

## Podcast 516: The Power of the Checklist

### Episode Transcript

**Andrew Pudewa:** Here's the assignment. If you want to do an extra one for a bonus ticket or whatever, you can, and then you got kids coming in with 3, 4, 3 paragraph stories. Why? It's like anything. Once you know how to do something, you don't mind doing it.

**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, this podcast is entitled The Power of the Checklist, and this is a part of our series on Back to the Basics, the foundation of IEW, and it's February. And so we're trying to, at the beginning of every month as it fits in the schedule, talk about some of the basic principles of Structure and Style and the IEW writing method. So I have in front of me *Blended Structure and Style in Composition* written by Dr. James B. Webster, and this is the second edition that was published in 1994.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yes. Second edition, maybe third, maybe fourth. There were lots of iterations of this thing in the eighties and nineties. Of course, I came on board with the blended sound site crew in 1990, so this was a huge improvement over the collection of what that book came from. Although it's bigger and longer, it's not necessarily always easier. But it's packed with stuff. So if there are any structure and style nerds out there who want to go to the horse's mouth and read Dr. Webster's stuff, it is interesting.

**Julie Walker:** We, we will. It is a big book, but even as I was paging through it today, looking for what I knew was in here that would inform the content of this podcast, I was surprised by how much of this perfectly aligns with what we teach today in IEW's Structure and Style writing.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, it should. That's, that's what we're about, fidelity to the system. And any differences that people would find are really not philosophically, pedagogically different. They're just small refinements that we have found over the years of teaching and coaching parents and teachers.

**Julie Walker:** Exactly. Exactly. And of course, Dr. Webster's no longer with us.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah. I think it's about two years now.

**Julie Walker:** Yep. But his legacy lives on through IEW, so we're delighted to have that. In his introduction to this second edition is what he calls this one, you were there, Andrew. You

know the true story, but I love this little quote here. And does this sound like he could have written this yesterday? “Students who enter university do not know how to write. One can only imagine the illiteracy of those who are unable to enter college.” And then he goes on, of course, he was a professor at Dalhousie University, which I had the privilege of visiting not too long ago, and was like, oh my goodness, this is Dalhousie. I know this place. And took a picture there with my husband and sent it to you and you were surprised, I think. What are you doing in Nova Scotia?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah, I hope you ate some lobster while you were there.

**Julie Walker:** I did, but that was in Maine. So. The power of the checklist is of course, based on Dr. Webster's great work, *Blended Structure and Style in Composition*. And he named this book as a nod to his aunt who wrote, or as you say, aunt, who wrote *Blended Sound Sight*. So it's kind of like the same feel of that. But this one is in composition. But I want to caution all you listeners. First of all, yes, this is a Back to the Basics podcast that we're recording today, but I believe you're going to learn something new. Second thing is don't run out and buy this book unless you really want to see what our legacy is based on.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, let's just say it's not possible to run out and buy that book. You would have to order it.

**Julie Walker:** order it online

**Andrew Pudewa:** from us.

**Julie Walker:** link in the show notes

**Andrew Pudewa:** No one else sells it.

**Julie Walker:** We're not pushing this book.

**Andrew Pudewa:** No, not pushing the book.

**Julie Walker:** no. But one of the things that he talks about is this idea of the method of learning, stresses modelin—sounds familiar. This book is not a philosophy of written communication. It's a practical how-to method of teaching writing, which has been developed in the classroom.

And I love to say that because this is just a reminder, this is homeschooling. Homeschoolers are not the only ones using IEW. It is used in the classroom, and we just have had so many great results. I love this little piece of history of Dr. Webster: “As a high school teacher. I recall dreading wet and rainy weekends, and there are many of us in the lower mainland of British Columbia because they inevitably produce a crop of new unsolicited compositions Monday morning.” These kids wanted to write. That was the outcome of teaching writing: structure and style.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I've seen that too. My little group of kids. Here's the assignment. If you wanna do an extra one for a bonus ticket or whatever, you can. And then you got kids coming in with 3, 4, 3 paragraph stories. Why? What is it? And some of these kids were the reluctant ones to begin with because they didn't know how to do it. It's like anything, once you know how to do something, you don't mind doing it. You come to like doing it.

