andrew Pudewa: I think we have such a dearth of good examples of rhetoric in the public forum today. You go through a political season and you listen to these people who want to be elected to lead you in local, state, or federal positions. And you just wonder, do they even hear themselves? And if they do, why don't they change? Why don't they work a little harder on, as you said, using the better words in the better combinations to communicate more accurately the ideas that they want to promulgate. And I think it's so important when we have communities where children can observe, number one, older students and even adults doing this, which is why I am such a huge supporter of speech and debate NCFCA, STOA. I wish every kid could have that experience to some degree. And then of course the training that then reinforces, but you have to have one, you have to have both. I think you have to have the environment that creates the examples that they grow up with. And then you have to have the technical side, one without the other really doesn't seem to bring the product that you want.

So tell us a little bit about the New England consortium and what you do. And then we have a conference coming up this year, I'm very excited, and who attends and what people might be

able to expect if they're in that part of the world, or maybe they want to fly to that part of the world.

Julie Walker: There are airports in that area, I'm pretty sure.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm pretty sure, yeah.

Tim Knotts: At least one or two. So the New England Consortium we founded several years back for the purpose of supporting and growing classical education in the New England area. There are wonderful and old schools up there, the oldest classical school in America is Boston Latin, but many of the schools that sort of still cling to the idea or the name classical have largely abandoned it in practice or don't fully understand it. We have a lot of young parents who see that their school options are limited and want something different for their children. And we have actually a fair number of adults who aren't looking to be teachers or educate their own children necessarily, but want to continue to be educated and are seeking opportunities to learn and to grow and to have good conversations. And part of what it is to be involved in classical education is to be a perennial and persistent student. So we want to support those people as well.

So we do put on an annual conference. It is July 18 and 19 in 2025 near Plymouth Rock. So yeah, if you're in the area and want to come check out the interesting historical artifact that it that is on this rock.

Julie Walker: Which is very small.

Tim Knotts: It is. It's actually pretty disappointing. I don't recommend it as the highlight of your New England trip. There are many other better things to see, but you would be in the area and could go be disappointed along with the rest of us. But yeah,

Andrew Pudewa: I want to go to the Boston Library and see the Joan of Arc room. I was told by a friend that there's a whole room filled with, I don't know how many, but well over a dozen thousand books about Joan of Arc, who evidently is the third or fourth most written about person in all of history, which is kind of surprising. So I want to verify that. I've heard it, but I want to know for sure that it actually exists.

Tim Knotts: Many of our Classical Conversations students write about Joan of Arc when they do their Faces of History projects, using the IEW materials to do so. So they're adding to that great corpus of writing.

So this year our conference theme is really centering on goodness, one of the three transcendentals that are identified by the ancients as being part of what it is to be good.

So goodness, truth and beauty together. And we've investigated beauty and truth the last couple of years, this year we're on goodness, and Andrew is coming to be our keynote speaker, which we're very excited about. There'll be all kinds of different sessions, some that are very practical, hands on pedagogy kind of sessions or sessions about how do we talk

about things like fables and fairy tales and use them as preparation for further education. Some of them will be a little more on the esoteric side. So for those who like the deep end of the pool and want to talk about norms and nobility, we can do that. But we also do other things during the year. We have several book clubs that we operate because again, people, where we live rarely find them satisfying around the area and in person. So we want to support people that way. We do teacher trainings so that we can help support our local classical schools who want to develop their staff and improve their own practice in the classroom, or as administrators. A lot of different things going on that we, that we really enjoy doing.

And again our great goal is to have lots and lots of friends. With whom we can do classical education together.

Andrew Pudewa: Awesome. And where can people find out about this event and your organization?

Tim Knotts: So we have a website through our partner, Kepler Education, because they are our, sort of, not a parent, our first major alliance that we made as an early endeavor. So then we are at theclassicalconsortium.com And you can find us there at the New England Consortium of Classical Educators for a sub page there.

You can also email us at NECCE@theclassicalconsortium.com

Julie Walker: Great. And of course, we'll include all these links in our show notes. So listener, if you're out for a walk and didn't get a chance to write that down, just come to our show notes and you can click right over to that. Well, Timothy, I think we're closer to being ready for rhetoric. If I were to summarize this, I would say choose a good pathway to improve your vocabulary, improve your syntax. I don't know, something like maybe IEW Structure and Style, perhaps, I don't know, maybe something like that as they're getting older. And consider that logic type of writing or study. And by doing that, then they can help to lead readers to the conclusion that you want to have them embrace, and therefore now they'll become good rhetoricians.

Did I say that word right? First time I've ever heard it today.

Tim Knotts: Rhetoricians. Yeah,

Andrew Pudewa: Returition.

Julie Walker: It's a great word. So there we go. Three easy steps, but a lot of hard reading in between, maybe.

Tim Knotts: It's a lot, but it's really rewarding to see where you can go and how much can be accomplished with just a steady diet of good intake and lots of practiced output.

Julie Walker: And it's worth it.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for joining us today. Time as always just whips by, but I will look forward to seeing you again personally in Boston for the conference. And hopefully we can continue our relaxed conversation in the spaces in between.

Tim Knotts: Thank you for having me. Enjoyed our conversation a lot.

Andrew Pudewa: God bless you.

Julie Walker: 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.