

Ask Andrew Anything

Transcript of Podcast Episode 340

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.

Episode 340, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: What does that mean, Julie?

Julie Walker: Well, you know, but just in case our listeners don’t know, I will tell you, Andrew, and they can overhear, okay? Every tenth episode we do an “Ask Andrew Anything,” and we have our listeners ... And sometimes we get these from webinars or various places, customer service questions, asking you anything. And I have a page of questions that you have not seen yet.

Andrew Pudewa: No, I haven’t. I like questions from kids.

Julie Walker: I don’t have any from kids this time.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, we should do one just from just from kids.

Julie Walker: Just from kids. Well, this one is just about kids. So parents and teachers are having questions for you about their kids. So you ready to dive in?

Andrew Pudewa: I am ready.

Julie Walker: Okay. Well, the first one comes from Lauren. Her family does a lot of reading aloud together, which ... Of course, we love that in the IEW camp. And they also do silent reading daily. However, we have not done ... This is Lauren speaking. However, we have not done the best job with a formal writing or grammar program.

If my oldest is going to be a seventh grader and is reluctant, how do I make this a year of making language arts a priority and not discouraging? I’m struggling with doubts that we’ve started too late.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, the question isn’t really how do we do this. Because the answer is obviously

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: dive in the SSS. The question is, you know, are we too late? Have we missed the boat? And there was a book written many, many years ago, and I believe the title was *You're Never Too Old to Twinkle*.

Julie Walker: Oh, nice.

Andrew Pudewa: And it was a book on Suzuki method and teaching and kind of, I think, the reminiscing of a Suzuki violin teacher. So I don't remember a whole lot about the book; except I completely agreed with the idea of the title. It's never too late to start anything. You know, Dr. Suzuki himself did not start playing the violin until he was twenty-one or twenty-two.

Julie Walker: Wow. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: So we tend to think, "Oh, no. If we don't start young enough, somehow we're going to miss out on our full potential." But that's just not true. And it's not true in music. It's not true in writing. Certainly not true in reading. We look at the kids who have the dyslexic tendencies, and they have zero interest in reading or writing anything sometimes years past the "traditional" age at which that is begun in school. And yet they often end up being excellent readers and writers. Or even, you know, the real irony is getting a degree or a master's or a PhD in English or philosophy or something.

So there's really no fear that by waiting and not making it this kind of rigorous level priority that you've lost any potential gain. So, you know, she can have confidence that if now's the time to begin, then now will be the right time. And the success that she will experience will probably be appropriate to the timing.

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: And I always remind people: It is way better, way better to start too late than too early. Right? You take a little child who's five or six years old and try to force them to do things which they are not neurologically ready for. You can create a multi-year hatred of that thing, whereas if you just wait a few years, and now they're ready, and everything goes more smoothly ... And you know, I won't even use the word *catch up* because that implies that you're in a race, or you're comparing yourself to someone else. But it is always possible to reach, you know, a high or full level of potential even when you're starting after other people.

Julie Walker: Exactly. And I'm also reminded of what you say to teachers in the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* Seminar, where you talk about the value of having language in there because you can't get something out of a brain that isn't in there to begin with and that you've seen teachers who can't write well because they don't have that language.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. In fact, I was just hearing a podcast. It wasn't even an education podcast. It just came up kind of randomly. And I don't remember what it was, but it was essentially saying that the more words a child hears during the first few years of life has a greater impact on them than IQ. Now, I don't know if that's true or verifiable or where that came from, but it struck me.

I think the context was the problem of the last few years and kids not being in school for long periods of time or in an environment where they're not hearing and seeing language in the quantity that they should be that would benefit them. But I thought, "Well, you know, reading out loud, reading – you're hearing words. If that's the most important thing that you can do to improve academic aptitude, well, by all means, let's do it!"

Julie Walker: Right. And so Lauren: *Structure and Style for Students*. You've got a middle schooler. So start with Year One, Level B. Throw in some *Fix It! Grammar*. Get the Premier package. If you want to teach yourself our writing methodology with a *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, you can hear Andrew talk about that very thing that we were just discussing.

