

## Homeschool 101- The Two Most Important Things Transcript of Episode 395

**Julie Walker:** Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

**Julie Walker:** So this podcast, Andrew, is intended to be a Homeschool 101 podcast. So we have families that are thinking that maybe they'd like to homeschool, they have friends maybe are already homeschooling, they have friends that are thinking about it. Maybe just all kinds of opportunities now for people to explore different options.

And so we started doing every 10 episodes, Homeschool 101. So although this content could be general and useful for everyone, we're specifically going to gear this to those who are considering or are brand new to homeschooling, maybe brand new to our podcast. Maybe they've never heard anything we've done.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I think no. Having an idea of what we're going to talk about, I really would challenge the idea that there's any limit on the usefulness of this subject matter. Any parent, which would include probably a majority of school teachers, any grandparent, any older sibling, any student of any age would benefit from understanding whatever we're going to talk about.

**Julie Walker:** Whatever we're going to talk about, this mystery here. The title of this podcast is the two Most Important Things, and we say that kind of tongue in cheek because of how you say that.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I know, and of course most indicates a superlative. Can you really have two most? You know what I learned? An interesting thing the other day, the word *priority* was not used in the plural form until the mid 1900s.

**Julie Walker:** Oh, interesting.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Because *priority* would be one thing above all else. But now we can have multiple priorities, which goes right along with our multitasking.

**Julie Walker:** Yes, it's true. So what are the two most important things, Andrew, that an educator, home, parent, grandparent, or otherwise?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, we have to bring focus to this. Otherwise, we run the risk of being challenged because you could say, well, food is more important than what we're going to talk about. But in the context of language development, in the context of nurturing excellent communication skills, which is our bailiwick, I would put these as the two most important things. And you know anyone who's listened to one of my talks on the four Arts of Language, cultivating Language Arts, preschool through high school, these are all available. We should

put links to that. But anyone who's even looked at our logo and website has probably noticed. We have a tagline: Listen, speak, read, write, think.

Well, most people would call us the writing program, right? Because that's what we're most well known for. And secondarily, probably grammar which is right in there with composition, composition, grammar. But part of what I came to realize long ago, early in this was no matter how good your system for output is, no matter how good you think your curriculum is, you won't get something out of the brain that isn't in there to begin with.

So if what you want is children to use reliably correct and appropriately sophisticated language when they write, you have to be sure that you've got a rich source of reliably correct and appropriately sophisticated language coming into the brain.

And I started to think possibly that's where many teachers in schools, and that's where we're not doing what we could and should be doing. And so then no matter how good our writing system is, if the words aren't in there, how are you going to get them out? If the grammar isn't in there, just knowing parts of speech and being able to label prepositional phrases isn't going to make you competent in using that syntax. So that's why I started this talk a long time ago, and then I wrote a summary of the talk called "One Myth and Two Truths."

**Julie Walker:** And I just want to share a little story if I can insert this little story about how I first became acquainted with this topic and that was right around 1999, 2000. I was working at the time for Biola University, and you had started to do workshops for our parents and teachers in the program that I was running.

And you were very excited, and you were sharing with me over the phone. I remember sitting in a parking lot hearing all this stuff, writing all this down, and just going, this is amazing. Yes. We need to host you giving this talk. And wow. So that was before you wrote the article. And the article, of course you can find it in our book, *However Imperfectly*, your book that you wrote. And this is a collection of articles that you wrote, and we have them organized chronologically. So the oldest one is in the back and the newest one is first.

**Andrew Pudewa:** That's way toward the back.

**Julie Walker:** It is one of the very last articles, but that means it's one of the first that you wrote, "One Myth and Two Truths."

**Andrew Pudewa:** So the one myth is, the thing I discovered a lot of school teachers would believe or say, or kind of allude to is this idea that if kids would just read more, writing would automatically improve.

