

Getting Creative with Unit 3 Transcript of E392

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, the page of the calendar has turned or will have turned when this podcast

Andrew Pudewa: Future perfect tense. I like that. Yes, it will have turned by the time people are hearing us.

Julie Walker: Yes, and for us what that means, it's time to move on to a new unit. Now our *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, there's four words that are really important in there. We are teaching teachers how to teach writing, English composition. *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* and the structural. What is the structural referring to?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, the units, the ways of collecting up organizing ideas, and the style refers to the ways of presenting those ideas. And for anyone who knows our system, they are probably aware that the basic idea is to work through all nine of those units over the course of a school year. So if you're starting in August and you're doing Unit 1 and 2 around the beginning of September or middle, depending, I guess, when you started and what grade you're teaching and what things you're using—it is time to move on to Unit 3.
And I wanted to get some bumper stickers, don't get stuck.

Julie Walker: Don't get stuck.

Andrew Pudewa: and then in little tiny words right below that, in Unit 2. Yeah.

Julie Walker: Well, and so I've been working with you for many, many, many years, and I know that was a problem in the beginning. I don't think it's as much of a problem now because we've done so much to tell people, “don't get stuck.” But one of the things that I noticed is there were curriculums written, not by us, but by other people that were based on only Units 1 & 2.. And they didn't know the structural models. They didn't know there was a Unit 3. And you tell the story, would people call back in the day when you actually used to answer the phone?

Andrew Pudewa: And they would say, “Well, we used your writing program for a while, like three months. It was going really well, but now it's not going so good anymore.” My first question, what unit are you in? Their answer, what do you mean?

Then I know we're in deep yogurt.

Julie Walker: So Unit 3 is very different than Unit 1 and 2, but there is also a lot of similarities.

Andrew Pudewa: So the idea of keyword outline, a lot of people say that, and what they mean is take keywords from every sentence, a la Unit 1 and 2. But if you look at our student writing, student samples, everything we do, the key word outlines look very similar through all nine of the units in

terms of generally a maximum of three key words per line in the outline, separated by commas with symbols, numbers, and abbreviations, judiciously interspersed.

But the way we get those key words changes in every unit, and I think that's the thing that we've been working really hard to communicate. And I think with our summer Great Adventure and with these podcasts and with the Monday night webinars and with everything, I think people basically get the idea.

“Oh, so when you go into Unit 3, you're not looking in the sentences for key words, you're not even looking on the page for keywords.” And that's a big shift. It's possibly the biggest shift in the whole syllabus, Unit 2 to Unit 3. But once you get it, then everything else is downhill.

Julie Walker: It is so easy. So the key words come from the elements of a story. So the students read a story, and if they don't understand the story— it's a short story. Usually you start with something pretty short, right? And then they read it again. Maybe.

Andrew Pudewa: The story can be any length. It could be a half page Aesop fable. It could be *Gone with the Wind*. It can be anything in between. But what we have found, of course, is that using shorter source texts especially in the beginning, the first few weeks or the first couple years of working through the units, it's a whole lot easier, right?

And therefore everyone has more success, teachers and students. So the basic idea of Unit 3— and I, I try to this stupid little full magic

Julie Walker: It's not stupid. It's brilliant.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I take a rolled up piece of paper and I say, “Here's the story. You put it into your brain,” and I stick the thing behind my head.

Julie Walker: You told the trick.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and then with my other hand, I pull it out my ear, right? And the idea is you're not looking on the page for the key words. You're trying to put the story in your mind. Understand it. Imagine, reflect, let it sit for a little while and then you ask the questions from the Story Sequence Chart to pull the answers from those questions. And that's what goes into the key word outline.

Julie Walker: So Story Sequence Chart— to some of our listeners who may be new brand, brand new to IEW—tell us how the Story Sequence Chart came about and what's it made up of.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's a three part way of telling a story or retelling a story or using a story or analyzing a story, and it's nothing particularly new, but perhaps the fact that it's so simple, it was, I don't know, ignored or rejected or eliminated as being too simple. But the history actually goes all the way back when Mrs. Ingham was teaching grade one, two, and Dr. Webster was teaching grade five, and he came over to Mrs. Ingham's for a holiday, and she had a little pile of stories on her coffee table.

Julie Walker: And these were written by first or second graders.

Andrew Pudewa: Written by first and second grade students, and so he picked up the little pile and started reading the stories that her students had written, and he realized that these were better stories from a storytelling, from an interesting point of view, I suppose than his fifth graders were creating,

Of course that's understandable because kids are 10, 11 years old and you say, write a story and if they're all like me, it was like "Once upon a time there was a..." and then what you gotta think of something that nobody ever thought of before and you're just overwhelmed.

