

Ask Andrew Anything

Transcript of Podcast Episode 350

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: Episode 350. Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: I know what that means.

Julie Walker: Tell me.

Andrew Pudewa: It means we’ve been doing this a very long time.

Julie Walker: It’s true.

Andrew Pudewa: But it also means we’re on the ten, multiple of ten. So this would be an “Ask Andrew Anything.”

Julie Walker: It’s exactly right.

Andrew Pudewa: Good. I hope you have some excellent questions or even some mediocre ones. I can work with that.

Julie Walker: I believe I have some excellent questions from teachers and parents. But I was also thinking: Episode 350 – we’re halfway to a century because every one hundredth episode we try to do something really special. Like we did a radio drama kind of feel on our hundredth episode. We did a live in-the-studio with *Structure and Style for Students*’ students, asking their parents and their students, asking questions of you. So I don’t know what we’ll do with Episode 400.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you’ve got, I don’t know, forty-nine weeks to figure that out.

Julie Walker: This is true. This is true. I do have some ideas, and it involves our listeners, so stay tuned for an exciting four-hundredth episode probably a year from now.

Andrew Pudewa: A live call-in show. We could do that.

Julie Walker: That’s kind of what I was thinking actually. That’s funny that you actually thought of that as well. All right, you ready to jump right in?

Andrew Pudewa: Absolutely.

Julie Walker: Okay. Our first question, then, is from Christina. And she asks a very general question that we have been asked so many times that we've addressed, devoted whole podcasts to. And that is the question of dyslexia. "Do we have any resources for dyslexia and other alternative ways of learning with an unofficial, undiagnosed learning challenge?"

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's the same answer. And that is usually, most of the time, almost all the time, our writing and grammar stuff works very, very well for kids who have any kind of challenge: dyslexia, dysgraphia, auditory processing, ADD, ADHD. You know, obviously it's all on a spectrum. *Undiagnosed* means that, you know, the parent has a strong suspicion. And I recall Susan Barton in one of our podcasts interviews; she said if you think your child is dyslexic, he probably is.

So you know, the case of what's different is ... Well, number one, you just take everything slower. Break it into very small, manageable pieces. Part of what exacerbates the vision problem is the feeling of overwhelm that happens when, you know, a child just can't process that much visual information and all those steps that are required for writing at one time. So you know, that's, you know, that's the twenty-second elevator thing. When someone says, "What's different about IEW?" my answer is we take a very complex process and break it into much smaller, more manageable, doable steps.

So that's one reason why our writing program, I think, is very ideal, if you will. And of course, we have testimonies: hundreds, thousands of families who said this is the first thing that I've been able to get this child to really write anything at all. You know, a second guideline would be sure that whatever the child is looking at is large as possible in terms of font size.

You know, one thing I know we attended to carefully in the *Fix It!* was keeping the font size perhaps larger than one might normally provide in a grammar program. Why? Well, because you know, with my background and my experience, I know that kids who have visual issues at all – everything is easier if you just bump the font size up four, six, eight, ten points. So we've done that. And plenty of white space. I mean, we've actually argued about that a little bit, you know? Why is there so much wasted paper here? But what we do know is that space enables people to see things better. And if they have a challenge with the printed material, then larger and more space always makes it better.

And if it isn't big enough, guess what? Get yourself a enlarging copy, printer, multifunction thing, and make it as big as you can. Oh, the third thing, I think, is—I guess this is kind of overall for all kids with any kind of learning challenges—but our system is not as stressful. It breaks things into smaller pieces. But you know, there's no right or wrong. There's no tension really.

It's just a process, and you're going through it. And you go through it again and again and again. And every time it gets a little more familiar. And one of my mantras that I repeat often to parents who ask questions of this nature is, "Don't be afraid. Help your child as much as possible. Don't have an expectation that they're going to do this independently the first, second, or third time. Maybe you're going to just do it together with them for a year." And that's okay because it's not

a race. You're not ahead or behind anyone else. The idea is you're making progress in comparison to yourself.

And then just being patient. Most kids that ... You know, I would put my son as kind of the super typical – couldn't read anything till he was almost eleven years old. Didn't read a book until he was twelve years old. But by fourteen and fifteen, he was reading and writing everything. You know, difficulties perhaps with spelling in particular, but in terms of the catch-up factor, if you load in a lot of audiobooks and do, you know, memorization of poetry and other beautiful language, you're furnishing the mind.