**Julie Walker:** Sure I've heard that.

**Andrew Pudewa:** There's a certain logic to it, but the obvious problem, which is much more of an obvious problem now than it was when I wrote that thing twenty-some years ago, is that very few kids do read at all. And I've talked to school teachers who basically say, I don't even assign books because nobody reads them. The actual reading that happens in most kids' lives right now is that which is going to happen in class, and the teachers even feel guilty about that. Like, well, we have to get ready for the test or whatever.

So people are not reading literature in even a small fraction of the quantity that they were twenty years ago, which was a small quantity compared to a hundred years before that. So it would be nice if all kids would just spend an hour a day reading, but it's not going to happen.

**Julie Walker:** Right, right. I think that, I wonder how much that is modeled. My. I have grandchildren. You have grandchildren. The parents of my grandchildren, they do read, they've got a stack of books on their nightstand. They're reading out loud to their kids all the time. They are readers. They were, and their parents read, meaning my husband and I, we are readers and we've got the stack of books on our nightstand.

And oftentimes now because of the convenience of audio books, we will listen to books together, but we're still reading. And I remember, and I know you talk about this and maybe you're going to bring this up, but when I was in elementary school, I had a teacher, Mrs. Jensen, who would read to us *Where The Red Fern Grows* or some of these other great stories after recess.

And we would just hear her read and we just hated when she was done reading a chapter. We wanted her to read more. And what, and it wasn't a lot of time, but 15 minutes a day, it's all we got. But that was just really...

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, in the prescreen world, children could either be bored or read. Those were generally the two options you had when you couldn't do something else. So most kids would read to assuage the pain of boredom. And now that's just not there anymore. There's no boredom pressure because 90 some percent of the kids will have a screen and they'll be occupied.

But let's get back to the basics here. Why is it that good readers don't automatically become good writers? Because they don't. I'm sure many of our listeners have met a child who does read, reads a lot, reads all the time, but doesn't write the way you would expect that kind of literate person.

I kind of just spent a bit of time observing children and talking to children, watching my own children, their friends. And I realized that kids who read a lot, they like it and they want to get through the stories, and they want to kind of read books like you can watch a movie. It's just constantly going on and it's exciting and it's plot driven. So in order to satisfy that, they start to read faster and faster and faster. And when you start reading faster and faster, a few things happen. One is if you see a word that you don't quite know. How you would pronounce it or even what it means, you kind of just skip it. You don't have to know what that word means to still watch the movie, to still get the story. Or there's an idiom or an allusion to something, or a person or a place historically mentioned, and you don't know who that person is or where that place was or what that's referring to. Then you skip that because you don't really need to know. It was there at the higher level of language, but it wasn't at the baseline of what's happening. Right?

And then you even get to a point where you can see a whole sentence or two or three or a whole paragraph and almost instantly decide is that paragraph important to the plot or not? And if the answer is, it's not, why bother? Right? I mean, you're wanting to just live in the story and increasingly popular books have been written to be that way as opposed to books that are maybe, I would say a hundred to two hundred years old. People used to enjoy imagining things. So you'd get longer descriptions of scenes, you'd get longer descriptions of

people, you get more backstory, you'd get more of kind of the contextual richness of the thing. And as our attention spans have shrunk, our tolerance for that type of writing has also decreased. And so now the most successful books are the ones that give you just enough you can imagine it and see it, but it's really plot driven, and you just want to know what's going to happen next. And then if an author is smart, they'll end the book with one plot ended, but the other one kind of hinted at and already started. So then the kid just like, I have to get this next book.

So, the commercialization in a way, and that's not particularly new. Some novels in the 1800s were published as serials. A lot of Dickens novels would come out in chunks and people would look forward to reading those chunks. So there's nothing wrong with creating that suspense or desire. But what we see is a simplification of the literature to a point where it doesn't have that same richness. And the richness isn't just experiential, it's linguistic as well.

Like why put a word in a book if there's a danger that many people won't understand that word, and they're not going to go find out what it means. So simplify the language and you get better popular appreciation for what you've got. So I think that is one reason why good readers do not naturally or automatically become good writers, but the problem of nobody reading is actually now a much greater problem.