And good job that you've given your kids a leg up by reading out loud to them. So it's not too late. All right. Next question is from Kim. She says, "How do I motivate my student to revise his work?"

Andrew Pudewa: Well, do we know how old the student is?

Julie Walker: No.

Andrew Pudewa: We know it's a boy because she said *his*. I don't know that you can. Probably the solution there is just revise it for him, and then make him implement those changes. You know, if he typed it, then go type in the changes. If you handwrote it, re-handwrite it.

How do you teach revision? Well, mostly through modeling. How's that going to start? It's going to start by saying, "Here's the changes that need to be made on this." Passive voice is okay. And do it.

And then, you know, at a certain point in time, this person, this child in the process of growing up will have a desire to produce the best possible thing that he can produce. But you can't make that happen. And I will say that in my experience very often it happens later for boys than for girls. Not always, but sometimes. Or there's some kind of external accountability, external motivation.

I know in talking with our online instructors that ... and parents who have their kids in our online classes – that those kids will work harder for Mrs. Whoever than they will for mom. And I think, you know, in boys that often tends to hit around eleven, twelve, thirteen, where that external accountability and that sometimes positive peer pressure is a whole lot more meaningful or impactful for them than just making mom happy.

Julie Walker: Right. And we'll put a link in the show notes to your talk on motivation. Kim, you can look at those different types and see which ones you want to use whether it's outright paying him to revise his work to inspiring him to do his work.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. You know, we always have to at some point address the question of audience.

Julie Walker: Yes. It's true.

Andrew Pudewa: You know, in writing why do I care about anything I write? Because someone who I care about, generally a potential person that I want to influence. And so that's why I would even proofread. That's why I would be careful.

That's why I might, you know, sit there and think for a few seconds whether ... is there a different way to cast this sentence? Why do I even do that? Because I want to impress this person or group of people whoever that may be. Coworkers, people who maybe want to hire me to do something, possible customers, or just, you know, out of pride. But kids don't necessarily have anyone that they really care to impress.

They just want to often do what they have to and be done with it. So you can't really force that level of caring into the world of a child who doesn't have an audience that matters to them. So you know, at some point that external accountability can really tip the scale in that way.

Julie Walker: Well, and always plugging. That's what I do, right? Kim, I have a suggestion for you, and that would be encourage your student to submit his essay into our *Magnum Opus Magazine*. And actually this year we are doing a print edition. So if it's really good, it might be good enough.

Andrew Pudewa: Essay or report or story or writing from pictures ... any of the composition models from our nine units.

Julie Walker: Yep. So we've got that coming out in January or February. Look for it on our website where you can order a print copy of a magazine, and you'll want to order a dozen or two if your kid's articles are in there. So that's good. All right. This is from Amy: "My child has dysgraphia and dislikes writing because he is a perfectionist. And if it isn't perfect, he gets very upset." Again, it's a motivation question. "I would like to find a way to help motivate him and not frustrate him."

Andrew Pudewa: I'm assuming here that the frustration this child is experiencing is in the visual appeal of the writing, but it could extend, of course, into the problem of spelling. So I don't know where's the gap between his perfection standard and what he's able to do without overwhelming stress.

Certainly, for any kids who have any challenges—I mean, really for all kids—separating complexity is very, very important. So when you're looking at handwriting, then strengthening that through just straight copying, right? Just, you know, a paragraph a day or a Bible verse or a stanza of poetry or whatever you like so that there is no demand for him to be putting words into sentences and checking that it makes sense and worrying about how to spell and all that.

So building stamina through copy work, you know, even at an older age for dysgraphic trauma. My son did copy work all up until about twelve years old. In fact, when he was eleven, he pretty much couldn't read what he was copying because he was so dyslexic; he couldn't read anything.

But he was learning how to, you know, make letters and spell words and punctuate, you know, an attention to detail – capital versus lowercase.

