



University of Ljubljana  
FACULTY OF ARTS

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# 101 English Tips

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A Quick Guide to  
Avoiding  
“Slovenish”

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Jason Blake

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**101 ENGLISH TIPS:  
A Quick Guide to Avoiding “Slovenlish”**

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Published by: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete

Univerze v Ljubljani (Ljubljana University Press, Faculty of Arts)

Issued by: Department of English

For the publisher: Roman Kuhar, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts

Ljubljana, 2018

First Edition, e-edition

Publication is free of charge.

DOI: 9789610600657

CIP - Kataložni zapis o publikaciji Narodna  
in univerzitetna knjižnica, Ljubljana

COBISS.SI-ID=294404864

ISBN 978-961-06-0065-7 (pdf)

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## **TIPS FOR IN-CLASS PRESENTATIONS ..... 59**



# INTRODUCTION

This booklet of tips is intended as bedtime, bathroom or bus reading. By skimming through it again and again – the way you might return to a joke book – you’ll gradually rid yourself of many typical “Slovenlish” mistakes. Each tip in this guide pertains to *Slovenian* students’ mistakes. To make the list, a mistake had to occur relatively frequently but also be easy to fix.

The “101 English Tips” are not ranked. In other words, number 18 is not necessarily worse than number 92. *That said* (see Tip 68), 1, 7, and 95 are major boo boos. Number 6 will help you get better grades and save you much embarrassment. Numbers 75-77 are lumped together because, for reasons that now elude me, they have a ketchup theme. Also, “101 English Tips” is a misnomer since several titles contain two or more tips. But “124 English Tips” is a lousy title.

Though many of these tips first appeared at [anglistika.net](http://anglistika.net) under “Mistake” or “Tip of the Week,” I’ve added about two dozen tips and removed a handful of others. One of the removed tips was too basic to warrant a space on this list of 101: “T is capitalized. Always. Even in e-mails. Please stop writing ‘i [sic] am writing...’” I hope you got that big, fat hint!

Another deleted tip dealt with plagiarism and with how easy it is for readers or listeners to detect a change of voice: “Imagine Adi Smolar taking over mid-song from Justin Bieber and you get the idea.” I dropped this tip because anti-plagiarism rants do nothing for your English. Neither, however, does plagiarism. Time spent copying is not time spent practicing writing.

Like the 101 English Tips, the Tips for In-Class Presentations first appeared online, and like the 101 Tips they are a response to Slovenian student presentations. More specifically, they are a reaction to *dreary* presentations – to monotone monologues, to parroted heaps of statistics and lifeless information unaccompanied by analysis (“He was born in... His first novel was published in... His favourite drink was... Are we at 20

minutes yet?”), and to talks that were simply too complicated for listeners to digest at a single sitting. Zip through these twelve tips before your oral presentations. Especially if you happen to be in one of my classes.

Approach this booklet with healthy scepticism. If you disagree with a tip or ten, fine; if you know precisely *why* you disagree, even better; if you kind of, sort of, just think, “nah, Tip 59 doesn’t really apply to me, dunno why...,” that is not fine. Realizing precisely why you write the words you write – why you choose to say “mutt” instead of “dog” – is a key to critical thinking.

There is some overlap here with *Writing Short Literature Essays – A Textbook with Exercises for Slovenian Students*. I refer to my other writing guide for three reasons: first, though there are many excellent guides available, very few target the specific problems of “Slovenlish”; second, it is more convenient to point to a single work than to say, “See Paul Briens’ excellent website *Common Errors in English Usage* ... see Alan McConnell-Duff’s *Into English: Writing and Translating into English as a Second Language* ... see David Limon’s article/glossary ‘False Friends Revisited’” (to name three very useful sources); third, it is only through repetition that we can cull mistakes.

Consider this booklet a not-so-gentle reminder of slack prose such as this:

Sadly, it is still an issue that many people write things like such as, for example ‘poetess’ and ‘pedagogue,’ however it is far from being tragic, eventhough I get the feeling it is high time we stopped.

The same, with references:

*Sadly* [31], it is still an *issue* [84] that *many people* [81] write *things* [*perhaps* 29] like *such as, for example* [16] ‘*poetess*’ [3] and ‘*pedagogue*’ [27], [1; 52; 101.4] *however* it is *far from* [25.2] being tragic, *eventhough* [76] *I get the feeling* [21.2] it is *high time* [32] we stopped.



# 101 ENGLISH TIPS

**1. ..., (sic) however/therefore.** “We went to the store, however the shopkeeper was not there.”

Why is that sentence wrong? Why does your grammar check slap a squiggly green line under it? It is wrong because it is a run-on sentence or “comma splice.” When “however” (or “therefore”) is used to join independent clauses, you need a period or semi-colon, or a coordinating conjunction such as “and” between those clauses.

This is correct: “We went to the store; however the shopkeeper was not there.”

This is also correct: “We went to the store. The shopkeeper, however, was not there.”

Slovenians love making this mistake. Notice how frequently it occurs in otherwise flawless texts.

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**2. E-mail Etiquette** (as in “politeness,” not “*etiketa*”). When writing formal e-mails at university, remember the following:

- 1) Always use the subject line and provide a clear subject.
- 2) Provide your name in the body of the e-mail. Occasionally I get mystery e-mails from [Ilovekebab@Ireallydo.com](mailto:Ilovekebab@Ireallydo.com). Who wrote it?
- 3) Keep it snappy. If you have a simple question, ask it. Some messages needlessly run to hundreds of words (ironically, often telling the recipient “how busy” the sender is).
- 4) Even though e-mail tends to be relaxed, beginning a message with “Hey, X...” is quite chummy. Use standard English and avoid slang.
- 5) Do not respond to everyone in the class if the message is a simple “Thank you.” The rest of the class does not care if you found and returned my cap.
- 6) If you attach a file, provide a clear name for it – e.g. “Janez Novak – Essay” rather than simply “Essay.” If you are sending a second draft, write “Janez Novek – revised” or “JN – second draft.”

- 7) Before asking for a clarification of an e-mail, re-read the original message. If, after the second reading, the point *still* isn't clear, you have a right to ask!
  - 8) If there are two or more concerns in your e-mail, it's a good idea to number them. E.g. "1) test date? 2) essay length? 3) weather on Friday?"
  - 9) ...and verify whether your teacher accepts e-mail as a form of correspondence before sending your e-essay to be graded.
- 

**3. Poetess. Authoress.** These feminine forms are not neutral translations for "*pesnica*" and "*avtorica*." There is a sense of condescension in a phrase like "She is Slovenia's leading poetess..." – as if women writers mysteriously worked according to lesser standards. In any case, the poet's name usually makes matters clear: "Emily Dickinson was a poet." If the sex *has* to be pointed out – as in "*prva slovenska pesnica...*," write "first Slovenian female poet" or "woman poet."

Similarly, many find the word "actress" discriminatory. (A bet: with a decade, "actress" will go the way of the antiquated "authoress.")

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**4. Vagueness.** The number one problem with most essays and arguments is vagueness.

"Your essay is due by midnight on October 31" is gorgeously specific. "I will hand in my essay in due course" sounds lovely and will gain you some brownie points for vocabulary, but isn't it usually a synonym for "*I have no clue when...*"?

Know that Slovenian is fonder of abstractions than English is. An example: "*zaradi objektivnih razlogov*" sounds comical to English ears when no actual reason is given! Similarly, to my eye, "*čimprej*" looks funny on an official letter if no deadline-date is given.

Be specific and concrete when writing your essays. In literature essays, provide plenty of direct quotations to back up your abstract thinking.

(See “Avoid Vague Language,” “Vagueness,” and “Vague Academic Prose” in *Writing Short Literature Essays*, 23, 48, 85)

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**5. Too Much Information.** What is the most important piece of information here? (Slightly changed from a solid translation.)

“The Ljubljana Museum, recipient of the Council of Europe Museum Prize in 2010, with its photos, maps, models, weapons and personal belongings of soldiers, and a documentary film, presents with sensitivity the most extensive story about World War II on Slovenian soil.”

Two major facts stick out in this very literal translation from Slovenian: 1) the Museum won an award; 2) it is about World War II.

Each of these two pieces of information important enough to have its own sentence: “The Ljubljana Museum *received* the Council of Europe Museum Prize in 2011. *With its...*”

The longer the sentence, the more information provided; the more information provided, the greater the likelihood that the reader will miss a crucial detail or fact hidden among the word-weeds.

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**6. Read the Instructions.** Is there anything more boring than reading instructions? Probably not. Nevertheless, you have to read the instructions when you write a test or produce an essay.

When the essay handout says “400-500” words, don’t hand in 1200. If the test says, “Use complete sentences,” you should use complete sentences. If there is a list of tips or guidelines attached (such as “write in paragraphs,” “underline your thesis,” or “avoid basing your argument on ‘I believe’ or ‘I think’”), follow those guidelines.

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**7. Firstly... Secondly... Boringly...** Please do not lead off every paragraph with a linking word. Pretty please with sugar on it. Even when I beg, plead, and threaten, a hardy few hand in essays with this structure:  
PARAGRAPH ONE: (come to think of it, you can't start with a linking word. Let's move on...)  
PARAGRAPH TWO: "Firstly,..."  
PARAGRAPH THREE: "Secondly,..."  
PARAGRAPH FOUR: "Thirdly,..."  
PARAGRAPH FIVE: "In conclusion,..."

When I forget to beg, plead, and threaten students, *about half the class in first year* hands in essays with the above structure.

There are several solid reasons for *not* building starting each paragraph with a linking word. Here are three:

- 1) Very few English-language newspaper and other essays do this, which means that your essay will probably sound unnaturally foreign.
- 2) Usually you can do without the linking words; use "Firstly,..., Secondly,..., Thirdly,..." when you need to help the reader keep track of arguments.
- 3) (The Big One) It is crushingly dull to mark essays that all look the same, that all look like a high school exercise. Your paper will not seem unique and will not be in the running for a top grade.

(See "Linking Words" in *Writing Short Literature Essays*, 90-95)

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**8. "While" vs. "Whereas"** "Whereas" establishes a more marked contrast, than "while" does. The reader might understand "Sarah goes to university, *while* John goes shopping" to mean "Sarah goes to university [every day], and John goes shopping [every day]."

If "while" is in the first position, there is more ambiguity: "While Sarah goes to university, John goes shopping."

To imply that John is lazy and wastes the couple's money, write "*Whereas* Sarah goes to university, John goes shopping." That pushes the reader in the right interpretive direction from the first word of your sentence.

