Podcast 464: Thinking with the Canons of Rhetoric

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: That discipline of “think before you write” is so phenomenally valuable. And hopefully it transfers a little bit into “think before you speak.”

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,

Julie Walker: Andrew, we hear this all the time. “I don't know what to write. I can't think of anything.”

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, well, we don't necessarily, but we hear parents and teachers say that they hear that all the time.

Julie Walker: Yeah, it's the number one problem in learning how to write or teaching writing.

Andrew Pudewa: And if, if I meet a child who doesn't like writing, very often that's where you get to in the conversation is they just don't know what to do.

Julie Walker: Yeah, they can't think of stuff. And of course, one of the things that we are tackling head on in our system is we don't expect the students to come up with something to write about. We give them the what to write about so they can learn how to write, but of course, at the same time, learning how to think,

Andrew Pudewa: Right, and the music analogy holds very strong here because if you had a kid sit down at the piano and taught them the names of the notes and then said, now just play, play around, fool around, they might very easily say, “well, I don't know what to play.” So what we do is we give them–here's the piece, learn this, here's another piece, learn this, here's another piece, memorize it, polish it up, get good, do that, learn a dozen pieces.

And then what happens is the child will use their natural aptitude for combination and permutation of ideas and draw musical strands from different things they have committed to memory and then be able to improvise to some degree. And there's a very clear relationship in music: the more music you have memorized, the greater facility you will have in improvisation and likely also composition if you want to take it to a formal level.

So I think we're working in that same zone: Here's an article. Use this. Make a key word outline. Retell it. Here's a story. Retell the story. Here's some encyclopedic information. Choose, collect, organize, and present facts. You don't have to think up facts. In fact, that's a dangerous thing for people to be doing.

And so we work in the units, Unit 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 in this kind of orderly way of building up the repertoire of language-based ideas expressed in writing, which then become available. And I think most people might agree that the language side is bigger in a way than the music side, at least in terms of a child's experience because there's just so many more words and possible combinations, infinite possible combinations of words. And there are with notes too, but the language has this larger magnitude, and it's got that formal, logic, grammar-based thinking attached to it.

But it's, I think, a very good analogy. And so, what we love to do, what we love to see is students who come in and that kind of blank brain, blank paper, holding the pencil, "I don't know what to do"…bring them through our system for half a year. And then they hit Unit 7, Inventive Writing, or they hit a demand from some other teacher or source or expectation, or in schools can be these prompt-based standardized writing assessments. And then they have so much greater success and confidence that they know how to approach the task.

Julie Walker: So I have in front of me our *University-Ready Writing* course, and I am kind of using this as a way to demonstrate how we teach thinking in the context of writing. And this in some ways is almost a crash course. Students don't have to have any previous experience with our Structure and Style methodology to be able to follow it, to be able to be successful here. And yet it really does prepare the students for college-level writing, which of course is our goal with this course. And we have a testimony actually from a dean of students at a university who talked about, and we can put a link in the show notes to that video of how this has been so helpful.

But. I wanted to tell our listeners where you start at the very beginning of this course. You call it your "hurt and rescue operation." You ask the students to write a 20-minute essay, given a prompt. You actually give them two options of a prompt to choose from. One has to do with learning a foreign language, and is it worth it to spend the time learning a foreign language?

The other is a quote. I'll read you the quote: "Education has produced a vast population able to read, but unable to distinguish what is worth reading." And so the students are to respond to that. And all they have is a pen, some paper, and what they're carrying around in their brain, which of course is for us, a Unit seven, inventive writing, but you start right off there just to kind of show the kids what they don't know.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, that's typical of the task they might encounter, especially on, say, a SAT-style test. SAT doesn't have a writing prompt part to it anymore. They kind of gave up on that years ago. But I think that's typical of the task. Here, think about this. Now you have a limited amount of time to sound as knowledgeable, articulate, intelligent, logical, literary, as you possibly can; ready, set, go.

