

Podcast 512: IEW Gradebook – Why Teachers Love It

Episode Transcript

Heidi Thomas: IEW Gradebook solves the problem of helping teachers grade efficiently and effectively. We really started, this was my third August now, of how to make sure that I can stay organized as a teacher.

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 listener, if Andrew were here, he and I would be talking about why IEW is so effective in helping students learn to write. And our topic would be something like this— Our method is so effective because it's easy to use, the kids enjoy it, and they get to do a lot of writing because you know, if you're doing anything and you want to improve a skill, you have to do a lot of it. And he would agree with me, and we would talk about the problem of grading so many papers, but he's not here today, so we are not talking about that. But instead of Andrew, I have a guest on my podcast and this is our own Heidi Thomas. So Heidi, welcome to our podcast.

Heidi Thomas: Oh, thank you, Julie.

Julie Walker: So Heidi is the wizard behind the curtain, the one that you don't see very often. You might see her name in some books because she's one of our contributing authors. You might have seen her name in the closing credits of a *Structure and Style for Students* video. Heidi, we came up with this title called “Title Card Maven” not exactly sure what that means, but when you have excellence as your middle name, you've got to make sure that those words are correct, and that was what you did. But of course, that's not all that you did. You definitely work long hours and hard with our curriculum development team. So many great projects are coming off of your desk into the hands of our listeners. And the one we're going to talk about today, I think this is one of those, we don't want it to be a best kept secret, but it kind of is. So let's tell our listeners more about IEW Gradebook.

So you gave me some stats, which I thought were really fun. And was this just for one month? Was this just for November?

Heidi Thomas: It was just for November and I pulled November because December is filled with holidays. I thought maybe that wouldn't be quite as accurate. I pulled these numbers reflective as of November 30th. Of course, Thanksgiving, I guess, was in there, so

Julie Walker: Yeah. A lot of schools are closed that whole week.

Heidi Thomas: Right, right. So yes, that was just the month of November.

Julie Walker: Well, and I kind of led with that idea of IEW requires students to do a lot of writing because of this, and that is, IEW Gradebook helped teachers evaluate 8,237 papers. That is a lot of papers, Heidi.

Heidi Thomas: That is a lot of papers, and that's reflective of 2,445 students who are submitting papers through the student portal.

Julie Walker: Yep. And that's just this small elite group of people who have found Gradebook. And what we like to say is now they're getting their weekends back.

Heidi Thomas: That's right. Yeah. Weekends are for teachers too.

Julie Walker: Yes. So how long has Gradebook been available? When did you start beta testing? What is the problem that we're trying to solve by offering IEW Gradebook?

Heidi Thomas: IEW Gradebook solves the problem of helping teachers grade efficiently and effectively. That's the two E's that I like to use: efficiently and effectively. We really started. Two years ago I started working with the developer, Joseph Tabenkin, I guess two and a half years ago. So I have worked with him—his was my third August now—of how to make sure that I can stay organized as a teacher. So we worked together for several months and then started slowly adding IEW teachers from the IEW Online department.

Julie Walker: Well, let me interrupt you right there, because I mentioned all these things that you do for the thousands and tens of thousands of people who are enjoying the benefits of your late. But you are also one of our IEW Online instructors.

Heidi Thomas: That's why IEW products are so strong right now. Right? Your product development, IEW's product development team is a team of people. I am one of those in that cog of the wheel, and we work directly with students. We work directly with people who are using the product so that we do get that feedback.

I think it's the effectiveness of the *Fix It! Grammar* program. It's the effectiveness of the curriculum that we have and it's very helpful in IEW Gradebook. IEW Gradebook was created by teachers for teachers to help them grade, like I said, efficiently and effectively.

And there's a student portal. We looked at how students had been submitting papers in the past, whether it was paper-clipped stacks together, or if it were through Google Classroom or emailing to teachers. And the whole thing is, where can I keep it all? How can I keep it organized? There's so much to hold in your head that it was difficult. So working with a developer who would watch me grade and then in turn, watch other people grade is what has made this product phenomenal. And it's why today we have several hundred teachers who are saying, wow, it really has made a difference in my teaching ability.

Julie Walker: I love what you said in this little cheat sheet that I'm looking at right now. We have teachers who have been using IEW Gradebook since we introduced beta testing, and those teachers are still around. They can't, they can't, they don't want to do this without it anymore.

