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102 English Tips

Another Quick Guide to Avoiding "Slovenglish"

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102 ENGLISH TIPS:
Another Quick Guide to Avoiding "Slovenglish"

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CONTENT

Only at/not until
Persuade and dissuade
Puts it nicely/shows nicely
Rather
Really
Revolves and evolves
Started/began to
Shed (some) light on
Sure and surely
Temporal and temporary
That and so that
Thematize
Therefore and "zato"
There is/are and exist(s)
Too long
Until not long ago
Yet
Young/elderly Hemingway

STYLE
Adding life to descriptions
Adverbs in neutral and cited sentences
Appositions and relative clauses
Circularity
Develop your own (passionate) voice
Footnotes and endnotes
"In... in..." patterns
In other words
Lists
Long sentences
Look forward
Making observations
Overuse of conjunctions
Private companies
Redundant complexity
Repetition of "I," "this," "of" and "so"

Repetition of meaning
Repetition of vague expressions
Repetition of words sentence-initially
Short sentences
Starting an essay
Starting an essay with a quotation
Strings of adverbs
Strings of pronouns
To-infinitival constructions
Vagueness, tenses and bland expressions
Word order
Zero relative clauses

PUNCTUATION AND LAYOUT
Apostrophe
Block quotations
Colons
Comma after a lengthy subject
Commas and decimals
Comma in comment clauses, participle clauses and appositions
Comma in (non-)restrictive relative clauses
Comma splices
Decades
Exclamation mark
Footnotes and endnotes
Hyphen
Indenting
Italicizing the comma
Percent sign
Period/full stop
Period, full stop or dot?
Quotation marks
Quotations – placement
Quotations within quotations
Quoting and punctuation
Sentence-ending punctuation

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is a catalogue of favourite English mistakes made primarily (but not only!) by Slovenians. As its title hints, *102 English Tips: Another Quick Guide to Avoiding "Slovenglish"* is a follow-up to *101 English Tips: A Quick Guide to Avoiding "Slovenglish."* The overwhelming majority of student mistakes are covered explicitly in these two guides. That's worth repeating: *the overwhelming majority of student mistakes are covered explicitly in these two guides.* Study these two guides and you're guaranteed to improve your written English significantly.

Read and return to *101* and *102*. Do so frequently and critically. Do so frequently because it takes time to evict these stubborn and unwanted guests from your writing and speaking (even the smoothest speakers occasionally mix up "let" and "leave," or "crush" and "crash"); do so critically because if you're a student of English it's no longer (always) a matter of simple rules, of right and wrong. Sometimes you might have good cause to flout a rule.

Also, be on the lookout for sarcasm and tongue-in-cheek comments in this guide! The tone of *102 English Tips* is meant to be as light as it is possible for a grammar book to be. Because this is a list of tips, and because tips should be short, the explanations are sometimes pithy. *102 English Tips* is not a replacement for a formal grammar book. These tips don't always conform to a specific variety of English (though rumour has it there's a slight North American bias), and they err on the side of brevity and bad jokes.

102 TIPS

WORDS AND PHRASES

(A) few and (a) little
Spot the howler in this sentence:
"I have learned few things over the years," said my dad, with a wistful and knowing look.

Here, "few things" is a synonym for "I have learned virtually nothing..."

Sometimes a missing article makes a big difference:
"I have learned A FEW THINGS over the years," said my dad, with a wistful and knowing look.

Another example:
"I know few things about cars" means: "You don't want me taking a wrench to your engine."
"I know a few things about cars" means: "You can't fool me – I'm not buying your second-hand lemon."

Also note the difference between the analogous examples with '(a) little':
"I had little time to react" means "There wasn't enough time, there was not much I could do."
"I had a little time to react." means "I had to do it fast but I could do it."

Without the indefinite article, the quantifiers "little" and "few" have negative meanings.

A bit (of a)
Wrong: "Writing in a bit snotty way."
Correct: "a bit of a snotty way."
More elegant-sounding and formal, though just as annoying: "a somewhat snotty way."

Adjectives in –ly
Some sneaky adjectives look like they should be adverbs because they end in -ly.

Examples:
"We piled our dishes DISORDERLY" is wrong.
"She passed him a cup of tea MOTHERLY" is equally wrong.

There are a few solutions here:
1. opt for ugly and clumsy but clear phrases: "in a disorderly/motherly manner/way/fashion"
2. search for a synonym, or paraphrase: "We piled our dishes chaotically." or "She passed him a cup of tea, as if she were his mother."
3. Avoid -ly adjectives like the plague – which is of course a repetition of 2 (and impossible to do on a daily basis).

Some other adjectives in –ly are: fatherly, friendly, lonely, elderly and lively. When they mean 'characteristic of' (e.g. "motherly"), they are typically in the attributive use. This means that they stand before the noun, as in "fatherly advice."

Among others
A common transfer error involves the overuse of "among others" by Slovenian speakers.

Some food for thought: the phrase "med drugim" has a higher corpus frequency count than "hrana" in Slovenian (see the corpus Nova beseda, which was 44,099 for the various forms of "hrana" and 57,593 for "med drugim"). In English, on the other hand, "among others" is not so common (the BNC, or British National Corpus, gives 472 hits for "among others" and 18,681 for "food"). Don't sprinkle your English-language prose with "among others."

As (I) mentioned
The "I" in "As I mentioned earlier" should be avoided. Just write: "As mentioned..." instead. Also, the combination "as it is mentioned" is not acceptable.

Two further notes:
1. Do not overuse this phrase.
2. You can usually drop the "earlier" – the past tense tells us not to fast-forward in the essay. (No one would write "As I *will mention* earlier...")

Also see the tip "Look forward" in the section "Style."

As and because
If you use "as" to express reason and result (as a synonym for "because" or "since"), you can often add clarity by putting a comma before it.
1. Potentially ambiguous: "He went to the store as he needed potato chips." ("when" or "because"?)
2. Clearer: "He went to the store, as he needed potato chips."
3. Even clearer, if the WHY or MOTIVE is to be emphasized: "He went to the store, because he needed potato chips."

Readers anticipate sentence direction – that is, we all anticipate how a sentence will continue (think of the "...not!" joke that undoes what we've just heard). With the comma before "as," the (intended) link between the cause and the result is easier to establish.

Author
Instead of "the author," just write the author's name, e.g. NOT "The author's novel..." but "Hemingway's novel..."

Two more details:
1. remember, in literature papers, to avoid Slovenian-style initials – NOT "C. Dickens" but "Charles Dickens" or just "Dickens."
2. "author" sounds odd for the visual arts and even odder for music. Picasso was a painter, Beethoven was a composer, and so on."

Borrow and lend
An ancient joke instead of a lengthy explanation:
"Can I borrow an egg?"
"Will you return it?"

If returning the item is not an option, "borrow" can sound strange.

Also, if you can't move something, you usually can't borrow it:
1. Wrong: Can we borrow your playground in the afternoon?
2. Correct: Can we use your playground in the afternoon?

Unlike native speakers, Slovenians rarely mix up "borrow" and "lend:"
1. Wrong: Can I lend your pen?
2. Correct: Can I borrow your pen?

Century
Use "the early/late 19th century" rather than "at the beginning of/at the end of the 19th century" (this is the influence of "začetek/konec stoletja").[1]

Also see the entry "Hyphen" in the section "Punctuation and layout."

Colours
1. Redundant: "Red colour is important to my life."
   Better: "Red is important to my life." (Since "red" is obviously a colour).
2. If you want to emphasize the *colourness* of the colour red, write: "The colour red is important to my life."
3. Also, "colour" often appears in sentences discussing less common colours or colour combinations: "Can I dye my hair from a reddish/purplish colour to a light brown colour?" (Feel free to read through Yahoo Answers[2] if you want to find out if this is possible.)

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1 Read more on article use in Frančiška Lipovšek's article "Misconceptions about article use in English" (*ELOPE* III/1-2, 2006).

2 https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20110608040550AASbExU

Crush and crash
"Crushed" is good for cans, bugs, and emotional hardship.
1. "Kunigunda crushed the beer can with her foot."
2. "She was crushed by a Japanese monster." ("Godzilla," The Arrogant Worms)
3. "I was crushed when my crush on John..."

Unless the car/bicycle/skateboard is totalled – as in flattened – from above (perhaps by falling rocks or UFOs), write: "crashed the car..."

Does a good job
The phrase "does a good/excellent job" is wildly overused among native speakers.

Is there NO other way of saying "s/he done good" [sic]?

See if you can avoid it in your essays.

England/English and Britain/British
Years ago, a Scottish teacher trainer asked a bunch of teachers-to-be:
"Can you place Liverpool, London and Leeds on a map of England?"
Several hands went up.
"Excellent! Now, can you place Liverpool, Glasgow and Cardiff on a map of England?"
A few English hands went up.
"On a map of England?"
Some hands went down.
"Really?"
Only a few confident hands remained up.
"Well, young teachers-to-be, last I heard, Glasgow was in Scotland..."

Oops. The point? England is only a part of Britain. Britain includes England, Scotland and Wales; the United Kingdom, on the other hand, also includes Northern Ireland. To describe the nationality of somebody from the UK, use "British." Even in informal conversation, be extremely

careful with "England" and "English" as synonyms for "Britain" and "British" – especially if you are chatting up a Scot or a Welshman.

