

Laying Foundations with Unit 4

Transcript of Episode 396

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, Andrew, as you know, and as our listeners perhaps know, the structural units, the Unit 1, 2, 3, 4, you recommend that we follow a one a month schedule. So in the spirit of that, we're going to be talking today about Unit 4 because it's a new month.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, that is the original idea of Webster. Nine units, nine months. Of course, we tweaked that a little bit because Unit 1 and 2, in most cases, can kind of be just simultaneous. And then it seems like you lose a little bit of time between December and January, especially in a school classroom. But if you persist and make it all the way to May, you can get all nine units in.

Julie Walker: All nine units.

Andrew Pudewa: One a month,

Julie Walker: And there is sometimes a misunderstanding about mastery learning and how that applies to the units, because we talk about this whole philosophy of EZ+1.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And that is specific to building the style checklist because it's cumulative, but the units are not cumulative in that way. In other words, you don't have to completely understand Unit 3 to move on to Unit 4. So very often you will end a unit, particularly with upper elementary kids who may need a lot of help or any kids who would need a lot of help.

You may end the unit for that month and still just be helping them, helping them read the source text, think it through, make the outlines, and that's okay. They don't have to have independence in that way. What you do want to do is of course only introduce a new style technique, dress ups, openers, decoration, as they become easy, because that list is ever growing through all nine units.

But some people are worried, oh no, what if they didn't get to the point where they could do Unit 3 independently? Well, no problem, because next year, you will come around in October and hit it again.

Julie Walker: Yes, you will. So what is different about Unit 4?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, if you look at the kind of big picture of the units—when I draw it on the board and the way it is in the seminar workbook, one and two are kind of in the middle because those could be fiction or nonfiction. It could be an Aesop fable. It could be interesting information about an animal or a person or a place, something.

But then on the right side, Unit 3, and that's kind of a fiction-y thing. That's usually a story. It's Retelling Narrative Stories, so it could be a fairy tale, myth, fable.

And then on the left side, then is Unit 4, because that is kind of on the non fiction, fact, report, research, essay side.

And then we just go right down, and the odd numbers, 3, 5, 7, are the creative inventive ones, and the even numbers, 4, 6, 8, are more of the research fact-based ones. And that is, I think, one of the genius aspects of the way Webster put this together so many decades ago was he noticed that children like variety. They like a new thing. And so if you announce, it's a new month, we have a new unit, then everybody's happier because it's something new. And the teachers like new things too. Nobody likes to do the same thing for too long. You know I think gives everyone an opportunity to experience both sides because there are some kids who really don't like the creative inventive, you gotta think of something and be funny or unique or original. I was one of those kids, like, don't make me write a story, just give me some facts. But then there's other kids and they don't like to have to be obedient to the facts. They just rather have the freedom to make crazy stuff up.

Julie Walker: I was one of those kids.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, so, and the world needs both, right? So that's part of the genius, is alternating. And so kids who are strong on one side have a little chance to experience that, but then they go over to the other side and they have to get a little stronger and go through the school year. And so it kind of meshes together the discipline of being obedient to content and the act of being more imaginative or creative.

So, hopefully then those things kind of come together in Unit 8 and 9 where you can be serious, have your specific things you want to put in, and also be creative with that. So that's part of, I think, the genius of the way it was set up and the goal.

Julie Walker: And we have had questions over the years, do we have to do the units in order? And best practices say, yes. I know you're going to waffle on this.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, no, you think about anything, there are very few things that you have to do, right? And the old saying, well, you have to die, that's one, and if you don't pay taxes, you'll die because you won't be able to buy food, so you might as well. I guess you could beg, you could be a beggar forever. Taxes you could possibly get out of, I don't know. But other than that... Everything's optional. Well, that's not ideal though. So, there are things that we do to have a better life. There's also things in our writing system that if you do them, you'll get a better result. You could skip them and live, but we have found over time that it really does work best to do the units in the order that Webster originally created them.

