

How to Teach Writing with Confidence

Transcript of Podcast Episode 339

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.

So Andrew, this podcast is called “How to Teach Writing with Confidence.” I feel a little bit like we’re going to be super ostentatious and say, “Yeah, the easiest way to teach writing with confidence is use IEW,” right?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Okay. Well, I’ll see you later. I’ve got other things to do. Why did you choose this title?

Julie Walker: So two things come to mind, and I’ll start with that. And then I’ll follow up with a question. Okay. I think about what I say at the beginning of every podcast: “Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials that will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent writers and thinkers.” And this whole idea of confidence leads to competence.

So I want to maybe address that a little bit, but I also want to just share that oftentimes when people come to us, they say, “I’ve heard so much about IEW. I don’t know where to start.” So where to start? *Structure and Style for Students*, whatever level your student is, Premier. That gives the students their course and the teachers their course.

So you put it together. It’s the perfect solution. But I know that there’s more to this conversation than just that.

Andrew Pudewa: I was going to say it’s like an Oreo cookie, but of course, I’m very opposed to anything like Oreo cookies.

Julie Walker: Yeah. You don’t eat Oreo cookies.

Andrew Pudewa: However, you know, in terms of a metaphor, you’ve got the two sides: the *Structure and Style for Students*, the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*. And then when you do those, magically this incredible filling occurs. Only our stuff is actually good for you.

Julie Walker: Yes, no high fructose corn syrup was used in the making of *Structure and Style for Students* or *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*. So here’s the question. The question is how can a parent or teacher teach writing with confidence?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you know, I don’t know how recently we’ve talked about this, but if we step back a little bit and look at the act of writing something, it’s very valuable to kind of

contemplate the incredible complexity of this operation that we so easily take for granted for a few reasons. Humans have been doing it for a very, very long time.

And most people make it look pretty effortless, and we don't necessarily have a good memory ourselves of being that young and not knowing how to do it. But let's start at the beginning. If you want to write something, first there must be an idea. If there's no idea, there's nothing to write. There's no capacity for writing. And sometimes this is the point at which kids are stuck.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: "I can't think of anything. I don't know what to write." I think most all parents and teachers have heard that at least a few times if not many times.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: Now the idea can preexist outside the imagination and memory, or it can preexist inside the imagination and memory.

And I bundle those two together because for children they're almost indistinguishable. In fact, when you look at brain activity on FMRI scans, you notice that imagination: things that have not necessarily actually occurred, and memory: things which you believe have actually occurred – it's all part of the same neural networks.

So when we remember something, we are accessing our imagination and amplifying whatever actual memories we have. And when we're imagining things, we have to draw on previously existing input. So an idea can preexist inside your imagination or memory. So if I said to you, "Please write about the most recent trip you took," right?

I'm asking you to remember and elaborate on that. However, if I said, "Please tell me about this room that we're in." That's more immediate. That's existing outside to some degree. I mean, there's obviously overlap. So what's really kind of, I guess, ironic ... I don't know, but for most children it's easier to access an idea that is outside memory and immediate than it is to access memory and imagination.

Now obviously there's a spectrum there. But that's the first thing that has to happen. The second thing is this idea has to be spoken into existence, right? Now, some ideas preexist in words, right? So you hear something; you read something. You see something that is words. And so that idea preexists in language, but other ideas do not necessarily preexist in language.

If, again, I ask you to tell me about your most recent trip, you would be accessing those memories and the imaginative elaboration that occurs naturally. And you would have to find the words to communicate that to me because you couldn't very easily just show me a movie or draw me a picture of what's going on in your head.

So that again becomes a stumbling point for a lot of people. They don't necessarily have the words to do a good job of translating that image or memory into much detail.

Julie Walker: Right. And I, of course, as you're talking, I'm thinking of the parent or teacher of that in our world, the nine-year-old boy. That's who we're trying to reach is that nine-year-old boy because if you can reach him, you can reach anyone. And he just doesn't have that many words yet. He's not all grown up.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. And that's part of the odd circumstance of modern society. Most children are hearing fewer words during the important developmental stages than they were, say, even fifty but certainly a hundred years ago. So we see kind of on a broad scale a shrinking vocabulary. Now, and obviously there's exceptions to this.

And many of our listeners are firmly committed to reading out loud to their children every day and having good conversations, but not everybody is able or willing to do that. So we do notice, then, that the capacity for the general population of children to translate ideas into words is lower than it has been previously.

So that is a challenge for us as teachers of writing. So we go back to this idea: okay, you need an idea that can preexist inside or outside the memory and imagination. This idea needs to get into words. It can preexist in words; it can preexist not in words, but you've got to get it into words before you can even take the next step.

