

Podcast 521: Announcing the 2026 IEW Writing Contest

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, I tell you, if they win anything, even honorable mention that just completely transforms their self-image. And then we move into that law of motivation. Kids want to do what they can do.

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 Andrew, it's March, which means if you're doing the one a month schedule, you're probably somewhere around.

Andrew Pudewa: Unit 7, we would hope.

Julie Walker: Yes. And if you're a little further than that or a little bit behind, that's okay. But Unit 7 is that blank page assignment that we don't start with. We give the students plenty of runway to be able to get to that. And it also corresponds perfectly, and we did this intentionally, to our writing contest.

Andrew Pudewa: right. How many years have we done this now?

Julie Walker: Well, this will be our 11th year of doing a writing contest.

Andrew Pudewa: And why do we do this?

Julie Walker: Well, so many reasons. And these are questions I should be asking you, Andrew. Why do we have a writing contest? What's the value of a writing contest?

Andrew Pudewa: Because you like to give stuff away.

Julie Walker: Well, this is true and we do have prizes for our winners, but most writing contests have prizes.

Andrew Pudewa: Of course. Yeah. And we've sponsored many writing contests, HSLDA, Pro-Life, various state homeschool organizations. I think it's one of the best things that a community can do to kind of orient people more toward, “Hey, let's write and let's submit and let's read what each other are writing and thinking.”

Julie Walker: It's some of that motivation talk, Andrew, that you give. How does a writing contest fit in the different levels of motivation?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it could fit with inspired because you could read someone else's piece and say, I could do better than that, and then enter the next time. Or you could say, wow, that's really well done. It makes me want to try to aspire to that. Or it could have the opposite effect. You read the writing contest winners and say, I'm hopeless. But there's that level. I think more importantly though, it inspires a kid to kind of go the extra, put in the extra effort. I've noticed for years and years I can give kids assignments. Okay, here you have to do this, okay, fine. Do it. And they're busy and they have all sorts of things going on.

They don't necessarily put in a hundred percent all the time. Some of them seem to not put in a hundred percent any of the time. But when you have this external thing, and it's not just a teacher and students or a mom and her kids, there's this, "oh, I'm in the big world now, so now I have to, I have to polish up, I have to look good. I have to do my best." And so I think you get an extraordinary amount of effort. Often, not always, but often when a student goes and enters the writing contest. I've seen this with all sorts of . . . competition in general is highly motivating for kids. Some couldn't care less, but I'd say a super majority, at least, when they have a chance for competition, they put in the extra effort, whether it's speaking or writing, or even things like art or martial arts. It's like, okay, we need to prep up for this.

Julie Walker: We use the analogy of music a lot when we're talking about writing, mostly because of your background, but, but just because it makes so much sense. And I had my boys in music lessons and one thing that was very motivating was that recital. And they were playing for me and the grandparents and everybody else who was there, but really it made them want to polish their piece so they could play it by heart.

So I have. The prompts from the writing contest to announce to our families and our teachers so that they can get their students busy on writing and possibly winning prizes that we're giving

Andrew Pudewa: Right, and, and I might say, I've done this to my kids, grandkids recently, my students, okay, there's this writing contest. You could enter it. You might win something, you might not, but I will give you a prize for entering, whether it's some tickets or 10 bucks or what, kids, kids are motivated differently.

But I think just getting them over the hump of, okay, I'll do it. We can help with that. And then, oh, I tell you, if they win anything, even honorable mention that just completely transforms their image, self-image, oh, I'm good at this. And then we move into that law of motivation: kids want to do what they can do.

Julie Walker: So here we are. Here are some prompts. We break it down by levels, level A, level B, level C. This is on our website, IEW.com/iew-writing-contest. Link in the show notes and all of the rules. The deadline to apply, which is the end of April, so you've got a little bit of time to work on a rough draft, a final draft, turn it into us. There are very specific directions, and I will tell you, Andrew, that we first of all look to see if they followed the directions. If they didn't follow the directions, they're immediately disqualified.

Andrew Pudewa: well you have to.

Julie Walker: We have to do that.

Andrew Pudewa: Otherwise you make little exceptions or you ignore little things, and then pretty soon it's just a mess.

Julie Walker: Well, and it's our team of online instructors who are doing the evaluating, which we are so grateful for them, but we get hundreds. In fact, last year we got thousands of applicants. So we just have to wade through those that are not going to be in the top tier and just kind of go through that quickly.

But here is the prompt and Andrew, obviously we do this in collaboration with you, and you had the suggestion about literature and so let me just read the prompts. If you are a student ages eight to 10, you will write a two-paragraph. So don't do three, don't do one. Otherwise, we'll kick it out before we even read it, but write a two-paragraph composition answering this prompt: Write about a book, short story or movie whose characters, events or theme have significantly impacted you and explain how.

Andrew Pudewa: That could be hard for nine-year-olds because they don't necessarily know what significantly impacts them. But you could translate that into something that made me think, something that made me want to change in a way. I think “significantly impacted” may be a little hard for a 9-year-old to wrap their brain around.