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**9. Don't (Always) Trust Your Dictionary.** Be cautious with dictionaries, especially with a certain Slovenian-English one you probably have on your computer. A "paramedic" does not parachute to your house with a black bag ("*zdravnik padalec*"); "pretentious" people can be "demanding" but that doesn't make "*zahteven*" a synonym for "*pretenciozen*." These are plain wrong. Other entries in that certain dictionary are more inventive: they simply do not exist in English. They are fictions.

Whenever an English word coughed up by any dictionary sounds new or unusual to you, look it up in a second dictionary, or do a quick Internet search to get a feel for the word in a sentence.

When writing scholarly articles, it's preferable *not* to cite an Advanced Learners' Dictionary. That's like saying, "My mommy said I should wear this shirt for our date."

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**10. Synonyms: Wordiness, Tediousness, Verbosity, Redundancy...** One reason Slovenian sentences or Slovenian-minded sentences rendered into English – that is to say, sentences that sound like a translation from Slovenian even if the grammar and the vocabulary are exquisite – stretch into eternity (or is it infinity?) is the love of synonyms, of like-meaning words, of words that have essentially the same purpose. That's why my first sentence is horrible. It's too long and the last three phrases are superfluous synonyms.

This is also tediously wordy: "Here one sees that the narrator is full of bliss, is happy, is truly in a fine and healthily positive state of mind."

These phrases all say the same thing:

- 1) "is full of bliss"
- 2) "is happy"
- 3) "is truly in a fine..."

Saying the same thing in three different ways often borders on insult or sounds like high-flown rhetoric. It's like following up a simple joke with "Do you get it? Do you get it?"

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**11. Slovenlish "that" and Pronoun References.** Note the two instances of Slovenlish here:

"There is a habit among male and female students that they help each other with their assignments or actually do them instead of them."

Did you spot the two instances?

- 1) "That" is overused as a relative pronoun. Whenever you initially opt for "that" in a sentence like the above one, try to replace "that" with a gerund or infinitive construction:
  - a) "There is a habit among male and female students *of helping* ..."
  - b) "The habit among male and female students is *to help* ..."

These structures are trickier to produce than the Slovenlish *that* + subject + verb, but they are generally more correct and always more idiomatic.

- 1) Can you make sense of the messy pronoun references in the above example? "...do them instead of them"? *Who* is helping *whom* with *what*? No reader wants to spend five seconds figuring out what the antecedents are. Make it easy on the reader by:
  - a) stretching things out: "or the BOYS actually do the assignments instead of the GIRLS" (which is even clearer than "the former" and "the latter");
  - b) using more precise language in the first place: "There is a habit among male students of helping or actually doing assignments for female students."

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**12. As it (sic) can be seen.** This is Slovenlish: "As *it* can be seen, the author could not spell."

So is this: "As *it* has already been explained, the author had trouble spelling."

Drop the “it.”

Correct: “As \_\_\_ can be seen, the author could not spell.”

Correct: “As \_\_\_ has already been explained, the author had trouble spelling.”

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**13. Because it’s not a complete sentence.** This tip’s title is not a complete sentence but a fragment. This is a complete sentence:

“This is because it’s not a complete sentence.”

As my grade two teacher constantly intoned: “Never start a sentence with ‘because.’” That’s a half-truth worth committing to memory.

Of course, the following *is* a complete sentence, even though it begins with “because”: “Because it starts with ‘because,’ it’s not a complete sentence.”

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**14. Paragraph Division.** The following example is how *not* to divide an academic essay (I did not make these numbers up; they’re from a published paper):

Paragraph one: 832

Paragraph two: 890

Paragraph three: 757

Paragraph four: twenty-nine (yup, just 29 words)

Paragraph five: 338

Paragraph six: 1688 (well, we did have two paragraphs to restore ourselves, no?)

Strive for paragraph balance.

(See “One Argument per Paragraph” and “Top-Heavy Papers” in *Writing Short Literature Essays*, 53-54)

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**15. Circular Explanations.** This sentence is a dog chasing its tail:  
“The research project ‘Transnational Identity and Diasporic Citizenship in Canadian Literary Texts’ focuses on exploring the concepts of transnational identity, diasporic citizenship, *transnationalism* in *literary* texts written by *Canadian* authors.” Go figure.

Make sure that your explanatory sentence doesn’t circle back on itself – that is, make sure your sentence presents new ideas or clarifies the old ones and it marches along.

These are further examples of circular explanations:

- 1) “The *utter lack of light* in the poem indicates *darkness*.”
- 2) (You’re informing the reader that it gets dark when you turn out the lights!)
- 3) “Considering the *main theme* of the novel, we see its *central conceptual idea*.” (This is just a series of abstract synonyms; we still have no clue what the “theme” or “idea” might be.)

When in doubt, check for synonyms at the start and end of the sentence. If you find them, chances are good that you’ve gone nowhere: “The *canine* comparison makes one think of the protagonist as something of a *dog*.”

It also helps the reader if the entire sentence doesn’t hinge on one word: “The novel’s protagonist is very *erudite*, and she has clearly gained this *erudition* by means of an autodidactic life with books.”

Something like this is both easier on the reader and fresher: “The novel’s protagonist is very *learned*, and she has clearly gained this *erudition* by means of an autodidactic life with books.”

(This example differs from the *canine/dog* example. Why? Because the sentence explains *how* the “novel’s protagonist” became learned, rather than merely re-stating *that* she is well-read.)

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**16. Such as, for example.** The phrase pairing “such as, for example...” is clunky and redundant. Use one or the other, not both. Occasionally I see the two phrases squished together in a single sentence. More frequently, “such as” and “for example” sandwich a list, like this: “There are many good authors here, such as X, Y, and Z, for example.”

Correct: “There are many good authors here, such as X, Y, and Z” or “There are many good authors here; for example, X, Y, and Z.”

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**17. Choices – be it (sic) right or wrong.** Many advanced speakers and writers of English love the phrase “be it X or Y.” I do too. It sounds classy, and the old-fashioned subjunctive (or is it the conditional?) baffles Word’s green-eyed grammar sleuth. However, you look ridiculous if you proudly aim for the subjunctive but ignore the plural.

A *negative* example: “Many dictionaries, be it monolingual or bilingual, are...” That’s wrong. Because “dictionaries” is plural, the pronoun must also be plural. Nobody would dream of writing: “The cows, *it* comes home!”

Correct: “Many dictionaries, be *they* monolingual or bilingual, are...”

(There’s no harm in looking ridiculous – aiming high and sometimes falling are of course noble parts of language acquisition.)

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**18. To beg the question and botch the idiom.** Here’s a battle I’m losing: “to beg the question” means to assume something is true while pretending to present an argument.

This is begging the question: “Banning long sleeved shirts during exams will stop students from hiding cheat-sheets under the sleeves.” The argument assumes from the outset that students are cheating.

Another example: “The television report is dubious because you just can’t trust the media.”

“To beg the question” is too often used as a synonym for “to raise the question,” murdering a precise phrase. As one retired philosopher wrote, “I implore you: give the technical use of beg the question back to the logicians.” Or at least use it correctly.

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**19. Don't be so un-positive!** What's wrong with the following sentence?

“Not all of the states are on board, and neither CIC nor CBSA appears not to give a damn, since in the state where abuse is most extensive they refuse to meet with non-governmental organizations that serve and advocate for immigrants.”

There are too many negatives. Here are the negatives highlighted:

“*NOT* all of the states are on board, and *NEITHER* CIC *NOR* CBSA appears *NOT* to give a damn, since in the state where trafficking is most extensive they refuse to meet with *NON*-governmental organizations that serve and advocate for trafficked immigrants.”

(In this example the verb “refuse” also adds an air of negation, further obscuring the meaning.)

Double-negators, like coffee-addicts, are convinced that the dangers apply only to other people (I am not unguilty here). The most obvious perils of double negation are:

- 1) lack of clarity (see above example!)
- 2) bogging down your sentence with extra words – “I am not saying that I am not not going” is confusing because the reader has to turn mathematician as s/he adds up the NOTs
- 3) a sense of reserve or reticence. “You are not unattractive!” is a splendid back-handed compliment.

Also, the closer together the two negatives, the easier it is to understand them as a positive. “I am not unhappy” is obvious. Not so, “I am *not* saying that despite all that I have gone through in the recent past I am *unhappy*.”

Of course, sometimes reticence and indirectness is precisely what you want – and you may prefer “My dog is not unintelligent” to “My dog is stupid.”

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**20. Optional comma placement** is a horrible topic in English. Though there are many clear comma rules (such as adding one before a non-restrictive relative clause), sometimes the waters are murky. Optional commas often add clarity but kill flow.

Clear but plodding: “In 1989, when the Wall fell, and many East Germans saw the West for the first time, great changes were in store for Europe, because it meant the end of the Cold War.”

A great flowing mess: “In 1989 when the Wall fell and many East Germans saw the West for the first time great changes were in store for Europe because it meant of the end of the Cold War.”

Here’s a rule of thumb: if you have more than three words qualifying the sentence, provide a comma:

No comma needed: “In Canada there is sometimes an ‘Indian Summer.’”

Comma, please: “In certain regions of the Canadian province of Ontario, there is sometimes an ‘Indian Summer.’”

Bear in mind (not *bare...*) that no two editors agree on *optional* comma placement. Reading your sentences aloud and trusting your ear is the best bet here. Do you have to pause to catch your breath?

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**21. Three Dangerous Phrases.** Be on the alert when using these phrases: 1) “together with”; 2) “get the feeling”; 3) “a different perspective.”

1) “Together with” is a very popular expression among Slovenian writers – presumably because it is a direct translation of “*skupaj s*.”

Very often, a mere “and” would do the trick: “Together with Sally, she went...” Isn’t “She and Sally went...” much simpler?

If you want to emphasise *togetherness*, consider: a) “She, along with Sally, went...”; b) “Both she and Sally went...”

2) “Get the feeling” is a weak phrase for making an argument. “I get the feeling here that...” is a synonym for “gee, I dunno, I just kinda sense that...” “I get the feeling” does not fly as evidence in court or in an essay. Even worse, it draws attention to the vagueness of your argument.

(For the bluffers: instead of “In this scene, I *get the feeling* he is nuts...,” write, “This scene *provides a hint of* insanity...” or “This scene *implies* the possibility of lunacy...” Avoid the first person and use the neutral-sounding third person to feign objectivity.)

3) “A different perspective” is imprecise. If your lover or talking gerbil says, “I have decided to consider our relationship from a different perspective,” you have to wait to find out exactly what the meaning and consequences of that “different perspective” are (more vacation time? moving in? moving out?).

Often writers do not qualify the “different perspective,” leaving the essay-grader confused. You can write “from a different, more optimistic, perspective,” but why not avoid the hackneyed phrase and simply say “more optimistically”?