Julie Walker: So Unit 4 is more factual. How is it different than from, say, Unit 2?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, the biggest change would be in Unit 2, you basically don't have a funnel or a strainer, it's just straight down. You start with seven statements, you get seven statements worth of key word outline content, and then you write that out and you may very well end up with about seven statements. So it's kind of a straight down, it doesn't require any thinking about other than what are the key words in the sentence.

Whereas in Unit 4 now, the whole design is to have too many facts. So, now you, you have this problem of okay, I've got a source with maybe ten facts, and I only want a paragraph with six of them. Or whatever you've decided.

Well, that's pretty easy, because then you can just, like, choose the best six, or ignore three or four, and end up with something. But as that funnel opening gets wider, now you've got fifteen facts, and you only want six or seven. So, you've got twenty facts, you only want six or seven. Now you've got fifty facts, and you have to divide it into two topics. And then you've got twenty to thirty facts, and you only want six or seven for each of those, and you're writing two paragraphs, and you could even get up to three.

Honestly, you could do, I mean, you could have a thousand facts and still write one paragraph. The wider the funnel gets, the more challenging it is because the task is trying to figure out, okay, what of the too many statements we have should I choose and then transfer into the key word outline using the keywords.

So the similarity is you're using key words from the text on the page, you are having to choose those three key words, but the differences are, number one, you've got too many facts. Number two, if you had a sentence that had two facts, then you could actually take three key words from each half of the sentence, or you could possibly have a sentence with a compound sentence with a long clause in the end, and it could theoretically contain three distinct facts, and you want to choose them all, then you might have three key words from each part of that sentence.

So we're teaching take your key words from facts, not sentences. That's probably the biggest difference [in] Unit 2 and 3, along with the fact that we've intentionally created source texts and we intentionally try to choose source texts that have too many facts, but kind of the Goldilocks, right? Not too many that it's overwhelmingly stressful and not too few that there's no choices required, so it's that middle zone where, of course, the wisdom is always in the balance.

Julie Walker: true. It's true. So how do you choose?

Andrew Pudewa: There are a lot of ways. Random is helpful, just like close your eyes and poke the page. I've tried that, and it works. So, if you are totally lost and desperate and didn't have any idea, you could actually just choose at random.

But we would like to train the discernment of the student in making the choice. And so, the criteria—words that I like to use are— number one, interesting, number two, important, and number three, if the kid is old enough to understand, relevant. How is it related to or connected with the direction you're going here? But that's maybe a little harder to teach. It kind of comes with maturity, I think. So with younger kids, or first time I do this, I basically just say, pick what you think is interesting.

Julie Walker: Yes, and then you have the charge to teachers who are teaching this system the difference between interesting and important and why choosing something interesting for the most part should trump what's important.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, interesting is very safe, isn't it? Like, if you and I read something, and then we talk about it, and I say, “So, what did you find interesting about that?” And you tell me, and then you say, “Well, what did you find interesting about that?” And I tell you, we

may pick some of the same things, we may pick different things. And we can't be wrong. There's no right or wrong about interesting; it is purely a matter of opinion. Whereas, if you stress what's important, then you could be wrong, because there actually are things that are more important than other things. There's a hierarchy of important things. And while our modern news media doesn't seem to understand this, the great historian Hilaire Belloc made this point. He said it is not just a responsibility of an historian to relate facts, but also to prioritize those facts.

And we see this totally mixed up. I think it was a well-known billionaire. We'll just leave it at that who asked a friend of his, a girl who was in school, who's the first president? George Washington. What do you know about George Washington? He was a slave owner.

Well, is that the most important thing? That's a fact, but it's probably not as important as many of the other things he did to help establish the foundation of an entire nation. So, we realize that that's a level of discernment, but it comes with experience and age and maturity and modeling.

And so, with younger children, if you say, choose what's important, they may think, well, I don't know what's important. And then they could make a choice and you could say, "no, wrong. That is not as important as this other thing. You should have picked that." And then, they don't want to do that again.