So what seems to be evident to us is that for almost all students, it is easier to work with ideas that preexist outside the memory, because you don't have to go find them. They're right there in front of your nose and ideas that preexist in words. That's why we start with source texts and use things like interesting information about a person or a place or an animal or a little story like an Aesop fable or a parable or something because that meets the qualifications. And then to the degree that it is interesting and can touch on the imagination, then there will be more motivation and engagement.

Okay. So now the next thing is you've got your idea, and you have to kind of speak it or respeak it into existence. And that's where our key word outlines and telling back content from key word outlines is so incredibly powerful. You know, we meet people all the time who say, "If I had just known this when I was in school ..." Or even they'll take the simplest idea of a key word outline and say, "This would've been so useful when I was in the university." Right? "And it's going to be useful in my life today."

And these are adults, but you think about that, and it just changes the whole landscape for most kids: Like, okay, here's an idea. It exists. I can speak it into existence. And then, of course, if you're going to go the full thing and ask the student to write it, then they have to kind of hear what they heard themselves say.

Now that seems like, "Well, duh!" But if you've spent any length of time with children, you have noticed that sometimes they do not hear what they say, right? And so there is a creation of attentiveness to thought that occurs in a very effective and powerful way when students say it out loud with the intent of doing something with that rather than just, you know, mouthing off whatever idea floats into their consciousness at any given moment.

Julie Walker: So intentional speaking ...

Andrew Pudewa: Intentionality. Yeah. Okay. So they find the idea, speak it, or respeak it into existence, hear what they heard themselves say to themselves. And then they have to hold that in their memory long enough to be able to go and wrangle the spelling and letter formation or punctuation, mechanics, whatever it's going to take.

And of course, that varies greatly, depending on the age and experience of the student. They have to hold that idea in their mind long enough to go wrangle the technical information in order to record it, generally on paper or type it out. And we all have had the experience of losing what we will often call "train of thought."

Julie Walker: Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: Right, so we had an idea or a sequence of ideas. We were intending to tell that or write that or do something, but then some distraction occurred, or simply we didn't have the capacity to hold that much in our memory. Sometimes we overestimate what we can remember. This is more likely at our age than younger ages, but we have to hold it in the memory.

So the cultivation of memory is very, very important for this act of being able to record language in written form. Then of course, you have the problem of, do you have the spelling and letter making and mechanics and punctuation skills necessary to somewhat accurately record that idea?

And then usually we're not working with just one idea. We're working with a whole string of ideas. And so then we have to kind of go back and repeat that process: Find it. Speak it into existence. Hear what we heard ourselves say to ourselves. Hold it in our memory long enough. Wrangle the technical information. Get it down on paper. Go get the next idea.

And this is a tremendous energy expenditure.

Julie Walker: Right. I think about the sixteen-year-old who's just learning to drive a car. And I know you've given this example before. Sometimes you and I, when we're driving to work, it's just like, muscle memory takes over. We don't even have to think about it. And it's like, oh, my goodness. We're here, which is probably a little dangerous. But that sixteen-year-old ...

Oh, my goodness. They're thinking about every little thing. That nine-year-old boy who's not experienced writing is thinking about every little thing. So I can just imagine the teachers and parents listening to this going, "No one actually gives that much thought to how complex writing is." Oh, yes, they do. If you're nine years old and have never done this before, you absolutely do.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and you know, a child, doesn't say, "My, this is a very complex thing that I'm trying to do with my brain and body." No, they just get overwhelmed and say, "I can't do this. I hate this." And so I would say it's relatively safe to claim that any child who dislikes the whole process is disliking it because they are overwhelmed in one form or another.

Now some children get overwhelmed because they have neurological conditions that make it more likely that everything's going to be harder whether that's a dyslexic, dysgraphic tendencies, whether it's attention issue, whether it is memory. Right? They could be on a spectrum.

It could be accessing language and just not having an easy time finding the words that you think you know. Getting old is helpful in that it gives you a bit of perspective on what it was like to not be able to do everything really easily, right? So when you get older, sometimes things slow down; you have to work harder to remember something.

And so I always kind of think there is that arc, you know, where you're growing up, and things are gradually getting easier, and you're getting faster and more competent. And then you hit a peak in your middle of your life. And then, you know, you get a little older. Things slow down a bit; you get a little older past that, things get a little harder, and it gives you a lot of empathy.

This is why I think grandparents and young children are such a good match for each other. But you know, for me as a teacher it's just kind of interesting to note: Aha. It is so easy when you're thirty years old or something to take that all for granted. And there's a value in reconnecting because you kind of gain this compassion, this understanding for what happens when it's not easy.