**Julie Walker:** Exactly. Exactly. So Andrew, I would like for you to tell your story just for the listener that perhaps has not heard this before. How did you get introduced to Dr. Webster? And specifically tell your experience using one of Dr. Webster's checklists.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, my wife and I were working both at a small school, very small school in Montana, and one of the teachers was a Canadian, and she was talking about this blended sound sight program of learning. This is the greatest thing since sliced bread. This is the best possible way to teach kids to read and write, and she sold us on it.

So. It was the whole faculty, but I think there was only seven of us. I mean, like I said, it was a very small school, and we all went up that summer for the ten-day teacher training course in Grouard, about four hours north of Edmonton. Way up north.

**Julie Walker:** So 10 days versus now our teacher training course is about 10 hours, I think.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah. Well. There was some overlap because everyone sat in on kind of the core lectures that Mrs. Ingham gave, and then they divided it. You could be in the primary grade group or the other group, and the primary grade group went mostly with Mrs. Ingham and her daughter, Shirley George, and kept working on how do you teach reading and handwriting and poetry and composition to first and second graders. And then Dr. Webster took the older students, teachers and was teaching about his structure and style in composition. So we went up there, did the 10 day course, came back.

I was teaching combination fourth-fifth grade class in this school, and the results were really good. I mean, the results surprised me. They surprised the kids, they surprised the parents, and I thought, wow, this works. But I felt like I didn't really understand what I was doing per se. I was just kind of trying to slog through it. And so the next summer, I decided to go up and take that same ten-day teacher training course again, and I got a chance then to feel like, okay, all my questions are being answered now. I really have a much better sense of the thing, and I was kind of a senior person in terms of attendees. I wasn't the only person who'd been more than once, but.

**Julie Walker:** Not senior in age, but senior in experience.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So then the third year—so I came back, I shifted over to seventh and eighth grade, and that worked even better. And then the third year I thought there's more I could learn. And I said, well, could I go again? And they said, well, yeah, if you're going come up here, you might as well help us run this thing. So I got to be Dr. Webster's assistant. That was great because now I was part of the team and I was in the meetings and the planning, and I

was meeting all these people for whom it was new, and Webster even kind of assigned me to do one of the lectures, so it was my audition.

**Julie Walker:** Okay.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And so I did one of the lectures on Unit 3. I gave the assignment to, the practicum assignment that all the participants do because up there over 10 days you have to write an assignment for all of the units. So all nine units. And Webster had kind of an approach that we don't espouse, which is make everyone do all the stylistic techniques in the very first paragraph they write.

**Julie Walker:** Oh wow. Wait. You're talking about sentence openers and

**Andrew Pudewa:** dress ups, openers, and a decoration and a triple—part of his kind of approach was I think a hazing approach, like.

**Julie Walker:** Throw them in the deep end.

**Andrew Pudewa:** We're gonna make you sweat here, and if you survive then we'll talk. And if you don't, we'll, but, that's kind of his university style as well too. It is like, get as many kids to drop this class as quickly as possible because I don't want to have to grade all these papers. I don't know. So anyway, I gave the assignment, and then he said, well, you're gonna do it too. Aren't you? I said, well, I did this last year and he said, no, I think you should do your own assignment. And I said, well, I have other things to do. And he goes, no, you should do it. So, okay, so I wrote this thing, and this was before laptops. This was before you could have a printer. I had to hand write this thing. And I'm thinking, okay, now I have to be absolutely perfect. I have to get 100%, and unlike me, Webster really likes grading and marking papers.