And that, I mean, that's stressful for anybody, right? Even if you have experience doing this sort of thing. It can be stressful for the kids who had little or no experience. Hopefully, it was

very stressful, but that's part of the goal, right? Is that hurt and rescue, and that's true in sales, that's true in teaching.

If a student realizes, wow, “I really don't know what to do here,” then you can back up and say, okay, that was just an exercise. Now let's walk a path, and I assume we give them a similar type of thing toward the end of the course so they can compare how much did they learn over this twelved weeks or whatever.

Julie Walker: Well, this may surprise you because it has been a few years since you taught this course, but we actually reintroduce these topics in week five. So you're right. There is a path. Week one, let's hurt them. Okay. Let's rescue them. Let's teach them a system of note taking, which is really enjoyable, I think, for the students. Write a little paragraph on plagiarism, which we thought was somewhat ironic, but helpful at the same time because so many students don't even realize they're plagiarizing.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and if you write a paragraph on it, you might learn how to spell the word. And that's fun.

Julie Walker: Exactly. But then, week three, you teach, it's actually in week two, you teach the precis model, which is much like a Unit 4.

Andrew Pudewa: It's a fancy word for summary

Julie Walker: a summary, exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: To take in information, sort through it, extract the salient or most important parts, present that, and that's something that students are constantly having a need for in higher education. And of course, the biggest problem everybody suffers today is too much information.

So learning to sort through those great massive files of information is, it's got to be learned. It's got to be a skill that is learned. And unfortunately, I suspect that many students today are not going to do that because they're going to just ask chatGPT or some AI agent, give me the summary of _____ and then they're going to take that and tweak it around a little bit, rewrite it and think that they learned something from doing that.

Julie Walker: Right, exactly, rather than wrestling it with themselves and really knowing it. What we do typically is we give them content as they're learning this new skill. So how do you write a precis? We gave them excerpts from Eleanor Roosevelt's speech that she gave in Paris in 1948, following of course World War II, and talking about human rights.

And the students, I mean, this is a multiple paragraph speech, the students’ assignment was to choose two topics from the speech and write a precis about that topic.

Andrew Pudewa: About each of two topics.

Julie Walker: Right. And what I love about this is this actually gives a very clear step-by-step process of how to write. One. Write the topic line. What's your topic?

Andrew Pudewa: You got to decide.

Julie Walker: You've got to decide on that. Follow the pattern. Subject, topic, one more word about the topic. So that's what your topic line is. And then find interesting, important, or because these are now college kids, or soon-to-be-college kids, relevant. Are these facts relevant to your topic? And then write out your key word outline, and then edit it. Give someone else to look at it because it's so hard to self edit, right? And then rewrite it because there's no such thing as a first and only draft.

Andrew Pudewa: And it's interesting as older students–especially if they didn't come through our system or a system that requires, if you will, pre-writing activities. I don't really like the word, but a lot of people do it, but outlining–that discipline of think-before-you-write is so phenomenally valuable. And hopefully it transfers a little bit into think-before-you-speak as well because then we can improve the quality of not just our speaking and writing, but our thinking as well.

So that's why we do key word outlines with everyone, whether they're in second grade or graduate school. If they don't have that foundational ability to separate the complexity of what am I going to say? and then saying it, they won't ever reach their higher potential on this.

Julie Walker: Key word outline, key to who we are at IEW. Absolutely. So I'm gonna skip ahead now to week five because this is now where we get into a little bit more of this thinking skill, specifically invention. And I want to just be careful a little bit here because I am personally, I don't know if you know this about me, Andrew, but I am personally allergic to us being overly concerned about "classical education." Although, as it turns out, I guess I kind of gave my kids a classical education.

Andrew Pudewa: We would bring in some wise words from a good friend of mine. "What is classical education? It's what education was before we had modern education, right?" So the classical stuff has some specific vocabulary attached to it, and you can connect it with things that are very old in the way Quintilian suggested things 2000 years ago, but it's really been the form of education that everyone experienced up to really our generation.