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**22. The whole Slovenia and Slovenia as a hole (sic).** “The whole Slovenia” and “the entire Slovenia” cause problems.

“The whole of Slovenia” and “the entirety of Slovenia” are grammatically correct. However, unless you are emphasizing each and every centimetre of Slovenia the phrases often sound superfluous.

“All of Slovenia” is sometimes ambiguous. Does it refer to every person in Slovenia? Does it refer to the territory? Is there a particular need for emphasis?

“Slovenia as a whole” (*not* “Slovenia as a hole” [sic]) and “Slovenia in its entirety” are stilted but correct possibilities.

Very often, unqualified, un-proceeded, adjective-free “Slovenia” is the simplest solution.

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**23. Too Intense and Unintentionally Funny.** This is a tricky one. Unless humour or suspense is your goal, do not overload your sentence with qualifiers. As well, if your sentence starts with colourful words, it should also finish strongly.

This sentence starts vividly and toddles into tedium: “The sword swallower had dreamed of becoming a showman *ever since* he was *just a tiny little* boy.”

After “sword swallower,” “boy” is lifeless. The sentence also climaxes too soon: “ever since,” “just,” “tiny,” and “little” all qualify “boy.” We get the point already after “ever since,” since other than “boy” or “young man” what could come? We understand that the hero had been dreaming of showmanship for ages.

This is easier on the reader because it saves time and space: “The sword swallower had dreamed of becoming a showman *ever since* he was a little boy.”

(In literature, such delaying is a brilliant – and cheap and fun! – way of building suspense, because the reader imaginatively predicts what the end of the sentence will bring. A fictional example: “Walking down the street, I saw an enormous, humungous, gargantuan, massive, elephantine, and big *newspaper stand.*”)

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**24. Nine Overused and Three Underused Words/Phrases.** A few anecdotal ramblings about overused words and their overlooked counterparts:

**Nine Overused Phrases.**

1) “the **natives**” almost always sounds negative and borderline racist. Drop the article and specify the place: “Native Americans...” or “Natives of Xanadu...”

2) “**It is not by chance** that...” is wildly overused. Alternative phrases: “It is no coincidence that...” or (although very relaxed): “It is no fluke that...”

In any case, these phrases are generally redundant: “It is not by chance that Shakespeare describes a rose...”

The wise-cracking rebuttal to each would be “No kidding!” When tempted to use these phrases, ask yourself whether they add anything to your statement or argument.

3) **Addressing the reader** directly – in the style of Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* (“O Reader...”) – can make you sound ancient. Or arrogant.

4) You **should** avoid the phrase “you should” in essays (see *Writing Short Literature Essays*, 99, for other problems with “should”).

5) “**You’re probably wondering...**” is generally to be avoided. “You’re probably wondering why I picked Wordsworth for my essay...” (Trust me, that’s the farthest thing from my mind when I’m grading Romantic Poetry essays!)

6) What is the fascination with “**Carpe diem**”? It’s not wrong, just far more frequent in Slovenian than in English (well, Latin, but you get the point).

7) “**One of such descriptions...**” is wrong. “One such description...” is not.

8) “**full of...**” is overused.

“The poem is full of metaphors...” can be replaced by the wordy “replete with metaphors...”

Often, simply “many” would work: “There are many metaphors in the poem.”

9) Be careful with “**The fact is...**” It can make for a very, very harsh tone:

“The fact is, my brother’s a nitwit.” (Mean, but fine)

“The fact is, the peanut butter is on the top shelf.” (Accusations of silliness on the part of the peanut butter seeker.)

“The fact is, William Blake wrote this poem...” (Grumpy-sounding).

**Three useful words/phrases** I rarely encounter:

1) “**That said,...**”

Use this to provide a contrast. “The poodle is a dangerously vicious animal. That said, it’s a rather cute breed!” The comma is a must.

2) “**albeit**”

“The poodle ran bravely, albeit foolishly, into the fire to retrieve its bone.

3) “**increasingly**”

You can often use this as a substitute for “more and more”

“The neighbour’s poodle is, increasingly, getting on my nerves with its barking.”

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**25. *Managing to insult is far from being praise.*** Avoid these expressions when you want to express unreserved and enthusiastic praise:

1) manage to

2) far from being

1) “Manage to...” suggests that something is done *against all expectations*:

“My little brother managed to eat his lunch without spitting it out.” That sentence oozes non-confidence in your sibling’s table manners. It is pure sarcasm.

With that in mind, does this sound like convincing praise?

“William Shakespeare manages to portray a convincing love story.”

Nope. It sounds like a synonym for “Everywhere else, Shakespeare mucks up love stories, but here – miraculously – he doesn’t.”

2) A hallmark of irony is indirectness and that’s why “far from being” is wonderful for producing irony.

“Far from being boring, the play is interesting” sounds tepid. Why not say it directly? Why the need to focus on the negative? If minor or nuanced praise is your aim, by all means be indirect. Just be aware that this is not the way to praise your brother’s cooking. “Far from being lousy, your pasta was edible” is a borderline insult.

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**26. Second-Hand Praise: “is widely regarded,” etc.** Many, many, many concert leaflets, book reviews, and diploma theses include lukewarm sentences like “Margaret Atwood *is widely regarded* as being Canada’s finest writer.” Fine, dandy and true, but there are some problems with this ubiquitous praise formula:

- 1) “is regarded” creates distance. This is like saying it is *not* my opinion. After all, we often use the passive to shift blame or responsibility away from ourselves – sorry, *the passive is often used* to shift blame.
- 2) Because “is regarded...” sounds distanced, the reader may expect an *opposing* view: “Margaret Atwood is widely regarded as being Canada’s finest writer, *but her reputation is based more on her persona than her actual writing/I disagree.*”

“Margaret Atwood is Canada’s finest writer” is far more convincing; what is more, there is obviously a human being, a personality, a strong voice and opinion, behind the statement.

Similarly, when you aim to praise and please, avoid the phrases “is thought” or “is considered...” They often lead to unintentional irony:

“Jane Austen is thought to be a great novelist...” suggests that, despite what others think, you happen to disagree.



“Cormac McCarthy is considered to be America’s leading novelist” suggests that you have no opinion on the matter and are merely repeating what others say.

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**27. Who you callin’ a *Pedagogue*?** A “*pedagog*” is not always a “pedagogue.” “Pedagogue means” “a dull, formal, or pedantic teacher” (Webster’s). The label has to be earned in English. Unless you’re out for blood, “teacher” or “educator” suffices

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**28. Avoid the future (tense, that is).** Do you need to use the future tense in essays? Not for presenting your thesis. When you speak of arguments and examples “that will come,” you’re *about to* argue but not yet *arguing*. It very soon becomes tiresome to read “The article *shall* show... [p.1]. This point *will be* explained... [p. 3] ...We *shall* consider...[p. 5].” Reading becomes tiresome when the essay spends its time looking to the future rather than arguing in the present.

Live in the moment. Rather than “The article will show...”, write “The article shows...” (Even while living in the moment, though, *do* not use the present progressive – i.e. avoid “This article *is showing*...”).

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**29. *Thing and something.*** Here’s a Laurel-and-Hardy-esque conversation I once had with my daughter:

She: “There’s something in my shoe!”

Me: “What is it?”

She: “If I knew what it was, I wouldn’t say ‘something,’ I would just say what it was!”

What does this have to do with essays?

To obfuscate or imply that you don’t know what you’re saying, by all means write “thing” or “something” as often as possible. In other words, *don’t*.

Three main problems with “thing” and “something” in essays:

- 1) overuse
- 2) vagueness
- 3) tone – in formal essays, “The thing is...” often sounds too groovy.

Had my daughter been more specific, our mini-conversation would have run differently:

- a) “I have a *slimy, gooey substance* in my shoe!”  
“Call your mother to remove it.”
- b) “I have a *metallic, jagged object* in my shoe!”  
“Is it the car key?”

Remember that vagueness is the cardinal essay sin. “Thing” and “something” lead to obscurity.

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**30. *Namely, because it’s overused...*** Some words and formulations are not wrong but overuse makes them sound wrong to English ears. For example, “namely” is far less frequent in English than the seeming equivalent “*namreč*.”

Another example is “In the continuation...” – as in, “In the continuation of the poem, Keats notes...” Here’s pudding-proof:

“in the continuation of the novel” – 5 Google hits.  
“*v nadaljevanju romana*” – 119 Google hits.

If you are tempted to write “in the continuation of,” see if a simple adverb will suffice.

Slovenlish: “In the continuation of the movie, the hero dies.”  
Simplified: “Then the hero dies.”

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**31. *Sadly, unfortunately, I feel for him.*** Adverbs such as “sadly” and “unfortunately” often look sappy and maudlin in critical essays. They are the equivalent of the “APPLAUSE!!” sign for a TV programme’s studio audience. Especially when they are the first word of a sentence, they cast their glum shadow over the rest of the statement:

“*Sadly*, the horrific effects of the war were soon felt.”

“*Unfortunately*, the woefully ineffective governmental policies destroyed all cultural projects.”

“*Sadly*” and “*unfortunately*” tell the reader how s/he should respond (with, duh, sadness and a sense of the unfortunate!); this is pedantic because phrases like “horrific effects” and “woefully ineffective” already make your stance clear. There’s also a hint that you think the reader is daft or emotionally cold, and that s/he has to be told how to interpret the sentence.

This is not a call to ban the words “*sadly*” and “*unfortunately*” (and their counterparts “*happily*” and “*fortunately*”) but to ban the lazy writing that reaches for these words instead of indicating emotion. You can often use adjectives to *show* rather than *dictate* emotions – “The result was catastrophic” is livelier than “*Sadly*, the result was not positive.” The reader will get the emotional point even without your hint.

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**32. “It is high time” we stopped writing “nothing special.”** Two phrases that creep into English are “nothing special” and “it is high time.” Though these phrases exist in English, they are uncritically adored by Slovenian students.

“Nothing special” is fairly relaxed, and also unclear. “That poem is nothing special” says only that you don’t like the poem. It does not point out how the poem achieves its ordinariness.

“It is high time” often sounds more rhetorical and moralistic in English than it does in Slovenian. One envisions an ancient orator imploring us to change our lives for the better. You are all too young to sound like ancient moralists. (That said, there is a wonderful gravitas to “It is high time we went for ice cream.”)

**33. The Slovenian Language.** This is not so much a mistake as a redundancy. “I speak the Slovenian/Slovene language” is verbose because “I speak Slovenian/Slovene” suffices. Other than a language, what can one speak? Hamlet (who was never short of words) says, “Speak the speech.” He does not say “Speak the *language* speech.”

