

## Podcast 519: The Value of Grammar

### Episode Transcript

**Andrew Pudewa:** If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant. And if what is said is not what is meant, then what must be done remains undone. If this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate.

**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:** I have a joke for you, Andrew.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Let me guess, What is May 4th?

**Julie Walker:** Well, that's National Star Wars Day

**Andrew Pudewa:** right? It should be national lisp day. May the fourth be with you,

**Julie Walker:** Very nice. Very nice.

**Andrew Pudewa:** But you've got a better joke, I’m sure..

**Julie Walker:** Well, it's just a little bit, you're two months after me.

**Andrew Pudewa:** March 4th.

**Julie Walker:** Yes, but now you gave the punchline. It's not really a punchline. What is the only date on the calendar that speaks a complete sentence?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah, March 4th, which means that it's National Grammar Day.

**Julie Walker:** And of course at IEW we actually spend the whole month talking about in March because just one little day on the calendar is not enough to talk about this important subject.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I think one reason is because people think about grammar in such a narrow way.

**Julie Walker:** It’s so true.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And people who kind of get into an interest in the classical tradition. To realize that grammar is much, much more than just knowing your parts of speech and what

makes a complete sentence. That's, that's just the microscopic outer tip of what grammar really is.

**Julie Walker:** Yes. And I think that one of the reasons why it's so important to us at IEW is I believe that we have that balance of the appropriate attention to what students actually need when they're learning that type of grammar. Like how much do they really need to know in order to, to what? Actually write?

That's what we're all about. We're the Institute for Excellence in Writing. And grammar definitely plays a part in that, the one that you're talking about, but there's also the grammar of even learning to write.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Sure. And then there's the value of grammar as it pertains to reading comprehension. That's huge. And then there's what is grammar and looking at it from a much larger humanist point of view.

**Julie Walker:** There's your outline. Boss.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well. So for years I've done this talk, but, but, but what about grammar? And I think we have that available?

**Julie Walker:** link in the show notes. Mm-hmm.

**Andrew Pudewa:** It's one of my favorite talks. I talk about the four paradoxes of grammar, the three divisions, and then the two worst and the two best ways to teach it without becoming a sales pitch for our stuff. But we live in a world today where people are increasingly wondering—is it really worth the time to learn all that stuff when we have AI that can generate grammatically correct text more reliably than most human beings?

So we won't get into AI. We'll save that for a different month. But one of the things that I try to bring to people is the importance of exactness in communication, and there's a great quote from Confucius who lived right around the same time as Plato, around 500 BC.

**Julie Walker:** So did they talk to each other much?

**Andrew Pudewa:** I don't think they had any correspondence, but it's interesting how both of them had similar thoughts about various things like music and government and language, and this quote from The Analects, I think just is so timely and always has been and probably always will be.

“If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant. If what is said is not what is meant, then what must be done remains undone. If this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate. If justice goes astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion. Hence, there must be no arbitrariness in what is said. This matters above everything.”

And there's a few things to attend to in this. The first thing is that language and action are very closely related. Of course, we think in language for the most part, at least in a formal, communicable way. And then we act based on what we've said. And so if I just said, "well, meet me at the place," that's not going to help. What we want is a precise idea. Meet me at this specific place with no confusion, at this specific time with no confusion, so that we can do a particular thing. And that's a simple idea, but you can extrapolate that out on larger social scales and it becomes very important.

Then the other observation I would make is that "if things that should be done remain undone, then morals and art will deteriorate," meaning that to have a high quality of morals and art requires maintenance, it requires input, right? We know the law of entropy. If you don't keep working on something, it'll start to degrade and eventually disintegrate. We see that in systems; we see it in all schools, governments, businesses, our lives. So we need a constant attentiveness to the order that grammar is in its essence to maintain art and morals.

And the third thing I would point out in this quote, which I found so fascinating, is that justice is a function of morals and art. So those are all combined, and it goes back to goodness, truth and beauty but in Confucius's language. So when we attend to precise thinking, precise language, precision in what we do, we're actually supporting the morals, art, justice, the goodness, the truth, the beauty—the things that are distinctly needed for human flourishing.

And then I always mention this book, the War Against Grammar, by David Mulroy, where he, as a college professor, noted that students over his tenure, and he taught classics, I think at the University of Wisconsin, he found them less and less able to understand even the literal meaning of things they were reading.