So with children, you know, they're on the upswing, so everything's going to get better every week for the most part. But we as teachers can benefit hugely by understanding the complexity of the process and then breaking it down into several steps.

You know, you meet people and say, "Oh, you know, my one child is just a natural writer." Okay. "And my other child's just not." Well, what's the difference there? I would argue that it is probably a case of just neurology being different and the complexity of the process being more overwhelming for the one who is not the natural writer, whereas the one who is, that just wasn't an impediment in the same way. But we all have the capacity. Writing is a human function.

So, you know, it can be cultivated in any human being, but like anything you need different strategies to do the best.

Julie Walker: So you've touched on some of our methodology and how IEW actually fulfills that need of breaking things down to the most, the easiest possible steps, you know, even starting with copy work, just copying letters that they're old enough to hold a pencil, pen. "Convert to Pens." See link in the show notes for that article.

But then we ... And we, of course, we gradually grow to the Unit 8 super-essay, the superduper-essay, the behemothic essay, the literature type of writing that we do in Unit 9 and beyond. So, okay, we've broken it down. And a lot of writing programs do not do that. So yay. Go IEW. Buy *Structure and Style for Students*. Get the teacher training course so you can know our methodology. But Andrew, talk a little bit about this idea of confidence in teaching writing.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's like anything whether it's a sports activity or music or art of some sort. I would guess that you have very little confidence about playing the bagpipes.

Julie Walker: That would be true.

Andrew Pudewa: Why? Because you've either never done it, or you tried it once and didn't have enough help to have a modicum of success. Consequently, you would not say, "Yeah, I'll play something for you on the bagpipes." Neither would I.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: Right? But you do have confidence on various other things. You probably would be fairly confident that you could get on a bicycle and ride it around.

Julie Walker: Tis true.

Andrew Pudewa: You know, why? A person who never rode the bicycle would probably not feel that level of confidence. And this pertains to everything we do in life.

Julie Walker: I should insert just a little trivia about Julie Walker. I used to race bicycles in high school. So I know you know that, Andrew. Maybe some of our listeners don't. So yeah, I can ride a bike. And a unicycle. Do you know that I used to be able to ride a unicycle once upon a time?

Andrew Pudewa: Okay, now that I did not know, but I do believe it. You know, it goes with that ice skating business, you know, balance and all that.

Julie Walker: Yes, yes.

Andrew Pudewa: But why? Because you learned and you practiced, and then it gradually became second nature. So we would like to imagine that somehow we can cheerlead people into being confident. Like if I talk to you long enough, somehow I can convince you that you can pick up the bagpipes and play it.

Julie Walker: You, Andrew Pudewa, could probably talk me into at least trying because you are very motivational.

Andrew Pudewa: But what would probably happen is your first experience would not be a good one. The sound would not be pleasant. It would feel very awkward. And you might just give up unless you had some longer, larger goal. Those kinds of longer, larger goals are much more typical of older people. You don't generally meet a nine- or ten-year-old who says, "I'm going to struggle through this because someday I want to be good at it."

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: Most kids are like, "I want to be able to do this right now. In fact, what I want to do is do it and be done with it so that I can go do something else that I know I'm good at like Legos or fort building or climbing trees or whatever.

So I don't think that trying to convince kids, "Yes, you can do this" is really worth the time or energy – anyone's time or energy. It's not worth yours as a parent or teacher or the child. So this cheerleading kids into believing ... You know, if there's any effect, it's small and very temporary and tenuous.

What's the better approach would be go back and start at the very, very beginning of something and gain the mastery. That why a long time ago, you know, 150 years ago nobody sat around and said, "Let's teach eight- and nine-year-olds how to express themselves on paper," right?

What did they do with young children? It was entirely how to make letters beautifully and to do it again and again and again and again, and handwriting books and copy work.

And, you know, we look at that as being almost medieval in its uncreativity, but what's the benefit? Well, gradually copying a word again and again and again and again ... Pretty soon you don't have to think to do it. It's like getting back to our driving analogy, right? Kids, when they first start to drive, they get in the car. They're thinking about everything, but then they do it again and again and again and again. Then pretty soon they don't have to think so hard about controlling that car.

And it's just repetition. What frustrates a lot of teachers and parents is that kids need differing levels of repetition to gain the same mastery or ability. The confidence comes from the mastery or the ability. So one student may be able to do, you know, X amount of copy work and kind of be done with it and ready to move on whereas another child may need two X, three X, that same amount of practice before they can, say, write a word and spell it correctly and not have to think about how to do that.

