

## Podcast 481: Writing across the Curriculum with Dr. O'Toole

### Episode Transcript

**Kathleen O'Toole:** There are many that go into being a good writer. First of all, you have to figure out what exactly you're trying to say, and then you have to figure out what are the exact words that I need to convey this thought. It's a very high level, complex type of thinking that goes to writing.

**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, I'm working on an article. I know.

**Andrew Pudewa:** You are? I'm impressed you have time to do such a thing.

**Julie Walker:** Yes. It's about writing across the curriculum, and I think that I have some understanding of what that means, having worked for IEW for as many years as I have.

**Andrew Pudewa:** It's an old buzz word thing that came out 25-30 years ago, this idea that if kids would write about the things they're trying to learn about, they might learn to write better and also learn the things they're trying to learn better. But it never got a lot of traction in the general public school world. Even though everybody thought it was a good idea, very few people had an implementation strategy.

**Julie Walker:** So the teachers who are now tasked with the responsibility of teaching writing, they're writing about literature oftentimes, or they're doing a lot of grammar and a lot of blank page assignments that we talk about. So of course, we've been talking about this for years here on our podcast and articles that have been written.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, and most people who are familiar with our program know that Dr. Webster, who created the Structure and Style system originally in gosh, late seventies—that was the 1970s; you have to say that now, —he was a professor of history, so his whole orientation was content based writing. That's where you really learn how to do it.

**Julie Walker:** Yes. And of course I include that anecdote in this article that I'm working on, and it's going to be a blog post. So by the time this podcast launches, maybe my article will be done, and we'll link to it. But I talk about how people, if they wanted to learn to write, this is the story you tell the Teaching Writing: Structure and Style seminar.

They skipped the English department and took West African history from Dr. Webster.

**Andrew Pudewa:** That was the reputation he had. And he would promptly make the classes as hard and impossibly difficult as possible so he could get rid of as many students as he could, keeping I guess the elite levels. Good story. But now we see this fulfillment of his vision. And not just in history, but in all the things that we hope that children are learning about.

**Julie Walker:** And so for years now, we've had these theme-based books. The theme might be the Bible, that was the first one that you wrote. Bible-based, history-based writing lessons, ancient history, medieval. But recently we had someone approach us and ask, could you write curriculum based on our program that would be all across the curriculum, true writing across the curriculum? And that person is here with us as a guest on our podcast. Welcome, Dr. O'Toole.

**Kathleen O'Toole:** Thanks for having me.

**Julie Walker:** So how did you find out about IEW? What is your story? How on earth did we receive that knock on the door that has really changed a lot of who we are and what we're doing?

**Kathleen O'Toole:** Well about ten years ago, I found myself starting a classical school in Austin, Texas. And I had to do what a lot of brand new school founders have to do, which is hire a lot of teachers rapidly, and this is a very intense time. The success of your school stands or falls largely on the quality of the faculty that you hire, and so you're looking for people who really understand what classical education is and what teaching is.

And I learned about Andrew and IEW in conversations with many of the teachers that we ended up hiring. There was a homeschooling community up there north of Austin, Texas. Many of those parents were considering our school for their kids, and I learned very quickly that if they knew what IEW was, that meant that they were really good, diligent homeschool moms, and I should probably try to hire them for my school.

**Julie Walker:** Nice.

**Kathleen O'Toole:** That's how I started learning about it. And we started the school. We didn't have IEW as part of the curriculum at the beginning. We had ideas about how to teach writing. We thought teaching writing was really important, but we didn't have a structured method of doing it. And along the way, we adopted IEW, and I saw an immediate difference in the students and the teachers too. I mean, as important as writing is, it's hard to teach it well, and you need a good guide. And so the Structure and Style method was that for us, and we were sold from the very beginning.

**Julie Walker:** You talk about teaching writing and that you need a system, you need a method. I just find it fascinating, even to this day, universities typically do not have a writing methods class. They have math methods, they have reading, but writing isn't given that same attention.

**Kathleen O'Toole:** It's a funny thing I've thought about that myself. Here at Hillsdale College, we teach teachers how to do classical pedagogy. We provide a curriculum. And one of the things that we've always said to K through 12 teachers is writing is thinking, to be a good writer is to be a good thinker. And it's that foundational. I think that's part of the reason why it's so hard to figure out how to do it because it's so foundational, you know?

**Andrew Pudewa:** And there's kind of like, there's a book I got once and it said, if you can talk, you can write. And I understood the premise, but I thought, no, we don't actually want people to write like they talk today. Maybe a couple hundred years ago. I saw a great quote I'll share with you. And there seems to be a little bit of debate as to whether this is a true quote or not, but I like it, whether it's true or not.