**Julie Walker:** These are basically honor students.

**Andrew Pudewa:** People who have signed up to read hard stuff.

**Julie Walker:** Yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** But, but he came to the conclusion after taking a sabbatical and studying the problem that it was because they no longer could understand what was the subject of the sentence, and that the meaning was lacking conciseness, the meaning was lacking precision because they didn't understand the grammar behind it.

So that's where I went. And then we talk about inherent grammar, applied grammar, analytical grammar, and then the two best ways and worst ways to teach it. The worst ways, since that's what everybody wants to cut to, is just separating completely from the context of using it. These kind of grammar workbooks where you just fill in the blanks, turn the page, you forget it all, or by not teaching it and assuming that you'll just pick it up from language.

There's some truth to the fact that we pick up grammar from language, but if we're going to rely on that, we have to put in a very high quality of language. And even then we need to attend to the details that allow for the comprehension of that language. The two best ways to teach it are writing, and that's where we build the bridge between our grammar and our Structure and Style and composition approach. And then studying a foreign language and the value of getting some distance between the language you're studying and the language you already know, and then learning grammar by building those bridges. Well this thing is called, and that's what it means in both of these languages and that's how you use it.

So that's that talk. I'm doing another talk this year, and since this is the beginning of March, we have conventions starting up right around the corner. I know for sure I'm doing this talk at all of the GreatHomeschool Conventions and maybe a couple others, but I think that that's where I'll be.

Working on, and the talk is called A Better Life through Grammar and Rhetoric. So I'm, I'm hoping that piques people's interest and they'll show up

**Julie Walker:** I want to live a better life.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, normally you don't think of doing grammar exercises as an improvement in life, but there are, at a much deeper level, there are skills that are part of that kind of larger liberal art of grammar-attending. And we've talked about attentiveness, and last year I did a talk on cultivating attentiveness. And you think about, okay, here's a sentence. I can just read it and go away or assume I understood it, or I can ask a few questions, I can attend to it. But really that skill of attentiveness is core for learning anything we want to learn.

And there's a grammar of everything, right? There's a grammar of music, there's a grammar of fine arts, there's a grammar of basketball. There's a grammar of everything we do. And so attentiveness. Also, naming is a skill of grammar, and we look at the first task that Adam had was to name the animals. Now we don't necessarily make up names for everything, but we need to learn names. And so understanding words and definitions and even idioms in our language and the language you're reading is a linguistic representation of that skill of knowing what things are called and what are the rules that govern their behavior.

Then we would look at also the skills of communicating like describing, expressing, storytelling. All of these things are where we wrestle with the ideas we get, and then re-presenting them, right, and that re-presenting things is really at the core of comprehension. We do this naturally and children do this naturally. They read a book or see a movie or go somewhere. What do they want to do? Tell you all about it.

**Julie Walker:** All about it. We just had some friends over and they just got back from the Holy Land, and they shared some pictures, and this was very exciting to my husband because he also went but many, many years ago. So to see some of the exact same sites was just a joy to him.

**Andrew Pudewa:** You get to revisit that in your memory, and that reactivates things in your memory. And I spend a good amount of time with grandchildren, and well, pretty much all of them, they just want to talk to you.

**Julie Walker:** Yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** They just love having a person, an adult who's not busy, who will just listen to them. And I can see how that re-presenting of their experience is solidifying their understanding of life itself in their mind. So that's such a very valuable thing.

And then of course, we live in a story, right? We live in the greatest story. And if we can understand life in terms of characters and setting and conflicts and problems and resolutions and climaxes, and lessons to be learned from our life, we're so much richer than if we don't have the capacity to think that way.

**Julie Walker:** If you are new to IEW, what Andrew just narrated was the elements of our story sequence in the Unit 3 of our Structure and Style writing program.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Which has kind of been such a now normal part of my way of thinking about things. I didn't really even think that I just said it. And that's one thing I really loved about. The Fix It! idea. So I don't know how many years ago it was, but I came across this book that was, I think it was called *Grammar with a Giggle* or something, and it was this idea that you would make up stories and embed errors in those stories and then give them to your kids to fix the errors.