And then when the eyes and brains start to just click in with maturity, which very often happens, you know, around puberty, kids will get that willpower, that kind of burst of force in their soul. And they can exercise that will over neurology and do things they couldn't previously do. Then all that rich language storage is readily available.

So you know, the last thing was just don't have anxiety about it. And don't compare children based on age. And I think we have a whole string of pages, links that will provide more and more resources for this and other listeners with kids who are dyslexic, mildly dyslexic, maybe dyslexic, or not really sure.

Julie Walker: There's something going on there. They need some extra help, and maybe it's not extra help. I think about the students that you taught in *Structure and Style for Students*, especially Year 1, Level A. We had a handful of kids who really had some learning challenges, and oftentimes they were sitting in the front row. And they could see that board that you were writing on.

And the kids that didn't need help – they were off making their own key word outline. And you said, "Hey, you, you know, Josh ..." or you know, the kids that were having some challenges, "You help me with this." And so we had you showing all the kids at home and the kids in the class how to do a key word outline. But some of the kids that didn't need that much help, they did it on their own.

Andrew Pudewa: And kids reach that level of "I want to do this independently" at different speeds. So the idea is okay, if they're ready, let 'em. But if they're not, don't force it. Just do it together one more time. Do it together one more time.

Julie Walker: Right. And you said another thing that I think is really important just to reemphasize is there's a lot of flexibility here. And in our all of our teacher's guides that go with the theme-based books and with the *Structure and Style for Students*, there are suggested key words in the key word outline. But they are truly suggestions. It's almost like we almost don't want to put them there because it makes it look like it's the answer key.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I absolutely don't want to put them there. But I have been convinced as to why it can be helpful. But we do have to remind everyone: This isn't right or wrong, yes or no, fill in the blank. You got it or you didn't. No. There's a hundred ways or more to do every key word outline. And so just doing it together is the way kids learn stuff. And you can go to,

you know, anything – playing music, cooking, dance. How do you learn stuff? You do it with someone until you say, “Hey, I think I could do this myself.”

Julie Walker: Exactly. And you know what? I’m kind of previewing the next question. And I feel like we’ve already answered it, but I’m going to just say it for Rachel’s sake because everybody wants their question answered.

Andrew Pudewa: And we can just say, “Ditto.”

Julie Walker: Ditto, right. So Rachel asks: “My third grade son struggles tremendously with getting ideas from his head out onto paper.” And I’m thinking ... third grade. Well, *son*. Okay. “Writing completely on his own requires a tremendous battle and results in a great deal of frustration on his part as well as oversimplified sentences relative to what he composes orally. He’s not a great speller, but he hates to get things wrong. I’m thinking about Andrew’s comment that you cannot help a student too much.”

So Rachel’s been listening. Good job, Rachel. “I allow him to dictate his rough draft to me while I record it on a whiteboard. He then copies it down, edits, and completes a final copy.” Here’s the actual question: “Do you have any other recommendations for how I can help scaffold his instruction?”

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it sounds like she’s doing everything correctly. And yes. I mean, when she started that question and said he has a hard time getting thoughts from his head onto paper, you know, I would go back to my analysis of what’s required for writing. An idea must preexist. It can preexist in the memory or imagination, or it can preexist immediately, like outside memory and imagination right here, right now.

That’s easier. It’s easier to look at something that’s right here right now and say something about it than it is to think of something that’s less concrete and then say something about it. So we start with immediate. So here’s the source text. You know, here’s – in the case of Unit 5, here’s the pictures. You know, here’s the story you’re dealing with.

You know, the second thing is something can preexist inwards or preexist in sensory impressions. And I like to use the example of a child writing about their dog, right? Children love their pets, and they experience them in this kind of visceral, emotional, nonverbal way.

And to take the complexity of human experience there and put that into words ... Well, number one, you have to have a pretty good vocabulary to do it. And a lot of young children just don’t yet have all that many words to use. And then the second thing you have to do is you have to have a process. So that’s why, you know, our system starts with immediate things that preexist in words. And so you build the pathway that way.

So sounds like she’s doing that. But you know, her secret desire is that he would just decide that he wants to do this and can do it and just take off and she doesn’t have to go through this with him anymore. But eight years old, especially for a boy ...

Julie Walker: That's exactly what I'm thinking, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Really young.

Julie Walker: I'm a boy mom, and I know that sometimes it just takes longer with boys. And that's okay.

