

## Podcast 511: Back to the Basics (Laying the Foundation)

### Episode Transcript

**Andrew Pudewa:** Let's cultivate a love of learning in our students. Well, how do you do that? You don't walk in and say, okay, children, this is going to be so much fun. You, you can't know that. But what you can do is take them on a path of learning something interesting and useful.

**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:** Well, Happy New Year, Andrew.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yes. Can you believe it? 2026.

**Julie Walker:** Well, yes I can, because I've been working on projects for 2026 for almost the entire 2025.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I know. Well, the new year always takes me by surprise. I don't think as far ahead as you do. But it is the new year.

**Julie Walker:** It is. And Andrew, I know that you're not a fan of football, but I think you know who Vince Lombardi is. Do you?

**Andrew Pudewa:** I have heard the story. He was the, was it UCLA?

**Julie Walker:** Green Bay Packers

**Andrew Pudewa:** Green Bay Packers? Oh, it was Woodward was the UCLA basketball coach. And, and I think there's a similar story here. Go ahead.

**Julie Walker:** It's true. And so it is football season, so that's why I bring up Vince Lombardi. And of course, if you win the Super Bowl, you win the Lombardi trophy. So that's, he's a big name. But he has never had a losing season, which is really remarkable.

**Andrew Pudewa:** That is really remarkable.

**Julie Walker:** This is the story. At the beginning of every football season, he's talking to the pros, the Green Bay Packers or whatever team he coached. He was not coaching Pop Warner football. He was coaching the pros. The guys that knew how to play the

**Andrew Pudewa:** Heisman Trophy winners from their

**Julie Walker:** exactly, exactly. And he says, gentlemen, this is a football. Every year he really drilled the basics, even though these men obviously knew the basics because well then he led them onto yet another winning season.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well that, that similar story with, um, the coach of UCLA. He would, at the beginning of every season, I think it was basketball, teach everyone how to put on their socks

**Julie Walker:** Yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Because you get your socks wrong, you're going to get blisters. You get blisters, you're not going to play well, et cetera. So let's start at the very beginning. So.

**Julie Walker:** right. And of course, this is kicking off our theme. We've been doing this idea of a theme every year because we just have so much to talk about let's at least try to categorize this a little bit, right? Division

**Andrew Pudewa:** Focus is always good.

**Julie Walker:** Focus is always good, right? And so the theme for this year is back to basics.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, and that's a big focus. I mean, you could go anywhere with that, but.

**Julie Walker:** And I jotted down a few things that we could talk about today. But the nice thing about this being the theme for the year is we can talk about this all year long.

**Andrew Pudewa:** We probably will.

**Julie Walker:** Yes. So our 2026 Magalog, as is our common practice, although it takes a little bit more cajoling from me to you trying to get your article to write.

**Andrew Pudewa:** What do you mean? I got this in on time and ahead of schedule.

**Julie Walker:** You... Sure? Absolutely, boss. So the article's called Back to Basics and you lead with a nice attention getter where you're telling a story about someone on social media who posted something. Can you, can you share a little bit about that?

**Andrew Pudewa:** You just read it.

**Julie Walker:** Alright. I'll just read that first opening sentences. "I recently watched a social media video post from a teacher and it stunned me, so I transcribed it for you here verbatim new pedagogical idea. Stop teaching kids to add. Seriously. AI handles all the arithmetic and perfect grammar instantly. We need to focus on what humans do best. We taught everyone to drive, not to shoe a horse. AI is the new car. The kids aren't wrong. Our curriculum is simply ancient. And this goes on. And you commented, is..."

**Andrew Pudewa:** Is this satire and he wrote, no, I'm a real teacher, and these are my views. Yeah. So, I don't think every teacher would hold that position. I know some teachers

personally who would hold the opposite position, but it is, I think, important to be aware of the edges of how people are thinking and to consider seriously what are some of the implications of this.

And the other thing I thought is, I would sure love to know how to shoe a horse, right? I mean, that's infinitely, that requires infinite more skill than driving a car.

**Julie Walker:** Right,

**Andrew Pudewa:** I mean, anybody can learn to drive a car, but shoeing a horse.

**Julie Walker:** To put a ton of muscle on your knees so you can drive nails into its foot? No, thank you.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, no, I, I would, but I just thought that was an interesting kind of fallacy in his thinking there, which is:you didn't learn to shoe a horse so you could ride a horse the way, you drive a car so you can drive a car. Shoeing a horse would be a skill, a significantly valuable skill and still is today, even though very few people ride horses anywhere.