So how do we recapture, in a way, what was done very successfully without losing some of the benefits of what we know about cultivating imagination and creativity today? And that's what I think we do very well around here is, you know, we're not pedantic about opposing all new ideas. But at the same time, we're very careful not to remove the tried and true ideas that have worked for many, many decade centuries. Right?

Julie Walker: Right. Well, and I love that you talk about writing as a skill. It's a learnable, teachable skill. Talk about that for a moment.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you know, the idea would be to ... You know, this kind of comes from Mortimer Adler's work and *The Paededia Proposal* and all that. But there's three things you have to kind of balance when you're teaching anybody anything. One is information. Another is concept, and the third is skills. And so everything needs all of these, but then some of them are more weighted on one side.

So learning multiplication tables, learning spelling – this is information. And it basically requires repetition to the point of memory, right? If you memorize multiplication tables, you will be a lot better off when you get into something that requires more concepts and skill like algebra.

Right? If you don't have the information of how to spell words, then it's going to be very hard to move into the idea of representing whole sequences of ideas. So information, memorize, repetition, mastery. That's a good foundation. And we don't want to give short shrift to that because it's true in anything that you do.

Concepts are things that are not so limited. Like if you memorize up to twelve times twelve, you're good to go. But then you would apply the concepts of, say, double digit mental multiplication. And you know, that wouldn't be something you would memorize. Nobody's going to walk around and memorize twenty-four times eighteen. But if you understand the concept, you can harness your memorized information and apply it to a concept.

And that's true in all of the areas that we would look at as being kind of things we want to be able to do whether it's cooking or reading a novel, right, or riding a bicycle or playing the bagpipes. And then, you know, the third is you have a skill. And that's where you have information.

You have concepts, and you are doing it. Right? So you could get all the information and all the concepts you need about playing the bagpipes and still not be able to do it. You would only be able to do it by doing it. And there's a pathway, and the pathway is through imitation and refinement. So you know, I taught violin for many years.

Well, how do you do this? You show someone how to do something, and then you let them try. And then you tweak it around and try to help them make it a little better because you're the teacher. And you know, and they don't know. And then that concept of imitation, attempt, refinement; imitation, attempt, refinement; imitation, attempt, refinement goes on.

And over time, weeks, months, years, decades, that skill is acquired to a greater degree. So we are looking at this with the teaching of the language arts—listening, speaking, reading, writing, thinking, but with that focus on writing—as imitation and attempt, right? A modeling and attempt: that's imitation and then a refinement. And then the next step or the next level or the next idea in the sequence however that goes.

Julie Walker: And so this idea of confidence happens because the student has mastered it, and then they become more competent as you introduce higher level skills. And you just continue that model of imitation, giving them feedback. Go up a little higher, kind of a cycle.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. And what you get is, you get a belief that you can do it. Right? I mean, confidence, the root there is *fides*, right? Latin - belief. So you have a belief based on your information and experience. And if you don't have the belief, then you don't have the confidence, and you don't want to do it.

Julie Walker: Well, our timer just told us time's up, but I do believe that you have addressed, Andrew, very clearly and with passion, I guess I should say, this idea of confidence: how you get confidence, but also the technical way that we at IEW teach writing that allows students and teachers ... because teachers become more confident in their teaching of writing once they have a pathway, once they have a methodology that they can be assured that it works.

Andrew Pudewa: And you know, I'd like to throw in one more idea here because I've heard this so many times from so many teachers: If kids just read enough ... If they read a lot, then they become good writers. Well, it's true that many kids who have become good writers also like to read a lot, but I don't see it as a causal effect. It makes sense because people who claim that are saying, "Well, that's the imitation part; that's the modeling part." But there's too great a gap. It's almost as though if I said, you know: Here. First violin lesson. Let me play this Vivaldi concerto for you, and you try it."

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: You know, it's ... There's too great a gap between C.S. Lewis and Tolkien and great, great writers and what a ten-year-old child is attempting to do. So what I think we have so fortunately, blessedly, effectively been able to do is to tighten up the imitation loop so that what we're asking children to look at and try is a small step within their range of capability.

And we're not going to take a nine-year-old, read Tolkien, and say, "Try to write like this." Right? Now, is it good for him to listen to and read Tolkien? Absolutely. It's building the database of language and all that. But we can't assume that just by listening to Mozart concertos, a young child is going to be able to pick up an instrument and do that.

So our taking of that skills-development sequence of modeling and attempt, imitation, and then feedback and the next level of attempt – I think we do this better than anyone that I know of at least in this area of teaching English composition.

Julie Walker: Well, I agree. And I'm a fan. 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.