

Podcast 548: Ghostwriting with Joshua Lisec

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: We're not putting people in a box. We're equipping them with the tools that will actually increase their creative options downline. And you, I think more than anyone else I've met, have found that to be very viscerally true

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.

Andrew Pudewa: Hello. This is a different kind of Arts of Language podcast in that I believe for the first time ever I do not have Julie Walker with me. So it's just me, but I do have one of the most interesting and remarkable guests that we have been able to welcome to this stage if you want to call it that, a man I, who knows me perhaps better than I know him, but wow, what a fascinating individual. Let us welcome Josh Lisec. Did I say that right, Josh?

Joshua Lisec: It is Joshua Lisec. You're close. Lisec. Joshua Lisec

Andrew Pudewa: And we can see that he actually wrote this book, a nice poster in the background there, *So Good They Call You a Fake*, which I believe is just one of many, many books that you have written and helped people write. So Joshua, give us a little bit of background on who you are and the kind of very remarkable professional life that you live.

Joshua Lisec: Sure thing. Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to be here, here with you. Of all of the curricula that my classical education-focused homeschool mother had in the '90s and 2000s, the Institute for Excellence in Writing, your work, and I told you this when we first chatted, that of all the curricula that we, that we used, yours is the only one that I can specifically point to and say the skills that this person taught me, I have used in my adult life. There's a one-to-one correlation between learning the skill and using it professionally in my career.

We did very briefly meet in 2008 in Columbus, Ohio, at the Christian Home Educators of Ohio, a kind of association thing. You gave a sort of presentation there. And myself, my older brother, and my mom, we were, we were a bit of, I guess you could say some, some groupies and fans, kind of swarming you after the speech.

Obviously, that was a number of years ago. I probably look a bit different now. But the Institute for Excellence in Writing gave me a vast range. You, you talk it like the, the checklist of dress-ups and sentence openers and the different structure. Three short staccato sentences. Okay, all the different, let's say, options available to the communicator. And that, I believe, enabled me to fit hand in glove into a career as a professional ghostwriter. Over the last 15 years, I have written more than 120 full-length general trade nonfiction books on just about everything: business, sales, psychology, medicine, wealth management, finance,

politics, current affairs, history, and a number of memoirs, plus an additional number of novels.

I'm also in the double digits of books that I've authored or co-authored under my own name, and I have three New York Times bestsellers that I've had in the last two years that are a Joshua Lisec, authored or co-authored, New York Times bestseller, which is pretty cool since I began as a ghostwriter.

But it was that foundational skill set of learning all the different ways that one can write that when I would study an author client I was able to very quickly pick up on what, of the checklists from Andrew Pudewa, does this person use? And so it was very easy for me to sort of fit myself into their voice and style and then begin writing as them.

And of course, ghostwriting is where someone is hired, like an attorney or a tax preparer, to do the professional service on behalf of the person, but using their information, of course, their stories, their data, their experiences and whatnot to produce, let's say, a professional level work that could be on bookstore shelves.

And I have my work in bookstores all around the country now. And I fully believe, again, it's that one-to-one. Joshua takes IEW from Andrew Pudewa as a youngster. I started when I was nine years old went till the time I was sixteen. Joshua becomes successful as a writer, even as AI is wiping out so much of the human profession of professional writers, freelancers, copywriters, et cetera, speech writers even, that Joshua's doing well because he has IEW and AI does not.

Andrew Pudewa: What could I ask for better than that? It's interesting because a lot of people will say to me, "Well, this checklist and, and these models, that's all nice and good, but doesn't it stifle creativity?" And of course, so, part of my work is to explain we're not putting people in a box, we're equipping them with the tools that will actually increase their creative options down line.

And you, I think more than anyone else I've met, have found that to be very viscerally true. And so it's very exciting for me because you like to say the proof is in the pudding. In this case, the proof is in Joshua. I'm so curious, though, how did you get the idea to be a ghostwriter? Like, how did that come into being? Because that's just not an occupation category that many people ever think of when it comes to language, writing and publishing. It seems almost like such an obscure niche. You're like a secret agent in the world of words somehow.