Supposedly Cervantes said that writing, no, the pen is the tongue of the mind. That is so cool because you can say something, but when you have to write it down, you chew it, you rotate it. You think hard. Is this as close to what I'm trying to think and say as possible? It's really a different activity than talking off the cuff, which we enjoy doing that as well, but...

**Kathleen O'Toole:** But when you're writing, there are many things that go into being a good writer. First of all, you have to figure out exactly what you're trying to say, which means you have to have a thought that is tight and cohesive. And then you have to figure out what are the words, the exact words that I need to call up to convey this particular thought that I have. And then you think about larger questions of writing, like, how do I situate this phrase or this sentence that I've now crafted to encapsulate my thought? How do I situate that in the larger essay or even paragraph that I'm writing? It's a very, very high level, complex type of thinking that goes to writing and not dissimilar to what a teacher would do in speaking to a class or crafting a lecture.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I was writing a talk description yesterday, and I think I spent half an hour on four sentences. I just thought I should be able to do this faster. But then I thought if I persist to the end of this process, it will be as close to what I'm trying to actually say as possible, so I need to continue and be diligent here. But I, I kind of reflected on the time that it takes. And one of the things I hear from teachers and parents is it takes so much time to do this. Well, yeah, it does. It's not easy, but that's okay. If it didn't take time, you wouldn't be doing what you're doing.

**Kathleen O'Toole:** Yes, the best things take time. And the art of education is not to take shortcuts on things that don't allow for shortcuts if they are going to be done well. And I would say that writing is at the top of that list.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So you moved from Austin to Hillsdale, where you are now the—what's your official title?

**Kathleen O'Toole:** I'm Associate Vice President for K-12 Education at Hillsdale College. We have a lot of educational outreach here for K through 12 schools and have for many years. It

encompasses everything from our private classical school here on the Hillsdale campus to all of the resources and curriculum that we provide our nationwide network of classical schools.

**Julie Walker:** So tell me about just the structure of these Hillsdale Academy Schools, these K-12 schools, because I know you have different member schools or.

**Kathleen O'Toole:** Yes, we found, helped to found and support a nationwide network of schools and a group of these, a small group of these are called our member schools, and these are schools that were founded to become Hillsdale College schools. We provide to them guidance for their board, guidance for their headmasters, and then a comprehensive curriculum and teaching approach for teaching that curriculum. And then we teach them what kind of culture a school ought to have in order to be fulfilling its mission, its classical mission.

All of these schools serve the same mission, and it's the mission that we have here at Hillsdale College regarding our undergraduate students. It's to train the minds and form the hearts of our students well so that they can grow up to be not just educated, not just intelligent, not just informed people, but people who have moral character and civic virtue too. And so that mission resonates with a lot of people who are looking for a better education for their children, a lot of cities and states that are looking to improve the quality of K-12 education.

And that's the genesis of the Member School program. We work very closely with those schools. They're always up here at Hillsdale, and we're always visiting them. I'm gonna go visit one of them this afternoon, actually, Seven Oaks Classical School outside Bloomington, Indiana. That's one of our oldest schools. It's about 10 years old.

**Julie Walker:** Well, we have one right in Tulsa, Tulsa Classical Academy, which opened a couple years ago. Very popular, very full. These are publicly funded schools, so the tuition is free. These member schools. Are all the member schools tuition free?

**Kathleen O'Toole:** Some of them are charter schools, which means they're tuition, free and one of them plus Hillsdale Academy here in town are private schools. We have a couple more private schools coming online in the next couple of years.

**Julie Walker:** Great. And do you have another category besides member schools?

**Kathleen O'Toole:** Yes. Well, the Member School program is so important and so attractive to people that we've, we've always had more interest in it than we can satisfy, but we want to see classical education spread throughout this country, and we want to do everything that we can do to help make that happen. And so we've taken the curriculum scope and sequence and the resources that support it, and we make those available to any school that is mission aligned and that is committed to this approach to education for free.

Everything that we do for schools is absolutely free. We don't take any money from these schools, and we just provide them with the resources that they need in order to do an excellent job, and then we ask them to do an excellent job. So that's the curriculum school program. And that is a great opportunity for schools to become more classical, become more aligned in their curriculum, become more purposeful about the connection between their curriculum and their mission.

**Julie Walker:** And part of being a curriculum school and a member school is you have access to your Hillsdale K-12 Program Guide.