...and don't forget the definite article if you *do* write “*the* Slovenian language.”

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**34. It's *typical* of him (to be like himself)**

“A Cup of Coffee’ is *typical* Cankar.”

“Ode to a Grecian Urn’ is *typical* Keats.”

There are two problems here with these sentences. First, the reader already has to know Cankar and Keats in order to make any sense of these observations. Second, these sentences point out the obvious! Why wouldn't a poem written by the poet Keats be “typical” of Keats? Why wouldn't a Cankar story be “typical” Cankar?

An easy solution is to add an adjective or a little bit of information: “A Cup of Coffee’ is one of Cankar’s *typically bleak stories*.” That sentence economically drops information about who Cankar is and what his writing is like. Whenever you are tempted to write “it is typical Cankar,” provide a *because*...

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**35. Underlining vs. Italics.** To highlight an individual word, use italics rather than underlining. (Flip through a dozen books in English and you'll see a 100 to 1 italics-to-underlining ratio.)

The likelihood that an italicized word or phrase will be confused with a title is very low because a title is capitalized and also does not naturally fit the sentence's syntax. We immediately recognize it as a title, as in:

“*Under the Volcano* is not a *memoir* but a *novel* – despite the fact that author and narrator alike are constantly intoxicated.”

Better yet, try to avoid italics. If your sentence is clear, avoid rubbing your reader's nose in an important word. (See "Do you see it? Do you? Are you sure?" in *Writing Short Literature Essays*, 78)

And stop italicizing quotations just because they are quotations.

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**36. Use quotation marks to guide.** (I begin with single quotation marks here so that the quotations within the quotations are easier to see.)

Use quotation marks to guide the reader and separate your own words from words you are highlighting.

This is needlessly difficult: 'A common and basic mistake among students is using their for they're and its for it's.'

In contrast, we can understand this right away: 'A common and basic mistake among students is using "their" for "they're" and "its" for "it's."'

If you are quoting from literature or other sources, you must use quotation marks (not italics!): 'The German philosopher Schopenhauer famously called the German philosopher Hegel a "flathead."'

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**37. Only...** Starting a sentence with "only" can lead to ambiguity: "Simon loves Kunigunda. Only Kunigunda refuses to be loved by him."

The sense of "only" is not immediately clear here. It could mean:

- a) Kunigunda is *the sole person* who resists Simon.
- b) *It's just that/the problem is that* Kunigunda does not love Simon.

Though it is hard to predict how your reader will interpret your words, do your best to *guide* him/her through your sentence:

"*Although* it is clear that Simon loves Kunigunda, Kunigunda refuses to be loved by him."

The "although" placed at the start of the sentence tells the reader to expect a contrast – thus nipping misunderstandings in the bud.

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**38. In the wordy 90s of the previous century.** Here's a classic Slovenish example of wordiness: "In the 90s of the previous century..."  
Simpler, and clearer: "In the 1990s..."

"of the previous century..." can almost always be chopped – unless you have to specify, "in the last few decades of the previous century." You decide which is more leaden and horrific-sounding:  
"in the last few decades of the previous century..."  
"in the 1970s, 80s and 90s..."

---

**39. Punctuation. Yuck.** We all have great difficulties with the colon, the dash, and the semi-colon.

COLON: shouts out that an example or summary is about to follow

DASH: interrupts and moves in another direction (do not use it instead of a colon when introducing quotations)

SEMI-COLON: somewhere between a period and a comma. Slovenians avoid it like the plague (unless mistaking it for a colon)

Note the use of the colon in this example: "In the new sandwich shop, customers were licking their lips and salivating like floppy-jowled dogs at what was behind the glass: bagels."

A DASH would send a different message, one of moving in another direction. It would ruin the flow of the sentence as it moves to revealing *what is behind the glass*.

A SEMI-COLON would be plain wrong before "bagels."

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**40. In such (sic) city, we expect an article.** I have no clue why this mistake occurs: "The interpretation of the poem is crucial in such undertaking."

Did you catch it? Here's another one: "In such city, smog is to be expected."

You *must* use an indefinite article after “such.”

These are correct: “The interpretation of the poem is crucial in such *an* undertaking.” “In such *a* city, smog is to be expected.”

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**41. Base vs. Basis.** There seems to be some confusion between “base” and “basis.”

This is wrong: “The *base* for John’s theory of chocolate is that it should be brown.”

This is not wrong: “The *basis* for John’s theory..”

Some argue that “base” is literal and something you can touch, whereas “basis” is figurative – which is a good *basis* for remembering the difference. Do a few Internet searches (including quotation marks, and preferably in google.books to exclude most sloppily-written pages) to get a feel for the differences.

“The basis of the matter” – c. 55 mil. hits – rather a lot for a dull phrase.  
“The base of the matter” – c. 18 mil. hits – more than enough to convince your teacher that both are acceptable.

You might note the balance or ratio of hits and side with the majority:

“The basis of the decision” – c. 80 mil. hits

“The base of the decision” – c. 3 mil. hits

“The basis of the theory” – c. 48 000 google.books hits

“The base of the theory” – 719 google.books hits (mostly foreign scientists writing in English)

Remember the confusing plural of both “base” and “basis” is “bases.”

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**42. Transatlantic Gaffes.** I spent a summer living and teaching at a university in the United States, observing the language around me. These gaffes appeared again and again on explanatory signs at museums, in shops, and occasionally in student assignments and e-mails:

1) “The family did not know where to take there holidays.”  
“They’re is a dog on the beach.”  
“Their is going to be a thunderstorm today.”

2) (Even more frequent):  
“The family forgot where it parked it’s car.”  
“Its beginning to look a lot like Christmas.”

Why are these elementary mistakes relevant to you? They pop up very frequently in writing by Slovenian students of English, even though all of you know the difference between “it’s” and “its.”

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**43. You + do do insult.** To avoid insulting, avoid combining “you” and “do” and “not” in e-mails and letters.

Thomas Hardy’s poem “A Broken Appointment” immediately sets the accusatory tone: “You did not come”. This is as straightforward an accusation as “And just where the heck were you?”

Note the harshness of “You still did not answer my e-mail from yesterday.”

Remember that English is generally less direct in formal correspondence. Sentences like this, though understated, will be clearly understood:

“I can’t seem to find my grade in VIS...”  
“Have you had time to enter my grade...?”  
“This is just a friendly reminder to...”

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**44. That darn comma before “that.”** Remember, that, “that” is not always preceded by, that thing, that we call a comma.

Huh? Let’s try that again with fewer commas: “Remember that ‘that’ is not always preceded by that thing that we call a comma.”

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**45. Good images after bad.** In general, avoid using an image or figurative language to explain another image. Why? Because it can easily lead to a confusing mess of pictures. This is a particular problem if you choose a vague image, or a cliché.

Example: “When King Lear refers to his ‘pelican daughters,’ it is clear *he cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel.*”

The commonplace phrase about a light and a tunnel does nothing to explain what “pelican daughters” might mean. (Often it is obvious that the student thinks a phrase is important and that it should be quoted for some reason or other – but doesn’t quite know what it means.)

The following is clearer because you show the reader exactly what you are thinking: “When King Lear refers to his ‘pelican daughters,’ it is clear *he feels utterly rejected by his own family.*”

Another example: “Linguists refer to this as fruitful common ground, because we can *broaden our horizons.*”

If your reader doesn’t understand “common ground,” what help is your image?

Better: “Linguists refer to this as fruitful common ground, because we *all learn from the conversation.*”

To be clear: I do not mean that you should avoid images in your essays. Arguing your point in solely abstract terms; piling airy term upon airy term is a ticket to Boredomville.

...and please, please, lay off “broadening horizons” and “light at the end of the tunnel.” They are overused phrases.

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**46. Laughable Images.** Pay close attention to the images you use. Especially with dead metaphors or near-dead metaphors – like “going to another level” or “drawing the line” – we no longer “see” the image.

Sometimes, however, our phrasing brings the long-dead image back to life:

- 1) “The baker of the *four-tier* wedding cake amazed us with her skill; she *went to a new level*.”
- 2) “The teacher stood at the blackboard, *chalk* in hand, and decided to *draw a line* when it came to John’s poor behaviour.”

When revising, look very, very closely for clashing images. Reading aloud usually helps. Reading aloud to a friend always does.

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**47. “Might well” vs. “might as well”** There is a difference in meaning between “might well” and “might as well.”

This is clumsy: “The author might as well believe that ghosts actually exist.”

This is probably what the student meant: “The author might well believe that ghosts actually exist.”

Stronger: “The author might very well believe that ghosts actually exist.”

“Might as well” generally sounds flippant – you *might as well* say, “I don’t care.”

Read Dorothy Parker’s half-comic, half-grim poem “Résumé” and enjoy the build-up to her last line: “You might as well live.”

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**48. Capitalize Languages.** If the mistakes in this example sentence do not make you scream and howl, you should be forced to forget Slovenian and then re-learn it:

“The french language is a beautiful language, which is not to say that italian and what the slovenians speak are not also beautiful.”

Capitalize the names of languages, whether using them adjectivally (“the French language”) or as nouns (“Italian”). “Slovenians” should also be capitalized. You know this. Just don’t forget it!

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**49. Overuse of *per se*.** “Per se” (and “as such”) are overused in much formal writing by Slovenians.

“Per se” seems to be a replacement for “*kot tak*.” What, pray tell, does “per se” add to these examples?

“Philosophy, per se, has a lot to do with thinking.”

“One can no longer claim that literature per se is limited to writing.”

“Per se” tells the reader to look carefully at the word that precedes it (here “philosophy” and “literature”). Point out specifically what is interesting (“philosophy as a *love of wisdom*”), why we have to look at the word before “per se.”

For those who like arbitrary guidelines: one “per se” per 50 pages suffices.

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**50. On.** Prepositions are evil because they rarely translate literally from one language to another; even Anglos can’t agree on “At the weekend” (UK) vs. “On the weekend” (US).

When you do your last-minute check of an essay, test paper, e-mail, etc., look for the preposition “on.” If a student is tripped up by a preposition, “on” is usually the problem – either because it’s there or because it’s missing:

“When I was on university my friends used to comment my unusual attire whenever we went on coffee.”

That sentence should read:

“When I was *at* university my friends used to comment *on* my unusual attire whenever we went *for* coffee.”

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**51. Fragments.** Unless. Poetic desire. Fragments. Awful.

An anecdote: I used to proofread for a Slovenian television show that wrote its Slovenia-friendly texts in Slovenian and then had them translated for an international audience. So far, so good. The problem? Many, many flowery texts began:

“Sun. A table. *Pršut*. We are in Kras...”