Joshua Lisec: Yes, it did happen to me by accident, and I became a ghostwriter before I realized that that's what the profession was called. When I was in college, I wrote a couple of novels. They got a very small book deal, and so I am 21 years old, and I'm a real published author with books to my own name. And I had wanted to be a freelance writer by that point because I had already done some work, let's say, in a traditional workplace environment, eight to five, W2 type of experience. And I hadn't really found a way to, to actually deploy the skills that I had learned, first through Institute for Excellence in Writing and then through the communications degrees that I earned and I achieved. And that was primarily research writing projects on any number of topics that were all over the place.

It was a little bit of actual training in real life and putting my skills to the test, sharpening them, giving an opportunity to deploy them. And I thought, "Maybe I can make a living doing this." So I was, let's see, I was 19 years old when I got my first freelance writing gig while I was writing my novels, you see.

So then the novels come out, and I'm looking for freelance writing gigs. I'm thinking, I'll write, like, I'll write a resume for someone and a cover letter. Or, I'll write their TED Talk. I've written, I, I've written a number of speeches both for politicians and for TED speakers.

I was thinking I could do that and do more of that. But then a couple of my readers, having read my novels, reached out to me because being a marketer, knowing how to do follow-up, even at a young age, I created bookmarks. I put it in the bookmarks in my book. I had my contact info. Okay. And I didn't realize this was going to happen.

I was hoping that people would reach out and like, "Hey, I want to buy your next book. Get on your email list," that kind of thing. This was before that everyone was using QR codes everywhere to make that easy. So these bookmarks, two people reached out to me from my bookmarks, my little leave-behind inside of my novels.

This was from, like, um, doing author panels, book fairs, library speaking, that kind of thing, in my local area here in Ohio. Two people via my bookmark texted, emailed, called me or otherwise, said, "Josh, I read your book. I love it. I'm wondering if you can help me write mine."

And here's the key. Here's the key. Memoir, not fiction, not novels, not stories, but memoir. Hmm. And having read my novel, they thought I put it together now. I've been trying to write my autobiography, which is like an extended Wikipedia entry about my life. I don't even wanna read that. That's so boring. I wanna read the ex-take the exciting parts of my life, the highlights and the lowlights, and weave it together with dialogue and action and settings, and write the novelization of my life.

Is what, is what people ask for. And I said, "Okay, fine. Sure, I'll help you with your book." And I've been saying, "Okay, fine. Sure, I'll help you with your book" ever since.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow. That's amazing. I'm curious if you have ever been asked to do something that you had questions about the ethicalness, the ethicality of that. Like, someone wants you to write something, your secret behind the scenes, they're gonna put their name on it out there. Um, something like a, a, a doctoral dissertation or something comes to mind. Have you ever had to turn down a job because you just didn't think it was right to do?

Joshua Lisec: Y-yes, yes. And I have done my best nowadays to prevent those sorts of inquiries from wasting either of our time. I kinda make it clear that I'm more so on the conservative side of things. I write mostly now for conservative Christian people, both those who are in sort of a p- private business. They're in an industry. Perhaps they're an attorney or they're a consultant. I write books for a lot of clinicians nowadays, or those who are political, historical nonfiction, outspoken journalists, let's say, but, who are very much coming from a conservative Christian viewpoint. And there had been a time where I was a little more all over the spectrum, but it was in, I believe it was in either 2020 or 2021, let, let's say that I had

a project that had a big five publisher lined up, and they wanted me to write a book that would basically condemn half of the country.

Okay. We'll leave, we'll leave it at that. As all the labels, you know all the labels I'm talking about? If you, if you're a conservative Christian, you, you know what the labels I'm talking about. You, you'd get all the labels. And so this person was going to pay an inordinate amount of money to me. I didn't even... Like, the deal was brought to me, "I want you to write this book." 'Cause I had written one book for this person previously, right? So this is on a different subject. He wanted to go from a business topic to, like, management, leadership, et cetera, , to a political current affairs type of book. And I just... I could have taken the money.