**Kathleen O'Toole:** That's right. That's the curriculum scope and sequence. And that is the product of many decades of work. It's a funny thing—when my parents were trying to choose a school for me when I was little, they were kind of unusual parents and they would ask, what are you going to teach my daughter if I send my child to this school? What is she going to know at the end of her time here? And it was, it was rare that a school was actually able to answer that question with a lot of detail.

And I think that's true of many American schools. They don't have a comprehensive curriculum plan K–12 that is shared by everyone in the school and kind of articulated to parents at the beginning, and that makes it very easy for schools to get off track over the course of the nine or thirteen years, if it's a K–8 or a K–12 school that a child is there, it can result in a disjointed education for the child.

Looking back on my own education, I went to a couple of different schools, growing up, and the people who taught me mathematics were not all on board with each other about how I should be taught mathematics. And I was a diligent student and I thought school was important, but my math education was really subpar because I was being taught a couple of different ways, and I think I could have been a much stronger math student if I had gone through a program that had a plan for me starting at kindergarten, going up through 12th grade.

The Hillsdale curriculum provides that, and it's a great way for schools to stay on track over time and to get all of their faculty on track with each other internally for the sake of serving the students with consistency.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I think writing can be even worse than math in terms of consistency. I've actually heard people say, like a ninth grade teacher, “Now, forget everything you learned before this. This is the right way to do it.” And then they go to 10th grade, “forget everything you did before this.” I think some kids come out more confused after a few years of that than they were before.

I know you are working so hard, and the consistency is such a shining beacon. People are just drawn to that so I can be part of this thing and contribute to it, and then my efforts will continue to bear fruit as the students grow, as the teachers continue in this.

And that's what I pick up when I've been to Hillsdale for your teacher training sessions, which are almost like too fun to be a job because everyone's so happy, but they just feel part of this much bigger thing. And so I just commend you for all that you've done and your awesome team there. And I know that the joy of those awesome teachers is very tangible. And of course I interface with them, with their specific questions like, "Well, what about in unit five? How does that work?" And it is just wonderful to be there.

**Julie Walker:** And I have a family friend. They have three kids enrolled in Tulsa Classical Academy, and it's really fun to talk to mom who is helping her kids with their writing assignments. And she's getting it. She is learning it herself because they're doing the same curriculum through the grades.

And so if you don't mind, I just want to mention just kind of quickly, I've got in front of me, our third grade book. This is *Adventures in Writing*, and I say third grade, we usually don't say grade levels, but Hillsdale Schools are using this in their third grade classes. This is called *Adventures in Writing*, and on the cover is our logo and the Hillsdale College logo, which we're very happy and proud of.

Unit 1, very beginning: Nile River, Yangtze River. That's the source text. Guess what's in the program guide? Nile River. Yangtze River, right? And then we've got the Roman Hoplight, the orchestra and conductor. So now we're doing some of that writing across the curriculum ideas. We get into Unit 2: Roman Coliseum, and then we get to one of our favorite topics here in Oklahoma, tornadoes, and then it just goes on. And I'm going to skip over to Unit 6 because Dr. O'Toole helped to write the source text for Unit 6. And we did a couple sources on the Roanoke Mystery of Roanoke and where did those Native Americans disappear to, and then also the Mayflower. And then also William Penn. And so these are, these are topics that these students will have learned about or will be learning about in the future.

And so they now have a hook to hang their hat on because they're learning more about it in their writing. True writing across the curriculum. I love that we were able to partner with you in a very intentional way to be able to do this.

And I will tell you this, that *Adventures in Writing* actually replaced, we discontinued a beloved title. *All Things Fun and Fascinating*. And I know that a lot of our families were very sad and disappointed, but once they get their hands on *Adventures in Writing*, they see that not only are we doing the same thing—that writing across the curriculum—but the lessons are so much easier to use. And that was something that was also very important to us at IEW. We wanted to be sure that your teachers had the best opportunity for success, and so we made the curriculum to be kind of open and go.

**Kathleen O'Toole:** It's made such a difference in the schools. Before we had this really robust content-rich curriculum, and we were doing a lot of heavy science and a lot of literature and a lot of history, and it was so exciting and it was so energizing for the teachers and the students alike. But then our writing curriculum—we were writing about other things.

So now it's really deepened the student's classroom experience, and it's made life more convenient and easier for the teachers because they can be teaching the Bayeux tapestry in history looking at it, and there's some history there. There's some art there, and then we'll go write about it. And now we're deepening our understanding of this, of this important topic within history and art. We're not just hearing the teacher talk about it and answering questions, we're actually writing about it, which means students will understand it that much better while crafting their own writing ability.