Also, don't forget the definite article, as in "The British are coming!"

Europe

If you are talking about the European Union, say, "European Union."

1. "Slovenia is in Europe" is obvious.
2. "Switzerland is not in Europe" is a bizarre statement.
3. "Croatia went to Europe" is cryptic if you mean "entered the European Union."

For different/several reasons

The phrases "for different reasons" or "for several reasons" are pointless unless you provide at least some of those reasons. This is a common transfer error. "For objective reasons" is equally vague and twice as cryptic for native speakers.

First, firstly and the first

If you don't know the difference between "first" as a synonym for the adverb "firstly" and the ordinal numeral "first," make sure you hide the fact!

Consider these (correct) examples:

1. "First (=firstly), I would like to address the issue..." (adverb)
2. "He was the first to arrive." (ordinal numeral)

Now consider the egregious mistake in each of these sentences:

3. "First person to set foot on the moon..."
4. "There are three ways to eat a chocolate éclair. First..." (note that there is no comma here – "First" is *not* an adverb.

No. In 3 and 4, it has to be "THE first." Ordinal numerals are used with the definite article when the meaning of ordering is expressed. In short, not each and every use of an ordinal numeral calls for "the."

From/between
This is a sentence from an e-mail:
"I can meet you from 1 to 5."

A four-hour meeting? Persuasive interrogation? Thankfully, just a signature was needed... The fear arose from a poorly-chosen preposition.

Correct: "I can meet you BETWEEN 1 and 5."
(...and, of course, it is not "late FOR ten minutes" but "ten minutes late")

Gossip
Ruminate on this sentence:
"The gossips were gossiping about gossip."
1. "The gossips" – people
2. "to gossip" – verb
3. "gossip" – singular noun. No need for the plural, even if you have oodles of stories about your neighbour.

How it would be like to...
Instead of the half-Slovenglish "how it would be like to...," write "what it would be like to..."

Wrong: "I wonder how it would be like to climb Everest."
Correct: "I wonder WHAT it would be like to climb Everest."

The Google test:
1. "how it would be like to" (c. 2 million hits, Slovenia's population)
2. "what it would be like to" (c. 93 million hits, Germany and Greece's population combined)

And the number of hits for "how it would be like to" in the British National Corpus? Zero.

In other words
"In other words," be brief.

When you summarize a complicated argument with "In other words...," the reader will be thankful and think "I won't be left behind!"

Just don't make your thoughts *more* complicated. Your follow-up sentence should contain fewer words than the preceding one – that is, than the one that it is clarifying or summarizing. In other words, the sentence with "in other words" should be shorter.

A whimsical but useful example:

"The patient became dislodged from his saddle, through some force of nature or perhaps stroke of misfortune, by a low-hanging tree branch as he sought to pass under it. IN OTHER WORDS, he fell off his horse."
[29 words, followed by 8]

A negative example (changed very slightly from an academic article):

"I contend, with many other contemporary literary critics, that being self-conscious as a reader with regard to the philosophies and ideological standpoints that steer our reading is a positive way of circumventing the trap of producing a superfluous or hackneyed theory that, while pretending to unveil something new about a text, in fact leads to an interpretive silence. IN OTHER WORDS, I do not contend that there is no utility in assuming a firm theoretical position, though I do contend that such firmness, while perhaps offering the intellectual solace of clarity of assertion and even results, is more limiting than illuminating because it fails to recognize the theoretical blind-spot that curtails our understanding from the very outset."
[58 words, followed by 58. This is fearful symmetry]

Here, "In other words" is false advertising. It looks like the writer will make things easier for us! ...but s/he doesn't.

On a stylistic note, you don't have to put "In other words," in the first sentence position. What I mean, IN OTHER WORDS, is that you can do what this sentence does.

If I am honest
In order to avoid the grammatical niceties and nuances of indirect conditionality, a simplistic rule: Avoid "If I am honest..."

A fine hedge in spoken English ("How do you like my new flip flops?" "Well, *if I am honest*, they suck!"), the phrase has suffered from overuse. This is probably because especially beginners learn to say, "If I am honest..." in order to buy time to figure out exactly what they want to say.

Of course, some eloquent speakers of English also adore this phrase...

From a *Huffingtonpost.co.uk* interview with a politician:

"'That sort of fund manager is a different world from investment banking. IF I'M HONEST WITH YOU' – A PHRASE, RATHER DISCONCERTINGLY, REPEATED BY [the politician] SEVERAL TIMES THROUGHOUT THE INTERVIEW."[3]

i.e. the interviewer is thinking, "gee, is it ever annoying to hear him say 'if I am honest...' so many times!"

It can be seen
The sentence lead-in "It can be seen that..." very soon clogs up the sentence.

To save a few words – and to get to the point – you can use an adverb instead.
1. "It can be seen that the hero is hurt when the dragon leaves him" ("Pretty, like truck," as the saying goes).
2. "The hero is evidently/obviously/visibly hurt when the dragon leaves him."

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3 Source: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/09/30/ed-balls-interview-bitch_n_1926677.html

It is so
"It is so..." usually requires an adjective and a clear pronominal reference for "it."

If you use "It is so" as a synonym for "the situation is thus...," your sentence usually sounds odd:
"The movie is poor. IT IS SO because they ran over budget and had to cut corners."

Just say: "THIS IS BECAUSE they ran over budget..."

This example is, of course, sooooo idiomatic (and more common in spoken English):

"It [i.e. the movie] is so awful!"

It is so because
"It is so because..." is a transfer error. Just use "This is because...":
"John is feeling awful this morning. This is because he ate a bad taco last night."

It seems (to me)
In written English, don't bother with "it seems TO ME." "It seems" always shows your personal attitude (which is why we have to expressly state "It seems *to Katarina*...").

In the British National Corpus, only about 10% of the hits for "it seems" include "to me."

It would be nice
It would be nice if we all avoided the phrase "it would be nice."
1. It is overused.
2. It can sound sarcastic ("It would be nice if you got off your arse and closed the window that *you* opened...").
3. It does not say much. "It would be nice to go to the zoo..." does not ooze enthusiasm.

Unless you are Borat of *Borat* fame, the adjective "nice" is bland, colourless and non-committal.

"Nice" also has a dubious past. Over the centuries it has meant "accurate" or "exact." Over the centuries it has meant everything: foolish, senseless; silly; fussy; fastidious; dainty, delicate; fussy; exact.

According to the sexist example cited in the Online Etymology Dictionary,[4]

"By 1926, [the word 'nice'] was pronounced 'too great a favorite with the ladies, who have charmed out of it all its individuality and converted it into a mere diffuser of vague and mild agreeableness' [Fowler]."

Just

"Just" is a useful and slippery term. It can be used for emphasis ("Just stop it!") or as a synonym for "fair-minded" ("He's a just man, but a pain to deal with").

The word "just" can often sound flippant or trivializing – as in the song lyrics "It was just one of those things."

Consider this example:
"Adjudicators are just people and they mark candidates accordingly."

Two problems:
1. is "just" an adjective with the meaning of "righteous" or "equitable"?
2. if "just" is an adverb – which is the more likely possibility here – is there a suggestion that "adjudicators" should be MORE than "people"?
3. (but who's counting?) ...perhaps this is just/merely/only/quite simply a transfer error from Slovenian.

Clearer:
"Adjudicators are ONLY HUMAN and they grade candidates accordingly."

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4 http://www.etymonline.com

Let and leave
Note the very important difference between "let" and "leave" in constructions like this:
1. "I LEFT my brother clean up the mess." (Wrong)
2. "I LET my brother clean up the mess." (Correct)

This is also possible:
"I LEFT my brother TO clean up the mess" (i.e. "I made him clean up the mess.")

That sentence is potentially ambiguous because it could be understood as "I took leave of my brother in order to clean up..."

Save yourself some effort and opt for "let" – it's easier than sentences like: "The mess was left to my brother to clean up."

"let" – similar to "I allowed"
"leave + to + verb" – a hint of abandonment (as in "She left him in the lurch...")

Of course, "left" is stronger in tone:
"I let him gaze at me while I ate the ice cream."
"I left him to gaze at me while I ate the ice cream."

Also, use "allow" (and not "let") in the passive voice:
1. Correct: "He was allowed to enter the building."
2. Wrong: "He was let to enter the building."

Let alone
A rule of thumb for using the phrase "let alone" is that it generally follows a negative. The word "any" behaves in this way as well (as we all know, such words are often termed "polarity items").

Three examples from an online book-search for "let alone consider":
1. "NOBODY can be conscious of, let alone consider, all aspects..."
2. "But it is already an advantage with respect to interpretive economy NOT TO HAVE TO CONSIDER the possibility of having here case of type 3 of CS, let alone consider the adjectival meaning..."

3. "There is such a chaos of contentious, inconsistent, unrelated elements in the field that it is IMPOSSIBLE to make sense of it, let alone consider it to be scientific."

Compare these distortions of Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham*:

Correct:
"I would not, could not, in the rain.
Not in the dark. [LET ALONE] on a train..."

Bizarre (after Sam tries the eggs and ham):
"And I will eat them in the rain.
And in the dark. [LET ALONE] on a train..."

Of course, you can also use "let alone" to signal a contrast or intensification of (negative) possibilities, as in these two examples:
1. "In a postmodern era of exponential change, how can we take stability seriously, LET ALONE consider it a virtue?"
2. "The embodiment of ugliness belonging to one person was too overwhelming to separate, LET ALONE consider that it was coming from a father who would do anything for his family."

