Asking Questions with Unit 5
Transcript of Episode 401

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 it's time to flip the calendar again, which means it's a new unit.

Andrew Pudewa: And if it's somewhere a little bit before or after Christmas, it might be Unit 5.

Julie Walker: It's exactly right. So Unit 5, now we get to go back on the fun, creative side of the pathway.

Andrew Pudewa: Or the horrors of having to actually try to make something from nothing.

Julie Walker: Well, it's not quite nothing. The weaning step, you call it. So Unit 5 is Writing from Pictures. I would love for you to share with the listeners how the whole thing started.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. Well, it is interesting that there's actually a story for all of the units as to how Webster was inspired or kind of how things crystallized for him. But way back, not quite a hundred years ago, but it's getting closer because he's getting older. He was teaching in middle school. This would have been late 40s, early 50s. And the big discipline problems back in those days…

Julie Walker: Guns, knives.

Andrew Pudewa: No, gum. Gum. And contraband comic books.

Julie Walker: Oh, comic books.

Andrew Pudewa: Kids would sneak comic books into the classroom and hide the comic book inside a textbook, or think they were. And read comic books while they're supposed to be studying history or English or whatever. And part of the job of the teacher was to enforce the rules, and so he had to get them to spit out the gum, and he would confiscate the comic books. So he got this pile of comic books, and he thought, well, if the kids like this, why not have them write about them.

He got his little scissors and glue and started cutting pictures out of the comic books, gluing them onto pieces of paper. And usually, I think he started with three, because he had had pretty good success with three paragraphs in terms of length of things. science experiment/report write up, or a story, telling a story in three parts. And so he put three pictures, and he made a pile of these things and gave it to the kids and started to help them figure out a way to write from pictures. And so that's where we got Unit 5.

And over time, he then was able to incorporate some of the points of continuity between the units. So the first thing that he wanted to keep going with, because it had been so successful, was the idea of using keyword outlines. And so there are keyword outlines in every single one of the units. Everything that we ever do involves first the creation of an outline. What's different through the nine units is the way you get those key words. Where and how do you extract them from either the text or from your mind or your memory, etc. So, we use the keyword outline. And that's consistent.

Then the other thing is he incorporated the topic-clincher rule from Unit 4. The topic sentence and clincher sentence must repeat or reflect two to three words into Unit 5. The problem though is that there's really no topics per se. In the same sense of Unit 4, you have a thing like dolphins. And then you have divisions of dolphins, and those are the topics, so the habitat of dolphins, the behavior of dolphins, the family groups of dolphins, dolphins interacting with human beings, species of dolphin. So those would be the divisions. With pictures, you don't really have that. So what he did was he came up with this idea that a good way to get started is just to say what do you see in the picture? So your topic sentence or your first sentence in the paragraph could just be what he called the central fact of the picture, the thing that you see.

And then, of course, you've got to write a whole paragraph about that thing. And that's where the challenge of the creative or inventive side of the unit comes in. And as we have mentioned in previous podcasts, some kids have a much more natural penchant for just making stuff up and spinning it. And those kids often are not bound by the rules of logic or reality. And so they can just go wild and crazy. I think, I don't know, my parents used to say, you're like a little old man in a child's body. I guess I've just always been more on the logical, practical side, so I, as a kid, did not really just like having the freedom to make stuff up and be wild and crazy and imaginative because I thought, well that doesn't even make sense. I'm one of these people who always wants it to make sense.

Julie Walker: But I know this about you, Andrew Pudois. Yeah. You say that about yourself, but I know that you very much enjoyed coming home from school and turning on the television and watching Star Trek reruns.

Andrew Pudewa: But Star Trek makes sense. There's an internal logic to it. I think things improved for me once I got into the world of fantasy gaming. Because then you are in this world of creatures that don't follow natural laws, myriad other forms of mutated intelligence. And so you get farther and farther as it goes. But nevertheless, I've always just preferred operating in the world of logic and reality. But the Writing from Pictures has that potential because there's no text. You're not retelling the story that someone created or even making variations on a story that exists. You're gonna say whatever you can possibly think of, and I would have done very badly with this. I mean, when I was 10 years old, if you gave me a picture of a guy in a boat and said, write a story about it, I would have written, "Once upon a time, there was a guy in a boat." And I would have been stuck, like, okay, what, I mean, what more possibly could you say? That's all there is.
And now... If you said, here's a picture of a guy in a boat, write about it, I could say how long. I'll spin it out as long as you want. I can go hundreds of pages. Won't be any good, but I could do it. I could invent content because I have now discovered the trick of thinking of stuff.