Heidi Thomas: That's true. That is very true. We have had teachers voluntarily write us and tell us, "I love it. I don't know that I would still be primarily, [especially those who are tutoring, right?] I don't know that I would've continued tutoring the volume I am if it hadn't been for the help of IEW Gradebook."

Julie Walker: When we launched this, we knew that IEW, about 70% of our students are in a homeschool environment, but that growing number of schools that are using it. That is really who we thought would get all over this and want to do this.

And so I have a quote here from Heidi, not Heidi Thomas, Heidi Plotcher, and she is a high school teacher. She has 75 students, and she says. One of her classes is an ESL class for students who need targeted English language instruction, so English as a second language. "Another feature that is equally my favorite is the ability to remove stylistic techniques from the checklist." You know that we talk about that often—customizing the checklist so Gradebook can do that as well. "This gives me the ability to modify the checklist for a student using the easy plus one philosophy. I appreciate this often because I have students who are not ready for different dress up or sentence openers. For those students I can simply click the eye symbol, like the eyeball symbol and remove a style element from their checklist. I used to do that math by hand—[figuring out what grade to give these students.] So this feature also saves a lot of time."

So we have our IEW Checklist Generator, that's a part of our Premium Membership, and we've talked about that before in other podcasts. But this is like the Checklist Generator on steroids.

Heidi Thomas: Well the Checklist Generator is really what a teacher uses when working with a student. You customize the checklist for that student, and then you print it out and give it to them. So the Checklist Generator is the tool I use for the student before they begin writing their composition, so now they know their expectations. IEW Gradebook is the tool I use while I'm grading.

So they're both beneficial, right? But they have two completely different purposes.

Julie Walker: Yep. Exactly.

Heidi Thomas: Yeah, so we have worked very hard with IEW Gradebook to make sure that we stay consistent with the philosophy of IEW. One thing that sometimes people misunderstand, they think, oh, I have this IEW Gradebook, and instead of using that, I just run it through chat GPT, and it's like, no, IEW Gradebook does not consider content. It doesn't consider the nuances of each individual student. That's what it does consider. It

allows a teacher to do that. It keeps the teacher in control of grading. And so it isn't the same thing as just running it through another program or just asking somebody. What's your opinion of this?

IEW Gradebook helps me consider the checklist, the things that I have required of the student. Did they do them? Are they following that? And then there's all these little comments that help me remember what the title rule is. And the words used about the title. The title should repeat one to three keywords from the final sentence, right?

But it's easy for a teacher to get it confused with the topic-clincher rule, which is to repeat or reflect, right? So I have these little notes that I can quickly look at while I'm grading. Because face it, teachers are multitasking. They not only have stacks of papers, they have meals to cook, they have homework to help with. They have all these other things. So it just keeps your mind focused so that you can remind your student that they need to do this next time, or you can praise them. Right? Because we do want to make sure that our notes within our papers are short. They're quick. They're not a lecture as Andrew reminds us often. So it's true to the Structure and Style method.

Julie Walker: Well, you've mentioned so many different things that I want to unpack a little bit. You talked about the stylistic techniques which require the students to use indicators. That's what IEW Gradebook is looking for—those indicators. Can you talk about that?

Heidi Thomas: Yeah. When a person, when a student learns the -ly adverb, the who/which clause, the strong verb. If they know those three dress up, then every paragraph they write should have three words underlined. Right? And so because they're saying, Hey, Mrs. Walker, or Mrs. Plocher, or , Mrs. Pike. This is the -ly adverb I put in this paragraph that I want you to evaluate, right?

And so Gradebook alerts the teachers to the underlined words. They actually change the student's underlined to like a, a color. A teacher can choose which color they want. I have mine in sort of a burgundy. Some teachers have theirs in blue, but it's just a color that helps me see it a little better.

And then when I am evaluating -ly adverbs, those words literally glow. So my tired eyes can see them easily. I can immediately check to see, did they do them? What do they have? The same thing with sentence openers. It starts looking for the numbers and lists them down the page for me so that I can look and say, okay, does the prepositional phrase start with a preposition and end with a noun as I anticipate it's supposed to do?