But parents can help with that and sometimes they might. Say, well, I really like [fill in the blank,] but to write two paragraphs, it's have to be why, and that why has to go into the direction of how has it affected your thoughts, your feelings, your emotions, your behavior, your desires, your goals, your dreams, anything like that.

Julie Walker: So personalize a little bit to be able to explain how it impacted you. The next level. So this is level B. So students that are, we are looking at ages because we do have to be pretty strict about that. Ages 11 to 13 write a four or five paragraph composition, answering this prompt. Write about a book, short story or movie whose characters, events, or theme have significantly impacted your thoughts and/or actions. Explain the impact and its significance. So we're looking at a basic essay model, five paragraphs with an introduction and conclusion with either two or three body paragraphs. That's probably the model to be used.

Andrew Pudewa: Probably what our online instructors who will sort through these things are expecting.

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly. Exactly. And then for level C, they're very similar, just.

Andrew Pudewa: It's actually the same question.

Julie Walker: Yeah, it's just longer. Write a five to seven paragraph essay answering this prompt. "Write about a book, short story or movie whose characters, events, or themes have significantly impacted your thoughts, actions, or how you view the world.

So a little bit of modification there. Explain the specific elements that contributed to this impact, the impact itself, and its significance in your life. This would be a great college application essay.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, yeah, they used to do things like that. I don't know that they still do or not. But yeah, so writing a prompt is hard because you have to think of something that anybody could write about, but no one has any specific privileged knowledge or experience with. So hopefully book, movie, short story—hopefully everyone has some of those. And again, I think for young people, they don't necessarily think this way. They don't necessarily say, oh, that story really caused me to think differently about something.

But that's part of the process, trying to become a little bit more objective and apply the ideas that you are experiencing in that world of literature and fiction or movies and say, okay.

And, and you could even go so far as to say, well, it may not have affected me this way a lot, but it should affect me. Right. And you could build off that. I would think of a couple books from my childhood that unfortunately had a very negative effect on me. And I went to a public school, and they mostly in high school had this canon of depressing existentialist literature and you just think, well, that's just the worst thing I've ever heard or read. You tend to forget it. Hopefully people will have things that are a little more uplifting. I'm guessing we may get a whole lot of *Lord of the Rings* in there and that would be okay. But it would also be okay to have a response to something, not I want to be like that, or I want to think like that, or I don't want to be like that. And that would be equally as valid from from the prompt.

Julie Walker: Sure, and there's no limit in terms of length, it could be a short story. It says short story. And so if a student wanted to get started on this today and they say, Hmm, I got nothing. Well, they could read the Gift of the Magi from O. Henry.

Andrew Pudewa: I was thinking, oh, Henry, I was thinking Hans Christian Andersen, um, high schoolers, Chekov. And a short story might be a little easier to wrap your brain around. you get into a book and it's kinda like taking a trip and by the end of the book you don't necessarily remember where you went through the book.

And it's, it's hard to step back and get a perspective on the whole, which is what literature, classes, and teachers and courses are trying to do, but kids very often live in the short term. This is what I am experiencing right now. So a short story is good. Movies are good because you can watch them an hour and a half, two hours. If it's a movie worth watching, it should be thought provoking. I don't know that we would get too many people waxing philosophical about *Home Alone*, which for some reason is a big topic of conversation with a few of my grandchildren right now. But I think you also, you, you can look at that and say, well, there was a very disrespectful character and I saw the consequences. Or the horror or the repulsion

I experienced with this disrespectful character made me not want to fall into that type of attitude or behavior. I, that's totally valid.

Julie Walker: I like it. To learning from other people's mistakes or lack of character

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, the book I would write about is, it's a short novella by Tolstoy. It's called *The Death of Ivan Illitch*, and it's a book I try to listen to every year because it's a horrible, horrible, broken story about a man who just totally wastes his life and goes down every wrong path, and now he's dying. And he can't undo that. And so

Julie Walker: Time is our most precious commodity.

Andrew Pudewa: For me, that's one of the most impactful books, not because what inspired me by the nobility of Levin in *Anna Karenina*, which would possibly be a good one. But it's a stark warning and we always can use that sometimes too.

Julie Walker: Well, and I do want to just share a couple more things and all this you can find on our website. This writing contest is available to anyone, whether or not you are an IEW student. You can submit your application, your essay, your contest entry regardless of whether or not you've used IEW. We predict though that IEW students will perform better and likely be the champions.

And speaking of the champions, we do publish the champion applicants, the ones who win the contest, first prize, for second, third in our *Magnum Opus Magazine* in our print. Copy. So shout out to our managing editor, Elizabeth Brasells, who oversees all of that great work and compiles that. And we'll put a link in the show notes where you can request a copy of the *Magnum Opus Magazine* and see what the contest winners were like in previous years.

Andrew Pudewa: One more thought came to me. Thinking about my kids, one of my daughters in particular, the most impactful book, I know she would agree, of her youth was actually a biography. She read it when she was about 14. And so don't feel like literature has to be limited in this world of novels or fiction or that, because some of the most profoundly moving stories can be the non-fiction, the experience of real people writing about themselves or other people writing about them.

And I think the prompts are very broad and you don't have to interpret them narrowly, so it should be, I hope we get a really good turnout on this one.

Julie Walker: I hope so too. 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.