We were at the tail end of some of the tradition remaining in the 60s and 70s, but if we were to go back to our parents and grandparents–that was a classical education. They may not have studied in the same way, the canons of rhetoric, the way people are now today talking about it in the classical schools and classical renewal. But that's what was there. Even Webster, he didn't have any clue what I was talking about when I used the term classical education. But when he talked about his education, that's what it was. He got all that stuff.

Julie Walker: Yes. You're absolutely correct. And I personally, this is one of my core values is including people. And so if anybody isn't studying classical education, they can still come and have a seat at our table and we've got great things to talk about and we will listen and we will have conversations. And ironically, isn't that part of what a classical education is?

Andrew Pudewa: And sometimes you bring in the terminology based on the foundation of experience and understanding that people have, and it makes a whole lot more sense. So if you just pull someone off the street and start talking about the canons of rhetoric and the tools for invention, the words don't connect with their experience.

But if you bring them through a process, ideally, I would say the nine units of Structure and Style, and then you bring in those terms, then they have experience to connect it to. And a lot of our kids will kind of grow up in a situation where they learn your introduction for an essay should have an attention getter. And then in the end you should restate the topics, right? Well, if you've done that and then someone comes along and says, Oh, by the way, that's what we call an exordium. That's what we call a recapitulation because like, okay, I get that. But without the experience, the words can be harder to relate to.

And so I think that's where we stand in a really. good place in the world of language education, because Webster created this thing. He used words that students could understand. We've refined and improved, I think, on his work. And, but then the students go away to, it may be a high school or they go to college and they do study rhetoric in the formal, traditional, classical, full Monty sense. It all makes perfect sense to them.

Julie Walker: Yes. Yes. Perfect. And I want to talk just for a moment about rhetoric and defining what that actually means because in the common world today, rhetoric is not a good thing. It means you're basically lying to me.

Andrew Pudewa: Someone's trying to deceive you with words, it's just rhetoric. Well, we can look at it from many definitions. The simplest would be, rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and it is neither good nor bad. It's a tool. Rhetoric doesn't hurt people, people hurt people. So that kind of leads us to the second definition, which is a good person speaking well, right?

So that embedded in the idea of rhetoric is character. So building that character through the educational environment, the home environment, the community, the good and great books that you furnish the mind with, the good and great ideas, and that there's that element of striving for excellence, virtue, in the non religious sense, is being the best thing that you can be, being the best man or woman that you can be.

And of course, you go off and define what does good mean, but that idea of a good person speaking well. And then, you get into the speaking-well part. And then you get into some technical aspects, and the five canons, or divisions, or the five things that you traditionally would learn if you wanted to speak well. So, those are usually introduced in this order: invention, arrangement, elocution, memory, and delivery. Now, those are in that particular

order because of the logical idea. You have to go give a speech. You have to write an essay. What's the first thing you have to do?

Julie Walker: Come up with what to write. Or speak.

Andrew Pudewa: Come up with what to write. So that's why invention, that would be first. Then once you've got lots of ideas, you want to refine that into a good ordering, a good sequence, a good arrangement of ideas. Once you've done that, then you want to be able to use your skill with grammar and vocabulary and literary style, literary sense.

Julie Walker: Or maybe look at a style checklist and add some dress ups and sentence openers.

Andrew Pudewa: And you want to be able to say that in the most winsome, poetic, effective, stimulate the imagination of the reader, delight them, right, the delight? And then once you've written the thing, well, in the classical sense–you couldn't just send it to print place and get a book made or send it to Amazon print on demand or promulgate it on a blog.

What did you have to do? You had to prepare to speak that. And so the ancient rhetoric was that you would then use tools of memory so that you could give that speech without standing up looking uninspired reading off your paper. So that. Committing to memory, those ideas, and of course we could riff on the idea of how memorizing something helps you own it, ownership, gives you authority, authority, helps you be persuasive.

I mean, you watch one person reading a teleprompter and another person with a well-prepared presentation. It's a world of difference, world of difference. And then the last would be delivery, where you would study essentially the way to use your body and your voice and modulate and keep variety to keep people engaged.