And the trick, as you mentioned, is we've got to go back to getting it in through the ear. Getting it in through the ear. And that is why I have long said, and this is probably what I said to you on the phone when I was just formulating these thoughts twenty-five years ago, is the most important thing that any parent or teacher can do in any given day to cultivate a good writer downline is reading out loud from good and great literature.

Generally reading out loud at slightly above the decoding skill of the child because that's what brings up comprehension. So if there's a book that a kid can read and it may be kind of dumb, okay, well they can practice their decoding skills on whatever dumb little thing is floating around at the time. But to attune them to more challenging language, you have to read above their decoding level, above their sometimes even attraction level, and just say, "sit down, play with blocks, play with Legos, draw pictures. But I'm going to read this." Then of course what happens is if you're in the right zone, it may take them a little while to get into it, but once they're into it, they will want to continue to hear it.

And in their soul, they instinctively know that it's good to do this. It's good to have something that stretches you a little bit. It's good to hear words that you might not pay attention to if you were just looking at them. And oftentimes when a good reader and I think most adults can be pretty good readers because we basically get this sense of language, so when we read it, we read it with a particular cadence and emphases and a nuance that doesn't ever come through on a printed page. It's up to the individual reader to somehow internally audiate that nuance, whereas reading out loud provides all that. I heard a study that the number one predictor of people becoming adults who like to read is having been read to a lot when they were children.

**Julie Walker:** Well, that totally confirms one of the two most important things.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah. The other thing that disturbs me is when I hear parents say that a teacher said, "Don't read to your kids. Make them read it on their own. If you read it to them, They won't want to read on their own and then they won't learn to do it." Well, there's no,

there's no support for this at all. It makes me sad when parents have got this type of faulty logic, I guess, from a teacher somewhere along the line.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So, yeah. So anyway, if you want a good writer, if you want a database of language, if you want improved reading comprehension, if you want a more literate person exposed to a broader range of vocabulary and ideas, reading out loud as much as you can, as much time as you can afford every day, that's by far the best, most important thing that you can do.

**Julie Walker:** Great. Now there's another thing that you talk about in this article, The two most important things...

**Andrew Pudewa:** The two most important things. So listening, we talked a little bit about that. You're going to cultivate listening skills. Speaking. Okay, so people get confused in English. We have two words that are almost synonymous, but not quite. Speaking and talking. Talk, speak. Well, everybody talks unless you have a disability, everyone talks. Speaking- it has a different nuance. It has a certain formality to it. You speak to someone, you speak about something. There's an intentionality that goes with the definition of the word. And how do you cultivate that?

Well, one of the ways that that has been cultivated through all of history from probably about the beginning of recorded history until seventy-eighty years ago was people would memorize language. They would memorize history. They would memorize scriptures from whatever tradition they had. They would memorize poetry. They would memorize music, and you can go all the way back to the ancient progymnasmata and the teaching of rhetoric, and what did they do? They memorized the poetry and portions of history that had been written and speeches that had been given by others. They memorized this to furnish their mind with the language that would allow them to then do whatever they wanted to do, to write a speech or write a poem or write a history or talk and argue more effectively, to communicate more eloquently. And so this idea of a memorized language has a huge ancient, powerful, lasting benefit. And we've pretty much lost it.

It was Deweyism misguided. Dewey had his little experimental school at the University of Chicago, and he came up with his theories, not all of which I would disagree with. I mean, he said a few good things, but his basic idea was education had to really be about discovery and exploration and inquisitive activity and spontaneous self-expression. And this is what we had to all really work toward. That's not entirely wrong, but when you do that and it supplants or eclipses the development of basic skills needed for inquiry and self-expression and exploration. So unfortunately, the Deweyism that resulted in the modern progressive attitude about memory was that at best it's a waste of time and at worse, forcing children to memorize rote learning that could be harmful.

**Julie Walker:** And of course as you're saying that, I'm thinking whenever you say yes to something, you have to say no to something else. And when you're describing what Dewey. The initial ideas. I'm like, well, those are good things, but at what expense? And I would think that you would be able to do the discovery, the innovations much better if you have the foundation.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I mean, that's what we see in all disciplines is that creativity only happens on the foundation of basic skills. Without the basic skills, you don't get any quality creativity happening. And unfortunately, I think we can look around the world and see some fairly low level of creativity being thrust into the marketplace. And everyone's just accepting this now because there's no aesthetic discernment.