Some of that just super basic stuff. So if the problem is in handwriting, then I would encourage a little bit of daily copying. If the problem is in spelling, then I would try to isolate that and say, okay, let's look at the words that are most likely needed to be spelled and do a lot of verbal practice.

You know, a lot of parents for some reason think that in order to learn to spell, you have to do it all on paper. And that's just not true at all. In fact, in my talk *Spelling and the Brain*, I point out that for a very long time most kids learned spelling through a verbal auditory practice loop, the artifact of which is the spelling bee, right?

And so you can help children who are visually challenged gain confidence in spelling by just removing the paper. And you probably want to work in categories so that there are groups of words that have similar tool sounds. And group those together. And kind of build into the database of spelling in the brain those groups. But there's also benefit in saying, okay, what are the words that are most likely to be needed by this student? And then try to work some of those words in. And of course, there's words in English that really defy a phonics, figure-it-out approach, and you just have to memorize them. And so that's repetition.

Then the third thing, you know, if it comes to the grammar, the writing of complete sentences, if that's the problem, then what you would do is probably use one form or more forms of technology to accommodate. The simplest form of technology is mom, right? So the child can narrate what they're saying. Mom can write it down. A second level of that would be using some type of voice-to-text function, which is very, very high quality now compared to even ten years ago.

So you know, a child could dictate what he wants to write to a device, a phone, a computer, whatever, and it'll put it into text with pretty good accuracy. And then the third one would be, you know, teach them to type. So separate the complexity. Work on handwriting as handwriting, only spelling as spelling, only preferably minimal in terms of the visual requirement there.

And then the composition part: work with the vocal input, and then moving toward the integration of those things through typing but over a longer period of time.

Julie Walker: Good. Very good. All right. I have another one. Actually this is ... Both Pat and Olga ask a similar question. English is not their first language. So I'll read the questions. "How do I teach IEW if English is my second language, and I lack strong writing skills?" Another variation on that: "I'm a bilingual mother. My first language is Spanish. This makes it difficult when it comes to correcting my fifth and tenth grade writing papers. Do you offer any help in this case?"

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you know, I think that our video courses have been proven to be really ideal for families where mom's first language is not English, or she's not confident in English. I

have found that a lot of people I've met who say, "Oh, I'm not good at English." Truth is they're just as good as anyone. And you never would've suspected, but they have kind of an insecurity.

But with the video, you know, you don't have a danger of you're going to explain something insufficiently or incorrectly because we are doing all the explaining on the video. So that would be one thing. The second thing would be really on the editing side. So if you don't feel confident editing the student paper, well, then you need to look around for someone who could help.

So that may be a relative or a friend or a neighbor or someone at church or an older homeschool native speaker student who would be. You know, a lot of kids who are fifteen, sixteen, seventeen – they're pretty good at editing papers for younger kids. So you're just going to ... You know, like anything, if you can't do something, you've got to find help.

I can't fix stuff on my house. So I have to find other people to do that because I can't. And probably if I hung out with someone all day, every day for a few years, I could learn to fix stuff a little better, but at this point in my life, I just don't care enough to do so.

But things will get better. Things will get easier. And I just wouldn't have a lot of stress or anxiety about this perceived inability to help students in this way. It'll all come out in the wash. They're growing up in this country. Their sense of language is going to be a native speaker's sense of it in most cases. And, you know, they'll be able to probably edit their own work pretty easily when they're older.

Julie Walker: Yes. Good. All right. I have a question from Kate. She asks: "When a young high schooler's handwriting is not terribly legible, how hard should one work to remediate it? And how do I do that without breaking his spirit?"

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you've got to choose your battles with a child who's, I'm going to assume, thirteen or fourteen.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: You know, a lot of kids that age and especially at this time in world history – they just simply don't believe that it's valuable or important; nobody writes on paper. They would prefer to type everything. So why are you making me do this?

Or they have a goal to grow up and be a doctor whose handwriting kills people. I, you know, I don't know. I don't think that you want to go head to head and fight on this. But one trick that might help is a fountain pen or a calligraphy set. Sometimes boys are attracted to the coolness of the pen tips. And there may be an interest in just doing the calligraphy because it's cool.