And there was a prince and he saw a dragon and he killed it, and then he got a princess and that was the end. Where do you go with this? Right. So Dr. Webster said to his aunt, Mrs. Ingham, "Aunt Gertrude, these stories are better than anything my grade fives are doing. How? How do you do this?"

Which is what good teachers usually do, is they find better teachers and say, how did you get the results that you got? And Mrs. Ingham drew out on a little paper, a Canadian word is serviette which is a paper napkin.

But she drew out the story sequence chart. That was basically that when you ask children to write a story or retell a story, you say, well first, who's in the story?

What are they like? What's their situation? When? Where, what are the circumstances?

Then what is the problem or conflict? And then what happens? What do the characters think or say, or do?

And then that leads up to the third part of the story, which would be, how is the problem solved?

Anything that happens after that, and is there something to be learned from the story?

So it's a three-part idea. Now, with Mrs. Ingham, I believe that she was kind of letting them do that all just nonstop. But Webster took that idea and said, well, okay, grade fives, they do really well in their science experiment write-ups because there's three parts to it.

There is the part where you have the equipment and your hypothesis, and then there's the process you go through.

And then the third part is the outcome and what conclusions you make from that. And fifth grade science experiments are pretty formulaic to begin with.

But he noted that no one had a problem figuring out what to write. So he basically said, well, let's use this three part story sequence chart and do three paragraphs to get an appropriately lengthed composition. So that was the birth of the Story Sequence Chart in Webster's experience. And then it comes to us through the Structure and Style syllabus.

Julie Walker: I love it. I love it. And so we teach Unit 3 in September, October, whatever month you are. And we do the same nine units every year over and over again. So let's say we're talking to a parent or teacher, and they're teaching a student or a group of students and they've done this several times. Can this change a little bit to make this a little bit different?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, yeah, of course people sometimes when they hear, oh, you, you do the same thing every year after year, after year? Well, not quite. We're using the same tools.

Therefore it's getting easier to use things like the key word outlines and the story sequence chart and the topic-clincher paragraph and the questions for writing from pictures and the research process and the essay models and of course the style techniques. Those are the tools.

The content, of course, varies. That would be the stories, the articles, the subjects for research, the ideas for compositions. That varies according to grade level, reading level basically, and according to length and sophistication of content. And then another variable would be the speed at which you go through things.

Now the structural units, for the most part, this is a little different in say the high school levels, but in the upper elementary and middle. That one unit per month schedule works quite well. You may get three, maybe four compositions per eight or nine units over the course of the school year, and you're not expecting anyone to really master that.

So coming again the next year and working through all those nine units, then it's kind of like the kids are, oh, I vaguely remember the Story Sequence Chart. Yeah, I heard, I remember there's a thing called a topic clincher rule? So now you're revisiting that.

Julie Walker: I'm just going to clarify for any of our listeners, topic-clincher, we'll talk about that next month in Unit 4.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm just saying you revisit these structural ideas and then they kind of layer on and become more and more concrete. Then of course with the stylistic techniques we're working the same checklist every week, every assignment, increasing the complexity little by little through the EZ +1 approach.

So we're not really teaching the same thing. We're practicing with the same tools and that makes a lot of sense to everyone. And at a certain point you lose them. They grow up or they leave you or they quit listening to you. At that point then they're going to go off to some other teacher, some other class, some college things, some other writing, or maybe they escape any more writing entirely if they're lucky.

But, those tools then become, "oh, so what I have to do here is tell a little story. I know what makes a good story, got to have these elements." And you can take the greatest huge, long story, and it still has those elements. It's just got a whole lot of other stuff as well, subplots and other characters involved and peripheral things.

And so I think in a way it's an excellent exercise for everyone to be able to take a complex thing and then look at it in a simple way. Now Webster originally called this unit Summarizing Narrative Stories. And when we redid the syllabus with the new version, I think it was 2015, I'm pretty sure that's when we were really intentional to change it all from summarizing to retelling. Because when you think about summarizing, it's kind of limiting. First of all, you have a story and you have to write that story and make it shorter, but you can't really change anything. And so there's parameters there and there's a purpose to that activity, but it doesn't engender creativity quite so much.

So in the spirit of Dr. Webster, I thought, well, retelling—it's much broader. With retelling, you can elaborate, you can play with things a little bit. You can maybe change the ending; maybe you can take the plot and change the characters. All sorts of flexible things.

And you think about the tradition of storytelling. People have been retelling stories for a very, very long time, and there's nothing wrong with doing that. There's no plagiarism involved in retelling an Aesop fable or a fairy tale, right? Not only does nobody own them, people have been retelling them in prose, in verse, in film, in comics, right?

Julie Walker: And changing them. Like the original story of Cinderella does not have mice in it, from what I understand.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. It also has the sisters cutting off the bit of their toe so that the bloody, ooze of the slipper gives away the stepsisters? And you think, well, Disney, I mean, their whole company was established initially on retelling the great stories. So this gives kids a lot of freedom, a lot of freedom.