No one would've known it was me, but I would've known it was me. And that was the first time I turned something down out of principle, despite the cash money. I think, I think everyone does have their price, unfortunately. I'm a little pragmatic, maybe a bit pessimistic, having been in this business of book publishing for so long, right?

For example, publishers are totally publishing AI-written books and AI-assisted editing books. They only cancel the ones that people can tell and they get caught. So a lot of authors don't have "no AI in your book." That's not a clause in a lot of contracts still. Oh. They just don't wanna be embarrassed by getting caught, right? So there's a lot of pe- pessimism and pragmatism in my work. , but that my integrity was, was not purchasable at that price point.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I'm glad to hear that Christian homeschool childhood was deep in there, I guess. So one of the things that I talk about a lot with students is developing their repertoire of style through imitation. And of course, we have our checklists, and one of the things I did, and I don't know if you ever bumped into the lessons that I created on this, but I've had kids, like, read a section by Charles Dickens, first couple pages of *Christmas Carol*. Figure out what makes Dickens sound like Dickens. Read a couple pages of *Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain. Figure out what makes Twain's Tom Sawyer sound like Twain. Read a couple pages from the King James Bible and figure out what makes the King James Bible sound like the King James Bible, and then actually create kind of a checklist, and then do a little exercise of rewriting an Aesop fable or something like that in the voice of these various authors.

And I've even coached college kids who said, "I really want to get better at writing. How do I do that?" My answer is, "I don't really know, but here's what I would do. Find your favorite author, and then write a bit until you feel like you can sound like that author. Find another favorite author, write a bit until you can sound like that and maybe go through half a dozen or more different authors trying to imitate them." And I think you've probably done this to some degree. Um, could you tell us, like, do you have any favorite authors that you've kind of grafted onto your unique style, and then how you deploy that for different people in different ways?

Joshua Lisec: Yes. So having the Institute for Excellence in Writing background, as you said, it's less about putting it in a box and giving kids all the boxes, seeing what's in all the boxes, let's say, and then learning to pick from which box that you want given the position.

So let's say, for example, a direct response sales letter has a certain voice. It has urgency, it has hype, it has relatability, it has multi-sensory descriptions of how things look, taste, sound. It's future-oriented. This will happen when you do this sort of imperative. That if you've ever, if you've ever seen an advertisement sales letter whether it's traditional in a magazine or you've been on a product website, let's say from Shopify, for example, a plugin that does a lot of e-commerce, you know exactly what I'm talking about.

That's one voice. Then there are textbooks that have a very different voice. , what, a voice is a-- One voice in particular I like is that of an emergency room surgeon, like an emergency surgeon. I've written for several of those, , and, and their voice is extreme precision with brevity. So the, the, the most complete version of what could be communicated in as few words as possible.

Because you think in an emergency room context, someone's coming there with an extreme emergency where there are seconds to minutes to, to save the life, okay? And the doctor is in there with his gloves and his, all the garb on, okay? And the attending, the nurses, all the other professionals that are in, in the room, he can't necessarily back away and pull and te-tell them where things are that he's going to need. So he has, without any nonverbal communication, and he's laying in there, just stuck in here doing, for performing the emergency surgery. All he has is speech. All he has is words to communicate, and he has to get it right, lest the person hand him the wrong tool or the wrong size or the wrong medication or the wrong dosage. Hmm. So in that context, this is one of my favorite voices to write in the voice of, is with extreme precision.

Now, communicate with the... Imagine you're a political candidate and you want to communicate with surgical precision on an issue. You will come across like the world's leading expert on that subject. Or perhaps you're an economics professor going on a cable news show to talk about your new book that's come out. Speaking with precision, you will sound, wow, this person's-- this person sounds credible. You see? So taking that one voice out of that context and then repurposing it elsewhere works really well. There are a number of let's say, anonymous fiction writers, storytellers that I've found through the X platform, formerly Twitter, who have a very interesting way of writing, and it's not one in particular, it's several of them, anonymous novelists and short story writers, fiction writers.

They regularly... They don't use proper punctuation. Hmm. They don't use proper punctuation, and it's because what they're doing, when they write in the first person present tense, like, "I feel this, I do this, I see this." Imagine when you're an internal narrator kind of going, going through your life and you see something, oftentimes we will have words or pictures that come to mind that kind of have like an internal monologue, right? There is no punctuation in the internal monologue. For example.