Julie Walker: Right. And so they're going to wait for you to tell them what to them what to pick.

Andrew Pudewa: So, I usually just say interesting or important or relevant, connected with what you want to tell me about this. But the other thing is, and I say this in the seminar and I think a lot of people can relate. Do you remember being in school writing reports? I mean, I, my report writing memory is very vague, and it starts around third grade, and then I have a lot of report writing memories connected with fourth and fifth and sixth, mostly involving how to copy out of the encyclopedia and change enough words so that you don't get accused of having copied out of the encyclopedia.

Andrew Pudewa: I remember feeling, number one, I the teacher would say this kind of idiom I dislike intensely, "put it in your own words." Right? Everybody's heard that. Put it in your own words. But what does that even mean? I don't own any words. I'm borrowing all the words I've got. The other thing is, I remember thinking, this is kind of dumb. If anyone actually wanted to know about Japan or Christopher Columbus or tree frogs, they should just read the blasted encyclopedia. Why make me copy? I'm not going to do any better than it.

How am I going to do a better job than an encyclopedia telling someone about something? So as a kid, you're like, what's the point?

This is busy work. But if the teacher had said, "Andy, what I want is for you to tell me what you think is interesting about Japan or Columbus or tree frogs.

Well, that would have had a bit of a purpose to it. It's like, "Oh, the teacher wants to know what I think is interesting. Okay, I'll go find something that is interesting and tell her that's

what I think.” So there's, I think, a respect for the intellect of the student when you invite them to tell you what is interesting.

And if they can do that without the fear of being wrong, then not only will they be happier to do it, they'll probably be a little bit more creative in the use of vocabulary or sentence patterns or whatever they can come up with to be creative when you're trying to be obedient to the facts.

Julie Walker: Yes. So I've heard you say, for younger children in particular, and I suppose this is true for older students, if there is something important you want to be sure the students capitalize on, tell them so that they can include that in their paper.

Andrew Pudewa: Right, because they might not know and then if they don't include the important thing that you think is important and you criticize or mark them down or let them know that they should have done something differently, the kids are always like, “well, it's not very helpful to hear what I should have done because if I could have done that, I would have done that. If you want me to do something, just tell me and I'll do it.” And so that idea of saying, “If you're going to write about this thing, then here are three really important things you should be sure to include, and then three more you can pick whatever you like.” And that's a fair way to go.

Julie Walker: I love that. Yep. That's very good. So this whole idea of getting too much to choose from and having to narrow it down. Isn't that life, Andrew? I always think of Unit 4 as kind of a life lesson.

Andrew Pudewa: I would agree because, if anything, now there's way too much. I mean, I would open up the encyclopedia, turn to Japan and there's ten pages. Well, what am I going to do? I'm not going to copy all ten pages, but now you Google up Japan and there's a gazillion pages. And your ability to see what's important or to see the divisions of information, is a lot harder.

I am very sad about the demise of the printed encyclopedia because I think it was such a great tool for kids to learn one of the skills we're trying to teach in Unit 4, which is dividing a subject into topics. And encyclopedias always had those nice little subheadings, so that whatever you were looking at, if it was of any significant length, of any significance, really, there would be these little bolded subheadings, and you could just kind of roll down and go, well, okay, there's the geography, there's the agriculture, there's the industry, there's the politics, and okay, I see how a state could be divided up, but even if you go to Britannica.com or Wikipedia or one of the online encyclopedias, it's not clear like that. You don't see it by flipping a few pages and seeing the bold subheadings. So, I am always encouraging parents, boy, if you can get yourself a 2000 world book, yeah, it's 20, 25 years old, we're getting close to that. But, a lot of the world hasn't changed in 25 years. There's still a tremendous value in being able to flip through very quickly the pages in an article and see what's the scope of the topics that are there. So as a training tool, I still think the paper encyclopedia is very, very valuable.