There isn't that same foundation of basic skills that everyone had that allowed them to be creative in their way and allowed them to accurately appraise, right? I mean, if you know nothing about art, well, how are you going to know if it took skill and effort to produce that art? So everyone should know something about art in order to appreciate art. How are you going to learn through imitation? Right.

Same thing with language. If you don't have your mind furnished, how are you going to apprehend things?

So, getting back to the more practical aspect, memorization of language is defacto good for the brain. In fact, you could memorize things that are completely useless from a practical point of view, and it would still be good for your brain. It would still expand your vocabulary in whatever language you were doing it, and even more importantly, it moves words from a passive vocabulary, ie: can read or hear that word and kind of know what it means into the active vocabulary—I can use this word, I can speak it or write it with confidence. And that is a huge shift right there.

So a lot of things that we get—environmentally being read to for one, reading other stuff, hearing randomly, it stalks up our passive vocabulary. But how often have you heard a word and then kind of just forgot it? And then next time you saw it or heard it, you're like, well, I should know what that means, but I don't. And then you're too busy to worry about it. But if you had to memorize a passage that used that word and maintain that memorized passage for any length of time, you would now own those words. There's a completely different experience.

I'll give you a humorous example from my childhood. I grew up spending a lot of time on a sailboat before there was any technology that you could have. We didn't even have a radio, honestly. It was for emergency purposes, but we didn't listen to a radio, so there's no entertainment. And there we are over at Catalina Island two nights, three nights, sometimes four nights, nothing to do except books. And so while my mother read stories and books to me and to my sister, my father read poems. I started kind of just liking poems because I kept hearing the same ones week after week, month after month. And some of them were humorous and kids like things that are humorous or dramatic. And so there was this one poem and I just thought, that's so good. It took me a while to get it, but I memorized it. I was probably 12 years old, I'm guessing maybe 13. I'm going to say the poem, not everyone's going to recognize this, but it goes like this.

Scintillate, scintillate, globule vivific!  
Fain would I ponder thy nature specific--  
Loftily poised in ether capacious,  
Strongly resembling a gem carbonaceous;

Well, everybody knows “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.” I played “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” on the violin before I have any memory of doing so. And I learned that poem and then I noticed that I had these new words that I could use, such as capacious. How many thirteen

year olds would ever know or use this word or fain? Or even words like ponder. Or carbonaceous. And so these words from the memorized poem got into my active vocabulary and, and there are many, many other examples of this. And I was particularly attracted to poems that had kind of sophisticated vocabulary because when you're thirteen years old, you want to sound smart.

So it's very interesting and, and I could spend an entire podcast just telling people stories of how I have seen memorized language patterns come out in the spoken and written communication of kids and people. And sadly, we don't live in a nursery rhyme culture anymore. We don't live in a "read poetry to each other" culture anymore. And then the poetry we do read, we think, oh, it has to be emotionally impactful, or it has to be some kind of deeper transcendent value to make it worth. No. Where do you start with kids? Nursery rhymes. Where do you start? Tongue twisters.

I've got a video on my phone from one of my grandchildren reciting a tongue twister. How much wood would a wood chuck chuck if a wood chuck would chuck wood? He would chuck all the wood he could chuck if a wood chuck could chuck wood. Well, it's silly but, wow. Think of what happens in the brain when you have to memorize this thing and keep it straight and understand. And what does it even mean to chuck wood? I don't. I'm not sure any of us knows. Are you throwing it around? Are you biting it in half?

But this idea of memorization as a way to furnish the mind and store up words in the active vocabulary, nothing comes close. So I say to homeschool parents, if you really want a person who will read well and write well—if you read out loud to them and you memorize language, you'll get what you want on the other side so much more easily, so much more effectively, so much more painlessly. It's an organic thing, these four arts of language.

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

**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.