

# How IEW Helps Students with Dyslexia

## Transcript of Podcast Episode 363

**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, when I first posed this as a possible topic for our podcast (note the alliteration there), you were not overly enthusiastic, not because you don’t believe that IEW is actually connected to and can help people in this regard. You just feel like we’ve talked about it so many times. But I want to take a little bit different approach as we talk today about the challenges of dyslexia and how IEW can help.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, it seems a little bit like beating a dead horse because we have so many resources already available. But if you have a different take on it, if you have an angle that would be of interest, I’ll do my best to play along.

**Julie Walker:** Okay, sounds great. So we’re especially talking to families and teachers who have students with learning differences, and those can range from dyslexia, somewhere on the spectrum, maybe ADHD, dysgraphia. And so this year, 2023 in particular, we want to take some time and just explore a little bit about those learning differences and not necessarily consult the experts because we’ve done that before. We’ve talked to Susan Barton; we’ve talked to the Eides. And we can certainly link to those podcasts if ...

But I know that you’re the guy who knows our system so well, and you understand why it can help with students who have any type of learning difference. And so I think that’s where I want to go today. And dyslexia just seems, like, so prevalent. And that’s why we keep going back to this one because there may be many variations of what it means to be dyslexic and different ways that people are learning. And you yourself have experienced teaching a child who had some dyslexic challenges to say the least.

And so I don’t want to spend too much time talking about the technical “what is dyslexia.” But I think it’s important that we at least start there somewhat. But then most importantly, talk about how the Structure and Style approach to teaching writing can be adapted to help these students.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Sure. Well, you know, I agree with you. I’m sure that every single day we get at least one, if not many, phone calls, emails, text messages of someone saying, you know, I have an eleven-year-old dyslexic child, dysgraphic child, spectrum kid. What do you have that could help me?

**Julie Walker:** Right, because we don’t have any products with “Learning Differences” on the spine.

**Andrew Pudewa:** No, and we certainly don't want to label ourselves as being, you know, a company that creates curriculum for children who have learning challenges. But at the same time our testimonial piles ... probably the one of, "I had a child who could hardly read or write, and I didn't know what I was going to do. And then we tried your Structure and Style product, whatever, and it was amazing" (and then a description of how it was so amazing). I mean, I think that's probably the most common type of feedback we get just because it's the more dramatic in people's lives.

**Julie Walker:** Sure. Yeah.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And so you know, having talked about this and answered questions and writing ... And you know, I've been at this, gosh, almost thirty years, twenty some years, full-time, and I travel a lot, talk to everybody. What is it about what we do that is so effective for so many kids who have challenges, that just aren't picking it up? And that could be the mom who says, well, I kind of always knew how to write, but then I discovered I really don't know how to teach it.

**Julie Walker:** Yep. That was mine. Yeah.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Or I never knew how to write until I tried to teach it using your system, and now I know too. Or I tried this and this and this and this, and it never worked until we tried your system here. And it almost doesn't matter whether it was dyslexia, dysgraphia, you know, spectrum stuff or ADD, ADHD. All of those things have one common factor.

**Julie Walker:** Okay.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And that is, the kids get overwhelmed with complexity more easily than other kids. But you think; we do that too. Think about if you are tired, undernourished, stressed, any other bad thing that might happen, right? And you are in a temporary condition of not functioning at your best. Well, what tends to be the straw that breaks the back is complexity, right? In fact, you would look at most of people's feeling stressed, in general daily life, maybe not deep emotional stuff, but you know, the daily life of being stressed; it's overwhelm, right?

**Julie Walker:** Sure.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And so you have all this stress management, time management, executive function improvement. And it's all about what? Separating complexities. And you know, you read all these business management: how to, you know, run-a-better-company kinds of books, which I hate.

**Julie Walker:** Well, and let me just tell you; the book that I am relistening to, rereading right now is *Getting Things Done* by David Allen. And his biggest strategy is identify what's the next action item.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Right, and so if we take writing, which is mostly what we're teaching ... I mean this could apply to spelling; this could apply to poetry memorization. I mean it can apply to

anything. It can apply to math; it can apply to anything you're trying to teach. But because we tend to focus on writing ... You look at the process that's involved in having someone write something.

And if you break it into small parts, you're kind of amazed how complicated this process really is. In fact, you know, I think about it: Okay, if you want to write something, first thing is you've got to have an idea. The idea has to exist. If there's no idea, it's impossible to write something. So task number one, find an idea. Then you have to speak that idea into existence, right? Now the idea could preexist in words – something you heard or read or saw in words. I guess if you saw it in words, you would've read it.