Synonyms for "let alone" include "much less" and "still less" and "gee, golly, I don't even want to..."

Namely
"Namely" is overused by Slovenian students.

This is hardly a surprise if you compare the nearly 250 000 hits for "namreč" in the Nova beseda corpus with the measly 2145 hits for "namely" in the British National Corpus. These numbers alone strongly suggest that "namely" is not an exact equivalent of "namreč."

Ponder the Slovenian original and its (wrong) translation:
"Tekmovalcev je bilo malo, večina jih namreč služi vojaški rok."
"There were few competitors, namely a lot of them are in the army."

When "namreč" is used as a conjunction that has the function of explaining, justifying or giving reasons for what has just been said, translating it with "namely" is not possible.[5]

Here's an elegant and correct instance of "namely" in English, courtesy of Don Patterson and his *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets: A New Commentary*:

"The sense more strongly implies another bloke called Will, namely our feathered friend. (If we conflate him with the YM in Sonnet 144, it certainly lends some credence to the Mr W. Herbert theory.)"

Numerous
There's something curious going on with "numerous," but neither of us can put a finger on it. The problems stem from overuse and tone.

1. OVERUSE of "numerous."
   Slovenians write "numerous" very, very often. This might be related to the frequency of "številen" in Slovenian – the corpus Nova beseda lists tens of thousands of examples with the word, while the frequency for "numerous" in the British National Corpus is 3182.

   Do you need to use it three times in a single page? Or twice in a short passage, as in this (slightly changed) example?
   "She has performed with numerous Slovenian theatres and in the last couple of seasons. A well-known presenter on the radio and television, she has received numerous awards in Slovenia as well as abroad."

2. TONE when using "numerous."
   "Legion" or "hordes of" are synonyms for "numerous." In plain English, "numerous" means, "Wow, so many I can't even begin to count..."

   Use "numerous" only when you want to emphasize the largeness of a number, or if you are being rhetorical:
   "I have told you numerous times to take out the trash" (perhaps twice...)
   "My fine football team has defeated yours numerous times" (once...)

5 The examples and the explanation are taken from Primož Jurko's article "Divergent Polysemy: The Case of Slovene *namreč* vs. English *namely*" (ELOPE IV/1-2, 2007).

These examples sound exaggerated:

1. "The reader notices the use of numerous personal pronouns in this story." (There aren't *that* many "personal pronouns" in existence!)
2. "Countless possible story lines and numerous events evolving at the same time in the same space leave the reader wandering in the dark" (This lovely sentence works only if there are oodles and bunches of events. Don't write "numerous" if there are only "three" events).

Don't avoid the word, but do ask yourself if "many" or "several" would do the job.

A few more synonyms from thesaurus.com:

"bags of, endless, gobs, heap*, immeasurable, incalculable, infinite, innumerous, jillion, legion, limitless, loads, lots of, many , measureless, mess*, mint, mucho, multitudinous, myriad, numberless, oodles*, passel of, peck, pile, raft, scads, slew, stack, tidy sum, umpteen, uncountable, uncounted, untold, wad, whole slew, zillion"

(For some cryptic reason, only "heap" and "mess" and "oodles" are marked as informal! Also, be careful to add "of" after "loads," "slew," "raft," etc.)

Odd

This is an odd tip because it has to do with a single word. The word is "odd."

"Canada sent the odd performer behind the Iron Curtain..." can mean "...sent the WEIRD/STRANGE/KOOKY performer..."

It can also mean something like "*every once in a while* Canada sent a performer behind the Iron Curtain in those years."

Check out the sub-titles next time you watch a film. Very, very often even good translators flub this one, making for *odd* translations.

Sentences like “She has the odd beer every now and then” come out as grammatical but incomprehensibly bizarre. Compare the translations:
1. Wrong: Kdaj pa kdaj popije čudno pivo.
2. Correct: Kdaj pa kdaj popije kakšno pivo.

Also, don’t forget about some other uses of “odd:”
1. “odd jobs” – “priložnostna dela”
2. “odd numbers” – “liha števila”

Only at/not until
When mentioning time, note the difference between “only at” and “not until”:

“I can meet you only at four” does not mean “I can’t meet you until four.”

If you want to emphasize tardiness, use “not until”:
1. “He only got there at noon.” (Neutral)
2. “He did not get there until noon.” (He’s lazy!)

Persuade and dissuade
Instead of “persuade not to do,” write “dissuade from doing”:
“I dissuaded him from wearing my sombrero to the party.”

Puts it nicely/shows nicely
The phrase “puts it nicely” or “shows nicely” can sound patronizing and, sometimes, downright grotesque.

1. Patronizing
“Shakespeare puts it nicely when he has Hamlet say, ‘To be or not to be...’” (Well done, my wee Bardlet!)

The problem here seems to be a combination of weak praise – since “nice” is the minimum of praise.

2. Grotesque

"Shakespeare puts it nicely when he has Cornwall say to Gloucester, 'See't shalt thou never' and 'Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot.'" (There isn't much that's "nice" about blinding Gloucester.)

By the way, when you come across "nice" in older texts, try to determine the contemporary meaning. The adjective has had more lives than Madonna. At one time, "You look nice!" meant "You look foolish!" See the entry "It would be nice" for more on this.

Rather

"Rather" is rather annoying because it looks like it should be a verb:
"I would rather eat snake soup," she said after he asked her out.

"Rather" is a degree adverb. It is not a verbal synonym for "to prefer," which means that this sentence is wrong and torture to the eye or ear:

1. Wrong: "I rather run away than fight you."
2. Correct: "I would (I'd) rather run away than fight you."

In lieu of a lengthy explanation, use this rule of thumb:
When qualifying verbs, only use "rather" with "would."

Really

Do we really need "really" in an essay title?

All of these headlines appeared *in a single day* in a highbrow newspaper:

1. "How much do the Golden Globes REALLY tell us about the Oscars? Not much"
2. "Does [engaging in a certain illegal act] REALLY lower teens' IQs? A new study begs to differ"
3. "Does the 'feed and fast' diet REALLY work?"

Surprise, surprise, in each case the answer was "no!"
"Really" may be super for grabbing attention, but it's lousy for suspense because it gives away the answer.

Other problems:
1. "Really" gives away the answer (oops, we mentioned that)
2. "Really" often reduces complicated issues to YES/NO (but see 5, below)
3. overuse
4. overuse
5. "Really" invites equivocation ("You said the 'feed and fast diet' doesn't work!" "No, I said it doesn't 'really work.'" "You mean, it might work, in a way? Or do you mean that it does not work?" "That's not RE-ALLY what I said.")

(For a definitive overview of the other *really* – that is, the incredulous, sarcastic, eyebrow-bobbling *Really?* – see "*Really?!?* The Story of a Buzzword" in Ben Yagoda's *You Need to Read This: The Death of the Imperative Mode, the Rise of the American Glottal Stop, the Bizarre Popularity of "Amongst," and Other Cuckoo Things That Have Happened to the English Language*.)

Revolves and evolves
Note: "revolves around" but "evolves from":
1. "We all evolved from mud, or at least most of us did."
2. "The story revolves around a tedious love triangle."

Started/began to
Be careful with "started to" and "began to," especially if the action is immediate:
"She started to throw a punch."

Never has a fast action seemed so slow!
"He began to fall asleep in class on Monday."
"He fell asleep in class on Monday" suffices.

Shed (some) light on
If you read many academic articles, you will begin to hate the phrase "to shed some light on..."

A few examples:
1. "This paper aims to shed some light on immigration."
2. "This paper strives to shed light on the movie industry."
3. "This paper has as its purpose the shedding of light on academia."

Dull, dull, dull. And we have to read on to figure out what the paper is actually about.

Using the replacement test, we arrive at: "By turning on the lamp, I aim to shed light on the room..." Silly-sounding, but no less circular than the above examples.

There may be arguments for using "shed light on." Keep in mind, however, that:
1. The phrase is overused to the point of cliché or nausea.
2. If the noun after "shed light on" is vague, the sentence is hardly illuminating. a, b, and c, do not provide a thesis.
3. The combination "aims to" or "tries to" or "strives to" with "shed light on" is almost always laughable.
4. What is "some light"?

...if you are specific, the phrase "to shed light on" is tolerable:
"This paper aims to shed light on the use of Form T-29a in regulating immigration."
"This paper strives to shed light on the use of professional Slovenian soccer players in the movie industry."

Sure and surely
Note the difference between "sure" and "surely."

1. "This passage sure is meant to be ironic." (Slang)
2. "The story is surely meant to be ironic." (A suggestion)

Use "surely" to express your objection to someone's words or actions:
"But surely he must have mentioned it?" (You are wrong in suggesting he didn't.)

Use “sure” to show certainty:
“I’m sure he mentioned it.” (I know this.)

Temporal and temporary
Be aware of the difference between “temporal” and “temporary”:
1. Wrong: “I fixed the coffee maker with some duct tape. This is just a TEMPORAL solution.”
2. Correct: “This is just a TEMPORARY solution” – as in “ad hoc solution” or “band-aid solution” or “I’ll fix it properly next week...”