And oftentimes we think, we think of what to say and then we say it. Let's say. So some of these fiction writers, they write stream of consciousness without proper punctuation. Like when we're asking a question, use a period. When you say something, don't use quote for yourself or the other person, because it's like what they said and what you heard, and then you write what you heard in your head when they said that.

No punctuation and it's an incredible first person perspective that just sticks you right in there, and I will deploy that on historical nonfiction to put the person right there in the scene watching what happened in history, for example.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow. Well, I would like for you to tell us a little bit about, I think you've created some courses for people, as well as two questions.

Number one, what is the favorite thing you've worked on, the favorite project you've ever done? And then tell us a little bit about your newest book there, you've got the great poster with the decorated Mona Lisa on the back. Because I think you're such a fascinating individual, and it's tragic we have such a short time, but I would like anyone who's interested, particularly young people who would like to...

I get so many questions from young people, older teenagers, again, who grew up doing IEW or college students that did some IEW, and they really want to be writers in the serious sense. And so I think you must have some, some good resources for them. So tell us a little bit about that.

Joshua Lisec: Sure thing. Yes. So I have a series of courses under the kind of the trademark brand, The Best Way To Say It. That's what I teach. That's sort of what I did in the year 2020, is that's when I began launching courses, and I have maybe a dozen or so under the banner. I have several thousand business professionals who purchase them, and some CEOs, entrepreneurs, investors, et cetera.

It's sort of the fundamentals of business communication, but taught from a direct response copywriting perspective. 'Cause like p- persuasive writing does what? It convinces someone to change what they were going to do anyway. Right. It's a status quo breaking communication, word patterns? And how, how do you construct something that you're not... You're in the state of not buying product X. You read this description, and now you buy product X. How did that happen? Hmm. Well, the person found the best way to say it, didn't they? Oh, there we go. And so that's a series of writing courses.

Most often the people who've purchased that might consider themselves remedial adult writers. So maybe they struggled with writing when they were young, and suddenly all they're doing for work every day, regardless of their industry, their profession or job title or career, self-employed or not, is every day everyone is writing.

And now of course there's the slop, so to speak, which is sort of a robotic writing style that when someone sees it, you can immediately detect that they're using AI, and so the credibility and the trust in it collapses, and there's some great work by-

Andrew Pudewa: It is just nauseating. When I read that stuff, I, I just, I, I think why would anybody spend any of their time and money creating or looking or reading or even thinking about this? There's something so, so, I don't know, soulless maybe about it that I detect. I feel like I detect it right away. , you probably are even more sensitive to that kind of thing.

Joshua Lisec: Yes. AI writing tends to be melodramatic because it's not embodied, so it doesn't know exactly how things feel multisensorily or, or what's an exaggeration or what is an under-exaggeration. Let's- it, it doesn't necessarily know, so it tries to throw everything all at once to describe everything from every angle, and it ends up repeating itself or echoing itself or saying you're saying the same thing a different way, and you've read three pages, and you realize you haven't actually gotten to the point yet.

Just "Here's the kicker, and the truth is, what most people don't understand yet, is it's not just about this, it's about this other thing, which I'm going to tell you. And when you read it, everything, everything will never be the same." And okay, I- you told me nothing. I just read a bunch of sentences, and I learned nothing.

That's AI where it's sort of hypey and also melancholy, exaggerated, and you, you take away nothing vivid from it. Because- Yeah ... what you wanna communicate specifically, explicitly, it may not have in its corpus, in its, in its training, , in its large language model. So it kind of has to hype it up and give you a bunch of words that may not have the meaning that you are looking for.

Um, but the best way to say it process is based on how I ghostwrite a lot of books very, very quickly at a professional standard that they can be published by the Big Five. They can sell hundreds of thousands of copies being national bestsellers, all the things. And it's sort of remedial for adults. And I've had people reach out to me over the years and say, "Do you have a version for kids?"