And that's why some people would say, kind of, drama is the capstone of rhetoric. Because it's people who study drama that are most likely to be able to give a speech and use all of that subtle stuff. I just heard a really interesting podcast about the use of gestures in public speaking and how hugely impactful this is. I can't get into it now because it was very, very developed, but she was comparing various public figures and how they speak and how they affect you differently and how you as a person, either in conversation or in front of an audience can learn certain things to draw people in.

Julie Walker: Right. Right. And I've got to do this: a nod to our I*ntroduction to Public Speaking*, where you teach the students how to use gestures. And obviously, this is something that you do well. You're a great speaker. My son, and now all the listeners who go and watch you at conferences, noted something about you. When you do your hand gestures, you hold your violin.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, yes, my hand gets shaped like a violin motion. Well, we're all going to be shaped by the things that we learn, particularly in youth. That's why things like dance is so

valuable for young people, whether they continue dancing or not is irrelevant. But to study dance for a time when you're young, boy or girl, right, is going to give you a comfort level, a confidence that will just exude in your gestures and your expressions and the way you hold your body for your whole life. And, and music is closely related to that. But back to our subject at hand, which is the five canons of rhetoric.

Julie Walker: Yes, and how we at IEW use those tools in a very practical way, in a very technical way to teach students how to come up with content and present it in a, as you say, a winsome and well-ordered way. And if we were just to pick on one today, which would be invention, because that's the first one, I know that there's some subdivisions of this that we also talk about in *University-Ready Writing.* And you came up with a, an acronym for invention and how to come up with invention and that is DC at Sunrise.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah.

Julie Walker: So we probably only have time just to talk about one of them today, now that we've done this whole lead up of Is IEW classical? Well, yes. Do you have to be studying a classical education to benefit from IEW? No, but do you learn things that will help you be a better thinker at IEW? Absolutely. And so the first one is division.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. And, if anyone has watched me teach the TWSS, and we get to Unit 7, I will kind of reiterate the fact, this is the door through which you have to pass. And we do this exercise where you give the kids some subject, concrete or abstract–trees, right? I think I start with trees and say, "well, what are some things about aspects of or topics pertaining to trees that you could think of?"

So, kids might say kinds of trees or, the homeschooly types of kids will say deciduous because they know the word. You might get into climbing trees, building stuff in trees, building stuff with trees, things that shade, poems about trees. And you can expand that thing and come up with a couple dozen, then you can take one of those and go into the next idea. But if you don't do that division thing, you're just dead in the water. And what's so interesting is in the Unit 7 with the teacher training, I try to pick something that everybody kind of feels that would be hard to write 500 words about pocket lint or…

Julie Walker: Cotton balls

Andrew Pudewa: cotton balls, or whatever we come up with. That would be hard. Then we do the division exercise, and then I say, stop. Now ask yourself. Is it going to be easier to write your 500 words about cotton balls than you thought? And everyone, everyone says, yes. That's an amazing shift. That's a paradigm shift. And so, if you want kids to write about their dog or their family or some experience they had or a vacation they took. When they look at the whole thing, they can't get in depth on anything, so it's very surface-y, it's very superficial, it's just one thing they think of and another thing they think, but once you do that division thing, and you divide the big thing into smaller things, you've started on that pathway of going into something, seeing into it, seeing more than just the thing.

But seeing the aspects of it and that, to me, is something you can train in very young children. But if they don't have that as a thinking skill or habit, then you can still train it into older children and even adults.

Julie Walker: I love this exercise that you have shared before about, if you were a teacher in a five-day-a-week school, you would have your students, you'd put a word on the board, just a random word, and have them come up with everything that they can think of.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I would make it a noun. This will work better if you use an abstract or concrete noun.

Julie Walker: True.

Andrew Pudewa: And then just say, you've got three minutes to think of everything you can. And I use this language, and I've refined this way of saying this over years, “things about, aspects of, topics pertaining to.” And the word topics may be a little abstract for kids.

We try to use it very precisely. It's from the Greek word *topoi*, meaning place, right, or location. We get the word topographical map from that same. So you have a big thing. So where are the places in that thing that you can go to and explore? And then there's places in that thing where you can unpack and explore.