Andrew Pudewa: I will say that I have observed with many children, my grandchildren in particular, that doing just straight copy work ... Just, you know, copying some Bible verses or copying a couple stanzas of a poem or copying a paragraph of a short story or something and just doing that every day ... It's kind of like doing your exercises.

You know, if you want to run a three-mile race, you need to build up to that. If you want to be able to do something that requires a lot of internal musculature, you can't just go from almost nothing to that. So the best way to train the muscles of the eye and the hand and the brain and the body and the spelling and the confidence is just straight copy work. Just get on the treadmill basically.

So you know, I would say don't be afraid to continue just doing, you know, maybe fifty to a hundred words a day, whatever you can fit in a reasonable maybe fifteen-minute period of time. And just do that. And don't worry if other people say, "Why are you doing that?" Or "That's not a good idea. That's not what they do in third grade in schools." It may be what they should be doing in third grade in schools.

But I've just seen again and again. You build up a critical mass of experience and confidence and competence in just putting words on paper and attending to the details of that. And then you break through into where it's like, oh, okay, I can copy this idea from my brain just as easily as I can copy it from this other piece of paper.

Julie Walker: Well, and I want to speak to that. And I'm just thinking Rachel has a whiteboard. And an eight-year-old might have a real hard time translating the words from the whiteboard onto paper. What if she just did the key word outline on a piece of paper?

Andrew Pudewa: No, I'd stick with the whiteboard. And for most kids, that's going to be easier because when they look up, and it's farther away from where they are, and it's a lot bigger, it's a relaxing thing for the eyes.

So when you have two pieces of paper right next to each other, that's a narrower, more stressful thing to have to concentrate on. So that being able to look up, look down, look up, look down – there's all sorts of science actually to show that when you frequently adjust your eyes to different distances, they don't get as tired.

That's why when you're sitting at your desk, looking at your screen for too long, you get tired. And that's why they say, you know, look out the window. Look across the room; look at something farther away. And then it kind of gives you a break, and then you come back to it. So I think she's doing everything well.

And again, you know, same little answer as the previous person: Don't have anxiety; don't be stressed. This is a very young age, especially for a boy. And you know, in a couple years you won't even remember you had this problem.

Julie Walker: Great. Again, I'm previewing the next question. I kind of feel like there's a theme going on here today.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you are supposed to have previewed all the questions, aren't you?

Julie Walker: Well, I do, but I just love how this is flowing here. Mary has an adoptive daughter that

is just not putting sentences together well. They don't make sense. They're missing parts of speech and don't flow with other sentences. We've done key word outline many times with a simple paragraph, but she really struggles to take the outline and form a sentence. I don't think we can move forward because key word outlines are not easy, let alone dress-ups. Can one spend too long on key word outlines? How do I help her? She's eleven.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, here we would probably think that there's a second language issue. A lot of times, adopted children, you know, they did not grow up with English as their first language. Or if they did, they grew up at least for a few years in an environment where the language was not of a higher quality. Or there's a serious auditory processing issue, and it's a neurological condition.

And it almost doesn't matter which of those are the cause, but it's usually nice to try to figure out. Why is this a problem? The solution, you know – I think we go back to basics. Number one, more reading out loud and memorized language. I can't ... The more and more stories I hear and the ones I remember from my own kids and the ones I see with my grandkids – the more you've got memorized, the more likely you are to speak in reliably correct and appropriately sophisticated English.

So now that may be hard for this child. But that doesn't mean it's not worth doing. Sometimes things that are harder actually have greater value in terms of, you know, brain growth and even the development of concentration and willpower. So you know, I would definitely focus on the input side of language, so the listening and speaking part of the equation: hearing good language and reciting memorized good language. You know, the second thing would be follow the guideline that the source texts are at or below the reading level.

When you have an eleven-year-old, you tend to automatically think – uh oh, must be sixth grade or something. Uh oh, I better have a reading book that looks like it or a source text that looks like it's written for a child this age, whereas really they would do so much better dropping down the complexity level. So a lot of times people will say, I have a middle schooler. Buy a Level B book. But okay, there's learning issues; there's challenges; there's lack of experience, you know, all whatever.

And we would say, no, there's no harm in dropping down to a Level A book where the source texts are just written with some shorter sentences, a little lower level of vocabulary. It's better to err on the side of a source text being too easy. So that'd be the second one. And then the third one is just do it together.