“Temporal,” on the other hand, can mean either “not spiritual, secular” or “related to time.” Here are a couple of examples from the British National Corpus:
“...the secular rulers who thought only of temporal gain...”
“...temporal and social relationships between participants...”

That and so that
Spot the Slovenglish in this jingly sentence:
“Give me that thing that I cut off the string.”

Correct: “Give me that thing SO that I CAN cut off the string.”

Remember to add “so” and “can” to show purpose – “that” is not enough in English.

If you really want to leave something out in a clause of purpose introduced by “so that,” try with “that:”
“Give me that thing so I can cut off the string.”

Thematize
One word: “thematize.” What does it mean? According to Merriam-Webster.com, it means: “to make something (as an idea) a theme or framework.” Whatever that means.

Merriam-Webster also offers an excuse:

"This word doesn't usually appear in our free dictionary, but the definition from our premium Unabridged Dictionary is offered here on a limited basis. Note that some information is displayed differently in the Unabridged."

This means that "thematize" is not a common word (in fact, the dictionaries on our computers don't even recognize "thematize" or "thematise") and the British National corpus only lists a handful of hits related to the concept of "theme" in linguistics.

The point? Don't overuse "thematize" as an equivalent for "tematizirati."
"Discusses" or "analyzes" almost always does the trick:
"The paper discusses light alloys in bicycle manufacturing."
"The article analyses Slovenian foreign policy."

Therefore and "zato"
A common transfer error is the misuse of "therefore" – students equate "zato" with "therefore" and use it inappropriately instead of "so."
1. Wrong: "He was tired therefore he went to bed." [sic]
2. Correct: "He was tired so he went to bed."

And this is how you use "therefore" correctly (with the meaning of "for that reason"). The example is taken from the BNC.

1. And if the worst does not arise – anything else must be better and therefore easier to handle!

There is/are and exist(s)
Another tip based on a common transfer error. Use "There is/are" rather than "exist(s)" ("obstajati").

Too long
"Too long" can neatly be replaced by "overly long" when used before a noun.

"This too long novel is dull."
"This overly long novel is dull."

(Hyphenated "too-long" has a smidgen of humour. E.g. "'Yet another of his too-long lectures,' moaned Raul." The humour comes from the intentional flouting of the rules.)

Until not long ago
The phrase "Until not a long time ago..." is less idiomatic than "until not long ago..."
"Until not long ago, I cheered for Ptuj."

It's obvious that "long ago" has to do with time, so you can chop "time."

Similarly, phrases like "a year of days" ("leto dni"?) are redundant. A year is a year is a year. You don't have to subdivide the time.

(That said, if you are emphasizing the waiting, it can work – e.g. "I've been waiting a week of days for you!")

Yet
Why does this sentence sound odd?
"The matter of whether the egg or the chicken came first has not yet been explained."

The "yet" is superfluous because the matter is *never* going to be explained!

Drop the "yet" if no answer seems likely, as in these examples:
"Exactly how Zeus changed himself into a bull has not YET been explained."

"Whether the pre-literate Slavs took the name from the Celts has not YET been explained." (Don't get your hopes up if there are no written records!)

If, of course, you can expect an explanation, by all means write:
"Why my brother was singing 'Jingle Bells' on the school roof has not yet been explained."

(In some academic writing circles, adding "yet" is a hopeful convention: "The manuscript has not yet been re-discovered...")

Young/elderly Hemingway
This funny-sounding combination pops up occasionally:
"As a future author, young Hemingway was an avid reader."
or
"In her efforts to improve her writing, elderly Munro turned to the spellcheck."

The combinations "young Hemingway" and "elderly Munro" may sound dismissive to some English speakers.

Note that the versions with the definite article are, according to Quirk et al., more formal and stereotyped in style: "the young Hemingway" and "the elderly Munro."

STYLE

Adding life to descriptions

Here's how you can add life to descriptions and simultaneously show that you are thinking about what you're relating.

A neutral account of a man who was imprisoned and tortured in the 16th century (pay attention to the blanks, the capitalized phrases and the ellipses):

"A few weeks later, on his way back to Lancashire, Campion was trapped, arrested, taken to the Tower and PUT into a cell KNOWN AS 'Little Ease.' After four days of _____ confinement [...], he was _____ taken out, [...] and TAKEN to the mansion of the _____ Earl of Leicester..."

Only a machine or robot could speak so blandly about the lead-up to a gruesome execution.

Here's the same description, as it appears in Stephen Greenblatt's Shakespeare biography *Will in the World*. Look at how just a few adjectives and well-chosen examples add life and personality to the prose:

"A few weeks later, on his way back to Lancashire, Campion was trapped, arrested, taken to the Tower, and THRUST into a cell APTLY NICKNAMED 'Little Ease.' After four days of PAINFUL CONFINEMENT – THE CELL DID NOT PERMIT THE PRISONER TO STAND OR LIE FLAT – he was SUDDENLY taken out, CARRIED UNDER GUARD TO A BOAT, AND ROWED to the mansion of the IMMENSELY POWERFUL Earl of Leicester..."

Think about this when writing your essays, especially when you have to re-tell a bit of the plot.

Another example:
"Hamlet does not kill Claudius when he has the chance." (Neutral and dull)

"Hamlet, FOOLISHLY, does not kill Claudius when he has the chance." (Lively and interpretive)

Also see the next tip.

Adverbs in neutral and cited sentences
Use adverbs when relating neutral information or citing other sources.

Compare:
1. "As Jones states, '*Hamlet* is a famous play.'"
2. "As Jones CORRECTLY states, '*Hamlet* is a famous play.'"
3. "As Jones BLANDLY states, '*Hamlet* is a famous play.'"

A computer could write the first one, not the second two.

Also see the previous tip.

Appositions and relative clauses
Here's a structure to ponder:
"Ludwig Wittgenstein is one of the most influential philosophers of language who explained the essential role of 'family relationships' in his influential works."

The phrasing with the (restrictive) relative clause is complicated and, in fact, wrong (since there are not hordes of philosophers "who explained the essential role of...").

Better (as in clearer, easier to understand and more natural-sounding) is the version with the apposition:
"Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the most influential philosophers of language, explained the essential role of 'family relationships' in his influential works."

Circularity
Watch out for this type of methodological circularity:
"By comparing the two novels, I will establish what the differences are."

"By comparing implies a process," but how else can one find "differences"?

Less grandiose-sounding but more understandable:
"I compared the two novels and found many differences."

Develop your own (passionate) voice
This is a bonus tip from Siobhan McMenemy, a fine editor at University of Toronto Press:

The moment one reads passionate, honest writing, one knows. It's one thing to be objective, but I don't understand the lack of enthusiasm in so much scholarly work. I push less seasoned authors to develop their own voices not only by encouraging them to stop quoting other people and to tell me what they think, but also by asking them what really matters to them, when it comes to their subject. Why do they care about it? Usually when they start thinking in those terms, the writing comes more easily.

Footnotes and endnotes
Discursive and substantive footnotes and endnotes.[6] Keep 'em short.[7] (See footnote 6 for a taste of what a "discursive" note is.)

"In... in..." patterns
Try to avoid "in... in..." patterns. Use adjectives or adverbs to soothe the reader's eye and the hearer's ear.
1. "In an interview in 2001, Obama states..." vs. "In a 2001 interview, Obama states..."
2. "In general in Atwood's work..." vs. "Atwood's work generally..."

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6 This is the beginning of a discursive footnote – in other words, of a footnote that, rather than merely providing bibliographical information that tells the reader where to find the sources you cite in your paper, is far too long. It threatens to stretch on forever, to boldly go forth into...

7 Long footnotes look German. End of discussion.

In other words
See the entry in the section "Words and phrases."

Lists
Lists. Always a thrilling topic.

Make sure to order your lists clearly. If you mention "The works of Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Hemingway, Faulkner and Woolf...," you can arrange them:

1. Alphabetically: "The works of Chekhov, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Faulkner, Hemingway, Tolstoy and Woolf..."
2. Chronologically (generally by date of birth): "The works of Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Woolf, Faulkner and Hemingway..."
3. By language: "In the works of Dickens, Woolf, Faulkner and Hemingway, and of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov..."

If you order things in a funkier way, say what your logic is.
E.g. "These authors, ordered by zodiac sign and a predilection for fried food, include..."

Be sure to signal a change (as with ", and of Dostoevsky..." in 3, which moves from English-language to Russian writers). This example does NOT show that a change is coming:
"They need to stop occasionally and realize that the person was not just a challenging health case but a human being with fears, ailments, anxieties, relatives, and loved ones."

There's a comic ring to "anxieties, relatives, and loved ones."

A potential solution: "...with fears, ailments, anxieties, WITH relatives, and loved ones."

Without the change-signalling "with," you risk creating a zeugma in the style of "I took my sister and a bag of chips to the party."

Long sentences
Here's a quick rule that you'll be tempted to break often: don't have two massive sentences in a row.

A fiction editor once intoned that 20 words is already a long sentence. Two qualifications: "long" is not *pythonesque*; fiction is not academic writing.

In short, follow the guideline from the *Oxford Guide to Plain English*: "Over the whole document, make the average sentence length 15-20 words." Some word processors calculate this for you.

Look forward
You want each paragraph of your essay to look forward.

Let's try that again.

As mentioned in *Writing Short Literature Essays*, you want...

When referring to earlier points in your essay, you can almost always chop "I have already." That saves three words and takes the focus away from the self, repetition and the gloomy past.

