Podcast 468: The Grammar of Thinking with Pamela White, Part 2

Episode Transcript

Pamela White: If you listen to AI speech for any length of time, you may discover that it grates on the ear. It's tedious to listen to. And I would say that the same is true with AI writing. It's like spark Notes. It misses the heartbeat of the writer.

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: Andrew, last week we were so honored to have the author of our *Fix It!®️ Grammar* program with us, Pamela White, and we decided we just need to have her back.

Andrew Pudewa: We have to continue this conversation.

Julie Walker: Yes, so good.

Andrew Pudewa: Too many things that still need to be discussed.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Well, and I'd like to chime in on a question that you asked, Pamela, if you don't mind. And that is, how much grammar is enough? Now, I'm only just quoting people that I know and love. One of them would be you. How much grammar is enough? And you say, if a student were to go through all six levels, there are six levels of our *Fix It! Grammar*, we recommend that you start about fourth grade with Level 1, and then that will get you into high school. With Level 6, if you complete Level 6, you will know more grammar than 99.99999% of the English speaking world.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I say that, but it doesn't quite answer the question that parents have. Right. Which is, well, yeah, but how much is enough?

Julie Walker: Well, I have another answer to that as well. So, I have three sons, and I gave all of them, I forced all of them to take piano lessons. And two of them got through all of Book 2. The middle son exceeded my wildest expectations, and he loved it. So I would say, if you've got a student, you gotta get them through Book 4 at least get them through Book 4. But if you've got students who really love and appreciate language and want to go deeper, absolutely go all the way to Level 6.

Andrew Pudewa: My answer kind of goes that same direction. I like to point out to people that grammar is an art, not a science, right? We tend to think, well, study enough so you can pass a test to prove you learned something. You may or may not ever use that information, but you proved that you could learn it if you had to.

Whereas, when we look at the arts–and we can certainly go to music, we could certainly go to fine arts, like painting, drawing. But we also look at arts of language and grammar being the first of the seven liberal arts. So an art is something you can study forever, right? There's no cap on how long you can continue to learn and practice and improve in music or in painting or in dance or in a sport, or even in math or in grammar. So you could study grammar the rest of your life. And some people do, I guess.

Pamela White: I can attest to that. I'm still challenged by questions that I have to study in order to find an answer that satisfies me at least.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. So, what I like to do is make that comparison and say, well, you don't think about how much music is enough. You do as much as you can, given all the variables. Your time, your resources, the aptitude and interest of the student, it's enough to grow up playing a musical instrument, even if you don't continue.

It has enriched you permanently in your life. It's same with math. You could study math your entire life. So how much is enough? Well, that depends on lots of factors, right? But I think we all would agree you're going to be a happier, better, more competent human being if you have played music. At least sometimes, and that you do some math, at least sometimes, and that you bring that confidence into adulthood.

And I would put grammar in that same area. Does that make sense?

Julie Walker: Yeah, I love it. So, we ended last week's episode with a cliffhanger question. What about Grammarly?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Because that's where the parents think, well, why do you really need to do this, since kid doesn't like it, it's tedious, I don't really understand it myself. I, we could be doing maybe better things with our time. Why do this? Especially now that we have technology that can essentially fix you for you.

Pamela White: And it is tempting. It's very tempting. The grammar skills of programs like Grammarly are impressive. They're not perfect, but they are impressive. And they're getting very close to perfect and may even get there. The problem comes from relying on someone else to mop up our grammar and never learning it ourselves because when we don't learn grammar and punctuation, and we don't practice it and use it, it dumbs us down. And ironically, it's not so much because of that technical proficiency that you're talking about. It's more because grammar and punctuation underpin thinking and communication.

We learn to think by processing language, by analyzing data, and AI takes those skills out of our hands, and so we never develop them, particularly in education. I would say that AI offers undeniable benefits to adults in some workplaces, but in the hands of students, it's just robbing them of developing these skills.

Andrew Pudewa: And we talked last week a bit about how learning grammar really helps with reading comprehension.

Julie Walker: That was amazing.

Andrew Pudewa: So yes, Grammarly, AI, it could probably help you produce a piece of writing that was more correct, perhaps, than you could do yourself, but it can't actually help you understand complex ideas when you read or even hear those in the same way that you would if you had the intimate knowledge of how all those words fit together and the grammar that allows for the meaning, that unlocks meaning. That, I think, is one of the biggest dangers. I'd put that on the top of the list for if you don't learn to write and understand what you're doing, you won't understand what you're reading.