**Julie Walker:** Right. Exactly. Exactly. And the other thing that this teacher talks about, I think it's also a fallacy, and that is this quote. "Once they are engaged in creating complex systems such as running a business or building an app, they will naturally choose to specialize and master the deep math or rhetoric needed for innovation."

**Andrew Pudewa:** That is so ridiculous. I can't even begin. I don't even know where to start to critique that idea. But yeah, they're going to create complex systems, but they don't know multiplication and they've never done an algebra problem.

**Julie Walker:** This is one of those few times that I wish we had video on this podcast. We don't. We don't do video probably because I don't want it, but my mouth is open. I just cannot believe the ridiculousness of this. And of course, I live in this little IEW bubble and we have teachers.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And that's why I kind of push myself, watching these things. And I get a good number of teacher videos obviously because the algorithm tells me that I'm interested in that, but I actually am. And there are extremes. Most recently I've been getting a lot of videos of teachers saying, please teach your child their name.

**Julie Walker:** Oh my.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So that when they come to school, they will know their real name. Please try and help them learn the letters of the alphabet. Someone was teaching music to upper elementary kids and said, some of these kids, they don't know how to write. The letters A, B, C, D, E, F, G, in order to label the notes on a staff--basic problems, so extreme.

And then the fact that kids can't be quiet. They're constantly making noise no matter what. They can't listen to anything that isn't hyperstimulating screen-based engagement. I don't know; it's ominous. It is ominous, which makes me feel like we need to redouble our efforts, at least to help the people who want to be helped in this world.

And I think more and more parents are starting to realize this giving iPads to three year olds is profoundly harmful to their ability to learn anything. But I was in an airport just last week and there was someone sitting there, a two and a half, 3-year-old in a stroller just staring at a phone for 20 minutes while the mom was staring at her phone. The dad was staring at their phone, and I thought, there's so much that a child could look around and see here in an airport. And a normal healthy three-year-old would want to walk over and look at the airplanes and ask questions. But no total shut down. Just one of those things. It's sad.

Anyway, that's not what we're here to talk about

**Julie Walker:** No. Well, back to the basics. What does that mean, Andrew, for IEW? What are the basics of IEW that we need to get back to? That we need to say this is our football.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, I think it's on our tagline, isn't it? Like, listen, speak, read, write, think.

**Julie Walker:** I think we, I think, I think that's exactly right.

**Andrew Pudewa:** But we have for many years had this idea that somehow reading, writing, and arithmetic are fundamental to being able to think and operate in the world. And to the degree that we get those right, especially in the early, earlier grades, pre secondary, I guess, kids do better, and to the degree that we fail in that, kids don't do as well. And the reading wars are still going on, and I just heard that the state of, I believe it was Mississippi, has improved their reading scores from being some of the lowest in the country to being some of the best in the country.

**Julie Walker:** Wow, amazing.

**Andrew Pudewa:** guess what? Drum roll—a return to phonics instruction in the primary grades, makes a huge difference.

So, there's little glimmers of hope here and there. What I would guess we are talking about is, well, if what you want is really good writers and thinkers down the line, what's the pathway to get there? And I think the proof is in the pudding to overuse a cliched idiom. We know that IEW works. We know that get a kid, teach him to make a key word outline, and retell— that as a starting point, will be a launchpad. For higher level thinking. I was actually thinking about this action of retelling information, summarizing information, and how the modern world poo-poos it and says, well, what's the point? AI could do that.

What's the point? You don't really ever do that in the real world. What's the point? It's just, this writing reports about Japan in fourth grade. Stupid. Right? But really. We naturally want

to attend and represent information so that we understand it better. And those of us who are married, I think often have had the experience. We read something and then what do we do? We go tell our spouse what we read. Why? Not because they're particularly interested. Maybe they are, maybe they aren't. But our actual underlying instinct is to tell it to someone so we now understand it better, and it activates our memory. So you can read something and forget about it.

Read something and tell it to someone you remember a lot more, don't you? Read something and rewrite it, you'll remember even more. So it's cultivating attentiveness, it's cultivating memory, it's cultivating a skill of being able to articulate in hopefully complete sentences or close to it ideas. And without those basic things, how do we even function as a civilization?