**Julie Walker:** Pouring through every paper and scrutinizing them. Yep.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So I'm just on this thing, and I write it, and then I check it, and I rewrite it final, and then I give it to him and he gives it back to me: 98%. What?! I did, everything, there's every dressup, every opener, decoration, triple, everything's right. What did I miss? The date? It was on the checklist: name and date on paper. I didn't put the date and I suffered the ignominy of getting less than 100%, but I learned a lesson.

**Julie Walker:** Yes, and I wanna talk a little bit more about that lesson you've learned. I also want to just affirm, I'm on page 228 of Webster's tome, as you like to say. And number two, the cover page has the question exactly as given. Student's name, course number, tutorial number, tutorial master's name, and date submitted.

So there it is right there. He had three levels of checklists, maybe four. I can't find the fourth one, but in his book, he's got three levels. The first level has 36 items.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Now this, this is, we must let everyone be perfectly clear. This was for his university students.

**Julie Walker:** This is true.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Taking upper level African history or history courses.

**Julie Walker:** He taught PhD students.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yes. Yes. So this is not a checklist that I have ever used with kids. But what it's in the book so that we as teachers can see how this concept of a very specific, very detailed checklist really, really helps students improve even at the highest levels,

**Julie Walker:** Exactly. And I'll just mention these checklists, 'cause I, I've alluded to them. Level one goes up to 36 items.

**Andrew Pudewa:** 36 items,

**Julie Walker:** Level two starts at number 37, which means you still have to do your level one checklist and then you have a few more things added. And now your checklist has 82 things. And then your level three, he only adds six more up to 88, but 83 has five bullet points.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Fair enough. Yeah.

**Julie Walker:** so rather extensive. And of course you say this in the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* video course in the introduction—Word got around Dalhousie.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah. If you want to learn to write, you should take Webster's African history section. Don't mess with the English department. Go take history. And it caused a little bit of a problem because his sections were so large. Everyone was wondering why is there this boom of interest in African history in Nova Scotia in the 1980s? Right?

**Julie Walker:** Just a great story.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I think students used to do that before they had [rateyourprofessor.com](http://rateyourprofessor.com) kind of thing, right? They used to talk to each other and say, well, what's good about this teacher? That teacher? And what did you learn? And that's when I'm assuming students. They were there because they wanted to learn, not there just to get a grade and a number on a transcript. So he did kind of haze the students.

And the other thing that's super interesting is he did not use any textbooks except for one that was the compilation of papers from the previous section of the previous year's course, and he had that. And of course, this is really, again, pre-computer days. So these were typed and then mimeographed or photocopied bound together in a spiral book. And then he would make them buy that and say, if you want an A in this course, your papers have to be better than these.

**Julie Walker:** yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So he had this kind of idea of always improving, always striving for a higher level of excellence. And he loved to teach by examples. So almost all his lectures were, here's a paper. I'm going to read it out loud to you and point out various strengths or weaknesses in this student's writing. That was pretty much how he taught all of the writing.

And what's interesting too is he was a history professor. He was in the department of history at Dalhousie, but right at that time there was this kind of interest in writing across the curriculum. So what they said was, each department has to offer a class in that content area with an emphasis on writing. And he was universally expected to be that person. And he did have very large classes, but that also meant he got more TAs.

**Julie Walker:** Oh, nice. Okay.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And so with a 200 student class, you get four or five TAs to help you deal with all those students. So he had to train the TAs on how to use the checklist so that they could then help the students in the section in the class complete the checklist. So, yeah, it was, and it's funny, I've known him years probably, what, almost three decades. I knew him. But years after he retired, he would have students from his history course in Dalhousie write to him and tell them a little bit about what they'd done and how valuable his writing system had been in all of their later pursuits. And of course, I get that too now.

**Julie Walker:** Yes, you do. Yes. The legacy lives on. Talk about your experience in teaching students and how you came up with this idea of "check what you do and do what you check."