Under the right pen, such word-splatterings may sound lovely in Slovenian, but too often they sound puerile, sophomoric, and plain idiotic in English. Starting with a sentence fragment in English is stylistically hazardous.

...and if you use sentence fragments to avoid real syntax, know that you're not fooling anyone (trust me, I try the same trick in Slovenian and it has never yet worked).

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**52. Run-On Sentences.** A run-on sentence is born when you join two independent – i.e. stand-alone – clauses with (or without) a mere comma.

“He wanted to go to the store the car would not start” is wrong.

“He wanted to go to the store; the car would not start” is not.

As mentioned many times in these pages, *please, please, please* use at least a semi-colon or “and” or the like before “however,” “furthermore,” and “therefore” as linking words. *These are both wrong:*

“He went to the store, therefore, he could buy candy.”

“She stayed home, however, she was not lazy and got the candy-dish from the cupboard.”

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**53. There is *this* sarcasm.** The combination of “there” is and “this” often sounds sarcastic. An example: “There is *this* combination of love and repulsion in the new Steven Spielberg movie.” The sentence sounds like it's being delivered with a sneer. This is more neutral: “There is *a* combination of love and repulsion in the new Steven Spielberg movie.”

Remember that the reader can't *hear* whether you're being neutral or sarcastic – that is, your intonation is not guiding him/her. An easy way to influence the sentence's tone is to add an adjective: "There is a *cryptic/absurd/charming/failed* combination of love and repulsion in the new Steven Spielberg movie."

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**54. *Slowly* transferring errors *nowadays*.** Two minor Slovenian transfer errors:

1) "slowly" is odd in phrases like "We should slowly go..." because the adverb suggests turtle-pace movement.

"Gradually" or "by degrees" can be useful words if slowness is not your primary meaning. That said, often you can just chop "slowly." It's over-used and too relaxed for formal essays.

2) Nowadays, every second essay begins "Nowadays..." Save "Nowadays..." for your golden years, when you can wistfully think back on the twenty-something version of you. Of course, "nowadays" is best used for moaning and kvetching. Have you ever heard the sentence "Nowadays... things are much better than they used to be"? Exactly.

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**55. "Wows" and "Vows."** Some students mix up the word "vow," speaking of: "the exchanging of *vowels* at a wedding" or "the monk's *woe* of celibacy."

Keep this in mind when you want to talk of "vows of silence" and "wedding vows" and the like.

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**56. How do you say "*med drugim*"?** A minor case of Slovenish: "*med drugim*" is a lovely two-word phrase that is a pain to translate because:

- 1) The lengthy "among other things" dominates the English sentence space.
- 2) "Things" shouts vagueness; you never want to do that.

- 3) The phrase is often not needed in English
- 4) It can sound sarcastic, implying tip-of-the-icebergness (“Why didn’t you bring your dog to the restaurant?” “Well, among other things, he bites waiters...” – i.e. I could go on with a long, long list of transgressions).

Consider this example: “V tem poglavju *med drugim* berem tudi tele misli...” A simplified translation (with the superfluous-sounding and very-Slovenian “*tudi*” chopped): “In this chapter I read, among other things,...”

Here, “among other things” makes me wonder what those “other things” are. “In this chapter, I read...” sounds more natural, less cluttered.

When translating, you probably need to keep it; when writing essays, try to skip “among other things.”

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**57. -al.** You can often drop the “-al” from words. Sometimes it changes the meaning – “economical” is *not* the same as “economic,” and “historical” does not mean “historic.” When in doubt, check the dictionary.

It is *not* “ethnic literature” but “ethnic literature.” An Internet search reveals that “education system” is twice as frequent as “educational system” (“educational” is often used metaphorically rather than in reference to an institution: “My sister’s educational system was to dust the cookie jar with itching powder. I learned quickly not to steal her Oreos.”)

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**58. Comparison vs. Causality and “As.”** Wouldn’t it be lovely to have two words for “as”? One for comparisons, and one for expressing causality? (Perhaps “@s” vs. “as”?)

Until then, avoid ambiguity. “I went home *as* it was getting light out” means:

- a) (Dracula’s version) “I went home quickly *because* it was getting light out.”
- b) (Party animal version) “I went home *at the time* it was getting light out.”

“Since” is often clearer when you want to provide a reason.

On another as-note: when making comparisons (e.g. “as big as a house”), use *as* little space *as* possible between “as” and “as”:

“That novel was *as* long (and also, come to think of it, rather tedious and time-consuming) *as* the entire Harry Potter series.”

By the time the reader gets to “...*as* the entire Harry Potter series,” s/he’s forgotten that a comparison is in progress.

Better: “That novel was *as* long *as* the entire Harry Potter series (and also, come to think of it, rather tedious and time-consuming).”

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### 59. Pursuing after (sic), stressing out (sometimes sic).

- 1) “Pursue *after*” is wrong. The “after” is superfluous.
- 2) Note the difference between “to stress” and “to stress *out*.” The first means “to emphasize,” the second means you need soothing.

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### 60. Redundant Possessives. Fear. Being Late “for.” Three tiny tips, in descending order of badness...

- 1) **Redundant Possessives.** Each of these is wrong:
  - a) “He wants to complete his task that has been given him.”
  - b) “...and his feelings he has for his beloved kitty cat.”
  - c) “...his loved-one he is about to visit.”

What is the mistake? In each case there is an extra possessive adjective.

Correct:

- a) “He wants to complete *the* task that has been given him.”
- b) “...and *the* feelings he has for his beloved kitty cat.”
- c) “...*the* loved-one he is about to visit.”

The rule seems to be that when the noun (i.e. “task,” “feelings,” “loved-one”) is post-qualified, you need the definite article. Ask a linguist to give you a proper explanation.

- 2) **Fear.** Respect the crucial difference between “afraid *of*” and “afraid *for*.”
- “He is afraid *of* his neighbour’s daughter (because she has venomous fangs).”
  - “He is afraid *for* his neighbour’s daughter (because she practices ballet on the garage roof and might fall off).”

“afraid *of*” means “X scares me!”

“afraid *for*” means “I’m very worried about X.”

- 3) **Being Late.** It’s not late “*for* two hours” or “increased *for* two per cent” but “late *by* two hours” and “increased *by* two per cent.”

A small mistake, I realize, but this makes my temperature rise *for* (sic) 900 per cent.

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**61. Written by a Dutch author Cees Nooteboom (sic).** You may count the ways this is incorrect. You may count them because you know them: “written by a Dutch author Cees Nooteboom”

This is a major error, one made more egregious by its frequency and tenacity among students of English.

These phrases are correct and logical:

- “written by *the* Dutch author Cees Nooteboom ...” (there’s only one).
  - “written by a Dutch author, Cees Nooteboom, ...” (what a difference a comma makes).
- 

**62. Cheery conclusions.** This one’s long. Read it.

An observation from a fellow educator: “Doesn’t the ‘Cheery Conclusion’ to the Slovene student essay drive you batty?”

Optimism and good cheer are fine and dandy, but be very careful when donning – against all textual evidence and reason – rose-coloured glasses for your final paragraph. Anyone can see through a salesman’s fake smile, and any reader can see when sappy-eyed optimism and good cheer do not reflect what you’ve just written.



Imagine the following conclusion to an essay on “Hamlet”:

“To sum up, I think that every ‘noble’ person could learn from Hamlet. He may have issues with his mother, and more so with his step-father, not to speak of the late Ophelia (whom he has driven to suicide), but his hatred, spite, philosophizing and, eventually, action were born of love. For without love we are moved not to action but to apathy. And Hamlet was not apathetic. He cared – and where’s the tragedy in caring?”

... or an essay on *Brave New World* and *1984* (two un-happy novels):

“It does not matter who you are, where you are from, what your favourite football team is. What is crucial is that every person is proud of what they really are. If we have strong personal values, even the grim worlds of Orwell’s *1984* and Huxley’s *Brave New World* cannot bring us down. There may be torture, yes; there may be death, yes; but the spirit lives on, even as the rats are released upon the victim, and that is the optimistic message that these authors transmit.”

The problems here are tone and representation. Ask yourself these questions: Does your happiness in the conclusion reflect the work you’re looking at? Does the tone in your conclusion contradict everything you’ve said before? Is your conclusion jolly and light-hearted even though the rest of the essay is deeply, depressingly, philosophical?

Now, after having accepted the inevitability of looming nuclear apocalypse, let’s all hug each other and look optimistically into the future.

(See “Tacked-On Conclusions” and “Hokey Advice” in *Writing Short Literature Essays*, 38)

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**63. Is it “only natural”?** The phrase “it’s only natural...” is rarely followed by a plain argument. It’s usually a prelude to prejudice: “It’s only natural that non-Slovenians should not be allowed to...” Or: “It’s only natural that women/men should...”

If you use this expression in your essays, be aware that:

- a) “It’s only natural...” is a cliché.
- b) It very often begs the question (since if something is “only natural,” there’s no need to make an argument in support of the claim. That’s the beauty of the claim to naturalness: as every politician knows, it precludes debate).

Save “it’s only natural” for talking about bodily functions. Otherwise, ask yourself whether another phrase and argumentation is in order.

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**64. He saw you and I (sic).** Back in grade school, every native speaker of English learned that “Johnny and I” is preferable to “Me and Johnny...” Alas, we’ve overgeneralized. We now love to say “and I” whenever we want to sound elevated – accusative be hanged.

Typical (incorrect) examples:

“This is not for the milkman! This is for you and *I!*”

“Sally saw John and *I* just last week.”

That’s all you’ll hear from *I* on this topic today. Always correct me and other native speakers when you hear this mistake.

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**65. *The Nature.*** As you know, “the nature” is almost always wrong – except for when you omit the definite article, and (inevitably) your teacher commiserates, “in this case, you need ‘the’ before nature.”

Two quick fix-its:

- 1) Avoid “nature” at all costs (good luck!).
  - 2) Whenever you write “the nature,” always qualify it:
    - a) “The nature around the hotel is beautiful.”
    - b) “Around the hotel in which I’m staying the nature is beautiful.”
    - c) “The nature of man is to avoid difficult grammar problems.”
-

**66. Christianity.** Straight from the SAT exam (the American college entry exam):

“PUMPS are to FOOTWEAR as CATHOLICISM is to...”

Answer: CHRISTIANITY

In other words, “Christianity” and “Christian” are the umbrella terms (covering the Baptists, the Catholics, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Protestants, the Orthodox denominations, etc.).

In other, other words: a Catholic will be a Christian, but a Christian is not necessarily a Catholic.