And that, I know, for some children I've met has kind of been a bridge into, "Oh, I guess I can write something nice if I just slow down and do it very, very slowly." But nobody wants to slow down and do anything very, very slowly. It's just depressing.

Julie Walker: Well, and at least initially it's slowly, but if you're working on your cursive. Like you and your story ... Because you were that guy that said, "No, I don't need to learn cursive because I'm not a doctor, and I just print. And that way my wife can read my notes." But you turned a page. You taught yourself cursive.

You went slowly at first. And now tens of thousands of students around the world, Andrew, see you every week with your fountain pen on the SSS video, writing something.

Andrew Pudewa: But I still print everything on the whiteboard.

Julie Walker: It's true. It's true.

Andrew Pudewa: I can write cursive, but yeah, I was fifty years old before I decided that I wanted to reacquire that skill.

Julie Walker: So Kate, you can tell your son: Mr. Pudewa knows how to do cursive, and he taught himself to do it.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. You know, I think her point more was along the lines of legibility.

Julie Walker: Oh, sure, sure.

Andrew Pudewa: And again, that almost comes back to audience. Like, is anyone else really ever going to have to read your handwriting? And the kids are probably like, "Why can't I just type everything?" I don't know. It's a tough time to make an argument for spending a lot of energy on developing beautiful or even legible handwriting.

Julie Walker: Right. Exactly. All right. I have another one. This one is from Laura. It's kind of an IEW question. And she actually talks about that. She says, "How can I help my son express himself with confidence? He loves reading and is advanced in reading. He was a struggling writer till he began using IEW. When asked to orally explain what a book he just read is about, he is at a loss for words."

Andrew Pudewa: Well, there's a lot of complexity to that question. The first thing I would do is challenge the whole concept that writing has anything to do with expressing one's self. Writing is about expressing ideas, and I don't really ever think, "Oh, I want to express myself." Generally I acquire an idea from somewhere. It attaches or blends together with some other idea that I acquired from somewhere, and it seems like some kind of new or interesting idea that is worth communicating to someone else.

But I just don't express my "self" in writing. It's not ... I don't even know what that would look like because the last thing I'm going to do is go write a poem about how I feel about a sunset. I mean, that's just never going to happen to me.

So if we can kind of shift the context here: confidence in expressing ideas rather than confidence in expressing himself. I think that that contextual shift is very helpful because then you can say,

all right, the problem might be finding the ideas. And she mentions in this same thing: he read a book and has a hard time talking about it.

Well, we know from looking at our units: Unit 9, which is the critique, is the last of the nine units. And even then I don't recommend people start with a whole book and try to then figure out what to say about that whole book in five paragraphs or so.

So we know that Unit 2, the funnel is straight down, right? There's seven ideas, and you represent those seven ideas. Okay. That's ... You can do that. You don't have to think of much to do that. When we hit to Unit 3, well, the story may be a little longer. So now we're shortening or retelling or even, you know, modifying it to some degree. Unit 4 is where we really get that image of the funnel though, right?

So here's a source text. It has fifteen ideas, and you need to some-a-rize, meaning tell some of it, not all of it in one paragraph, which can contain six or seven of those fifteen. So now there's a thinking skill required, which is what of all the possible things I could say is interesting, important, or relevant in making decisions.

Now if that funnel is three times as wide, and there's, say, fifty ideas, and you only want six or seven, well, that's harder. If it's a ten-page paper with hundreds of ideas, and you only want six or seven, well, that's really, really hard. So think about the funnel. Think about the idea that it's about choosing what's available to you rather than finding something that you can't find inside yourself somewhere.

Julie Walker: Hmm. Right. Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: And that might be helpful in this case. It's all ... You know, it would be very handy, too, if when we get these questions, if people were able to tell us a little bit more, like how old. Because, you know, I might answer this a little differently for an eight-year-old as opposed to a fifteen-year-old.