And guess what I tell them, Andrew? I say, "Google Institute for Excellence in Writing." This is for your kids, okay? If you're the adult who missed the boat, unfortunately you didn't have IEW as a kid, I might be able to help you here as an adult if it's, if it's too late for you. Oh, well, thank you. But otherwise, I tell them to get IEW.

Andrew Pudewa: So, tell me, what was your favorite project so far in your life? The, the thing you've worked on that brought you the most satisfaction?

Joshua Lisec: As much as I would, I would like to say it's this book that came out three years ago called *So Good They Call You a Fake*, which by the way is I'm a systems thinker. So when someone brings me their project, I think in terms of step-by-step with no steps skipped how to actually get the result.

So imagine it's a, it's a unique weight loss strategy book, okay? Let's say that's the subject. Okay, there's 80,001 of those. What, what is your process that is different than or superior to everything else that's out there? And I'll talk them through this. "Oh, you just do this and this and this." Okay, but you do just this and this and this in what order? What's the first step? What do you need to know that if you miss out on that will mess up everything else later on? Well, what if it doesn't work for this kind of person? What would you say then? And so I'm sort of building this table of contents out for the book simply by interrogating their hypothesis or their thesis.

I'm trying to find out what the objections are going to be, and then like dominoes I lay them out, where once you learn this thing, it's easy to simply do the next thing. Once you've done that, you'll find it pretty easy to do this instead, and then this and then this.

And the domino metaphor works because some of you might have seen there's a rather hilarious meme that shows how to draw an owl. Step one, a circle on an oval. Step two, the finished portrait of the photorealistic owl. A lot of nonfiction how-to and self-help books are like that. Whether it's about business or money or health or fitness or anything else, personal development, they're like that. So but it'll be 50 pages talking about almost an AI hype.

And when I show you in chapter two this, you won't believe how easy it is to do chapter three. And then you get to chapter three and it says the same thing. And when you learn what happens next in chapter four, nothing will be the same. And not just not the same, but different. And, and so it's like the hypey self-help authors have been writing like AI for the last 30 years?

Andrew Pudewa: That's why AI does what it does because it's pulling from all of what's been written for the last 30 years, right?

Joshua Lisec: I suspect that this is exactly the case. Yes, it's mimicking common human writers who tend to be trying to sell something very poorly, at least for our more sophisticated audience now that we understand what they're doing.

So if you're drawing from a vast body of work from, let's say, the '90s or 2000s, you're going to get pre-social media, pre-social proof, pre we figure out what you're trying to do here. Back when it was novel to go to, let's say, a seminar, and now we know a lot of seminar, let's say, personal motivation, self-help. The point is to upsell you on the thing to get you to that seminar- Right ... to upsell you on the next thing to buy the next thing. So it's, it's [00:26:00] constantly cross-sells and upsells. Many businesses whose founders wrote books that are in the corpus for the large language models, and now it all makes sense.

So this is a project I feel very strongly about. It's called *Reframe Your Brain* by Scott Adams. Many people know Scott Adams as the creator of- Oh ... the Dilbert comic strip. Yes. Yes. I remember with my mother, I think she would, for, like, five cents, and even maybe it was, like, five cents for color, one cent for black and white copies.

Buying IEW material and, like, creating a copy for myself and then for my brother so we could each have, like, the same one. I remember being just utterly bored at Office Depot while she was doing this, and I would just wander down the Dilbert aisle. Back when, back when... This is, like, 2000, 2001, when it was such a big deal for most people in culture. Before it kind of became, like, a niche comic interest. And then the author, Scott Adams, pivoted to writing a lot of more personal development type of works. Writing current affairs, politics. He had started having a live stream, and he and I connected, and I became the contributing editor to a number of his books, this one being the one.

Wow. So *Reframe Your Brain*. Unfortunately, Scott Adams passed away earlier this year. Yes. He was like a... We... A lot of people call him, like, an internet dad. Scott, Scott Adams was kind of my internet dad. I'll put it that way. But he was also a client, and it was fun to, to

work with a celebrity who treated me like an equal which is rare. Yeah. Like, "Joshua, what do you think?" Or I would say, like, "I'm editing one of the most prolific P- E-O communicators of the 20th century," and he's like, "Oh, yeah, that's way better than what I said, Joshua." That was pretty cool. So that ultimately becomes a testimonial for the Institute for Excellence in Writing.