Another tip: move "I have already mentioned" or "As mentioned" to the second sentence position.

Compare:
"As I have already mentioned in this essay, Slovenia is in Europe." (A yawning and nostalgic look *backwards* that is possibly insulting to the reader. Is it a synonym for "Hey, buddy, don't you have ears to hear? I just told ya!")

"Slovenia, as mentioned, is in Europe."

When you read your essay aloud, try saying "as mentioned" in a sarcastic voice. That should bring home the point.

Also see the entry "Europe" in the section "Words and Phrases."

Making observations
If you make a pithy observation that something is "interesting," "appropriate," "ironic" or whatever, say *why* it is "interesting," "appropriate," "ironic" or whatever.

These are cryptically isolated statements:
1. "It is interesting to note that some of the research has been developed in Germany." Here it is obvious that the writer has something in mind. But what?
2. "It is surprising that Toronto won the Stanley Cup." Why is it "surprising"? ("...because exactly one century had passed since their last championship season.")

Overuse of conjunctions
Avoid using the same conjunctions again and again. "But" and "as" are two main culprits here.
1. Showing contrast:
   "The academic year is almost over, BUT that doesn't mean I have stopped already. Some students are tempted to stop, BUT I am not. BUT this is not a desire that is limited to students."

2. Showing causality:
   "AS the moon goes around the earth, and AS the earth goes around the sun, we can conclude that the moon goes around the sun. AS I do not have a telescope, I have to take this on scientific faith."

3. Fresher:
   "ALTHOUGH the academic year is almost over, it doesn't mean I have stopped already. Some students are tempted to stop, BUT I am not. This, HOWEVER, is not a desire that is limited to students."
   "BECAUSE the moon goes around the earth, and AS the earth goes around the sun, we can conclude that the moon goes around the sun. SINCE I do not have a telescope, I have to take this on scientific faith."
   ["AS the moon goes around the earth, and AS the earth goes around the sun..." or "BECAUSE the moon goes around the earth, and BECAUSE the earth goes around the sun" would of course be pleasant parallelisms.]

Another note: starting with "Because..." signals causality from the outset. In other words, there's none of the ambiguity that might spring from "As..." "As I was walking..." can continue:
1. "...I was obviously not driving." (Causal)
2. "...down the street, I saw a duck." (Temporal)

Also see the note "As and because" in the section "Words and phrases."

Private companies
Try not to advertise private companies: rather than citing a book from Amazon, refer to Worldcat; rather than Google, write "an internet search," etc. Such avoidance is, of course, often unavoidable, but keep this tip in mind.

Redundant complexity
Take three seconds and shorten this sentence:
"What Ralph evokes in Randy is something new."

"_____ Ralph evokes in Randy __ something new."

Or:
"Ralph evokes something new in Randy."

Unless you need time to think, or unless you want to up the anticipation, chop the needless "what" and "is."

Time to think:
"May I take your order?"
"Well, what I would really like to order from the menu is..." (vs. "I'll have a beer.")

Upping the anticipation:
"What really, truly annoys me about this menu is..." (vs. "This menu is too long.")

Repetition of "I," "this," "of" and "so"

1. Too much "I":
   "I will look at J.D. Salinger's work in this diploma thesis. I will examine his life, along with the major experiences he had. I will then consider..."

2. Too much "this":
   "This diploma thesis looks at J.D. Salinger's work. This body of writing will be examined with regard to his life. This approach..."

   (This tip ignores stylistic and rhetorical repetition in the style of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.)

3. Too much "of":
   Try to avoid long strings of nouns with "of," as in this example:
   "One OF the effects OF the integration OF moral virtues into the business plan OF a company is that consumers feel they are donating to charity just because they purchase a product."

   You can almost always avoid such ugly sentences if you intersperse gerunds and the Saxon Genitive:
   "One of the effects of INTEGRATING moral virtues into A COMPANY's business plan is that consumers feel they are donating to charity just because..."
   Of course, "One OF the effects OF..." could be simplified into: "One effect of integrating..."

   This is simpler and clearer:
   "One effect of integrating moral virtues into a company's business plan is that consumers feel they are donating to charity just because they purchase a product."

4. Too much "so":
   Do not use the convenient causal construction "..., so..." more than twice per page:

"The poem begins with 'I went,' so we immediately know it is about a past event. It is also in the first person, so we can expect subjectivity."

Other synonyms, near-synonyms and alternatives: consequently, hence, which is why, as a result, this results in, this means that, this entails that, therefore...

However, using "consequently" or "hence" can lead to lulling rhythmic repetition in your prose – that is, the reader starts to expect the same pattern in each sentence.

See if you can paraphrase and change the sentence structure:
"The poem begins with 'I went,' so we immediately know it is about a past event. Similarly, the use of the first person implies subjectivity."

Repetition of meaning
How's this for a non-informative (and real!) newspaper headline?

"Billionaire investor was keen on investing, fraud trial told"

No kidding. And *avid dancers like to dance*.

Avoid such repetition in your writing.

Unintentional *figura etymologica* is also common:

"The questioning of the suspect included questions like, 'Where were you last night?'"

Too much QUESTIONing and plain ugly.

This, however, is lovely and intentional and begs to be sung: "*Sing* a *song* of sixpence."

Repetition of vague expressions
Want to make your writing splendidly dull? No problem. Just repeat words, preferably vague ones:
"The good thing about the novel is that it's a good read."

Less obviously:
"SomeTHING that we might consider is that some THINGS are not anyTHING special."

For those into soap-box style rhetoric, near repetition through *figura etymologica* can add comedy:
"They poisoned him with poison."

In this poisonous (ouch) example there is little doubt that the repetition is intentional. "Poison," after all, is not a filler-word like "good" or "thing" or "dude."

The longer your sentence, the greater the danger of unintentional repetition:
"Within the *context* of 21st-century considerations of how we are to configure varying and competing perspectives on the individual qua individual, it is crucial that we bear in mind the contemporary *context*."

Admittedly, not many would follow that sentence to its sorry end. Still, the second "context" is grotesquely redundant.

Repetition of words sentence-initially
Unless you are aiming for parallel structure, don't start two sentences in a row with the same word.

An example:
"*Yet* despite his frustrations, he never established his own institution, even though his reputation would have allowed him to do so. *Yet* since the 1990s, American education has been increasingly characterized by market-driven mentality."

Another example:
"Last week I came across a thrilling new Swedish mystery novel. *The novel's story* is well-written and packed with suspense. *The novel's story* is not a typical mystery because there is no obvious culprit."

(The repetition here is especially harsh because the reader might anticipate highly stylized and pleasant parallelisms, only to have those optimistic expectations dashed by the dull repetition.)

Short sentences
"Express your most powerful thought in the shortest sentence" is pretty solid advice.

The above quotation is taken from the NY Times Opinionator blog.[8] Check out the blog post. You will learn something. Or you might find the advice glib. But do consider it.

The advantage of short sentences for your main idea: no one will lose your thesis in the forest of other ideas, the tangle and briars of gnarled syntax.

The disadvantages: it can sound like brow-beating, a harangue or politicking. In other words, expressing complicated ideas in short, short sentences is often over-simplifying. Nobody can express nuance in a five-word sentence. As we hope to have shown in the "Check out the blog post" series of sentences above, a row of short sentences kills rhythm.

On a side-note: keep your e-mails brief. If you want to ask someone something, don't hide the request within 150 words of fluff. Just ask.

Starting an essay
Take a breath and get ready to ingest a long how-to on writing essay introductions or setting the tone for your prose.

8 http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/07/the-short-sentence-as-gospel-truth/?src=me&ref=general

1. Avoid "seems" in the first sentence:
   "This novel seems to be about chickens and flying saucers."

   Especially if no contrast comes, this is like starting with, "I dunno..." before giving an answer.

   And you wouldn't want to do that, right? Oh, sorry. (See 3, below).

2. Wonderfully informative and excruciatingly boring first sentences:
   "In the novel X by Y..."
   "In the play X by Y..."
   "In the poem X by Y..."

   Or, if you really want to stretch things out: "In the poem 'The Poem' by the poet John Poet..."

   You should mention the author and the work in the first paragraph of literature essays, but try for a hook of some sort.

3. Many, many *second* sentences begin with "But..." or "However..."
   Try to avoid this. Or don't, if you want to blend in with the crowd.

4. The first sentence is crucial for setting the tone.
   Consider the tone set by these first sentences from real (but slightly changed) motivation letters:

   a) "I would like to take a chance and participate in study program called Zembla Study Tour – 'Thinking Zambla' in September 2013."
      (THE TONE? "What the heck, why not give it a whirl...")

   b) "I wish to apply for the participation in the Zembla Study Tour, because when I noticed the advertisement for this tour on my university's website I already knew this is the program I would like to be part of."
      (NOTE: The adjudicator cares not how you found out about Erasmus, etc. Don't mention it.)

c) "I, Randy Raoul, currently in my second year of bachelor studies of English Language and Literature at Philosophical Faculty at Trondheim University, and in my first year of diploma studies of English Language and Geography at Pedagogical Faculty at Honolulu University, would like to apply for a spot on the one-month Zembla Study Tour – 'Thinking Zembla.'"
(COMMENT: Too much information, too many words, crammed into one sentence. It also sounds like a legal document.)

d) "Being to the point, what my biggest motivation is, I would use Lawrence Martin's words: 'He pondered and suffered a good deal but he lacked the courage to dare – the first requisite of a practitioner.'"
(QUESTION: Is this "to the point"?)

e) "You should provide a convincing explanation as to why you wish to participate in the study tour, what particular contribution you feel you might make to the success of the tour, and what you anticipate will be the benefit of taking part in the tour."
(LITTLE THINGS MATTER. This candidate clearly uploaded the wrong file.)

f) "I found this quote which maybe shows my vision. 'The best way to predict the future is to form it.' Pavel Smythe."
(SPOTLIGHT: This "Pavel Smythe" sounds fascinating – oh, he's not the candidate! In other words, avoid starting with a quotation. You want the spotlight on yourself.)