You know, if a child is ... You know, you think about young children, and they say something to you. And it's grammatically not norm ... Can't quite think of an exact example that I've heard recently from a grandchild. But you know how they'll say something like my three-year-old grandchild. She's four. She's four now. She said, "Well, it's *gooder*." Right? Okay, well that is a perfectly logical thing for a child to say, right, because you got *big* and *bigger* and *small* and *smaller*. So why not *good* and *gooder*? It's just an anomaly in the language.

Well, what do we naturally do? We naturally restate what they said: "Oh, you mean it's *better*?" And then the child will repeat, "Yeah, better." And that's how they learn? That's how they learn that we use *better* instead of *gooder*. And of course, you take off the /ur/; you go *bet*. And so now you know you're in the world of, you know, risk and gambling. But so you know, that idea carries over into writing.

That's why when a child writes something, if it's not a complete sentence, it doesn't really help to, like, lecture them on what a complete sentence is. I would say just put in the missing word. Or change the ending. Or cross the thing out that doesn't work, and replace it with something that does. And say, "Here, I've edited this. Now you can copy it over."

And then the child has almost kind of a meditative, reflective experience as they copy it over. They are semi or even unconsciously noting: this is what I wrote, but this is what is more correct. And then they get those little bits of information that build the database of grammar and syntax.

So you know, I think just a very gentle approach. And again, just realizing that even though the child is pushing the teenage zone, it's certainly okay to do simpler things as if that child were a couple years younger as well.

Julie Walker: So Andrew, you've mentioned a couple times the importance of memorized language. And I would be remiss if I did not mention our *Linguistic Development through Poetry Memorization* course. And this is just a really gentle, easy way for all of you, Christina, Rachel, and Mary, to have your children learn poetry in a fun, easy way. And that memorization of poetry will help their writing be more easy, more fluent.

I also think of Mary. She probably, you know ... This key word outline – when do I stop doing key word outline? I think what she really means is when do I move on from Unit 2 to Unit 3? But you'll still be doing key word outline. And I think sometimes we forget that telling back verbally the key word outline before we put it on paper. And that's a great place for Mary to do that type of correction that you were describing with your granddaughter.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And Unit 3 is generally a longer key word outline because we're looking at three paragraphs' worth of content. And the process is, you know, definitely a bit

more abstract. But if you follow the guideline, just do it together. You know, maybe you as the mom are figuring out 90 percent of what needs to go in that outline.

Okay. That's fine. You're modeling, and that's a first step. And over time, over the years, that will get easier. But you know, break the longer thing into shorter chunks. And that's also another thing. I think we get an over-expectation of kids as they hit eleven or twelve, like they should be able to do more in twenty minutes or one setting or at a time or however you label that. And yet, you know, they're getting exhausted.

And we all know as adults that when we get really tired, our effectiveness decreases whatever we're doing. And so, you know, we hope our children, you know, grow their attention span and are able to do more and can sit still and focus for a longer period of time. But that's a gradual process, and it changes from day to day. And you know, there's so many factors too, like how's exercise and blood floated the brain going? And what'd you eat for breakfast? And so we're going to do some podcasts on, you know, how things like exercise and nutrition really affect vision and hearing and brain function and concentration and manual dexterity. You know, all of those things.

So you know, there's so many factors there. But you know, the bottom line is always try to guard yourself against anxiety. In fact, I think there's something in the Bible about that. Do not be anxious.

Julie Walker: Anxious for nothing. That's right. Great. So I hope that was helpful, Mary. And you know, the other thing that she mentions I just wanted to point out is this idea of she struggles with dress-ups as well. And the checklists that we include, the dress-ups that we include – there's no rule that says follow the curriculum and get through all six dress-ups and all six sentence openers. No.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. You can just camp out with -ly word and just stay there as long as you need to. And there's no rush. There's no race. You still got a child who's eleven, twelve years old. You've still got plenty of time, Mary.

Julie Walker: Plenty of time, Mary. So Lisa, who has a high school question now – she says, “I've been successfully using IEW for about eight years with three of my own children. One of my high school aged students has never enjoyed the process of writing. And now that he's in the eleventh grade”—dun dun dun. She's feeling that pressure, right?—“is losing all motivation for things he doesn't care for, writing being at the top of that list. Forts are no longer the things he would rather be doing. Any suggestions for motivating older students?”