Pamela White: I sometimes tell my students, if you are without understanding grammar, you are without understanding.

Julie Walker: Wow.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and it goes to music as well. Who loves music the most? The people who have experienced playing music. You have a much greater appreciation when you hear a violin concerto or a complicated guitar riff. You have a much greater appreciation if you've been in that world physically, mentally, and emotionally yourself. I think too many kids are now essentially being brainwashed, sometimes with the help of the school itself, that knowing how to use the technology to create the product is more important than knowing how to create the product yourself.

Julie Walker: I'm going to go back to your article, Andrew, that you wrote. Brilliant, I might add. We'll put a link in the show notes. This is writing maketh an exact man.

Andrew Pudewa: I just had AI whip that thing out.

Julie Walker: You did not. You absolutely did not. Here's the comment that I want to read and then Pamela, I'd love for you to comment on. "Technology will atrophy the skill it replaces. Give children spell checkers, and they will stop believing that learning to spell has any value, thus depriving themselves of a more intimate knowledge of the words they use every day. Give them grammar checkers, and they will believe that computers are better judges of correct language than they are, and thus stop caring about understanding the structure of their own language.

Pamela, you mentioned that, I mean, you work with students. Have you ever caught them using AI?

Pamela White: Yes, sadly. And that seems to be on the increase. I read them the riot act against using AI at the beginning of the year, not because I don't recognize that AI has real benefits to people in the world, but that at their stage of learning, it's doing more harm than good. But there are several reasons I can identify it, and I'm not going to get into all of the

reasons because we really don't want to tell the students what they could do to circumvent it, but their writing tends to jump out at you as AI-derived, which is why I would say that Andrew's article was not written by AI.

I don't look for AI writing in my students' work. I don't even want to see it. But without my wishing to see it, it jumps out at me. For one thing, it's usually impeccable grammatically which student writing rarely is. But, more importantly, AI writing is simply boring. There's a lifelessness to the language, and a monotony behind the ideas that deadens the language. So you feel this is not written by a human being with thoughts and with a heartbeat. It's written by a machine. I like to compare it to Muzak, that background music that you hear in elevators and restaurants. It's very polished, it's very professional, but there's no life to it. None of us really enjoys listening to muzak for any length of time.

And AI speech is a lot of the same way. It's perfectly modulated. It's clear. It's understandable, but it misses the heart and soul of the speaker. If you think about the way people speak, we have hesitations. We have slurs. We even have errors that let us know that a human brain, that there's real thought behind it. If you listen to AI speech for any length of time, you may discover that it grates on the ear. It's tedious to listen to. It's too perfect. Its modulations never vary. And the human ear needs to hear those hesitations, needs to hear the heartbeat of the speaker.

And I would say the same is true with AI writing. It's like Spark Notes. It has all the polish of Spark Notes or Cliff Notes, but it misses the heartbeat of the writer. And so there's this deadness to it that will never engage the reader in the same way that a person's real writing will. I think if you were to read, for example, the Spark Notes summary of a novel like *To Kill a Mockingbird* or Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, if I read the Spark Notes, I know the basic plot, but I'm not engaged with the characters. I don't remember the stories past few days, but when I read the novels, the characters come alive, and they stay with me like an old friend. I engage with the writer's ideas.

So the harm of AI writing is twofold. It's both dumbing down our ability to think critically, but it's also deadening language, and there's no substitute for that. I don't think that AI can ever produce what the human brain will produce–with all of its imperfections.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow, that's beautiful. And it makes me think of a quote that a student actually had on her notebook in my class decades ago. She clearly struggled with stuff, right? Everything was hard for her. But she had, right on the front of her notebook, "the one who struggles to learn is twice blessed. They learn what they're trying to learn, but they also learn how to overcome the struggle."

And I'm thinking about language here in the same way because, if you wrestle with the language, you are twice blessed. You're learning what you're trying to learn, but you're also learning how to do that thing. And overcoming the difficulty of it. But there's a flip side to this. The one who doesn't do that and relies on technology is twice cursed because they are

deluded into thinking that they know something that they don't know, and they don't overcome anything in the process of producing the product.

And I wonder if that's not perhaps the greatest danger of students relying on–whether it goes from the low tech side of a spellchecker to the high end of the best AI you can get to proofread and rewrite stuff or just produce text for you–there's a harm that students are doing to themselves. And I think the worst part of that is they are then deluded into thinking that they created something which they did not create.