**Julie Walker:** I remember you saying this, and you say this in the teacher training course. *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, which of course is our basic course that every teacher, every parent should watch multiple times. I know I have, and I always get something new out of it. But you say to, but you tell a story about a teacher who says to you, when are we going to get to real writing? As if what you just shared doesn't actually cultivate the skills needed to be able to do quote, real writing.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, and we've, we've had many conversations about vocabulary. We're seeing the incredible shrinking vocabulary of the average adult American today. But the more words you have available, the more thoughts you can have and articulate and share and use.

And I saw a little video basically condemning sophisticated vocabulary—like if you want to be clear, just use short, simple, easy one, two syllable words of Germanic origin. Don't use all those words of Latin and Greek of multiple syllables because you don't need them. Well. But words have nuances, words have history, words have origins. Words have underlying meanings. Words have depth.

And so of course one of the things that we're always trying to do, whether it's with the vocabulary enhancements to our curriculum, Writing Across the Curriculum books, or the conversations we had, the poetry, like everything we are doing points at least a little bit to growing the vocabulary, growing the capacity for more complex thought.

**Julie Walker:** You talk about the value of word lists, and that's something we're going to be talking about later this year, is more about word list. Some of the other things that we're hoping to talk about later this year is the power of the source text. So why do we give the students something to write from rather than just the blank page?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, we're going to talk about it later this year,

**Julie Walker:** This is true.

**Andrew Pudewa:** You want, you want me to comment on this? So, I get letters from kids a lot. One of the problems is I put into the SSS programs the assignment to write a letter to someone.

**Julie Walker:** someone, not you.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Consequently a good number of kids choose me, but I always find it very interesting what they want to tell me. And one of the things that has been mentioned by many children is how they've learned a lot from the source texts. I learned about an interesting person, Madame Curie. I learned about animals, I learned about food, I learned about geography. Well, that's a delight.

It's a delight to learn about things and then share them. And I think we would do so much better if we understood that by nature, children desire, all of us by nature, humans desire to know. And when we learn things and we learn them well, we learn them enough that we can communicate them to other people.

There's just a joy in there, you know? And people are talking about, well, let's cultivate a love of learning in our students. Well, how do you do that?

**Julie Walker:** Right.

**Andrew Pudewa:** You don't walk in and say, okay, children, this is going to be so much fun and I know you're going to love it. You can't know that. But what you can do is take them on a path of learning something interesting and useful, and guess what they'll say. Well, that was cool. That was fun. That was, I'll do that again. But "Let's just be creative. Let's just express ourselves, let's just break down the barriers to self-expression." That just sounds horrible to me.

**Julie Walker:** I have a rather articulate 8-year-old granddaughter. And she, not a surprise at all to you, I'm sure, is a good writer. And she is, she's well read. Her parents have read to her, they continue to read to her. Her grandmother reads to her quite a bit along with her little brother, but she's more of that, I just want to write whatever I want to write ilk.

But she got there even at the young age of eight because she was given content from which to write from. And it's really, really fun to watch her grow in her ability to use words and what does this word mean? And then she uses it and just love that. So.

**Andrew Pudewa:** You go back to the sports analogy or the music analogy, at every step in the process of getting better, there's that balance between hammering out basic skills, scales, etudes, exercises, pushing weights, whatever, and then applying that in that creative way, on the improv or at, on the field. Right?

And so it isn't as though the basics. It's not like you're ever done with the basics.

**Julie Walker:** Right.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Right. You learn some basics. You apply them. Now you learn some more basics. You apply them, you revisit basics, you apply those. So I think that's what a lot of people who've used our materials as adults, even come to the TWSS, watch the thing and say, I wish I had learned this when I was in school. Or wow, this is really going to help me in my own writing, my ministry, my work, whatever I'm doing now. So true basics are timeless.

**Julie Walker:** Yes, yes. And if our listeners don't already know this, they will learn this when they get the new magalog, which should be in their mailboxes any day now. Or maybe they already have it, but we released a new edition of the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* for 2026, and that is one thing that we really wanted to make sure with this iteration is to make sure it was basic.

It was for the new teacher who had not learned our method before, but at the same time building layers so that teacher who has seen it before will still gain insight and appreciation for this simple yet—I don't want to say complex—simple, but elegant way to teach writing to students. So if that would be my shout out from the rooftop message this year, it would be, Hey teachers, Hey parents, if you haven't done so already, get the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* video course. Watch the videos. Do the assignments. You'll be a much better teacher for having done so.

**Andrew Pudewa:** We hope so.

**Julie Walker:** Well. Thank you, Andrew. It's going to be an exciting year.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Okay.

**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.