So. That phrase, “things about, aspects of, or topics pertaining to,” seems to open the door in their mind for most all kids. Sometimes they still get stuck, and we'll give them help. But, that's the practice, that's the pathway.

Julie Walker: I'm going to just share a little bit from, again, *University-Ready Writing*, just to kind of wrap this up. So that prompt that you introduced in week one, we're now revisiting in week five. And I'll just pick one of them. And that was: Are most people today unable to tell the difference between something that is worth reading and something that is not? And so starting with division, you had the students come up with some things about, aspects of, and topics pertaining to this idea of, can you discern what is worth reading.

Andrew Pudewa: Value of reading.

Julie Walker: And of course, these are pretty intelligent high school students that you're

Andrew Pudewa: And you've got the, the board notes,

Julie Walker: I do have the board notes.

Andrew Pudewa: and so what, what'd they come up with?

Julie Walker: Well, they talked about the types of reading genres, fiction, biography, phonics, being able to read, foreign language books, vocabulary, I think they got mixed up maybe a little bit with the earlier prompt, but you can read books in other languages, vocabulary, maybe it's too hard to read, maybe life lessons, imagination, and then this one is

circle, I'll come back to this, focus, attention span, and then pleasures versus learning. And so this, the students then wrote about, or this particular student wrote about this idea of attention span, and I want to read their paragraph.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay. Yeah, I'd be delighted to hear it.

Julie Walker:

> Most people are unable to determine what is worth reading because people are choosing hyper-palatable digital alternatives to books. Before the era of digital technology, people chose to read to expand their knowledge and learn skills. Flying to Rome in a plane or watching a pristine 4K walking tour video was not an option. Today, people choose to watch a free YouTube video about car maintenance rather than read a $30 book. Unfortunately, videos and movies, whether educational or entertaining, do the intellectual work for the user by replacing the need to read. As a result, people are losing the ability to think abstractly. Reading requires a mental quietness and focus for comprehension. In order for people to determine what is worth reading, the culture must build an environment where reading is recognized as mentally strengthening, practically viable, and even enjoyable. Until that happens, people cannot discern what is worth reading and what is not.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow. I love it. I particularly enjoyed the use of hyper-palatable because it, it alludes to food and junk food and highly processed foods that are engineered to cause us to want to do more of that. So it's a wonderful vocabulary. Who wrote that? Do you remember?

Julie Walker: I don't know.

Andrew Pudewa: It's just a sample we pulled.

Julie Walker: It's a sample we pulled, and they did a great job of following those steps that we spelled out in week three to be able to then follow the steps in week five to be able to come up with the what to write about just through the process of invention through division.

So that's our theme for the year is how to think. And of course, we'll continue to unpack that. I hope, dear listener, that you enjoy the journey with us. I hope that you were able to maybe take some really practical things that you can do tomorrow with your students. either in your classroom or at your dining room table and help them learn to think.

Andrew Pudewa: Could I just add one more thought in here? So, when you talk to people and you use this combination of words, how to think, or learning how to think, one of the immediate responses is, well, everybody thinks, you don't have to learn that, it just happens.

But if we were to make some comparisons, for example, how to walk. Well, everybody walks, but there are some better and worse ways to walk depending on what your goals are. Or how to eat. Yeah, everybody knows how to chew and swallow, but there are better ways to chew and swallow.

Julie Walker: Avoid those hyper-palatable foods.

Andrew Pudewa: There are better choices that you can make as you chew and swallow. So even the simplest, most instinctive of our human behaviors, instinctual human behaviors, there are better and worse ways to do that.

How to sit, right? Everybody can sit, but you can affect the health of your spine for your life by the habits you create by sitting. And thinking is the same way. Yeah, everybody does it, but there are better and worse ways to go about it. The practice of that and that will affect you for the duration of your lifespan.

Julie Walker: Absolutely.

Andrew Pudewa: So that just came to mind.

Julie Walker: Well, thank you. And we'll talk more about this idea of comparison in a future podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: All right.

Julie Walker: All right. Thank you, Andrew.

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.