Julie Walker: Yep. And so the students that don't use indicators will not be correctly evaluated in Gradebook. I think of Andrew saying, check what you do and do what you check. If you checked off on your checklist that you actually identified an -ly adverb, but you didn't underline it, Gradebook is going to catch that.

Heidi Thomas: Well, it won't. It will show that you didn't do it, is what it will show. So the student, that's what Andrew says, that's when I give an I and say, this is incomplete. Mark, what you want me to evaluate and submit it again.

Julie Walker: The other thing you said when you were describing how you use Gradebook is you talked about the little comments. So we have, I shouldn't say we, because this was you and the other teachers who were part of developing this. You have embedded little notes, like a database of comments that you can just click on and it will show up on the paper.

Heidi Thomas: Absolutely. We have eight to nine comments for every stylistic technique and for the topic-clincher rule, for the title rule, for various when you're in the conclusions or introductions, reminding the students of what they've either heard Andrew say on the videos or what they see in the curriculum, those teaching pages for style and structure. And we have the comments, they always, it's just a quick database. You just click right, just a couple words, no lecture attached to help either a teacher praise a student because, right. Andrew reminds us that we do want to praise more often than we correct. A student will much more likely, even if they do something by accident correctly, to repeat it. So that's there, but they go the whole way down.

But then in addition, not only do you have to hover in, I say hover and click, you can look at when you're looking at strong verbs, and you can hover and click to choose one, or you can actually click and type your own. You can even save your own comments. So if you as a teacher say, I always say it this way, when they don't do something correct, or this is something I say in class, you can put that in there. And then you have your own fast comments to put in so that your student can hear that repetitive language as they're learning to implement a new skill.

Julie Walker: So I'm just kind of thinking in the seat of the listener. How does this actually work? Let's say I am a student. I have my key word outline that I wrote in pen, my rough draft that I also wrote in pen, my final draft that I typed, and I believe I've done all the indicators correctly. What do I load into? Essentially it's a learning management system, an LMS. What do I upload into Gradebook? Can I upload all three of those pieces?

Heidi Thomas: Absolutely. Yeah. And some teachers have their students do them at separate times. Some have them do it all together. It's really how the classroom is set up. In the student portal, I log into the student portal of IEW Gradebook, and where it says upload key word outline, as soon as it looks almost like little drawers, right?

So I have three areas upload. So this week my students, I also do a live class with students here in Rockford, Illinois for *Frontiers in Writing*. They are working on lesson 14 from *Frontiers in Writing*. So they had to upload their key word outline, which was a unit five. They just can hover when they go to upload and they can do it from a mobile device, from a Google doc or from their computer.

Julie Walker: I was going to ask that. So I don't need any fancy equipment. I can just take a picture with my phone.

Heidi Thomas: Absolutely choose From Mobile Device, and immediately it will pair with a device that you have in your home and you can take a picture and then you just clarify. Yep, that's the one I want. If you don't want to take a picture, maybe you've already scanned it or you had some other way of getting it, so as long as you have it in some kind of digital format, it doesn't matter if it's a JPEG or if it's a PDF.

Your key word outline is you can do a screenshot, whatever it is. They can upload that. They verify that's what they want, and they push submit, and then they get this green box that says, congratulations, you have submitted. Yeah, exactly. And then you do your rough draft much the same way.

Some teachers like to grade and edit the rough draft, not give a grade, but give comments, right? Give information on the rough draft. And so then you can do that if that's the type that your teacher wants. If they're asking for it to be typed, you can submit it through Word, but if Microsoft Word or Google Docs, but maybe your teacher says, no, I want to see the handwritten one. I want to see the one with the upside down carrot wedge thingy. I want to see the one that you had edited by either peer editing or parent editing. That's the one I want to see. If that's the case, you upload it exactly like I just explained the key word outline. And then the final draft, whatever the teacher's expecting of you. We're very flexible. We've worked now with, right now we have this week, 229 active teachers grading.

I checked those numbers, right? So, so we really are trying to be flexible. Remaining true to the Structure and Style methodology. At the same time, recognizing that we have a vast array of teachers who have slightly their own ways of doing things. So yes.

Then you upload your final draft that's marked right as indicated with underlines for dress ups, numbers for sentence openers. You upload that. You verify it's exactly what you wanted and you submit. And I, what I love, one of my favorite features is the fact that I can compare at any time I have the student's paper and the checklist on my computer screen, but at any point I can click a button above the checklist and it says, compare.