And I don't know the consequences of that, either individually, emotionally, intellectually, culturally, humanity, the evolution of humanity or whatever. But there's something that is happening now with a much greater intensity than has ever before happened in the history of the world–I'm guessing–which is self-delusion.

Do you see anything like that at all, Pamela, in the students? Like, they give you something, and you know they don't know, but they think they do.

Pamela White: I don't see it directly because I don't have those conversations with them, and so, no I can't say that is true. I mean, you can, you can intuit it, you can infer it. What I do see is that students who have cheated in my classes using AI–and I say cheated because I make it clear at the beginning of the year that they're not allowed to for my classes–when confronted, one of the ways I recommend parents talk to them is ask them, tell me about what you wrote. And of course if they can't, then they can't write it. They

Andrew Pudewa: That's why the PhD dissertations always have to have an oral component to them, right? Tell me what you did here.

Pamela White: They also fall back on that just because it's easy. They're in a crunch, and I get it. They have time constraints, and they feel they can't produce the writing for that week. And a lot of times it's just a one, one off thing, but when you confront them about it–most of my students are very apologetic and embarrassed–but trying to get them to see how it's robbing them and how they're really hurting themselves. I think it's the most important thing that we can convey to them. It's not so much about the grade, it's not so much about whether you can achieve something academically, because probably some students are using AI and I'm not catching them. But it's more about the development of their thinking skills that they're not doing. They're robbing themselves of it, and so they're not going to be able to take on challenges as adults that their peers who did struggle through the process.

Andrew Pudewa: And you said something that I want to reiterate and it sparked a thought and that was about the soulless nature of the AI-generated text and how you, you can feel that.

I've been thinking a lot about the problem of young people today, really growing up in a world where you can't trust anything, right? You see a video. You can't trust that that is a real person doing a real thing or saying a real thing because AI-generated video and voice

synthesis and everything is so close to real and then it's coming across a tiny little screen as you're distracted doing something else and you think, I can't trust that.

You see a photograph. You can't really trust a photograph anymore. Whereas I grew up with newspapers and channel six news. You believed that stuff. Young people today, they just don't believe what they see or hear or read anymore. So they become very cynical about the world they live in. And this is a pathological condition that we're all suffering. But I believe the currency of this new, I don't know, hyper information, artificial age. I think artificial is the best word to describe it. We've gone from the information age into the artificial age. But I think the currency is going to be authenticity. If you can get someone to believe that you are real, that's going to have a lot of traction in a world where everybody's grown up to disbelieve everything. And that would be, I think, a very good apologetic to parents and teachers as to why it's worth taking the time to struggle through this problem of understanding grammar, using it, and being able to communicate well.

And I think people who write well very often are able to speak better, too, and the people who practice speaking are able to write better because they're just so integrally connected. You can't really separate the one from the other. You have the rare case of the super quiet kid who never speaks at all unless you ask them a question and then they answer you in the fewest number of words they can, but then they write very eloquently. But that's kind of an anomaly. Very often you see it's the kids who have the better spoken vocabulary who speak in more complex sentences that also write that way. Would you agree?

Pamela White: Absolutely

Julie Walker: So, Pamela, in your opinion, where does AI fit appropriately in the world? Can students benefit from these powerful tools in any way? And let me just give one example, and you can defend whether or not this is AI or not. In our S*tructure and Style for Students* videos, Level C in particular, we talk about using EasyBib, where you just put in the, uh, ISBN number and it spits out whatever format you need to put in your works cited page. That to me seems like AI, right? Is that AI and are there other appropriate ways that we can use AI without robbing us of building our, and I think about, and I've got to say this, I think about, Pamela, what you said about students who are too busy, well, you know what they're busy doing? They're probably busy playing video games late into the night, or some other…

Pamela White: Not all.

Julie Walker: no, not all, but I do think that we waste a lot of time in today's modern age,

Pamela White: Those are good questions. And I actually do allow my students to use MyBib or EasyBib in order to generate their bibliographies. But I also spend a considerable amount of time teaching them how to catch the errors because as of this date, none of them are perfect and there are quite a few errors. In fact, I'll sometimes show students a before and after if you just plug in, say the URL of your internet sources into MyBib or EasyBib and ask it to spit out a bibliography, the end result looks pretty, but there could well be errors scattered all the

way through it. And I showed them. Here are the errors that would happen if you did it with this. And so having some understanding of how one creates a bibliography. What are the expectations? How do the entries go, in what order? It allows you to proofread the bibliography as well as other parts of the paper?