But this book teaches what's called reframing. Reframing is where you use words alone to describe how someone thinks about a situation. And we all know reframes through popular culture. One reframe is, for example, the usual frame is, "Well, I don't... I'm afraid of bad reviews. What if we get bad reviews?"

Reframe, "all publicity is good publicity." We might have heard another one, which is something like, um, ev- every politician is X. The reframe is every politician is Y. If you, if you use that sort of formula, it's X. It's not X, it's Y Of course, AI has learned this from reframing. But it's taking a challenge, describing it with different words to turn it into empowerment.

One that a lot of, , homemakers and stay-at-home mothers and homeschoolers use, very simple adjustment, something like, "I have to homeschool my kids." You all know the reframe already, "I get to homeschool my kids." Yeah. Yeah. It's, it's a three to four... It's a, it's a four... It's a one-word change, and it completely transforms outlook.

So this is a book of 160 reframes like that to completely change the outlook, and we have over 160 different problems or issues that one has in life. And of course, what can you expect to find inside the book but relevant Dilbert comics?

Andrew Pudewa: We would hope so. Yeah. Awesome. Well, we need to wrap it up. We try to keep our time to about someone's afternoon or evening or morning walk.

Um, if people would like to learn more about you, your courses, order your books, I assume everything's on Amazon, but where else might you direct them to learn more about this fascinating world of ghostwriting and getting published and using language in powerful ways?

Joshua Lisec: Yes. So my, my primary space and, and place is lisecghostwriting.com. I have kind of a number of places to go from there. We're list- listing courses, for example. But where I do list my courses is on the platform called Gumroad. It's an email or rather an e-learning platform. Simply put your email in there and then you can get access to a number of them for nominal fees.

This is not like college course pricing. I would dare say it's college course level quality for non-college course level- Well, we're above these days, so ... , , above price points. Oh, true, true. Yeah. Yeah. But that's at, um, jo- , joshualisec.gumroad.com, and then I'm on every major social media platform, @joshualisec, from X to YouTube, Facebook, and so forth.

Andrew Pudewa: And, and I think you mentioned that you were going to be using the , , structure and style writing stuff, um, with your son, y- , your oldest child, who's I think eight. Is that right?

Joshua Lisec: That's right, yes. I purchased the mega bundle for introduction to the materials in elementary school, and I've already been doing it with him the past year or so. Um, the u- Like, the, the favorite tool that we have been using is, you have those, they're like playing cards, right? -h. But it's teaching the different aspects, and it's a category base, and so I pull out a new one, and then do exercises based on that. Next day, different cards, exercises based on that.

Learning the fundamentals of writing communication that... I think an issue with the Prussian school model that's distributed throughout the United States is, like, copying, "Here's the correct answer, so write that down," kind of learning- Yeah, yeah ... versus focusing on mastery as quickly as possible. So if I teach, "Here's what this is," can you think of ways to demonstrate that?

Andrew Pudewa: Write a couple sentences, kind of self-generated. That, I think, is how learning is best, , cultivated in a child's mind. Awesome. Well, I think you're referring to our Fix It Grammar cards- Yes ... is what I, I think. , 'cause people will be curious. But thank you so much for joining me today, Joshua. I have really enjoyed this [00:32:00] conversation.

There's so much more we could have talked about, the value of studying grammar in a world with ubiquitous grammar checkers and spell checkers, and it does everything for you. That would be fascinating. I'm already percolating. Maybe I'll have to get you to help me write my memoir someday. I don't know.

You'd be the perfect person. But thank you so much for your time. And all of you, I hope you have enjoyed this. And if you have questions for Joshua, you can probably contact him through that website. Otherwise, without Julie here, I'm not quite sure how to end except to say, again, thank you, and God bless you.

Joshua Lisec: Thank you. You as well.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast, or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you will find our show notes and relevant links. One more thing. Would you please rate and review our podcast? This helps other smart listeners like you find us. Thank you.