And so in the Unit 3 TWSS video, and when I'm teaching it now, we teach the structure, we practice it through with, with the basic story of the fox and the crow and the cheese and all that. And then I point out that there's lots of ways to use the Story Sequence Chart and that kind of just straight retelling is one way to do it. Summarize would be another way to do it. But like I said, it doesn't engender much creativity because if you're trying to stay totally true to the original, you feel hindered. Like, I can't really change anything. And then the next step would be kind of an elaboration. So now we might add in a few details and add in some advanced style techniques that might make it in some minor way a little different than the original.

But again, what's the problem there? Then the next thing you could do is you could actually do like a variation on the story. So rather than just retelling the boy who cried wolf, well change the characters in setting. You don't have to have a European boy who is in a forest in somewhere in France or Germany, which is probably, well, I don't know, Aesop, that would've been way down in Greece or somewhere. Turkey, maybe, but you wouldn't have to have a boy who cried wolf. You could reimagine it. Maybe you have a girl who's a goatherd rather than a shepherd, somewhere in Africa who cries lion, right?

Or a lot of the fables like parables are transferable into the world of humans very naturally. So I've had kids take that story of the boy cried wolf, but they're maybe reading about the Civil War and they're studying that. And so they might have the, the Union soldier who was on sentry duty and got super bored and then cried, rebel attack, right? Or vice versa. You could move that story into any time and place. Or I've even had kids just switch it up. The wolf who cried, boy, right? And then all the wolves are panicking. Oh no, there's a boy with a gun.

So I've just found so many delightful opportunities in that use of the story sequence chart. there's a few other things you could do with it. One is you could keep the characters, but change the plot. Change the problem. So you could have the hare and the tortoise well after that happened, you've got a very cocky tortoise walking around who beats the hare and a hare who's now contriving some way to bring that tortoise down a notch on the pride scale.

So you could have the continuing adventures. That's a little harder. Usually changing characters and setting is easier for kids than changing a plot, but you can see how it could be interchangeable. Another thing that I have had fun with is kind of expanding the story and saying, well three paragraphs, that's kind of short.

If you want to write something longer, well then here are some ways to expand it. So you could have one whole paragraph about the hare and his backstory and how he got so cocky and prideful to begin with. And then another whole paragraph, just introducing the tortoise and where he came from and how he got to be the way he is. And then a whole paragraph about how they're teasing each other. And then a whole paragraph about how they organized the race. And then a whole paragraph about what happened during the race. And which reminds me once I had someone who wrote that story with

a brother and a sister. And they were going to race around the block. And so the brother of course takes off, but he passes by his friend's house who suggests that he could stop in a little bit and play video games.

Julie Walker: Oh, oops.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. So, that whole thing, so you can expand the story if you want to. I think three paragraphs is a pretty nice length for most people.. But there are some who just really like to get going on their next novelette, I guess. Another thing that can be done, which I have had a lot of fun with, is taking a story and writing it into a poem or taking a poem that tells a story and writing it into prose.

And a couple memorable ones—One of my daughters did one with the poem, “Jabberwocky” which of course everyone knows is my favorite one. And you can watch me recite that on Instagram or YouTube. She took the poem and wrote it into a prose fairy tale like story. And so that's kind of fun to do.

And then I tried a few times just kind of as an experiment to say, well, here's a story. Could we write it into a script for a little play? And do that. So there's so much possibility with Unit 3. My only regret is that you only get a month. You can't do all of that fun stuff in three or four or five weeks.

So, that's another good reason to revisit Unit 3 year after year after year for 3, 4, 5 years or more.

Julie Walker: Right, exactly. So as I had the opportunity to be at the NCFCA finals this year.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, you better tell everyone what that actually is because some people wouldn't know.

Julie Walker: So here's the funny thing, Andrew, is I did learn while I was there that NCFCA does indeed stand for something, but they've added a little bit more to explain it. It is NCFCA Christian Speech and Debate. That's the name of their organization.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, okay,

Julie Walker: So people can know what they are doing. They announced a new speech category that they're going to be rolling out for the next season, and it's storytelling. And you can either make up your own story, write an original story, or you can do what they're calling a derivation, where you take an existing story and retell it. So, wow. Those students that know our Unit 3 will find this to be something they're very comfortable with.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, and there's just so much potential with this because as I have said many times, there's really no new ideas. I mean, there's no completely new idea. Every new, every seemingly new idea is really a combination of permutation and expansion or development of previously existing stuff. And I think when we get this idea of what creativity is in that context, it frees up a whole lot of students to say, “Oh, so I don't have to somehow think of something that nobody ever thought of before. I can take something I'm familiar with and play with that.” Much like, and we've mentioned this on the podcast many times, kids and Legos. They buy these little Lego kits and it has these little things you follow to put the whole X-wing fighter together, whatever. The kids do that and then, then

they're like, "Okay, I get it now. I bet I could change my X-wing fighter. I could change this into some other cool little thing.