Now, is that important? Depends on the teacher, honestly. Some teachers are going to care a good deal about it. Some teachers won't. I've heard of college professors who give zeros to papers where the bibliography isn't nearly perfect because they reason that if the student doesn't take time with the bibliography, they're not taking time with the rest of the paper, and that's an extreme example, and I seriously doubt that many do that, but there is a danger in relying too heavily on these tools, which are helpful tools, but only so far.

I also, out of curiosity this past year, asked ChatGPT to create a bibliography for me using MLA, the 9th edition, and it spit out what looked like a beautiful bibliography, but it was no better than the one I got from MyBib or EasyBib. It also had errors in it. So, so far, they haven't gotten the technology to be able to do that. If that time comes where I can trust one of those tools is able to spit out a perfect bibliography, I would be delighted to let my students use it because I don't think that that's actually developing their thinking skills in the way that writing is and the way that studying grammar does. So that would be the one thing they would not have to worry about. And I think it would be a useful tool.

Likewise, in terms of developing content on the college level, I think AI is a useful tool. It can start your thinking about a complex subject and at least suggest some of the directions you might go for topics, but it's not going to be a substitute for research any more than it's going to be a substitute any more than the substitute for the written essay, the final product. So it, it can be a tool used in the right way. But I find that it's, it's too dangerous in the hands of high schoolers even. For the most part, I'm not saying I would never use it. But for the most part, it's simply opening up an invitation to rely too heavily on it.

And I would rather students go through the process of writing and teasing out their ideas, figuring out their topic ideas, figuring out the illustrations they're going to use to support them, than depend on somebody else to spit them out for them.

Andrew Pudewa: It's a, I think, a very, very confusing world for young people now, too. And even if you get the bibliography entry for a website correct, there's no guarantee the information on that website is even verifiably correct. The whole world of fact checking is just totally weird.

I've got to tell you a fun little story though, Pamela. So, there's a group of high school and college age kids that are part of an online learning community. And they have a Slack channel where they write stuff and each other reads it. And they were reading, so a few of these kids were reading together and laughing at what some of the other kids were writing. And one of them said, "Well, he sure didn't have IEW." And then another one said, "yeah, well, what they really needed was Pamela White as their online teacher." So you have a reputation of

requiring and producing very competent and critical, in the positive sense, in the critical thinking sense, students who are now young adults and doing fantastic things. And I just want to thank you for these many years that you have walked alongside us and brought your expertise and your knowledge and your passion for excellence at a very high level to the people that we have been able to reach and influence. And of course that hopefully will continue for decades through the *Fix It!* program.

Pamela White: Well, it works both ways, Andrew. I'm very grateful to IEW because I do believe the tools that IEW teaches are phenomenal and so much better than anything I ever used when I taught at private high schools before I started using IEW. These methods do make a difference, and whether a student is at the, at the weak end of writing or is already a proficient writer, going through IEW teaches the brighter students to understand why what they're doing works and to understand some tools and techniques that they may not have considered using before, and for the weaker students, it gives them a structure and produces papers that are comprehensible. And I've seen too many times, I've taught over 2, 000 students IEW and I've just seen too many times what a huge impact it makes in the quality of their writing and their thinking skills.

Julie Walker: So, I'm going to wrap this up with a little marketing pitch. Sorry, but there might be some of our listeners who've never had the opportunity to try out our fix it program. So I'm going to give you a URL. It is IEW.com/try-fixit. And you can go there and you can read a little bit more about it.

And then you have the opportunity to try it for free. We give you a handful of lessons at up to four levels. And like I said earlier, we recommend you wait until the students are fourth grade or older. You can start a little earlier. You can certainly start a little later, wherever your kids are. And I believe that you'll have a wonderful experience unlike you've ever had before, if you've never used our program. It truly is only 15 minutes a day. It truly is enjoyable. We kind of turned it into a game where it's a treasure hunt. They see if they can find all the embedded errors. And it's just an incredible tool. And I think this is really going to be something that can really help you, help your students enjoy learning grammar and learning to think using grammar.

Thank you, Andrew. Thank you, Pamela. This has been a delight.

Pamela White: Thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you, Pamela. 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.