In other, other, other words: “Christian” and “Catholic” are not synonyms.

This is a common and often confusing translation error (that is particularly adored by Slovenian newspapers).

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**67. Accidental Poetry.** Read this sentence aloud and listen to why it sounds odd: “The protagonist was very weary of the various plots against him.”

“Very,” “weary,” and “VARI-ous” add a jolly jingly ring to what aims to be a serious sentence.

Unintentional rhymes and puns – or near-puns – can also undermine seriousness: “King Lear is nothing less than *irate* when forced to consider his *fate*” is bad rap.

Or: “Spurned by his lover, the hero goes into the *forest* to *pine*.”

Extreme alliteration can also sound too perky: “The poor pauper perishes without the pre-death pleasure of eating his wife’s pumpkin pie...”

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**68. Articles. Yuck.** A useless rule of thumb: whenever you don’t think you need a “the” or “a,” you *do*. If, however, you remember this rule on a test and erase the article, you were wrong to do so. (That’s not really funny, is it?)

More seriously, these examples assault my ears like the screeching of fingernails on a blackboard:

“The car is in *a* good shape.”

“After working out like a steroid-addled linebacker, she is in *a* good condition.”

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**69. “I must say” you sound old.** I must say I find the phrase “I must say” old-fashioned in essays.

“It must be said” is usually just as fusty, and very often pretentious-sounding. The combination of the moralistic-sounding “must” and the passive voice sounds ventriloqual among young writers. Unless you have retired to the smoking room to listen to the gramophone in your comfy elbow-patch cardigan, avoid both of these phrases.

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**70. Grammar Humour.** A funny quotation and an easy brain-teaser... It’s not often that grammar is smuggled into spy novels or jokes, but John Le Carré does it in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* when a politician moans and groans.

“I got voters to deal with. You don’t. Nor does Oliver Lacon, do you, Oliver? He had also, thought Smiley, the American violence with auxiliary verbs. ‘Yes, I’m sorry about that,’ he said.”

Did you get the joke? Correct, dull and stilted would be:

“I *got* voters to deal with. You *haven’t*. Nor has Oliver Lacon, *have* you, Oliver?”

But then the joke wouldn’t work, would it?

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**71. “In question” and “given.”** Here’s some oft-quoted (and splendidly circular) advice from George Orwell: “If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.”

Two words we can very often chop are “in question” and “given” – as least when the *given* words *in question* are used adjectivally.

Negative (but not incorrect) example 1: “Charlie Brown had to read *War and Peace* over the Christmas holidays and he found the *given* book long.”

Just as clear: “Charlie Brown had to read *War and Peace* over the Christmas holidays and he found the book long.”

Negative (but not incorrect) example 2: “When a writer creates a superb novel, we cannot claim that the novel *in question* will excite everyone.”

Just as clear: “When a writer creates a superb novel, we cannot claim that that novel will excite everyone.”

If you don’t want to repeat “that”: “When a writer creates a superb novel, we cannot claim that it will excite everyone.”

Spend a few minutes plugging “the book in question” or “the person in question” into a search engine. Many of the hits will be old; many will be legalistic. *Ergo, methinks...*, to sound like an octogenarian lawyer, sprinkle your texts with “in question” and “given.”

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**72. DNA.** If you can find a dozen friends who know that DNA somehow stands for “Deoxyribonucleic acid,” you’re probably not in an English Department.

And yet DNA is overused to the point of nausea. Consider these examples from the *New York Times* – that is, from a highbrow newspaper. All appeared over a 48-hour timespan:

“She noted that players on the men’s tour also grunt, ‘but our female DNA transmits it in a different way.’”

“Right about now, their fans need to cling to the desperate love that is engrained in their DNA.”

“In a sense animals are encoded in the DNA of the cinema.”

“It’s difficult, because some of it’s doing the right things from a preventative standpoint, and some of it is just the DNA and composition of the player.”

“Ms. Cheung, 29, said her sketch of the inside of the new Dart had the bold, graphic statements that go along with the whole Dodge DNA.”

“Stephen Friedman, president of MTV, said the series was the kind of creative, boundary-pushing imagery that is part of the DNA of the network.”

“(both share the laugh-at-the-other-classes DNA of reality shows like ‘Jersey Shore.’)”

... and that’s only a selection of them! How can “cinema” have “DNA”? Will cheering for the Charlotte Bobcats change my DNA?

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**73. Doctor, dr (sic).** English style guides disagree about the period after “Dr.” But they all agree that “Dr” should be capitalized – it is not “dr No” but “Dr No” or “Dr. No.”

“Prof. Dr. Dr. X” looks splendidly Germanic. Never attempt a do-it-yourself translation of “red. prof. dr. Y” (“Reg. Prof. Dr. Y” is baffling). You can simply write “Professor Y” or “Prof. Y.”

Further complicating matters is that the English-speaking world cannot agree on academic titles. You may be a “Wilde Reader” at Oxford, but puzzled American ears will hear only “wild reader.” Similarly, the Oxfordian might think that you mean a companion or “associate of a professor,” when you announce your title as “Associate Professor.” Wherever you are, the goal in academic life is to become a “chair.”

On a cultural note: English is far less excited about mentioning academic titles. A case in point: former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown had a PhD, but that was rarely mentioned. Even academic books leave out the author’s letters on covers.

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**74. Trim the Word-Fat.** Though clarity and even forceful reminders of arguments are good essay strategy, lexical redundancy is not. In plain English: chop the excess words.

Consider this example (the example is real, but I've changed the name): "Thus, at the funeral of the deceased sporting hero Richard Morris, the coffin was draped in the Quebec flag rather than the maple leaf."

In other words, in keeping with *funeral* tradition, they waited until the sporting hero was *deceased* before plopping him in the coffin. Why the need to emphasize the corpse's deadness? What *not-yet-deceased* person goes into a coffin?

Of course, intentional repetition adds a healthy comedy, as in this mock newspaper clipping from Chris Riddel's challenging postmodern masterpiece *Ottoline and the Yellow Cat*: "Police *remain baffled* by the burglary [...]. Police Commissioner Ronald Flatfoot admitted, "We *remain baffled*."

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### **75-77 Robot essays; even though; commas and ketchup**

**75.** How to make yourself sound like a robot...

Write in paragraph one: "This essay will examine the rise of the ketchup industry."

Write in the conclusion: "In conclusion, this essay examined the rise of the ketchup industry."

Why is this boring? First, the teacher knows it's an essay, you know it's an essay, anybody who looks at the page from a distance of less than five metres can see it's an essay. You don't have to state the obvious. Second, though "this essay will examine" and "this essay examined" have the virtue of clarity, it is mind-numbing to read these phrases in paper after paper after paper.

Wouldn't this be more exciting to read and write?

Paragraph one: “The rise of the ketchup industry was both surprising and dramatic.”

Conclusion: “Ketchup is a condiment without a lengthy tradition...”

In other words, state your purpose clearly but not formulaically. (See “Verbatim Repetition” in *Writing Short Literature Essays*, 35)

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**76.** “Even though” is causing some silly spelling problems. These are wrong:

- a) “So even though, ketchup is a modern dressing.” (not a complete sentence)
  - b) “Eventhough...” (misspelled)
  - c) “Even though, ketchup will remain on our hamburgers.” (“In spite of this,” “Nevertheless” or “Regardless” would be correct.)
- 

**77.** Commas and more ketchup. In a long sentence, use a comma to indicate a change of focus or grammatical subject.

Example (from a Malcolm Gladwell essay):

“Rozin is the food theorist who wrote the essay, ‘Ketchup and the Collective Unconscious,’ and Smith used her conclusion as the epigraph of his ketchup book: ketchup may well be ‘the only true culinary expression of the [American] melting pot, and ... its special and unprecedented ability to provide something for everyone makes it the Esperanto of cuisine.’”

Without the guiding commas Gladwell’s sentence would be very difficult to read in a hurry, or at all.

Read these two fragments for a sense of how a comma guides us and our expectations:

- a) “She arrived on the scene, surveyed the room and the chickens...”
- b) “She arrived on the scene, surveyed the room, and the chickens...”



The first implies she checked out the room and the chickens it contained; the second lets us know that the chickens will be up to something (“... and the chickens started to run.”).

Counter-example: “The groom wore his flip flops to the wedding and the bride was angry.” No comma is needed because the sentence is short and clear, even though there are two subjects. (In fiction, you’ll notice that the sentences get shorter and the commas begin to disappear when the action heats up.)

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**78. Too Much Life.** Slovenians, and not just philosophers, like “life” and needlessly add it to many word combinations. “Life existence” makes the reader wonder what the opposite might be. Similarly, “I want to realize my *life* dreams” is almost always redundant phrasing.

This is not to say that well-worn expressions like “life philosophy,” “philosophy of life,” and “life stories” are meaningless.

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**79. She says this in her quotes (how?)** These sentences are illogical: “Shakespeare says in one of his quotes, ‘Cowards die many times before their deaths.’”

“In one of her quotations, Simone Weil points out: ‘Beauty is the harmony of chance and the good.’”

There is an odd doubling here that makes it sound like Shakespeare and Weil are *quoting* others rather than saying something on their own.

Better:

“Shakespeare says in one of his plays, ‘Cowards die many times before their deaths.’”

“In one of her works, Simone Weil points out, ‘Beauty is the harmony of chance and the good.’”

(A side-note: when quoting literature, be fair to the author. Despicable characters are fun to quote, but don’t assume that the author agrees with the evil antagonist’s words.)

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**80. End your sentences with a bang.** When writing, don't let your sentence trail off... twice. Read these two zipless examples aloud.

Bad example 1: "My essay focuses on the role of ideology in literature teaching, more *specifically* in hidden ideology, *i.e.* what we do not see as ideology nevertheless colouring our interpretations of texts, *especially* in texts that are not obviously political."

Better (but still not great): "My essay focuses on the role of ideology in literature teaching, more specifically on how hidden ideology nevertheless colours our interpretations of texts."

Bad example 2: "End your sentences with a predictable bang, more specifically by ending them in the way that the reader might expect, such as with a single qualifying phrase – that is, not like this sentence, which is on the way to – to use an idiom and split an infinitive – flogging a dead horse."

If you use a phrase like "more specifically" or "that is to say" or "more precisely," following up with "i.e." or "e.g." is clumsy. It's like tacking a second train to a royal wedding dress.

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**81. *Many people ... not!*** Approximately every fifth student essay includes the phrase: "Many people think... *but it's not true!*"

This is tedious because as soon as you read "Many people think..." you already know how the sentence will conclude (only in humour is the faux-contrast *not* satisfied: "Many people think Slovenian is difficult ... and they're right!").