Starting an essay with a quotation
Try not to start your essay with a quotation. Why (not)?

1. You want to establish your own voice from the outset. If the quotation is superb, you'll look dull in comparison!
   "'Talking About Art is Like Dancing About Architecture' is what David Bowie (or maybe Stravinsky) said. My essay examines the difficulties of..."
   Whose voice sticks out here?

2. If the quotation is not exciting, you've avoided the crucial hook: "'Undermining the foreign policy decisions of many EU states is the need for cohesion at a supra-national level' (Dull, 2008). This entails that..." Sometimes quotations are not exciting but remain necessary for your argument. Fine, just don't give them the crucial first sentence.

3. Too many essays begin with a quotation – that is, with thoughts and information that is NOT from the essay-writer. (Skim an academic journal some day and see how many papers begin with a quotation, footnote, or parenthetical reference – that is *with someone else's thinking in the oh-so-important first* sentence.)

4. It's often a clear sign that you didn't know how to get into the writing-mode. Don't we often reach for quotations when we can't think of something to say on our own?

Strings of adverbs

You may blithely pile up adverbs when describing an action:
"My sister scampered slowly, clumsily, hungrily, ridiculously towards the cookie jar."

That example is clear, fine and nasty.

Here, the two -ly adverbs are dissonant and mildly confusing:
"Hemingway's works function realistically primarily when they are autobiographical."

"Primarily" and "realistically" are not parallel – i.e. Hemingway's works can't function "realistically" and "primarily." In fact, in this sentence, "realistically" describes what precedes it, while "primarily" is an element (a subjunct) with a focus on the clause following it.

Just look at this example. Its meaning is clear:
"For the most part, Hemingway's works function realistically when they are autobiographical."

Strings of pronouns
Strings of pronouns can kill clarity:
"The only one who exacts proper revenge on Sally is Jennifer. After confirming that SHE had done HER wrong, SHE stole HER chocolate cake at HER brother's birthday party."

"She... her... she... her... her..." is confusing. When the pronoun can refer to two or more characters, use full names to make things obvious.

This is clearer, if repetitive:
"After confirming that Sally had done her wrong, Jennifer stole her chocolate cake at her brother's birthday party."

Or:
"After confirming that she has been wronged, Jennifer stole Sally's chocolate cake at her brother's birthday party."

To-infinitival constructions
Here's a nifty construction that, for whatever reason, is underused:
"She was among the first to research..."

Students almost always opt for:
"She was among the first WHO RESEARCHED..."

Vagueness, tenses and bland expressions
Spot the stylistic problems in this passage:

"Inspiration is something of a strength in this little text, and with that I'm thinking more or less of its rather positive qualities. The sentences are fairly short and, on the whole, clear, and the story was almost always suspenseful. Children will enjoy the humour and optimism, and they will probably have learned a great deal after having read it. This picture book will arouse the reader's curiosity and make us laugh."

This passage is murdered by:

1. Vagueness (which "text" and "picture book" is this? What are the "positive qualities"?)

2. Too many tenses ("I'm thinking"; "the sentences ARE" morphs into "the story WAS"; "will probably have learned"; "after having read it"; "will arouse" – this is a time machine gone wrong!)

3. Too many useless and bland qualifiers:
   "Inspiration is SOMETHING of a strength in this LITTLE text, and with that I'm thinking MORE OR LESS of its RATHER positive qualities. The sentences are FAIRLY short and, ON THE WHOLE, clear, and the story was ALMOST always suspenseful. Children will enjoy the humour and optimism, and they will PROBABLY have learned a great deal after having read it. This picture book will arouse the reader's curiosity and make us laugh."

4. Flipping between: i) first person singular ("I'm thinking"); ii) third person plural ("children"); iii) third person singular ("the reader"); iv) a warm and fuzzy first person plural ("make us laugh").

Here's a livelier version of the same:

"Inspiration is a strength in *GREEN EGGS AND HAM*, and with that I'm thinking of its _____ MOTIVATIONAL qualities. The sentences are _____ short and _____ clear, and the story IS _____ always suspenseful. Children will enjoy the humour and optimism, and they will _____ LEARN A GREAT DEAL FROM IT. This picture book will arouse THEIR curiosity and make us ALL laugh."

("make us ALL" signals an awareness of the switch – i.e. it shows that the switch is intentional)

Word order
Changing the typical word order adds life to your prose.

If you (as many students do) write "however" several times in your essays, switch it occasionally to the second position:
"However, I do not use the word too often."
"My brother, however, has serious issues with 'however.'"

Similarly, instead of writing "such as" all the time, try something like this: "In my spare time I watch *such* cartoons *as* 'Tom and Jerry,' 'The Smurfs,' and 'South Park.'" (This is a stylistic break from "cartoons *such as* 'Tom and Jerry'...")

Zero relative clauses
This is less of a tip than food for thought.

Read this sentence aloud (slightly changed from a real, published example):

"And universities have similarly raised intellectual property concerns over ownership of the online courses their professors are now asked to assemble, indicating that 'the future of their profession' is at stake."

The sentence is not gorgeous, which is excusable. It is needlessly difficult to understand, which is not excusable. The short but simple solution? Add "that."

"And universities have similarly raised intellectual property concerns over ownership of the online courses THAT their professors are now asked to assemble, indicating that 'the future of their profession' is at stake."

Much clearer and you don't have to tax your brains puzzling out the meaning.

(A final note: you'll surely have seen that "clear" and "clarity" recur again and again in these pages. Remember, in essays, clarity trumps style.)

PUNCTUATION AND LAYOUT

Take five minutes to review the names of English punctuation marks. Cover up the second column and see how many you can name.

Here's a table of punctuation marks and their names:

Mark	Name	Comment
.	full stop (BrE), period (AmE)	See below for more.
,	comma	See below for more.
:	colon	See below for more.
;	semicolon	
?	question mark	
!	exclamation mark	See below for more.
‘	apostrophe	E.g. in the contracted form “don’t.” See below for more.
-	hyphen	E.g. in the compound “well-intentioned.” See below for more.
–	dash	Used to separate a thought from the rest of the sentence: “He knew nothing about it – or so he said.”
_	underscore, understrike	A series of underscores is used to create a line, e.g. on a form or in a test.
...	(three) dots, ellipsis	
/	(forward) slash, stroke	Used to separate alternative words or phrases. It’s also called a “virgule” when used to mark a line break in poetry.
‘...’	single quotation marks, inverted commas (mostly BrE)	See below for more.
“...”	double quotation marks (mostly AmE)	See below for more.

Mark	Name	Comment
(...)	brackets or parentheses	
[...]	square brackets	These used to be called just "brackets."
*	asterisk	Used to draw attention to something, e.g. "Put an asterisk beside/next to their names." Also, linguists sometimes use it to indicate an ungrammatical structure, e.g. "John *teached me how to read."
#	hash (sign), also number sign, pound sign	Typically used before a number, e.g. "#5" meaning "number five."
~	tilde, twiddle, squiggly (informal)	Used with the meaning of "approximately," e.g. "~15 hours" meaning "approximately 15 hours"; also used by linguists to mark nasalization, e.g. ['mẽn].
@	at sign/symbol	
{}	curly brackets, braces, squiggly brackets	
< >	angle brackets	Individually, inequality symbols for "greater-than" and "less-than."
&	ampersand	It means "and."
%	percent sign	

Apostrophe

An apostrophe has nothing to do with quoting. Do not use "apostrophe" as a synonym for "quotation marks" (AmE) or "inverted commas" (BrE). Refer to "single quotation marks," not to an "apostrophe."

(Another tip: do a search-and-replace in your word processor to make sure that your apostrophes are all candle-straight or banana-curved.)

Block quotations
Block quotations – that is, quotations of several lines – do not need quotation marks; do, however, indent them. Like this:

"Hamlet famously says,

> To be, or not to be: that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them?

But what do these lines mean?"

Colons
Colons cause problems.

In *101 English Tips*, one reads:
1. A colon "shouts out that an example or summary is about to follow."
2. "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."
3. The only punctuation following a colon will generally be a period or question mark or exclamation mark (and commas, of course). Do not start a new clause.
4. This is bizarre because the sentence ends whimperingly:
   "Ogden Nash writes of a hunter: 'This grown up man with pluck and luck / Is trying to outwit a Duck,' AND THIS shows..."

Write this instead:
"Ogden Nash writes of a hunter: 'This grown up man with pluck and luck / Is trying to outwit a Duck.' THIS SHOWS..."

Also, never, ever use two colons in a single sentence. A colon and dash in a single sentence? Nope.