And the basic idea was you could make the stories based on two factors. What errors are these kids doing in their writing, as well as what would make them chuckle? What would bring them a moment of mirth in the drudgery of having to study grammar and do editing as a kid? And so I got this idea because not especially homeschool moms who's got the time to sit there and write a custom story and embed the errors that kids are likely to make or need to know.

**Julie Walker:** I'm sorry, you said homeschool moms, but classroom teachers.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah. Even teachers, nobody's got the time. I mean, I did it occasionally and I still do it occasionally, but it's a labor of love rather. So I thought, well, what we need is to have something done. Can and what stories would be good? Well, the good stories, the classic stories, and so that's how I originally got this idea for the Fix It! book was to take some classic stories, children's stories, fairy tales, stuff like that, and then write them with these embedded errors and starting really easy and then gradually increasing the complexity.

I think we've been through four versions since the very beginning and now it's really good. It's the best.

**Julie Walker:** Truly the best. There are so many things I could say that I love about our *Fix It! Grammar* program. I know that so many of our listeners are using it. I can almost

sheepishly admit this is our best selling product, and partly because it's so enjoyable to use. It's not just throw the book at your kids and have them do it, but they actually enjoy going through it and reading the story.

But as a teacher, I think, we can benefit from knowing that this method will actually then transfer into their writing, and more importantly, for all you *Fix It! Grammar* users who are not using our structure and style approach. This was actually designed to dovetail with it because you're looking for -ly adverbs, you're looking for sentence constructions and your sentence openers.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So we're using the same vocabulary, and we're embedding the style techniques, but you don't have to do, do the other. And I think, frequently yesterday I got an email from someone who said, well, we've been using your writing program for years, but we were in a program, like a homeschool co-op style program that was using a different grammar. My kids hated it, but we quit doing that. We just started *Fix It!* and it's so much better. The kids love it. They look forward. They want to do it first thing in the day.

**Julie Walker:** I want to address this because this does come up occasionally and I have personal experience with this. And that is our *Fix It! Grammar* program does not teach diagramming. Now, I personally taught in a real school, and the curriculum that we used did teach diagramming and I loved it.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Sure.

**Julie Walker:** Because it was a puzzle to me and I love puzzles. But what I found was the kids were very frustrated because, do I make that line straight? Do I make it, do I slant it? And they just spent an inordinate amount of time, and it didn't necessarily transfer into their writing. I'll let me say that differently. It did not transfer into their writing, being able to diagram sentences. And so the reason we don't do diagramming in our *Fix It! Grammar* is...they just need to hear it from you, Andrew, and not from me.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, there's nothing wrong with it. Some people do like it. A lot of kids are frustrated. One of the things I've noted is you could have a pretty simple sentence, give it to a few experts, and you might end up with different diagrams. That grammar is not a precise thing like math, right? If you had a math problem and you gave it to four different mathematicians, you would probably get the exact same answer. Four different English teachers, who knows? So that's one thing.

And I always stress to people that grammar is not a science. In that way, it's actually an art. It's the first of the seven liberal arts. And so there are various ways to do things, and in our materials we, and I always say, this is what I believe is the best way to do this, but you might meet some other teacher down the line somewhere else who says something different and that's okay, and you just have to live with it.

But I will say we have six levels of *Fix It! Grammar*. You get into level five, level six, you have such a phenomenal command of the grammar of the English language. If you did level six, got all the way through it, you would know more English grammar than 99.99999% of all English speaking people. You probably know more than 99% of all people with master's degrees in English.

**Julie Walker:** It's a very gentle,

**Andrew Pudewa:** Is that necessary? Who knows, people very often will say, well, how much grammar do you need? Well shift that over. How much music do you need? Right? When are you going to call it? A lot of people grow up playing a musical instrument and then at some point they kind of stop because they've got, but it's, they're better human beings for having grown up playing anything.

So, if you only did *Fix It!* one, it would be better than *Fix It!* . None.

**Julie Walker:** Right,

**Andrew Pudewa:** And, and you don't have to worry if you get all the way through the top levels. By the end of whatever you're going to benefit. The other thing is, I know for a fact kids who go into foreign language, this really helps because now they're in the habit of looking for parts of speech, understanding the language in terms of what's the subject, and sentences in languages like Latin where you have cases, right? Or others like Russian. I know they have cases too. You have to know, well, what is the subject and in what case is that? It transfers over very nicely. And the kids get to read a good story and copy it over, and they're always kind of interested, well, what's going to happen tomorrow? You have to be sure they don't, flip ahead and read the whole story.