And that really is, I think, why Unit 5 is so valuable and so important, is because, especially for kids like me, it helps to promote this idea of searching in your mind for something to say about something.

Julie Walker: Yes. And how do you do that, Andrew? How do you search in your mind? What is thinking?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, what is thinking? It's a wonderful question to ask teenagers. How do you think? How's it done? If someone says, "Think now about this." Which is essentially what you have to do if they say, Here, write an essay on whatever, right? How do you force yourself to think? So I usually tease the kids a little bit and go, "Well, you can't get something out of your brain that isn't in there to begin with. You can't really think a thought you can't think, so relax, you don't have to. You just have to find something that's there. And how do you find something that's there? Well, imitate your mom. Because if you know something, and your mom wants to know what you know, she usually says…"

Julie Walker: Where have you been? Who have you been with? What have you been doing? Why are you late?

Andrew Pudewa: And how are you going to clean this up? Yeah. So those question words, those are the real keys to accessing information that you carry around in your brain that may apply to a certain circumstance. And the more we've been at this over the couple decades, we've been working together here pretty darn close, the more we see in a crystal clear fashion that the ability to ask questions is the starting point, and the ability to ask better questions is the refinement of thinking. And that pervades all aspects of communication.

And, a lot of people have perhaps had this trained out of them to some degree. When you're a little kid, you're, you've got a million questions, and people are just going crazy. Like, just sit down, shut up, and don't keep asking me questions. Reminds me of a joke. There's this little boy, and he's with his dad, and he says, "Daddy, why is the sky blue?" And his dad says, "Well, son, I don't rightly know."

Andrew Pudewa: A little while later, he says, "Daddy, why are the trees green?" And he says, "Well, son, I don't rightly know." And then he... Ask one more question. "He goes, Daddy, why is the earth brown or something?" And of course he says, "Well, son, I don't rightly know." And then the little boy says, "Daddy, does it bother you that I ask so many questions?" And the dad says, "Of course not, son. If you don't ask questions, how are you going to learn anything?"

But that is the point. And so we see very successful public entrepreneurial types. If you had to identify the one skill they have that is perhaps much better than other people who are not as successful, is they have the better questions. I've even heard Elon Musk say this himself. That the quality of thinking is very dependent upon asking the right questions. So, our Unit 5 is a starting point or a continuation in a beginning phase of helping kids learn to ask questions in order to extract information from their brain about a certain thing that they see. So, our Unit 5 is really just a starting point or a step toward the beginning of the process of learning to ask questions so that you can find information, experience, imagination. You can find stuff in your mind about a particular thing you see.

And as you know, I don't really like Unit 5 as much as I like some of the other units, and the first few times I taught Webster's syllabus, before I had started IEW, I was just teaching kids, I just kind of skipped Unit 5 because I thought it was dumb. Writing about cartoons. I mean let's do something serious. Let's do some research. Let's write some essays. That was my attitude. And yet I have since come to realize that yeah, you could start with a comic. You could start with a picture. You could start with a drawing of stick people. You could start with a photograph. You could start with a Norman Rockwell painting. It doesn't matter, but the skill of being able to look at a picture and think about it is the same skill you need to be able to look at a situation in the world and think about it. And when the kids get this litany of questions, starting with the basic, who, what, where, why, when, how, and then you can expand your questioning powers from there. That's really the habit you want to have when you see a thing in the world. Rather than just reacting emotionally to it, stop. Before you react, ask some questions.

Julie Walker: There is a good life lesson right there.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I mean, what is this thing? Why does it exist? What are some of the reasons as to how it came to being? What are some of the effects of this thing, or consequences, or implications? How can you affect this thing? And when is the best time to act on this thing? I mean, you could keep going on and on, but you could apply that to a perennial difficult situation in the world, like homelessness or addiction, and you could also apply it to a Norman Rockwell painting, or you could apply it to a cartoon out of a comic book, as Webster discovered.

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly. So, you told the story about skipping Unit 5, but you didn't tell the rest of the story of when you brought these essays to Dr. Webster.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, so I had skipped Unit 5 a couple years and I was going up to Northern Alberta to help put on the Blended Sound-Sight program of Learning course and to learn more. I was kind of like Dr. Webster's assistant, but I was trying to be great. I was trying to be the best assistant he ever had. I was trying to be the best teacher of his system and impress him a lot with my students' incredibly good writing.

Julie Walker: Well, and that is truly a way to demonstrate your teaching proficiency is looking at your students' work.