Comma after a lengthy subject
This tip that has been covered before but can't be found in our computers, must be misplaced somewhere.

Like the comma before "must" in that clunky sentence.

Nobody would write this: "This tip, must be misplaced."

And yet, there's a wild tendency to add a comma to subject phrases that happen to be longer than the average subject phrase.

Do not add a comma before the verb just because the subject noun phrase is long (and there is a tone unit break in-between the subject and the rest of the sentence).
1. This is wrong: "Raul's speculation about how he would spend his winter holidays, turned out to be correct."
2. This is also wrong: "William Blake's poem about a chimney sweeper, is called 'The Chimney Sweeper.'"

Try the replacement test – that is, replace the confusing phrase will something simpler to see if it's the grammatical subject:
"Raul's speculation [...] turned out to be wrong."
"Blake's poem [...] is called 'The Chimney Sweeper.'"

Commas and decimals
Different symbols are used in different languages to indicate a decimal. Some countries, e.g. English-speaking ones, use the decimal point, while others, e.g. Slovenia, use the decimal comma. Compare the examples:
1. Slovenian (the decimal comma): "Njena povprečna ocena je 8,4."
2. English (the decimal point): "Her average grade is 8.4."

Also, notice the different delimiters used for numbers with many digits.
1. Slovenian (periods as delimiters): "2.000.000"
2. English (commas as delimiters): "2,000,000" (alternative: "2 000 000")

(If you think this does not matter, remember that bidding 1,50 Euros on eBay.co.uk means a lot of money for, say, a mouse pad!)

Comma in comment clauses, participle clauses and appositions

1. Wrong:
   "The book, as we have seen is long."
   "The last time I, dressed in green in red attended a party..."
   "Stanko and Janko, the well-known gangsters forgot where they had parked."

2. Correct:
   "The book, as we have seen, is long."
   "The last time I, dressed in green in red, attended a party..."
   "Stanko and Janko, the well-known gangsters, forgot where they had parked."

Comma in (non-)restrictive relative clauses

Here's one that you all know but that native speakers are forgetting. (Taken from a *Toronto Star* article.)

"The Canadians sleepwalked through the first period and trailed by two goals against the Slovenians who [sic] came ready to compete."

Hmmm. Was the Canadian hockey team somehow playing two Slovenian teams at the same time – one that came "ready to compete" and one (or more) that didn't?

In other words, use commas in (non-restrictive) relative clauses when adding information that is not essential for identification.
"My brother, who lives in London, is a pianist." ("who lives..." is a non-restrictive relative clause; the message is "My brother is a pianist. By the way, he lives in London.")

A restrictive relative clause, on the other hand, is one that enables identification.
"My brother who lives in London is a pianist." ("who lives..." is a restrictive relative clause with the meaning "I have more than one brother – the one with a flat in London is a pianist.")

Comma splices

Instead of a proper tip, a longish list of comma splices. Read them carefully and feel the outrage and the shoddy grammar!

1. "The ending is also the climax, almost the whole story unveils in front of us, but when the friend tells him what the flower means, we are surprised and understand the meaning of the whole story."
2. "Everything could have been easy, if the boy was a 'homebody', however he was mischievous."
3. "She lays bare the structure of the story, she presents it very clearly."
4. "I do not know what the idea was, I was very confused."
5. "The content of Gilbert's letter to Nevada is also revealed and indeed resolves an argument, at the same time it also alludes to the somewhat Biblical explanation of sisterhood between women in the story."
6. "People would be very strange to think dead frozen horses are romantic, they are scary."
7. "It was shown in the film that there are steeple-chases, in my country we rear horses mostly for rehabilitation."
8. "He did not want to make the scene believable, he wanted the audience to see the irony he was trying to show by making it obviously fake."
9. "These people have no sense of time, they can never remember what year it is."

Remember: don't glue two stand-alone sentences together with a piddly little comma!

For some reason, this type of error is on the rise. It is becoming almost as common as the splices in which adverbs such as "however" are used to separate independent clauses. Compare the examples in 10 (wrong) and 11 (correct):

10. "He presented some wonderful examples of cubism by Picasso, however he failed to mention any other painters."
11. "He presented some wonderful examples of cubism by Picasso; however, he failed to mention any other painters."

Also see Tip 1 in *101 English Tips*.

Decades

If you don't care for the background of the formidable stylists-vs.- grammarians battle, skip to the numbered list below, for it is well known that "Many hundred large volumes have been published upon this controversy" and "it is computed that eleven thousand persons have at several time suffered death, rather than submit"[9] to adding or subtracting an apostrophe to *1990s/1990's*. Although grammarians point out that *1990*'s is not wrong, many style guides beg to differ.

Ben Yagoda writes in *How to Not Write Bad: The Most Common Writing Problems and the Best Ways to Avoid Them*: "Some publications countenance the 1800's or the 60's, but it's wrong. The 1960s, the '60s, and the sixties are all okay, as long as you're consistent."

The 16th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* intones: "Chicago calls for no apostrophe to appear between the year and the *s*." (Interestingly, they have toned down the wording. The previous edition was absolutely rigid: "No apostrophe appears between the year and the *s*." End of discussion.)

Leaving aside the entrenched views on the apostrophe, here are some guidelines:

1. *1970ies* (Wrong)
2. *1970's* (See above) (Note that this apostrophe has nothing to do with ownership; that said, some stylists ask rhetorically, "What can a decade own?")
3. "in the '70s of the previous decade" (Too long)
4. *'70s* or *'70's* is fine if the century is clear. In formal writing, you'll often want to stretch this out to *1970s/1970's*. Note, however, that "70s" has a whiff of "I was there." You might sound old.
5. Note the apostrophe *before* the numeral in "Summer of '69" or "the spirit of '76."

Because views are so entrenched on this trivial matter, it is wise to consult with your teacher/professor/editor/blog readers before submitting your work.

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9 These quotations are from *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift. They refer not to apostrophes but to the important matter of which is the right side for breaking into a boiled egg.

Exclamation mark
Don't use too many. You will sound like you'd rather be punching out SMS messages in high school math class than writing a real essay. How many is "too many?" Hard to say. But two in a row is like, *ohmygad, totally so too much*!

Footnotes and endnotes
Put footnotes/endnotes *after* the period or comma, not before.[10] And don't leave a space between the punctuation and the superscript number.

Hyphen
"In the 18th century..." – no hyphen.
"In 18th-century England..." – hyphen.

In other words, hyphenate "18th-century" if you use it attributively (not all editors follow this rule. In any case, be consistent. If you hyphenate on page four, also hyphenate on page 31 of your essay).

And, at the risk of being redundant (see above), DO NOT hyphenate "In the 13th century..."

(Also note that some style guides advise against using superscript in ordinal numerals, e.g. "20th-century authors" is preferred to "20th-century authors.")

Indenting
Use the tab key to indent; do not hit the space-bar eight times. Over a 100 page document, this can literally take an hour to fix!

Italicizing the comma
Do not italicize the comma after a list of titles – that is, italicize only the novel title, not the comma that follows. This is a minor point, but it takes forever for the lowly proofreader to correct.

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10 Get it? While we're on the topic: use Arabic, not Roman, numerals. "...2, 3, 4, *lock the outhouse door...*" not "...ii, iii, iv, *lock the outhouse* door..."

Percent sign
In English, there is no space between the number and the percentage sign (e.g. “5%”). Add a space in Slovenian, though (e.g. “7 %”). (The same is true for units of measurement, e.g. “5mm” vs. “5 mm.”)

Period/full stop
A period/full stop tells us that your sentence is over. This means that you do not need two full stops in one sentence, even when quoting. That’s why the following is wrong: “‘in the thick of things.’ (Johnson, 1984).”

Period, full stop or dot?
A sentence ends with a “period” (US) or a “full stop” (UK), not a “dot.” (Talking about a “dot” at the end of a sentence is as odd-sounding as reading out: “www PERIOD A-B-C FULL STOP com”).

Quotation marks
1. Do not use Slovenian quotation marks in English-language papers (“quotation marks” not »quotation marks«).
2. Make sure your quotations marks face in the right direction – i.e. that they are looking at the quoted text.
   This is wrong: ”quoted text.“
   This is not: “quoted text.”
3. Don’t use two apostrophes (''...'') instead of quotation marks (“...”).

Quotations – placement
Experiment with where you place your quotations.

Compare the following:
1. “‘We’ve got him now!’ said Joe. ‘He can’t get down without being caught!’”
2. “Joe said, ‘We’ve got him now! He can’t get down without being caught.’”
3. “‘We’ve got him now! He can’t get down without being caught!’ Joe said.”

To all four of our ears, the first example is the most lively – though it's taken from literature, it's easy enough to adapt this type of quoting placement to academic writing.

An invented example:
"'The verb,' points out Professor Bernardi, 'often comes at the end of a German sentence.'"

Also, be sure to comment:
"'The verb,' pointed out Professor Bernardi HELPFULLY/REDUNDANTLY/WISELY, 'often comes at the end of a German sentence.'"

(Note that this desire for commentary and an interpretative stance is more keenly felt in literature papers. "The grammarian *correctly* pointed out that 'to run' is a verb" would be laughable in a linguistic paper!)

See previous tips for more examples – "Adding life to descriptions" and "Adverbs in neutral and cited sentences" in the section "Style."