Julie Walker: Yes, yes. I've heard you refer to this unit before as the linchpin of the structural units.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's right in the middle, right? Four out of nine, so close to the middle. I mean, nine, to me, eight is really the climax. And nine is kind of the extra little

thing you could do if you still have any energy left at the end of the school year. I know you think a little differently, but being right in the middle, kids are used to now choosing key words. They're used to writing from key words. They're used to adding in the dress-up techniques. And so now in Unit 4, those things aren't particularly new or challenging. But we introduced this idea of limiting, and then also the topic-clincher paragraph rule, which becomes a rule that the students will apply in Unit 5, in Unit 6, in the body paragraphs of Unit 7 and 8.

So, getting the topic clincher solid in Unit 4, for me, is a primary objective. Although, there will be some kids that still don't seem to do it or get it, but I'm not worried because I'm going to hammer it again with Writing from Pictures and Unit 6 research. But it is, I think, one of the ideas that just... it's almost like instant improvement in writing.

Julie Walker: Yes. We have this tagline with our company—Listen. Speak. Read. Write. Think. And as you were describing what you were just saying right now about limiting and being able to do the topic-clincher rule, these are real thinking skills. Can you speak to that a little bit?

Andrew Pudewa: When you listen to someone who's very articulate, they either plan or they have enough experience to give structure to their presentation, to their content. And you really can tell the difference. In fact, I go to many conventions over the course of a year and occasionally I will go and listen to another speaker. And there really is a pretty clear difference between someone who has the experience, the intentionality, the planning, to be organized, present ideas in units of thought and someone who just gets up and rambles. I hope that people would consider me in the more organized group because I think we all appreciate that. You go to a church and you hear a sermon, and it may be on point, and here's the three, four things you should take away, and those are units of thought. Or maybe not, and you kind of walk out and they're saying, "There's nothing really I remember from that sermon."

Andrew Pudewa: You've had, I'm sure, all those experiences. So, using this technique of units of thought and a little bit of repetition really helps people walk away with some of the concepts you're trying to share with them. So the topic clincher is this element of repetition that helps to frame the idea, reinforce the idea, and then when you move on to the next idea, you have that little bit of a sense of completion about that.

This, of course, is classical rhetoric. I mean, you can take this all the way back to simplest ideas from Aristotle and Cicero in terms of this units of thought concept. So, how do we teach that to children? Well, through a model, through a process, through modeling the process, and then through having them practice the process until they have internalized it.

Julie Walker: Yes, and you force the students to do the topic-clincher rule with hand motions.

Andrew Pudewa: I came up with that one time. And ever since I taught preschool, I knew that if you want people to remember something more easily, if you can affix either music and/or gestures, they will remember things with fewer repetitions than simply auditory or verbal practice. And that's true from Incy Wincy Spider all the way up to a very sophisticated rendition of a famous speech. And most people who get into drama know that once you start to block the scene and choreograph things, then the lines are easy to remember because

you're able to lock certain sequences to certain movement. So that's why I invented, kind of accidentally really, but now it's, it's pretty much standard. Everybody's doing it.

Julie Walker: It's IEW canon, absolutely.

Andrew Pudewa: The gestures for the topic-clincher rule. But the main thing is that you want that rule to be clear and ever present in their consciousness, in their thinking, so that when they come to the end of the paragraph, they stop, say, "I'm about to end this paragraph," they read the first sentence, they look for two or three words which can be fit into the last sentence or create a last sentence to mirror it. And then you start with repeat and use exactly the same words because that's teaching the concept, and then you can show them how to use a thesaurus-type of tool to look for synonyms that would then reflect the key words of the topic.

Julie Walker: So for, I mean, there might be a listener or two who has never heard the topic-clincher rule. Can you please say it for our listeners?

Andrew Pudewa: The topic sentence and the clincher sentence must repeat or reflect two to three key words.

Julie Walker: There it is.

Andrew Pudewa: So, if you wanted to write about—see, my mind just goes to dangerous and unsavory things like San Francisco.