Sometimes it's just dullness of phrasing: "Many people think that poetry has to rhyme..."

Sometimes, however, the problem is more serious. "Many people think" becomes the basic argument of the essay: "Many people think that the

Bologna system is an import from North America, *but this essay will prove that it is not.*”

Such an essay would prove, at best, that the purported “many people” are kooky and that, surprise, surprise, “Bologna” is not centered in North America.

A few tips:

- 1) Just avoid “Many people think” or “People think.”
- 2) Ask yourself (before writing “many people think”) whether many examples come to mind. If no example jumps out, skip the generalization.
- 3) If you are truly, madly, deeply in love with “People think,” why not change the phrase a bit? By adding:
  - a) an adverb (“People *often* think...”);
  - b) adding an adjective or two (“*Fatuous, ill-informed* people like my cousin think...”);
  - c) changing the syntax: “Poetry has to rhyme, many people think,...”;
  - d) using the passive: “It is frequently thought...” (The passive, of course, has its own dangers.)

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## **82. *But ... But ...***

What is bothersome about this passage? (You’re probably tired of tips by now, so here’s a hint: look at the capitalized words.)

“The story is about an elderly woman, **BUT** this woman is not like any old granny. **BUT** what is ‘any old granny?’ Generalizing is always dangerous, **BUT** when it comes to grannies, we think baking, sedentary lifestyles and, on rare occasions, Eurovision performances by Russian grannies. **BUT** that is not the whole story. The author implies at the start that this will be a usual grandmother, **BUT** that is not the case.”

Overuse of “but” is the main problem. Sub-problems:

- a) The rhythm is destroyed because it is so predictable. (“..., but... But .... ..., but.... But...”)

- b) The should-be punchy sentences beginning “But...” quickly become a style-gimmick.

As challenging as it is, try not to use “but” more than three or four times per page, and never more than three times per paragraph.

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**83. Kids face/play with (sic) trouble because of *different* reasons.**

Some general and mixed points...

- 1) “Kids” is relaxed. “Children” is more formal. Be aware of the difference in tone.

Compare: “Will you *kids* pipe down out there!”

To: “Could you *children* people quiet down?”

- 2) Instead of Slovensh “*because of* different reasons,” write “*for* different reasons.”

- 3) The expression in English is: “to face trouble” (and not: “to face *with* trouble”). Similarly, “Slovenia plays *against* Norway” in football, not “*with* Norway.”

- 4) Here’s a helpful rhyme: “I before E, except after C...” Thus:

“greive” No.

“perCEIve” Yes.

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**84. Issues with “Issues.”** I freely admit that I have issues with “issues,” but please hear me out. For what exactly is an “issue”?

From Tennessee Williams and his play *Sweet Bird of Youth*:

Windbag Father: “Honey, you say and do things in the presence of people as if you had no regard of the fact that people have ears to hear you and tongues to repeat what they hear. And so you become a *issue*.”

Daughter: “Become what, Papa?”

Windbag Father: “A *issue*, a *issue*, subject of talk, of scandal [...]”

Often we don't need the word. Often it's vague. Often it's an essayist's way of dodging the question. And definitely it is worn-out in student essays.

1) Example for “We don't need the word”:

“This poem examines the issue of death.” Why not just “death”?

2) Example for “it's vague” (or euphemism or preciousness):

“So, have you managed to – nudge, nudge, wink, wink – solve that issue of yours?”

“The guy's got issues...”

(Admittedly, humour amply compensates for imprecision here.)

3) Example for “dodging the question”:

“There are several issues that must be considered in this poem.” (Synonym 1: “There's some important stuff in this poem.” Synonym 2: “I'll tell you the important stuff in the next sentence.” Question 1: Why not just tell me in the first sentence?)

To be clear: obviously, “issue” can be a perfectly useful, even needed, word. Whenever you use it, however, make sure you're fully aware of why you are writing it. If you can chop it, do.

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**85. *Trying to discuss.*** Do not write “This paper *tries to discuss* syntax...” or “This essay *attempts to argue*...”

Why not? Because even if the paper is awful, it *will* “discuss syntax...” to some degree; even an unconvincing argument *will* “argue.”

Also, the phrases “try” and “attempt” sound weak-kneed and wimpy. Boring.

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**86. Capitalizing Titles.** As a rule, capitalize the headwords in your essay titles:

“Translation Skeptics, Go Stuff Yourselfs”

“Slovenia. A Nation of Poets?”

Also capitalize the headwords when referring to an essay, article, or newspaper article within your essay:

E.g. “Newman argues in ‘Irony Is Dead. Again. Yeah, Right’ that irony is not dead.”

THE FINE PRINT:

A) *The Chicago Manual of Style* says: “Books and Articles. Titles of books and the names of journals always use heading caps in the text, titles of articles and documents generally do so too, and are placed in quotes.”

B) *The Modern Languages Association (MLA) style guide*: “The major words in the titles of books, articles, and songs (but not short prepositions or the articles ‘the,’ ‘a,’ or ‘an,’ if they are not the first word of the title).”

E.g. “One of John’s favourite fairy tales is ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ (though he is not fond of the movie version).”

C) Linguistics and the hard sciences (metallurgy, dentistry, etc.) do not capitalize entire titles.

E.g. “Evidence of the effectiveness of AlTi3C0.15 grain refiner in the presence of AlTi5B1 grain refiner in an Al-Fe alloy”

D) It appears that the UK is less excited about capitalization.

*New York Times* article: “South Korea Snares Satirists in Hunt for Spies”

*Guardian* article: “Poll reveals Britons’ hopes and fears”

E) This tip assumes you have bothered to provide an essay for your title (and “Essay Topic 1” is a lame substitute for originality).

F) This reluctance to capitalize is likely a carry-over from Slovenian.

(See “Titles of Primary Sources” and “Capitalization” in *Writing Short Literature Essays*, 63-66)

And that “as a rule” up above means “in general” or “as a rule of thumb,” *not* “this is the rule.”

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**87. From Singular to Plural.** What’s slightly off here?  
“You can listen to music on an iPad or portable radios.”

Did you notice the switch from singular (“iPad”) to plural (“portable radios”)?

“You can listen to music on *an* iPad or *a* portable radio” is smoother.

(The singular is usually more concrete and thus easier to envision. That’s why so many jokes begin “A guy goes into a bar...”)

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**88. Colons.** A tip: if you use a colon to introduce the quotation, end the sentence with the quotation. This is disastrous:

“Ogden Nash writes of a hunter: ‘This grown up man with pluck and luck / Is trying to outwit a Duck.’ which shows that he can laugh at men who wait around in swampy waters to.”

(Note that the full-stop after “Duck” is *wrong, wrong, wrong*. The sentence doesn’t end, so chop the period.)

Better:

“Ogden Nash writes of a hunter: ‘This grown up man with pluck and luck / Is trying to outwit a Duck.’ This shows...”

Another colon tip: when continuing to write after a colon in your sentence, it is often a reasonable and admirable idea to make it snappy and not produce a sentence that looks like a little poodle with a long, long tail. Oops.

Yet another colon tip: bran.

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**89. Too much *about*...** Though not wrong, “about” followed by a number is overused – e.g. “About 100 authors were at the festival.” Once or twice per page is reasonable, but it is dull, dull, dull to read in a single short text “*about* 100 authors..., *about* 100 dollars was raised..., ... *about* 1000 people were in attendance.”

For the sake of variety: “*some* 100 authors..., *approximately* 100 dollars..., ... *over* 1000 people...”

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**90. Punctuation and Sentence Tone.** Note the difference in tone between these sentences:

- 1) Punctuation in English is a royal pain but I’ll try to explain...
- 2) Punctuation in English is a royal pain, but I’ll try to explain...
- 3) Punctuation in English is a royal pain; but I’ll try to explain...
- 4) Punctuation in English is a royal pain. But I’ll try to explain...
- 5) Punctuation in English is a royal pain (but I’ll try to explain...).
- 6) Punctuation in English is a royal pain – but I’ll try to explain...

Each sentence sends a slightly different message:

- 1) (No punctuation) “Oh, it’s not so hard to explain punctuation. I’ll just steam along to the explanation.”
  - 2) (Comma) “It’s not so hard, but a half-breath is needed before I begin.”
  - 3) (Semi-colon) “A full breath is needed.”
  - 4) (Period) “A huge break for breath and strength-lending sandwich is needed. Beginning a sentence with ‘but’? That means you want the reader to pay attention!”
  - 5) (Brackets) “We’re almost whispering here (and putting the focus on punctuation, rather than my attempt to explain).”
  - 6) (Dash) “Moving off in a different direction – like when we shift to another conversational topic.”
- 

**91. *Bringing and Giving.*** In English “to bring” and “to give” imply handing over a physical object.

“They *give* you knowledge” evokes wise mashed potatoes being dumped on your mental plate.



“To bring...” is even more physical (“Bring the bucket! I feel sick!”).

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**92. As John Keats would say...** Use this phrase only when confident you know what’s going on in another person’s head:

“As my sister would say, ‘that shirt sucks!’”

“As Marx would say, ‘there’s a class issue here...’”

If you simply want to use someone else’s term, write something like, “*To use John Keats’s term, ‘negative capability’ is a key to poetry.*”

In other words, make it clear that you are borrowing that person’s words, not playing mind-reader.

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**93. What I like to call X.** Opinions may differ on this one. Is the phrase “what I call” or “what I like to call” necessary?

“When players are tired and begin to stall, we see what I like to call ‘creating naptime on the playing field.’”

“This poem contains what I call ‘last-minute reconsiderations.’”

If you come up with a new term, super. If it’s a telling and fresh term, let the reader figure that out for himself/herself. Poets and writers of fiction don’t say “Wasn’t that a cool expression?” whenever they come up with beautiful words. (If you insist on pointing out the newness of a phrase, “what might be called” works.)

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**94. “Is Maroon Really Red?”** Many essay titles ask this sort of question. Aside from showing an extraordinary lack of originality, such titles already reveal the answer – or at least hint very strongly that the answer is No.

Come up with a more enticing title than of “Is Maroon Really Red?”

“Maroon: The Colour that Was Red.”

“Marooned in Redness.”

Or even: “Maroon Moon, You Saw Me Standing Alone...”

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**95. Cult vs. *kult*.** In English “cult” used adjectively – as in “a cult novel” or “cult metal band” – means “cool,” “arch” and “edgy.” A film that is hard to find in cinemas or that is likely to offend might be a “cult classic.” A blockbuster starring Tom Cruise and with a gazillion advertising dollars behind it is not a “cult” film. Do not use “*kult*” as a synonym for everything from “classic” to “foreign” to “not bad” to “cool” to “I like it.” (When *Wall Street 2* came out, I learned: “*Pred dnevi je v ZDA premiero doživel drugi del kultnega filma...*” If *Wall Street* is a cult film, what is mainstream?)