Julie Walker: Yep. Sure, sure. And I was also thinking as you were talking about, you know, the Unit 9 model and how big that is. You're still starting, though, with questions that are prescribed. And so, Laura, if you could look at our Story Sequence Chart and ask questions about the story, then maybe your son would be able to find the words that he can't seem to find when he's just said, "So tell me what you just read."

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And, you know, there's "tell me what you just read." And that for a kid could be kind of a needle in a haystack problem.

Julie Walker: Sure. Right?

Andrew Pudewa: What do you want me to tell you of all that I just read because I don't really remember that much. And then, you know, it gets one step further when someone says, "Tell me what you think about what you just read."

And for some kids, that's just totally impossible. They need to have the conversation. And that's why when you look at, I think, good literature teachers ... You read something together, hopefully not too long. And then you have a conversation with maybe a small group or a class.

And out of that conversation, then students are able to start to pinpoint things that resonate with them from the conversation. But without the conversation, super hard to find. You know, the other approach, which I like, is to help students get the habit of just using what once was called a *commonplace*, right, or just a notebook. You could call it that.

As you are reading, copy. Don't think about what you're thinking. Just copy what you like. So you find a good quote. Copy it. You find a nice little description of something. Copy it. You find something that you don't understand. Copy it into a notebook.

And then you've isolated certain things that you can focus on and maybe have some conversation about more easily than having to go back and say, so what did you think of that chapter? Or what did you think of the book? We could also mention *Teaching the Classics* ...

Julie Walker: I thought about that as well.

Andrew Pudewa: with Adam Andrews and his list of Socratic questions in the appendix. That course is ... It was really helpful for me, you know, as a parent, as a teacher moving into the world of dealing with literature in a more age appropriate and engaging way.

Julie Walker: Right. I also think about the article you wrote, and we can link to this, about having a colloquium, you know, where you're getting together with some high school students. And they're all reading the same book, something like, oh, I don't know, an easy read like *Jane Eyre*, you know, where you're talking about this book; *A Tale of Two Cities*, which is pretty ...

And I'm not suggesting that that's where you start, but that whole conversation that you were having with the kids was very motivating to them to want to read and come prepared with what they wanted to talk about.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and I would say that in our SSS course, especially Level B and C, we mostly worked with shorter stories. But some of the insights and some of the conversation that came up in the making of that video course I was very impressed with. And I thought, "If you're going to work on reading and discussing literature with kids this age, short stories have so many advantages over long books."

Julie Walker: Okay, Andrew, I've got one more question for you. And since our time is running short, I think you'll like this one though I'm loath to ask it.

Andrew Pudewa: Now I'm curious.

Julie Walker: I know. So Sayeh asks, "Have you ever considered creating a joke book? And if so, would you accept joke entries for your consideration?"

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. And yes and yes. In fact, the book will be something like *How to Learn, Tell, and Remember One Hundred* (or however many) *Excellent Jokes*. And it's going to be a combination of using the key word outline to help learn the joke and then public speaking or delivery tips on how to tell it well, combined with the medieval memory techniques of attaching a symbol and then locating the symbol in your home or your memory palace or whatever.

So, yes, that book is on my horizon. And I'm pretty selective about the types of jokes that I want to put in it. But if she or any of her family members have a particularly good joke that they think would deserve a spot among, say, the top one hundred jokes, I would entertain it.

Julie Walker: So Sayeh, send it to podcast@IEW.com. And if it's a good one, oh, Andrew will get the joke, and he'll decide. And who knows when that joke book is going to come out, but he has been talking about this for a while. So perhaps it's not as far off as we would think or hope.

Andrew Pudewa: You know my problem.

Julie Walker: I do know your problem.

Andrew Pudewa: I hate writing.

Julie Walker: He does hate writing. Well, listeners, I hope this was helpful to you. If you have questions for Andrew, please send them to podcast@IEW.com. And perhaps in the next tenth episode—that would be 350, I believe—then we could include it on that one. Until then ...

Andrew Pudewa: All right. Thank you.

Julie Walker: Thank you.

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