Julie Walker: Okay, well, let's talk about San Francisco.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, if you wanted to say that San Francisco has been suffering economic decline due to exploding homelessness and crime, that might be your topic sentence.

And then, or maybe you would just pick one of those, right? And so you might say, San Francisco has become a less pleasant place to be because of a great increase in minor and even major crimes. Then you're going to give a few examples. San Francisco snow, which most people don't know means shattered glass on the ground outside your car because someone broke a window to steal something out of it.

Julie Walker: And that's actually happened to me.

Andrew Pudewa: And you weren't even in San Francisco.

And then you could talk about how stores are closing because the police won't do anything about shoplifting. And so people just walk in and throw stuff in bags and walk out and nobody can stop them. And you might talk about other forms of crime that could make San Francisco a less pleasant place to be. And then, in your clincher sentence, you would, you could say exactly the same thing. San Francisco has become a less pleasant place to live because of an increase in crime. Or, you could say San Francisco is a criminal hellhole. I guess that's maybe a little harsh.

Julie Walker: Yes. Could be, but you get point.

Andrew Pudewa: But you get the point.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, you could also say nice things about Tulsa, Oklahoma, I suppose. Or you could say, recently it has been very, very hot.

Julie Walker: Yes, it has been.

Andrew Pudewa: So, that idea of looking for words that are either the same or similar, helps the student learn to follow the topic-clincher rule. And it's very interesting, I was reading an old book. This book was written at least a hundred and some years ago. And it was translated from the French. And I don't remember exactly the author or the title, but it was kind of a book on political science. It was a commentary on kind of the history of politics. And I was reading the book, and I was thinking, this is challenging, but it's really good. It's hard, it's stiff reading, but I can read it pretty easily. Like, I'm getting it.

Andrew Pudewa: Unlike some hard books, where I stop and have to start all over again five times and then give up. And as I was going through, I realized this author had, I would say with 90 percent or so, followed the topic clincher rule in every paragraph of this book.

Julie Walker: Oh, it's, it's not something you invented.

Andrew Pudewa: No, and it's not something Webster invented. Maybe codified, but the principle of presenting paragraphs as a cohesive unit of thought about a division of a greater thing you're talking about, just, that's the way we work. I mean, think about human beings. We have all these different organs and different systems, and they're all connected, but they're not smushed together in one big mess. They all have a function and a purpose. When writing does that, I think it just gives comfort to the reader and that slight amount of embedded repetition really helps the idea of, okay, this is what I can take away from this.

Julie Walker: So listener, as you are now preparing to delve into Unit 4, don't be afraid. If you haven't done so recently, perhaps watch your disc four or your clip four from your *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* and get a little refresher or use one of our theme based books that does a pretty good job of explaining what Andrew teaches on the video. But we know that you will have success with this. We know that your students will enjoy the process. Well, maybe they won't enjoy it, but they'll at least get it, and they'll be better writers.

Andrew Pudewa: I never ever tell anyone, "you're going to like this." I don't ever guarantee to anyone your kids are going to like this.

Julie Walker: no. But we hear from lots of people.

Andrew Pudewa: What I do say is, you don't have to like it, you just have to do it. If a kid does something, and they get a little bit better, a little bit better, a little bit better, what happens? They want to do it more because they have this sense of improvement. I was actually swimming with a five-year-old grandchild this morning who is not quite at the point of being able to keep her head underwater without inhaling or swallowing water.

Andrew Pudewa: But she's getting a little closer and a little closer and a little closer and pretty soon she's going to be able to jump in, swim underwater like a fish, and travel five feet. She's really close. But, the process of getting her from "I'm really afraid to have my face get wet" to the point where "I'm willing to jump in and swim underwater," you can't do that without a very small little incremental steps of improvement. And at first you hate it and then by the end, you're a six year old who just wants to swim all the time.

Julie Walker: Very good. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: My pleasure.

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.