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you know, you think of eleventh grade, someone sixteen or seventeen. Historically they're an adult, right? I mean, this idea of *high school* really has only existed for about a hundred years as a mandatory stage of development. You know, I think one thing that we would do better as a whole society is just put teenagers to work, right? Make them work harder in a physical job. And maybe their appreciation for education would increase. So you know, if someone said to me ... You know, my kid wants to stop doing school and start doing work. I

don't care what it is. I'd say great, you know. They could always come back and do an education thing later.

But you know, we can't actually externally motivate kids that age. I can't cheerlead a seventeen-year-old into wanting to do something, and I wouldn't even try. It's not worth it. It's ... you're not going to be successful. Everybody's going to be frustrated. You know, there are ways to motivate older kids to do things they don't want to do, but they have to say, "What's in it for me?" Right?

Julie Walker: Yes. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: So I mean, flat-out baseline, I'll pay you a hundred dollars to write a five-page essay. All right. Well, that would motivate most sixteen-year-olds, although it might violate some parents' kind of principle. But you know, a lot of people don't like writing. I don't like writing. It's hard. It takes time. You have to think really hard. You have to not do something else and devote the time. And a sixteen-, seventeen-year-old boy – they're just not ... They don't believe it when you say you should learn this because it will help you later in life. They just don't believe it. What helps them is what helps them right now. So you've got to try to figure out what does this kid want. And then work towards supporting that goal.

And then if you can bring in some academics, great. I mean, I could say ... And she can say to her son that "Andrew Pudewa said, 'You don't have to like it. You just have to do it.'" And it doesn't matter what you go into in life, whether you want to go into engineering or the military or garbage collecting, right? It doesn't matter.

People who can speak and write decently well rise up in professions to more influence, leadership. They can be used by God better to influence other people. The best engineer is an engineer. And he's a great engineer, and that's wonderful; we need lots of them. But the engineer who can also speak and write engineering ideas clearly and effectively will become more of a leader in whatever scenario they find.

So I don't know; it's a tough thing. Maria Montessori thought that you should just, as soon as kids are about fourteen, just have them work all day. And literally all day, like a full-time job on a farm or something for a few years. And then come back and look at their academic future, you know? And maybe they say, man, I just totally love working on farms, so I want to learn all of this about how to do that better.

Or maybe construction or maybe restauranting, you know? So I just think our whole concept of high school is pretty messed up. And it works for some kids. And it just doesn't work for others. So if you can finish high school as soon as possible and let this kid get into being an adult, which is what all kids that age want to do primarily anyway, well, maybe it's a GED; maybe it's a, you know, a dual enrollment.

Maybe it's a doctor-up the transcript and say, yep, you graduated. I don't know all the situations, but there are options to moving forward with life.

Julie Walker: So I'm going to give Lisa a couple of real tangible things that she can do with your great recommendations. And that is Lisa, if you are homeschooling, look into Lee Binz's transcript solutions. Andrew, you used the word/term *doctoring up*. I don't think that's what you really meant.

Andrew Pudewa: That's exactly what I meant. But anyway, yeah. Lee Binz. Was it Homescholar.com?

Julie Walker: Yep. And then the other thing is listen to Andrew's talk "Cultivating Language Arts: Preschool through High School." And you give some really great suggestions for those high school years that are more integrated: starting their own business, joining speech and debate, being a part of drama, where they're not just cracking the books all day long. Wow. That would be really hard for anyone, you know.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And what kids that age actually want deep down more than anything else is real, meaningful, honest to God, life and death responsibility. And what they crave in that context is working with, side by side, and learning from adults in a real-world context.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: And you know, John Taylor Gatto kind of points out: that is exactly what schools are contrived to prevent from ever happening. So you know, we have this cognitive dissonance between what's good for an older teenager and what the world says that we should do with them. So you know, out-of-the-box thinking.

Julie Walker: Well, Andrew, we are out of time. We're not out of questions.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, man. Well ...

Julie Walker: So listeners, if you want to submit your questions to "Ask Andrew Anything," know that if we can't get to them on the air ... like there's a couple here that we didn't get to. Know that a well-qualified customer service team member will get back to you and give you if not their own best answer, Andrew's best answer that we couldn't get to on the podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: If you would just come in with some yes/no questions, we could get a lot more coverage here.

Julie Walker: Probably not.

Andrew Pudewa: All right, well, we'll wait till Episode 360.

Julie Walker: There you go. Thank you, Andrew.

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