**Julie Walker:** They do that, you know.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Even if they did, it's okay because the stories are all worth reading more than once.

**Julie Walker:** And that this is just a, this is just a quick little assignment, 10 to 15 minutes a day. We're not spending an inordinate amount of time. I think that's another reason why diagramming is not something we wanted to do, is it just takes too much time.

**Andrew Pudewa:** We wouldn't be the ones to do it because there are other people who have already done that. This what we have is unique, and again, it's proven to work very well in the classroom, with two dozen kids or more, and it works very nicely in the homeschool or the small tutoring situation because then you can kind of go as fast as you need. If you need to slow it down, you have dyslexic kids or whatever. If you want to speed it up, you can do more than a book in a year.

**Julie Walker:** Right, exactly. Well.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Just tell, tell the people the stories because I'm, I'm very happy we have these great stories.

**Julie Walker:** Great stories about *Fix It! Grammar*

**Andrew Pudewa:** The stories that are in the *Fix It! Grammar*

**Julie Walker:** yes. Oh, okay.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Starting with *The Nose Tree*

**Julie Walker:** Right. So *The Nose Tree* is a brothers grim story. Sometimes people are like, I've never even heard of this story. Well, that's kind of cool. Now you get to learn about *The Nose Tree*. And then we did *Town Mouse and Country Mouse*, and that's Beatrix Potter.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, it comes from an Aesop fable, I think.

**Julie Walker:** Right. But she turned it into this beautiful story. And then *Robin Hood*. Now *Robin Hood* is a pretty long

**Andrew Pudewa:** It's just one, one incident from the whole *Robin Hood* story, but probably one of the most fun ones.

**Julie Walker:** And then *Mowgli and Shere Khan*.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Kipling. I love that so much.

**Julie Walker:** Yep. And this is how Man invented fire? No, but it's something about, it's the story of *Mowgli and Shere Khan* from *The Jungle Book* where it's about the fire story, getting the fire right. And then we have *The Frog Prince*, and now we're getting into some pretty high level grammar. But it's still a delightful story. And you know the frog getting kissed by the princess and turns into a real prince.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Right. Well, and it's got some interesting modern allusions in there as well.

**Julie Walker:** And then *Little Mermaid*, which of course, Hans Christian Andersen, the real story, not the Disney story. These are great stories. Let me share this other "great story." And this is from Alicia. We put this in our Magalog, so if you want to see our products, you can request a Magalog, but she says, "I love the *Fix It! Grammar* books. I love that each lesson has the list at the top of all the things my kids need to find and that they can rewrite the fixed sentence at the bottom of the page. You nailed it."

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, checklists are handy. You know what you're looking for. Find what you're looking for and look for what you need to find.

**Julie Walker:** So use our *Fix It! Grammar*. You'll love it.

**Andrew Pudewa:** people can try it for free. What's the link to try to Fix It! ?

**Julie Walker:** Well, we kind of have now this one webpage that's an aggregator of all the try free pages. Are you ready? [IEW.com/Try](http://IEW.com/Try).

**Andrew Pudewa:** Oh, even I have to remember that

**Julie Walker:** know. I thought you would like

**Andrew Pudewa:** And they can get the first few lessons of any level, see if it is appropriate, and try the next level up and the next level down. And then

**Julie Walker:** We don't really have a placement test because we kind of believe that to fill in those gaps, it's a good idea to start at level one, no matter how old your children are. Oh, Andrew, I want to talk to that. We're out of time, but I do want you to speak to this. When should parents and teachers start a formal grammar program?

Like Fix It!

**Andrew Pudewa:** That's hard to say. It's better to wait a little bit too long than to start too early because it's kind of abstract. But I think if you are doing it around nine or 10 years old, grade three, four, that's where the abstractness isn't too much of a burden on most kids. And then sometimes you got older kids, and they've done a bunch of other grammar, so they already are pretty good with knowing parts of speech and knowing if it's a complete sentence or not and all that. So that's why you could start at a higher level two or three if you had a lot of experience, but that's why we give you a chance to try it for free.

**Julie Walker:** Yep, exactly right. Alright, super. Thank you Andrew.

**Andrew Pudewa:** 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](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.