Andrew Pudewa: I think so. And so anyway, I brought him some of the best end of the year essays from my kids who were, I don't know, it was Genevieve and Heather, so they were 10, 11, 12, 13. So it was half a dozen girls in that age range. That was my main clientele at the time. And I was pretty proud of their writing. And so he looked at their essays and he noticed that, yeah, they did everything they were supposed to do. But the conclusion of the essay was very weak. That all they had really done was restate the topics, but they didn't add to it any kind of individual comment on the information. And when we get to Unit 8, we'll talk about what's the difference between a report and an essay. So report, facts, essay, opinion, but opinion without facts, well that's just obnoxious. So you have to combine. The ability to collect up, organize, and present facts and involve somewhere the ideas, belief, or opinion of the writer.

Well, I had got really good reports. But the conclusions failed to cross the line into an essay in his view. So he was critical of that point. And I didn't get it right away, but I did

eventually realize that by giving short shrift to Unit 5, by minimizing that act of writing from pictures by learning how to ask questions was also minimizing their ability to comment, i.e. ask questions and think about the facts they collected up. So now I think my teaching of Unit 8 has improved a lot because I have come to understand the integration of those activities. And while I still do not like teaching Unit 5, I try to do justice to it because I know the thinking skills that are associated with that activity have dividends elsewhere.

Julie Walker: Well, in our seminar workbook, we have the list of questions that you shared, the big six, and then there's more questions, the what's outside the picture, what's invisible, what happened before, what's going to happen. Some of these questions. And even if you yourself. I'm pointing to myself because this could be true for me. When I look at a picture, I don't know what the kids are thinking, but I can ask them the questions and as we corporately create the keyword outline, it's going to be fantastic and fantastical.

Andrew Pudewa: One of the best answers that I ever got from a kid, he's probably, I don't know, 13, 14 years old, to the question, how do you think? His response is, "well, you sort of have a conversation with yourself." I've had adults answer the question, say, well, it's an internal dialogue. And when you see people that are thinking well, they are usually doing this. They are finding a question. They are then seeking to answer the question. They're finding a question off that. They're seeking to answer. They're having a conversation with themselves. But for many of us, particularly the young ones among us, it's easier to have a conversation with somebody then all alone and which is why we in most all businesses operate in a very collaborative way We don't say to anyone here go do this entire thing and solve this entire problem all on your own or you're fired. I mean no business would ever operate that way.
And yet schools will often do that to kids and say, "Here, you got to figure this all out. I can't help you. Oh, and by the way there's a score or a test and all of our futures depend on how well you do this thing all alone with no help." And then you try to teach to that end, and it's not reflective at all. All of how human beings really function. So I'm not opposed to tests when the goal is essentially to have memorized stuff. Because that is something you can do alone, right? You can memorize multiplication tables. You don't have to think about why 6 You just have to know it. And it's actually easier to think about it after you know it. And so we're very backwards in the way we teach math in many ways, but if we're going to look at a picture and say, why is this guy in the boat, well, it'd be a whole lot easier to come up with some ideas if we can talk together on that account.

Julie Walker: And you model that really well in the *Structure and Style for Students* video courses. And you have the students on the video, talk to their partners at their table and then you have them relate back to those that are watching on the video. So what did you come up with? And it's just so funny sometimes. I mean, literally laugh.
Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, it is. And it's also kind of the Robin Hood style, right, where, and I've talked about that in the TWSS, you stir up a bunch of ideas and you let them settle where they may. And all the ideas are free for anyone to use. There's no, "well, I thought of that and that's my idea and nobody else can use it." We don't operate like that. I mean, you might get an idea and then you've got to go through the U. S. Patent Trademark Office in order to secure your legal rights to it. And even then it's possible that someone else came up with the same idea right around the same time you did. We see that in history.

So, I think Unit 5 has a lot of merits in developing the thinking process. And the good thing for a teacher of a small or even a larger group of students is you don't have to know in

advance how it's going to come out. You don't have to have the right answer. There are no right answers. You just have to be the facilitator of helping.

And the great thing is that many children and this seems to be a little bit more true the younger they are, but some retain it into middle and high school is they're not bound by limitations. Of logic and reality and feeling like, "No, I couldn't say that because… I couldn't say that because…" That's what happened to me. I can't really make it up because of all these reasons that it wouldn't make sense. And the only things that did make sense to me were things that pre-existed in a fantasy type of story. So finding a bottle, and rubbing it, and having a genie come out, and getting three wishes, well that makes sense. But you can't really tell that story, because somebody else already did, so. But in my world, like, finding a lighter and clicking it and having a genie come out and give you three wishes. I would never think of that because lighters don't do that. You know what I mean?