**Julie Walker:** You would've read it, yes, experienced it. "What I Did on My Summer Vacation"

**Andrew Pudewa:** Or it could preexist not in words, such as a memory or an imagination or a mix-up of all that. But where ... Regardless, you have to have the words available and speak it into existence because if you can't speak it into existence, you don't know what words you will need in order to write something. But then, not only do you speak it into existence; you have to hear what you heard yourself say. And I think most parents and teachers are well aware that children can say things and not hear what they said. It's actually a skill, right, to hear what you're saying.

And then you have to hold it in your memory long enough. And then you have to go and wrestle the information needed to put those words into some form that's recorded, either typing or handwriting. That involves spelling. It involves a manual activity. It involves an eye-hand coordination. And that is something that kind of exists outside the general language processing areas, right? And then you get a few words. And then you have to go back to the idea that you held in your memory. Well, what if your memory is short, right?

**Julie Walker:** Right, right.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And you forgot? And a lot of people say, I lost my train of thought. Well, why? Because you forgot what you were thinking. So then you've got to back up. Go find the idea again. Speak it back into existence. Hold that in your memory. Go wrestle the mechanical information in order to record that, and then go to the next set of words. And record that and the next set. And if you're a little kid, and you're just holding one word at a time, this is really complex.

In fact, I have said that, you know, in my personal opinion, the fact that human beings can write, that it's even possible for human beings to do this is clearly an argument for the existence of God. It's too complex to have *evolved* in a way. You know, it's an amazingly complex thing. So now, we look at kids who are just very neurologically solid – they don't have any clear or diagnosable impediments. They hear well; they see well; they have a good memory. They have good body control, right? And so for them it appears to be easier. It's so complicated.

**Julie Walker:** Yes, it is.

**Andrew Pudewa:** But we're used to taking that level of complexity for kids who don't have the burden of neurological impediment of any sort. And that looks like the "norm" to many people. So this is what children should be able to do. And then we base grade-level standards or curriculums on this. And we say, well, a nine-year-old should be able to do this. And if they can't, well, okay, now it's a problem. All right, so we create this kind of artificial age-based standard, comparing everyone to kind of a neurologically normal or average or unimpeded person.

Okay, well, now you get someone who's got dyslexia, dysgraphia, ADD, whatever. That whole processing system isn't functioning as smoothly, as easily. The kid is working harder. Maybe he's putting a tremendous amount of effort into making his eyes and brain see things the way they are. Or maybe he's putting a tremendous amount of energy into concentration and focus.

His ability to do that is limited compared to some child who doesn't have to put in as much effort, and it requires more focal point on the energy. So just that process of find an idea, right? And for most people in their writing programs, it's like, oh, write about your dog. Write about your vacation. Write about whatever you're thinking or feeling. Write about your opinion about something. And so it's very ephemeral, right?

**Julie Walker:** Right.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And so just that *finding the idea* can be overwhelmingly challenging. And yeah, they did it, but they're exhausted. Well, that doesn't work because what you want as the teacher or parent – you want them to go through this whole process and have a product right now. And they're just exhausted. I think part of it is they just get exhausted.

I remember, you know, when my son, who ... You know, if you want to learn about my son, we actually had a podcast with him. But you know, he didn't read anything until he was almost eleven years old. I mean, not even three- or four-letter words. And he didn't read a book till he was twelve. And I remember when he first started reading. And you know, I'm seeing this actually with one of my grandsons; he can do it, but a page is just exhausting, whereas maybe another kid could read five pages, ten pages. And it's not even right to compare them based on age.

**Julie Walker:** Right. Sure.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So you can be so exhausted you can't really go to the next step, which is, okay, how do I find the words in my vocabulary to express this idea I just found in my memory? Right? And then of course, you know, if you're looking on finding words, there can be impediments that prevent you from having a lot of words. Those could be environmental. A child grows up in a place where most all their language is colloquial or media-based. So they get most of their language from busy adults, peers, and screens. Well, that's not going to be a lot of vocabulary.

We use a much smaller vocabulary when we're talking to each other than we would have access to if we were reading—even a simple book. I was reading children's books to granddaughters

last night. And I thought, this is really interesting. These are well-done children's books. But the vocabulary included there – it just had words you would never bump into in daily life.

**Julie Walker:** Okay. Our listeners are wondering what books you read. Do you remember?

**Andrew Pudewa:** *Eensy -Weensy Spider, The Princess and the Kiss, even The Big Hungry Bear and the Strawberry.*

**Julie Walker:** Yes. Yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Right? I mean, these are simple, short books. But they include ... The authors have very marvelously included words – enriching, effective, engaging words that the child can understand because of the context and the pictures. But you just wouldn't bump into these words on a daily basis.