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, you know, kids will very often take the path of least resistance. And if they can do something and get away with it, then they'll do that or maybe less and see if they can get away with that. And so any of us out there teaching, we will notice, okay, well here's a kid, three paragraphs, and they're missing one of the dress ups in the second paragraph. Well, how hard do you come down on them? There's kind of two philosophies. One is, well, you dock them some points, and then you give them a grade based on did they do 93% of the things on the checklist or not. Whereas the other approach, which is the one I like to use, is the A/I. It's either accomplished, accepted, it's an A. It doesn't mean it's better than someone else's. It just means you did everything on the checklist. Or you're not finished yet, which means you now have to go find the place where you can fit in that pesky little missing dress up in the second paragraph or whatever. And over the years, I've been accused of being maybe a little too fanatical, if you will, but there's something about that doing a hundred percent of the things that you're given to do that is more than just building writing skills. More. I think it's even more about learning to do what you're supposed to do and then be sure that you did those things before you say, I'm finished. And there's a character element. Mrs. Ingham used to talk about the intangibles. Like, yeah, you're teaching reading, you're teaching writing, you're teaching math, but what are you really teaching while you're teaching all those things? And so this idea of do: what's on the checklist, right, and check it off, but

then check again to be sure that you did what you thought you did because it's very easy for us, all of us, to think we did something. But then on the second examination, realize, no, there's something still not done.

**Julie Walker:** Maybe not, not putting a date on a paper.

**Andrew Pudewa:** We work in a business, we have to work with people. We don't really. Want people who are gonna be happy with 88%, right? I mean, we want people who will keep working on the thing until it's a hundred percent the best they could, and double checking and then saying, okay, I'm finished. And then maybe there's still tweaks and things to be made, but that element of do what you have said you did, and check to be sure that you did what you said you did: "do what you check and check what you did." It's very powerful, very powerful, and I know that it helps produce better writers, but I think it actually helps produce better people.

**Julie Walker:** I agree. Yep, absolutely. Well, I just wanna mention as we're closing where timekeeper has told us we are out of time again, Andrew. How do we keep doing this? But this is just such great content, and I do want our listeners to hear the enthusiasm in your voice and perhaps even in mine of how valuable this checklist is.

And it does set us apart. The specifics that we put on the checklist are attainable. That's that EZ+1 idea. We're not teaching all the dress up since, and soap openers and decorations in unit two,

**Andrew Pudewa:** That's probably the biggest difference is I understood teaching children. And he, and he'd been in the university world for 20 years. The EZ+1, the mastery approach, it fits really well. I'm curious, could we put up those three university level checklists for people who are just curious,

**Julie Walker:** just wanna see it.

Okay. And,

**Andrew Pudewa:** out what is in that.

**Julie Walker:** and I'm not sure what style guide he used, MLA or APA, I'm not entirely

**Andrew Pudewa:** I don't even know that that stuff existed

**Julie Walker:** Yeah, he's got footnotes and those type of requirements–inset quotations.

**Andrew Pudewa:** looking at it as kind of an artifact, and maybe some of it would be useful for some of our listeners who've got kids in an upper high school or university environment. Yeah.

**Julie Walker:** Be great. So all of our curriculum, that's part of what we include, is checklists, and by extension of that, all of our curriculum that we are able to put the checklist in our checklist generator. We have done that, and that's a feature that's available only for our premium members. And this is so that you can customize the checklist to make it easier for some or harder for others. We love that customization.

And then the other thing that I just want to mention that we are doing is our IEW Gradebook does use those exact same checklists, and so that teachers who are teaching a group of students have a learning management system, an LMS to keep track of what those grades are. We'll talk more about that in another podcast. In fact, we'll link to a podcast that we recorded talking more about our checklist generator, but if you want to experience firsthand what that IEW Gradebook can do in evaluating your own writing in a checklist, then I would encourage you to apply for IEW's accreditation. Go through the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*. Get those stylistic techniques and some requirements for the structural models. Nail down, try it yourself and see if you can get a hundred percent.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And don't forget to put your date

**Julie Walker:** Date on your paper. 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.