**Julie Walker:** So I wanted to also mention that one thing that we're intentional about doing is supporting your teachers, and really anyone who's using our materials, because these are not just sold to Hillsdale Schools. These are sold to anyone who wants one, but Andrew and our implementation coach, Jeff Nease, they do webinars every year based on these books, and then we archive them.

So if you're going through *Adventures in Writing*, Andrew has recorded now seven different webinars about the lessons as they're going through the lessons. So this idea of supporting schools is something that we're very interested in partnering with you on, Dr. O'Toole. And I know at the beginning of, before it even turned on the mics, you talked about these events that Hillsdale College is doing across the United States.

Can you speak to that a little bit?

**Kathleen O'Toole:** Well, we have our Member and our Curriculum Schools, but we are also an organization to support teachers. We think teaching is one of the most important things that you can do with your life, whether you're teaching your own children or children in a classroom, you need to be set up for success and you need to be honored if you can do it well. And opportunities for that are few and far between these days.

For over 20 years, Hillsdale College has had something called the Hoagland Center for Teacher Excellence, which has always existed to provide teachers with the content knowledge and the inspiration that they need to bring a really rich experience to their students in the classroom. And today the Hoagland Center is larger than it's ever been. We host seven conferences all over the country every year. They go on throughout the entire academic year, and they're always free. They are a one-day deep-dive for any teacher that would like to come on a particular aspect of the curriculum. We just hosted one in Cincinnati on the art of teaching reading and writing.

Our next one is in April in Boise, Idaho, on Western civilization. And we'll cover math, we'll cover science, we'll cover general pedagogy, seminar discussion, all of the things that a great teacher needs to spend some time with. The speakers are Hillsdale college professors and master teachers from our network of schools.

And attendees always report that it was really helpful PD. It was inspiring. Kind of a fun experience. A nice day out of the classroom, which can be a valuable thing if you're a teacher. And also practical, they were able to go back—they're always on a Friday—they're able to go

back the following Monday with a new tip, a new thing to help make their own teaching, and the students' experience, that much more successful. So everyone's invited to those.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Where can people find out about these events? What's the easiest way?

**Kathleen O'Toole:** If you go to [k12hillsdale.edu](http://k12hillsdale.edu) and click on events, you'll see the schedule for the Hoogland Center for Teacher Excellence. There you can sign up for the mailing list and we'll send you a note when a conference is coming up and you can also watch some videos and recordings of previous lectures there could be helpful for people.

**Julie Walker:** Of course we'll put a link in our show notes to this. I have one more question. About a third of the people listening to this podcast are classroom teachers. They are administrators. They're working in full-time schools. Is it possible for them to join this network and be a curriculum school to be a member school? And if so, how would they go about doing that?

**Kathleen O'Toole:** Well, curriculum is a way that we can help schools and we want to help as many as we possibly can. If there's a school that's interested in becoming a curriculum school, the process is not cumbersome. It's just a way to discern if it's a mission fit and if the school will use the curriculum and it's not much more complicated than that. They can send an email to [k12@hillsdale.edu](mailto:k12@hillsdale.edu) and we can give people more information there and talk about what it would entail.

For teachers we have a lot of resources, including the Hoagland Center. We also have a classical education podcast, which is helpful for teachers who are in the classroom, and I think homeschooling parents alike. And we have a blog called the Classical Classroom. That is a great way for classical teachers to see what other classical teachers are doing and learn from their experience and get some teaching tips as well.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Excellent. I know for a fact there are many, many hundreds of open teaching positions in schools that are, or want to be, classical schools all over the country. And so I think what you're doing here, especially the fact that it's free, people can jump in and do this without this specter of big expense. It's so valuable, and I'm just so grateful.

I think about the world of charter schools and how the people really do want to bring goodness and beauty and truth to their students, but they're in a publicly funded environment where they do have to fall inside certain parameters, and that's sometimes a hard thing to do, but the K-12 schools I have visited and all the teachers I've met and just listening to you talk, which you're one of the few people that if I go and you're talking, I just love it. I just sit there and kind of bask in everything you say. It makes me happy because I think we really are making a difference here. I just commend you, and I pray that God will send you all the right people at just the right time so that you can grow this as fast as providence wills.

**Kathleen O'Toole:** Well thank you, thank you. I feel the same way about you, Andrew.



**Julie Walker:** Well Dr. O'Toole, it is truly an honor to have our logo side by side with Hillsdale. We have so much respect for you and the work that you're doing. So thank you for allowing us to partner with you on this educational journey.

**Kathleen O'Toole:** Well, thank you. It's just a pleasure.

**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](http://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.