So you know, does the child even have the words to take the idea and speak it into existence? Which is why when we start everybody, regardless of age, regardless of are you dyslexic or ADD or above average, totally normal, or gifted? What? It doesn't even matter. We start with: here's source text. Make a key word outline. Speak it into existence. That right there makes a huge difference, possibly the biggest difference.

**Julie Walker:** Yeah, because you don't even have to remember what you said because you have a key word outline of what you spoke into existence, maybe not the whole sentence.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Right. Well, you still do have to remember. But you have aids to memory. You know, I've studied memory a bit as well. And the more little elements that you can include in your thinking about something, the easier it will be to recall. And those can be visual cues, pictures. They can be words.

And so when kids have a key word outline, they speak the idea into existence. Those little cues give them a chance to exercise memory and be much more successful than if you didn't have the key word outline and you said, try to tell me what happened. Tell me the story; tell me what the information. So that right there, I think, is the number one reason: Because we solve the two initial problems, which is 1) finding something and 2) having the mechanism to speak the idea into existence. Well, then you move to the third part, which is rehearsing what you spoke.

Well, that's an extension because when you're doing it kind of formally,—so I'm with a child; they have a key word outline; okay, tell it back to me.—the form of it, the formality of it helps the student be successful in hearing what they're saying. And then that reinforces the memory, and then they don't have to worry about anything else. They can start the process of making a sentence out of those key words and not have the fear of "I don't have the words," and "I don't remember what I'm going to say."

**Julie Walker:** Right, right.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And so that's why they don't generally say, I don't know what to do. Right? I mean, it's very rare. And it's usually only the first time. Once a child gets the hang of it, they can make a key word outline from the source text, talk it back maybe a few times if necessary. It's there in their memory. Okay, write a sentence. And I'm here to help you in case there's a word you want to use that you don't know how to spell or can't really figure out what's best.

And so we basically have built, I don't know, kind of a slow motion conveyor belt that moves the child through this extraordinarily complex activity in a way where they really can't fail. I mean, if there is a failure, then we have to go back and ask some questions, like is the source text above their basic comprehension level? What are the missing pieces? But if we set up the system appropriately, the result is always success. And then that amazes people who have kids or students that haven't had success before.

I remember I was in a school in ... somewhere in southern Washington State. And I had no idea about any of the kids in this class because, of course, I had never seen them before. And so I'm just teaching a class. And it was middle school. They were on the older side, and it was seventh, eighth grade, something like that.

I finished the whole class, and it was like, okay, that was great. Anyone have any questions? And one of the teachers said to me, do you realize that boy—and she tried to describe him—has never written even an entire sentence in his whole years here, never written one entire sentence? And he finished the whole paragraph, the whole Aesop fable. They were astounded. Well, why was he able to do that?

The system was able to move him through the complexity so that he could experience the success. So that's why I think whether we're dealing with someone who's, you know, very clear: my kid's problem is dyslexia. Or, wow, this child just really struggles, and I'm not sure why. It works; it works.

**Julie Walker:** That's good. So what about the students that can't read because they have dyslexia? Can they start our writing program without being able to read?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, probably. If you look at, I don't know, kids like my son ... And I've met a lot of kids like that. And that's really the only thing going on, is just a real profound difference in the way they see stuff. And that problem of seeing things three dimensionally makes it really hard for them to deal with two dimensional letters on a page.

Those kids tend to have two big advantages in which they excel over a lot of other kids: number one, spatial intelligence. They will often start drawing things in three dimensions without ever being taught. They will recall details of something that they experienced spatially or visually. They often can navigate three dimensional environments quite well. The other advantage is they very often develop extremely good auditory memories.

**Julie Walker:** Oh, okay.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And that was the case, you know, of my son. And if you cultivate audio listening: reading out loud to kids, giving them audio books from a young age, which I think is good for everyone, not just dyslexic kids. But it's particularly important; audio books are particularly important for kids with a mild or a severe dyslexia because that's how they'll build their vocabulary.

But it tends to be that they have ... they will gain this kind of really great auditory memory. And just to illustrate, one time I was teaching a group of kids. And my teenage son was in this group. And I'm teaching. And he's the only one who just won't look at me; he's doodling on paper. He's just doodling, not taking notes like some of the good students. And so, you know, I naturally am slightly irritated by this. And I finally said, are you with us? And he said to me with his eyes closed, do you want me to tell you everything you just said for the last ten minutes?