Julie Walker: Especially if you already have some Legos and you can add to it and make.

Andrew Pudewa: Exactly. And the more Legos you have, the better you can do.

Julie Walker: And more likely dad's going to step on it in the middle of the night too.

Andrew Pudewa: We interviewed Katie Wells, who won the National Walking on Legos contest or something. She set a record for walking on Legos. I don't know, that's like coal walking or something.

This I think just has so much potential, even older students. I think some of the most interesting variations on stories or derivations I guess that I've ever read have been from high school students.

So it's not a little kid thing. It's really a very reasonable activity for students and adults of all ages. And sometimes it can get a little silly, but one time I was reading this paper that this kid wrote, and he was one of these, I don't know, probably 12 year old boy types who's just, he's just trying to be weird for the sake of weirdness, just kind of push the edges. And I remember reading it and experiencing this slight irritation, and then I flashed on VeggieTales right? I never was a VeggieTales fan and we didn't really have a lot of VeggieTales in our home, although everyone did learn "Where is My Hairbrush?" But I thought these were adults, right? This was a group of men who took stories, mostly from the Bible in the beginning, and recast those things in this world of talking vegetables. I could never do that. That requires a mental flexibility, a creative openness. And after I had that thought, I just realized, who am I to judge a 12 year old kid who's pushing the edges of what's reasonable in terms of weirdness in story writing, hands on, structure and style, hands off content. Just let it go. Maybe he'll do the next wave of the VeggieTales, hopefully a little better. Who knows what he'll do, but I have to tell you before we run out of time the absolute best story that I ever got.

This just absolutely blew my mind. And this was a 17 year old young man whose life goal at that time was to become a movie script writer. He had already studied to some degree script writing and movie plot structures, and he was really trying to get into that world. And this was not on a video class ever recorded, but I was using the story of the prodigal son. This is high school students and the story of the prodigal son. So he writes this story—the younger son is in a Mafia family and he goes to his father, the head of the Mafia family, and he says, "I don't really want to be in the Mafia. I would like to just get whatever you will give me and just leave and go live my life free of crime." And the father says, "Sure, no problem." So he gives him whatever he is going to give him. I don't remember.

So he goes to the airport and he's in the bar at the airport waiting for his airplane. And this very beautiful young woman comes up and starts talking to him, and he has a drink. He has another drink. I can't remember whether he goes to the restroom and comes back, but somehow he goes unconscious. He wakes up, and he's on the floor in this bar. The girl is gone. He's lost his ticket. He has no wallet. He can't get on the airplane, and he can't do anything but go home. So he has to go home. Whereupon the older brother, who is not happy with this situation at all, says to the father, "I don't think we can trust him because he didn't want to be part of the family business. What are we going to do?" And the father says, "I don't think he'll be around very long."

Julie Walker: Oh no.

Andrew Pudewa: I mean this like, whoa. And of course this was really well written, and I can't do justice to the thing, and I didn't get to keep the actual printed one, which would've been... But I thought, now that is so interesting how he kind of switched the morality.

Julie Walker: This is definitely a deviation of the what? What would be that? That like the deviation of even the climax.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. It's kind of like changing a lot, but I just kind of thought, well, that is just a brilliant way to apply that thought sequence in a totally different way than anyone could.

Andrew Pudewa: So the potential of Unit 3 for creativity—it's extraordinary. And I would guess that hundreds, if not thousands of kids who have been through this, have written a unit three story and thought, this is the best story I ever wrote.

Right? Because they have that sense that it has a structure. They were able to inject something into it that made it unique from everyone else's sharing of the structure. And there's only a certain number of plots anyway, and I remember hearing once that romance novels are basically all formulaic and if you become a romance novel, ghost writer or something, they just say, here, use plot number 32 and put it in the civil War period and crank it out.

Julie Walker: Okay, so Unit 3 listener. Don't get stuck in Unit 2. Forage forward and enjoy the ride.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, have a lot of fun with that. And if you have the TWSSS seminar workbook, read some of the student samples because some of those student samples do have this idea of elaboration or variation. And also we should mention the *Magnum Opus Magazine*.

Julie Walker: Oh yes. Great.

Andrew Pudewa: We do a print version of that every year. We do an online [newsletter] each month, and those are submissions that do follow, I would hope more or less, the guidelines for each of the units. So when you look at the Unit 3 stories in the *Magnum Opus Magazine*, you're going to get some more samples and examples of how this can be done well.

Julie Walker: Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you.

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, Google podcasts, 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.