Julie Walker: Yep. It's so similar. So, I think of our classroom teachers who are using our *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* methods. They're not doing what you just described. They're not having their students feel isolated when they're doing their writing. And I love how you say this to the students after they come up with their keyword outline together. You say to them, now you can write that story, or you can come up with something completely different on your own if you'd like. And it gives them the flexibility and the freedom that they're not bound to what they came up with in their partners.

Andrew Pudewa: And there's also, there's kind of a modeling process that is gradually increasing the freedom you would give. So, probably, if it's the first year, first assignment, Unit 5, nobody's done it before, I'm going to make the outline on the whiteboard and everybody's going to copy the outline and almost everybody's going to write from that outline.

And they may be very similar end products. But I don't care because I don't care about the product. I care about the process. So then in the next one, I might have a sequence of pictures, and then I might say, well who could this person be? And someone might say, "A soldier" and someone else might say "a policeman" and somebody else might say "a miner" and somebody else might say "my great uncle." I could say, "Okay write down whatever you think and then I'll kind of go through but say write down whatever you think in answer to this question."

And an easy place to start with that is just say, "What could this person be named?" And everybody has a different idea for a name. And so, okay, write down the name you thought of. Don't write down the thing I'm writing on the whiteboard, unless you want to. And then I would get to the point, probably by the end of the unit, or maybe the second year through, I would say, okay, I think you got the system here. I'll ask the questions. You think of answers. Put it in your keyword outline, but don't write down what I'm doing. Unless you can't think of anything, in which case you're still welcome to write down what I do.

So there's always a safety net. No one, I don't want any child to get to that point where they have this blank paper, blank brain. I can't think of what to do. And then you, you can deal with a very widely mixed aptitude when it comes to imagination and creativity. By doing this, you have the freedom to do what you want. But if you want to do what I'm doing, we can do it together. And there's nothing wrong with that either.

Julie Walker: One of our errors, of the four deadly errors is withholding help. We don't want to do that. We don't want the students to feel frustrated and not want to write. We want to give them the tools that they can so they feel successful.

Andrew Pudewa: The other thing I would mention about Units 7, and you start to see this probably really coming out in Unit 5, is as you are expanding the style checklist, you're into more dress up techniques, or maybe with older kids you're already into sentence openers. With high school or third year, you may be all the way into decorations and stuff.

Andrew Pudewa: Because you don't have to rely on obedience to facts and having enough facts to complete the paragraph, you can actually have shorter outlines with maybe three or four details than all of the six or seven you might need in Units 4 or 6 where you're relating facts. So you can have fewer details in the Unit 5 outline and in a way that's going to push a little more toward more diversity and creativity.

And lots of people have reported that having to put in a who-which clause, having to add in a quality adjective, forces the student to figure out what to add in. And that's forcing them to go find something. And that's called invention. And that's called exercising creativity. And so in a way I love it how Unit 5 usually kind of meshes at a point where the style checklist now is kind of forcing the kid to go out and look for different words, different phrases and clauses, different ways to say things, and to add in. And, I never, and you alluded to this earlier, I never am judging them on did your final composition match your outline. That's not a goal. The goal is for the outline to be a starting point. And if you want to change stuff, why not?
That way the outline is really more like kind of organizationally and creatively a rough draft. And then your actual first prose is like already reorganizing something. So you get better writing. Now, some people might say, Well, if you don't follow the outline, why even have it?
Well, because it's a first run at something. And then you say, Oh, I like that idea, but I don't like that one. And you refine as you go.

Earlier, I said how kids have a habit of asking a lot of questions. And then adults, schools, classrooms, busy people can kind of squelch or suppress that habit. And of course Kipling, just a master of the language and a brilliant observer of life, he wrote, what was it? The Six…

Julie Walker: "I Keep Six Honest Serving Men"

Andrew Pudewa: Six Honest Serving Men. Okay, read it for us, Julie.
Julie Walker:
I keep six honest serving men.
They taught me all I knew.
Their names are what and why
And when and how and where and who.
I send them over land and sea.
I send them east and west.
But after they have worked for me, I give them all a rest.
I let them rest from nine till five, for I am busy then,
As well as breakfast, lunch, and tea, for they are hungry men.
But different folks have different views.
I know a person small.

She keeps ten million serving men, who get no rest at all.
She sends them abroad on her own affairs.
From the second she opens her eyes,
One million hows, two million wheres, and seven million whys.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, and for all of us grandparents, we can relate to the fact that a five year old can wake up at six o'clock in the morning and immediately just start talking your head off and ask questions about everything in the world. And it's exhausting, but it keeps us young.

Julie Walker: Yes, it does. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.