And I can compare the student's paper to their key word outline, to their rough draft, or maybe even to a past paper of theirs. Yeah, so papers side by side. That lets me just see, wait a minute. I told them that they hadn't marked anything. I asked them to redo it. Let me see. Did I, did I tell them to fix that or did I miss it?

Right? Those are the little things that save you time. You don't have to go searching through files. You don't have to go searching through stacks of paper. It's just really one click of a button.

Julie Walker: I love that. I love that. Now, I am going to mention there's a couple things that Gradebook doesn't do. IEW Gradebook does not evaluate papers that are not from specific curriculum that we publish. Can you speak to that?

Heidi Thomas: Correct. IEW Gradebook is designed to compliment IEW curriculum, right? It partners with the curriculum that teachers are teaching and it helps you grade that. So it's all the SSS products. It's our Writing across the curriculum products, it's our Hillsdale *Adventures in Writing*, *Discoveries in Writing*. In fact, we already have *Voyages in Writing* in the system.

Julie Walker: Our newest book. We're super excited about that one. So if this. Is a product that IEW believes is teaching IEW with fidelity. That's that effective grading that it does. Those checklists are in IEW Gradebook.

Heidi Thomas: Yes, they are. And they're listed at IEW.com/Gradebook. All the curriculum that it supports is listed. Mm-hmm.

Julie Walker: So maybe not every single thing that we publish, but as Heidi said, you can just go to IEW.com/Gradebook. There's the list of curriculum that you're probably using right now if you're an IEW teacher. The other thing that IEW Gradebook doesn't do is it doesn't use AI. Can you speak to that?

Heidi Thomas: No, it doesn't. It is not going to. It doesn't, right. It's not going to put something through chatGPT. Or it's not even going to indicate if a sentence is awkward because we recognize that when students are first learning to write, sometimes they are awkward, sometimes to show strong image or feeling, my fourth grader is going to say, the student cartwheeled into the room right? Now, that creates a strong image and feeling that is a strong verb. Right. And in time I'm going to consider the age and the ability of my student and help them choose their words that better compliment their sentences. But we want to recognize that they are completing the checklist.

And so what it really does is it just alerts the teacher to where the stylistic items are. It's a reminder of what you're looking for when you're grading this unit or that unit or this introduction. And then of course, there's another aspect of Gradebook that we haven't mentioned much. It's the classroom features, which just is an organizational thing designed with IEW in mind. I can accept *Fix It! Grammar*. Information if students take pictures of it. I can accept vocabulary exercises if I have that built in. I have a way that I can very easily after I grade look at a snapshot of what stylistic techniques my students are doing well at. It lets me track patterns.

These are things that help teachers when they have to either discuss students with next year's teachers or when they're getting ready for parent teacher conferences, or just as a parent, I can say, okay, where are you always struggling? Oh, it's at www.asiab. Look at your, and it gives sort of a color coded system.

Right? So I can see you've missed the www.asia.b for the last three weeks, we need to just pause and discuss what a clause is before we go on. It helps me see that in just a just click of a button.

Julie Walker: So Heidi, our timekeeper, has told us we are out of time, but I do want to end with this quote from Jillian who tutors students from China. I mean the far and wide is our reach. She says “it has simplified my life and helped me give better feedback.” I love that right there, Heidi, because it is effective and efficient. She says it in one short sentence. That's exactly what she's saying. It's better feedback because it's consistent, but it's more efficient. It's helping her get through all these papers in a much more expedient manner. And then you just made a comment here. IEW Gradebook feedback parallels Andrew's instruction and is in keeping with the idea of short feedback, at the point of need, no lecture attached.

What a tremendous tool we have now available to teachers, whether they're just a homeschool mom and they're sitting at the dining room table with one student or some of our high school level English teachers who are using IEW at the high school level and are grading a hundred twenty-five, thirty papers a week. That's a lot of grading.

Heidi Thomas: It's a lot of grading, but Gradebook is such a time saver. It really is.

Julie Walker: Well, thank you, Heidi, for your hard work and thank you for being on the podcast with me today.

Heidi Thomas: Thank you for having me, 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.