And I thought, no, I do not. But you know, that was kind of like a turning point where I realized, yeah, it's all in there; he's got it all because he's blessed with this extraordinary auditory memory for language that was a compensation in a way for the extreme dyslexia, just like a blind person will hear things non-blind people often won't hear. So we get the accentuation of one sense through the deprivation of another. So these dyslexic kids, when they get a source text, and they hear it – some of them don't even need the key word outline because they can memorize the language so quickly. But what the key word outline does is it transfers the spelling information.

**Julie Walker:** Oh, right, sure. Sure.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And I always say, if I were you, I would choose the hard-to-spell words in the sentence because if you can copy them correctly into the outline, you won't have to figure out how to spell them later. Now, of course, there's some kids who don't copy correctly, and then they don't even copy the incorrect word the same way. And you just work on that.

And most kids outgrow that, you know, as they hit usually puberty or that age where they can just exercise their willpower over their eyes and brain and make things happen. So the key word outline, you know, serves for that. But very often the pure dyslexic has a pretty easy time reconstructing very sophisticated content simply by having heard it.

**Julie Walker:** Well, and you ... I wanted to just mention that in the *Structure and Style for Students* videos ... And we did have a couple of kids who were severely dyslexic in the 1-A class, and we won't tell you which one it is. Well, there were two in particular. But they didn't read well. In fact, they hardly read at all, but by the end of the class they were writing; they had caught up to their peers.

But one of the things that you do every time when you're doing a video course is you read the source text in its entirety almost without exception. Now the Level 2-C where it's Year 2, Level C, and it's like fifteen pages ...

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah, or you know, when they have to go get their own resources for research ...

**Julie Walker:** Yes. Right.

**Andrew Pudewa:** ... or essays. But, yes, I do make a point of reading the source text, especially in a group like that, because I want to be sure that every student hears and understands every word, every idiom, every thing because there are unfamiliar names and places and all that. But the other thing I would point out here is that a lot of times parents think, okay, the problem is dyslexia or whatever. So I kind of have to get this kid reading before I teach them spelling or writing. And in my experience, that's not necessarily true.

In fact by teaching spelling and writing, it often serves as a tremendous boost to the decoding. And in my talk on "Paper and Pen: What the Research Says," there's some actual interesting research to show that children who copy letters and copy words are able to recognize those letters and words more easily, more quickly than children who simply look at them again and again and again.

**Julie Walker:** Sure. Oh, right.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Which is, you know, one of the fears I have about the paperless classroom. That is kind of a goal of many schools is let's just get all kids learning everything on screens. And I think I shared with you: I had this experience living in Japan. I was trying to learn Japanese; I was trying to learn to read Japanese. And at a certain point I said, I'm just really not having a good time with this. It's not easy.

So I decided to learn to write Japanese characters, and once I learned to write the character, I could recognize it anywhere. So it was almost as though it made the connection between the active/the passive, the, I don't know, hemispheres of the cortex, the eye/brain/ear connection. But so I hope that, you know, parents who have kids that are really having a hard time with reading will also understand that by doing basic copy work, by using key word outlines, and letting kids, you know, rewrite from outlines is going to be a huge benefit to their reading.

**Julie Walker:** Right. And of course, that whole idea of copy work and key word outlines is one step removed from copy work.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Right, yeah. So you copy a whole sentence. Copy a whole paragraph. That's imitation in its most basic form. Now read the sentence. Choose three words. Copy that. Read the next sentence; choose three words. Copy that. Do that for the paragraph. That's you know, one step removed. That's a next point. But it is the simplification of the complex process of taking in information and then putting out information.

**Julie Walker:** Yep. That's good. So parents and teachers of dyslexic students, those with that particular learning challenge, can find success in teaching their children to write through the technical approach, sometimes you say, of breaking down the complexity all the way from copy work for those that need it, into key word outline, to getting key words from ideas, all the way up to doing research papers just little by little.



**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah, little by little. And you know, there's a necessary addendum here, which is what we saw. And we saw this, you know, in our SSS video years, and I've seen it many, many places is, you've got a child who does have kind of a natural aptitude for reading and writing. You teach them this process, and it makes the whole thing smoother and easier for them as well.

And it's almost like, you know, rocket fuel for creativity because now they can do all that stuff in steps along the way and be even more creative and more effective than they would have if you just said, oh, you're good at it; here just write.

**Julie Walker:** Right? Yeah. Don't skip the technical methodology.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So it works for everybody.

**Julie Walker:** Yeah, yeah. All right. Well, thank you, Andrew.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Thank you, Julie.

**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](http://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.