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**96. To predominate and prevail.** These words are not wrong, but they appear too often in student essays. They are overly aggressive terms for relating neutral information:  
“They have many pizzas and sauce-based ones predominate.” Here, “... and most of them are sauce-based” would work.

“There are stray cats in this neighbourhood, and the tabbies predominate” sounds judgemental. If you do mean that tabbies are the bosses, fine; if you’re simply relating numbers, you might say, “...and the majority of them are tabbies.”

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**97. They are Different.** For every ten sentences that note “they are different,” I read approximately zero that say “differ.”

“Shakespeare and Williams are different in their diction” is so bland compared to “Shakespeare and Williams *differ* in their diction.”

Similarly, remember that “various” is a fine synonym for “different”:

“Different languages spoken here” is staler than “*Various* languages are spoken here.” It is staler because “various” is less frequent and therefore more interesting a word.

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**98. Not Needed Anymore.** “No longer” is almost always stylistically preferable to “not any more.”

“The car is not needed anymore” is one word longer than “The car is no longer needed.” Opting for the shorter phrase saves ink over a lifetime.

That said, “not ...anymore” is slightly stronger in tone. Compare:

“I don’t want to see you anymore.”

“I no longer want to see you.”

Though we get the message in the both, the first sounds a little more personal (compared to the emotional coldness of “no longer” – as in the firing phrase “Your services are no longer needed.”).

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**99. Add an adjective, add life.** Though students often revel in synonyms – perhaps to reach the minimum number of words for the assignment – they are very shy when it comes to adjectives. Sprinkle adjectives throughout your writing to show that you are a breathing individual with individual views, and that you know precisely what you are thinking:

“This course has taken the focus on my reading to a whole new level” says nothing.

“This course has taken the focus on my reading to a whole new and *troublesome* level” still bathes in cliché, but at least it points out that the “new level” is not a pleasant one.

(See “Add an Adjective or Adverb” and “Use Adverbs and Adjectives to Show Your Stance” in *Writing Short Literature Essays*, 58-59)

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**100. Hammer home the point.** To avoid losing your reader in long sentences, follow up a complicated sentence with a short sentence to hammer home your point and to ensure that nobody will miss your argument. Summarize your argument.

E.g. “Given the multitude of identities put forth as candidates, or potential candidates, as the actual breathing author(s) of at least some of Shakespeare’s plays, it would not be impossible to speak – at least tentatively – of him (her) in the plural. Was the Bard actually *bards*? Was there more than one Shakespeare?”

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**101. A Final Potpourri.** (Courtesy of my Practical English students)

1) Avoid verbatim translation from Slovenian, especially if the grammatical subject is *not* in the first position:

“Dinner cooks my grandmother” alludes to a vicious meal.

“Man bites dog” would be a very strange, if newsworthy, headline.

2) “I dunno” is an unfortunate filler. Consider this idiomatic exchange:

“Do you know where the library is?”

“I dunno ... go down this street, turn left at the lights and you’ll be right there.”

(To self: “Why did he just say, ‘I dunno’?”)

3) If you want to sound like you can’t speak English at all, say: “many informations...” or “he run” (i.e. drop the third-person “s”). Try slapping yourself in the head whenever you make these basic mistakes; also do it whenever you use “like” as, *like*, an empty filler.

4) When writing, you can look simple if you refuse to put a semi-colon before “therefore,” “however,” “furthermore,” and “moreover.” And with that, we’re back to Tip 1 and the admonishment, “Slovenians love making this mistake.”

But you do not suffer alone. Take comfort in knowing that the English-speaking world is catching up with you. But it’s still wrong.

## TIPS FOR IN-CLASS PRESENTATIONS

**Teach the class.** Whether discussing your pet poodle, chocolate, or the narrative structure in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, treat the presentation as if you were teaching a class. Make sure that everybody learns something productive, that everybody comes away with helpful knowledge they can apply to other areas of their lives. If you convincingly explain how the narrative flows in Conrad's novella about going down a river, perhaps your classmates will be able to apply their newfound knowledge to other texts and, ideally, their extra-curricular lives. In conclusion, *teach us*.

**Prepare.** This should be so obvious that no further explanation is required. Nevertheless... even if you know a lot about a topic, even if your spoken English is stellar, and even if you are one of those rare individuals that loves being on stage, *prepare!* Very few speakers can deliver a convincing, structured and engaging talk without notes (I have seen precisely three in my lifetime; I have seen or starred in dozens of half-prepared ad libbed disasters). Preparing notes for a full presentation does not mean you should slavishly read pre-cooked sentences, but it is comfortable to have something there in case your memory fails or you get the jitters. If you have a very strict time limit – as is often the case with academic conference papers – writing out your paper in full is almost a necessity. In such cases, *act out* your written script.

**Be theatrical.** This can be achieved in many, many ways. Walk around a bit; break up the rhythm by turning our attention from the overhead to the whiteboard; illustrate a point by means of a joke (especially if your joke bombs, be sure to mention *why* you told the joke); even if you're not a natural arm-waver, wave your arms so you don't look like an ice-sculpture; if you have handouts, unveil and distribute them halfway through, like a magician yanking a rabbit out of a hat; modulate your voice: speaking quietly can introduce a sense of drama, and speaking more loudly might remind Janez or Jana in the back row to shut up.

**Say something new.** “There is no new thing under the sun” is a pessimistic half-truth. And yet, even the world’s millionth presentation on *Romeo and Juliet* or the umpteenth overview of “English Irregular Plural Forms” can seem fresh and novel. Before you present, consider exactly what you have added to the topic. Make it clear to your audience that you are not merely parroting another researcher’s thinking. At the very least, present your views and opinions, point out the difficulties you have with, say, the plural of “rhinoceros” or “goose” (and why you have these difficulties), and criticize or applaud the secondary sources you use with phrases like “Despite his awful prose...” or “rather unclearly, X argues...”

**Speaking is not writing.** We can’t assimilate complicated ideas on first hearing, and when listening to an oral presentation, we can’t go back over a previous passage. Use shorter sentences, rephrase or repeat key points, explain all terminology (the whiteboard is there for you!), and make us all see why this *had* to be an oral presentation rather than a mere essay read aloud. The following might be a swell first sentence for an essay, but it’s far too long and convoluted for an oral presentation: “When considering the usage of the term ‘cosmopolitan,’ a term often taken to mean ‘citizen of the world’ not least in the laudable sense of being receptive to new ideas, and the concomitant semiotics of discourse surrounding the term, it is important...” (come to think of it, that’s a stinker sentence *anywhere*.)

**Mounds of Information.** If you pile biographical information on your classmates, you’ll lose them in no time. Isolated biographical facts will not thrill your peers. After all, everybody had to be born *somewhere*, so merely mentioning a random place in Texas or Taiwan is not titillating. If you link the birthplace to the person’s activity, however, or show how it affected his/her life, you’ve made the fact relevant.

Lists of awards or novels are boring (and I say that as a list-lover!). If you had never heard of a particular award before you started researching your presentation, is there a point mentioning it? Will the class know it? If you feel an award is significant, please, please tell us *why* it is significant and what it was for. E.g. “In 1967, Sally won the ‘Bennett Buggy Memorial Award,’ given annually to the finest hopscotch jumper in the county....” Or, “She was the first woman to win the coveted...”

**Interact with the class.** Ask questions throughout your talk. Even a rhetorical or simple question like “Does anyone know which poet stands over Prešeren Square?” reminds us that you are aware of our existence. If you plan to leave discussion time until later, let us know – and keep in mind that it is unusual to demand sudden last-minute input from us after having insisted on silence. If you have three questions for the class, space them out rather than firing them all off at the beginning and leading us to rot quietly for the remaining 17 minutes. Questions or no questions, make eye contact with the class.

**Try to guide the class.** Every presentation requires solid structure *and fluidity*. Changing tempo is a good way of keeping us attentive while you build your argument. A monotone voice is death to excitement, but a series of Woody Allenesque one-liners can also soon become tiring (especially if the topic is capital punishment or global warming). Here’s a cheap but effective trick: speak more quickly than you normally do for a few sentences, more slowly at other times. Lead the class to discussion through a series of mini-questions. If you want to floor us with Big Metaphysical Concerns, jab us with easier, more concrete questions before delivering the knockout query.

**React to the class.** If someone seems bored, look at them; if someone looks puzzled, perhaps you need to rephrase your last point. If someone is talking or texting, they’re ripe to be picked as a volunteer...

**Pick specific “volunteers.”** While it’s cruel to pick someone out of the blue and throw a tricky question at them (“Mojca! What do you think of Plato’s cave allegory?!”), unless you have a very, very kind class, nobody is going to volunteer answers. What to do? Ask specific individuals to read a line from the handout or overhead, to offer their view on the ideal flavour of ice cream, to attempt the pronunciation of a word written on the board in Cree, etc. If a single individual *does* jump to answer every question, spread the joy! In other words, ask other people.

**Enjoy the silence.** Give us a few seconds to ponder questions. Remember that time is relative, which means that two seconds of silence feels like an eternity when you’re in front of the class. Count “*One*-alligator-

*two-alligator-three-alligator-four-alligator-five-alligator*” (preferably not aloud) before providing your own answer.

Also, sometimes there will be silence if a question is too easy. Deal with this as you see fit. There’s no need for alligator-counting if the question was a rhetorical “Does anybody know what day it is?” In that case you might want to say, “Of course, we all know it’s Monday” or say, “Maja, can you remind us what day it is?”

**Respect the audience.** It’s usually a result of nervousness, but... *never* abuse or badger the audience! Sometimes speakers gripe at their classmates for their lack of knowledge. This is just \_\_\_\_\_ (you can fill in the blank better than I can). As well, even if you happen to be great pals with Maja or Martin, don’t bark at her or him for not volunteering. For the rest of us, it’s like watching a lovers’ tiff when you say, “Ah, come on, Martin, help me out here!”

**End with a bang (not a whimper).** In terms of stage presence, I prefer those who say, “That’s it!” and sprint to the comfort of their seats. This is not an ideal conclusion – and, of course, I’ll still have a question or two for them – but it’s better than verbal spiralling off into silence: “That’s, uh, all I had to say. I could, perhaps also have mentioned that the author...but then I would have needed more time...in any case, I hope you liked...did I mention, I was a tad nervous?” When in doubt, just end with a firm “Thank you for your attention!” or (if you have more chutzpah) “Now you may clap!”









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