Quotations within quotations
When quoting within a quotation, use double and single quotation marks to differentiate:
"'I am sick of correcting this facile and basic mistake,' writes Blake."

Quoting and punctuation
1. This sentence. should never have a period or semi-colon; in the middle of it.

   Nobody would write such foolishness. Nor would anyone write:
   What once to me befell. is what Wordsworth says he will relate.

   However, when quoting literature and other sources, many students leave the sentence-stopping (or sentence-pausing) punctuation:
   "What once to me befell." is what Wordsworth says he will relate.

   Get rid of the comma, colon, etc. if it does not fit your sentence's syntax.

2. At least three students per decade pepper their professors with questions about quotation marks and punctuation. "Inside or outside," they plead. "I MUST know!"

   In the United States and Canada, the period goes inside the quotation marks:

   Last week I read Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery."

   In the United Kingdom, the full stop goes outside the quotation marks (if the punctuation is not part of the quoted passage):

   Last week I read Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery".

   More thorough explanations:
   A question to the *Chicago Manual of Style* (such things do exist!):[11]

   Q. Realizing that every style guide I have read states that periods always go inside quotation marks, I argue that, if a quote is only a part of a sentence, the period at the end applies to the entire sentence, and not just to the quoted part; therefore, it should be placed outside the closing quotation mark. Does this reasoning "hold any water" at all?

   A. Sure—but for style rules, unlike buckets, holding water isn't always the main goal. Although the British agree with you and punctuate accordingly, the time-honored convention in American-style punctuation is to put the period inside the quotation marks.

From Ben Yagoda's excellent blog:[12]

In all circumstances (except in the United Kingdom and certain countries that were formerly in the British Empire), commas and periods always go INSIDE quotation marks, never outside. This is true for titles and "air-quote" style expressions (which should be avoided anyway), in addition to direct quotes.

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11 Source: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/data/faq/topics/Punctuation.html?old=Punctuation05.html

12 Source: http://benyagoda.com/on-writing/yagodas-rules-for-quotes/

Sentence-ending punctuation
If your quotation has sentence-ending punctuation, there's no need to add another period.
"And then," Sally exclaimed, "I ran to the waterfall!". [sic]
Larry asked, "So what?". [sic]

On a similar note, if your sentence doesn't end, chop the sentence-ending punctuation:
"This is the end." [sic] is how the song starts.

See also "Period/full stop."

Spacing and line-spacing
Keep your spacing standardized. If you use a single space after a period, do it all the time. If you use two spaces after a period, always use two spaces.

Some students, for some reason, add two or three lines before the final paragraph. This is the visual equivalent of a drum-roll as you build anticipation. It's also completely wrong. Don't do it. Use the same line-spacing throughout. One line between paragraphs is enough.

Spelling
Spell the name of an author you cite... *correctly*. Do not leave it to the proofreader/teacher to figure out whether "Holbroke" and "Holbrooke" are two people or just one person you've re-named in order to torture your teacher or copy editor.

Square brackets
Use square brackets + "..." if you have inserted or changed or omitted something within quotation marks:

"He went to [his] bed."
"He went [...] to bed."
"He went to [the] bed [that he had slept in the night before.]"

In any case, be consistent! Do not use round brackets marks (sometimes – "He went (...) to bed"), then nothing (sometimes – "He went... to bed" and then square brackets "He went [...] to bed").

The Oxford comma

The Oxford comma. If you use it, use it consistently: "ham, eggs, and coffee" on page 4 should not be "ham, eggs and coffee" on page 10 (especially if the same terms are repeated verbatim).

OTHER TIPS AND GUIDES

Abstracts

A few notes on abstracts.

1. Avoid footnotes (they get very ugly very fast, especially if the abstract appears in two or more languages. In such cases, three harmless-looking footnotes become six or nine *opomb, Fußnoten, notes en bas de la page*, etc.).
2. Try to pack everything into to a single paragraph; more than two is ugly.
3. Talk about the *paper*, not the research that preceded it.
4. Say what the paper is actually about.
5. Pay at least passing attention to the possibility of coming within range of the word limit.
6. Follow the rules for citing titles: quotation marks for small things, italics for books, etc.
7. Avoid copy-pasting from your introduction or elsewhere in your paper – i.e. show that you are capable of writing different sentences at will.
8. If you cite an original title, look for the official translation; do not provide an ad hoc translation of your own for an already-translated work – Shakespeare's "The Tempest" should not become "Dež in veter!"
9. If the work you are considering has *not* been translated, do not italicize the title (think of it as advertising: no italics means "Don't bother trying to buy it from your local bookshop.").
10. Use present tense: "The paper investigates" *and not* "The paper will investigate..."

Diploma thesis advice: general

A few notes:

1. Put yourself into it – choose a topic you are genuinely interested in. Ten horses could not drag me to the computer to write about "social criticism in the works of a 17th-century author." If you have no interest in the 17th century, why devote a book to it?

2. If you are writing on a few works, have a firm rationale for why you chose those works instead of others – especially if you are examining only two of, say, Charles Dickens' novels.
3. Get to the point. You should be well into your argument by page 10. If you're not into your argument by page 25, it looks like you are running away from argument.
4. Plot summaries and biographies (though sometimes necessary) are usually tedious. Work on the assumption that your reader is familiar with the plot of *Waiting for Godot*. (I'm thinking of page-long summaries and chapter-long biographies that are solely factual.)
5. Make sure to add clear argument and analysis to every single paragraph – i.e. don't write something that's irrefutable and just as easily found on Wikipedia.
6. A rule of thumb: Quote from the literature in every paragraph.
7. Comment on every quotation.
8. Do not quote critics just because they are famous (of course, no critic is Hollywood-famous!). If you do quote them, take a stance on what they say. Do you agree with them? Why? Why not?
9. Write something every day. When you don't feel like writing and when the ideas aren't flowing, at least play around by searching for words you use too often or vague words such as "thing" and "somehow," fixing the bibliography, verifying those little typographical things that take up too much time, making sure that the details are right (i.e. that poems you refer to are in fact poems, not novels; that *Harry Potter* is not referred to as "Harvey Potter").

Diploma thesis advice: technical details and citing

A few notes:

1. Get rid of the hyperlinks. They are: a) unsightly; b) potentially embarrassing if a mere click on "Shakespeare" sails the reader to where you found your information.
2. Try not to refer to anything you do not know. If you have never read a Hemingway novel, don't discuss his influence on "your" author.
3. Lists are almost boring. Try to avoid epic lists.
4. Learn where to place the period in in-text quotations.

Correct: "This is the quotation" (Author, 23). The next sentence starts.

Wrong: "This is the quotation." (Author, 23) The next sentence starts.

In block quotations, the period comes before the reference. Here's an example:

> indented block quotation meant to illustrate the point that I am striving to make. (Author, 23)

5. Spell the names correctly. Sound obvious? We have never received a diploma thesis without at least one typo in the name (Those Mc's and Mac's from Scotland are particularly tricky).
6. Save first names for your friends and family. Write "Atwood is not my buddy," not "Margaret is not my buddy."
7. Quote from the original source. "As Shakespeare notes on EASY-QUOTES.COM, ..." looks hilariously lightweight. It's easy enough to start with the page of quotations, then go to the original.
   Two further arguments for now using the easy and general source:
   a. Many quotations are incorrectly attributed or quoted.
   b. Check out the quotation in context – there is nothing funnier than quoting a villain as a beacon of humanity because you missed sarcasm (come to think of it, a lot of things are funnier than that, but you get the idea).

Presentations

A few presentation tips. Adapt them according to the class and subject matter (linguistics papers tend to be more formally rigid):

1. Your first sentence does not have to be "This presentation is about..." Think of movies that start with action scenes before the opening credits roll. Why not lay out your topic two minutes into the presentation? (Also, if you have the topic emblazoned across your Powerpoint, you can be subtle: "As you can see...")
2. The typical tripartite structure is not always necessary. "First I will..., then I will, then I will..." Sometimes a narrative, meandering structure is more fun and useful. Especially with less academic topics – say, chocolate or my puppy Leonard – there can be a gap between

form and content ("First, I will elucidate how we acquired Leonard from the pound; then I will examine the factors involved in re-naming 'Fluffy' into 'Leonard'; in the third section, I will explain how Leonard prefers...").

3. Limit yourself. If have ten minutes to work with, skip the nine-minute-biography, stick to three rather than nine points. You can cover your bases by saying, "Of course, we don't have time for..." or "It's too bad we can't discuss the late Wittgenstein at this point..." (i.e. show that you know more than you are relating).
4. Consider the audience and the time of day. Early morning? Your classmates might be asleep and might need to be coaxed into Deep Thinking. Late afternoon? The later in the day, the harder you'll have to work to get or keep our attention. Is this a Practical English class? Give us a chance to participate!
5. Engage the audience at least every two minutes. Have students read from the overhead; ask a rhetorical question; ask if we agree with something – none of these takes any time away from your presentation.
6. Don't use more than three borrowed words in a row. Even if you are not plagiarizing, the audience can hear a different "voice." (Of course, look up the meaning and pronunciation of words that are new to you.) If you are paraphrasing another thinker, tell us!
7. Be fair with questions: it's humane and fair to lead into a tricky question with a series of little ones. Few people will spring to answer an out-of-the-blue questions such as "Can anyone briefly explain the essential differences between verb movement in Slovenian and English?" (A pre-question here could be: "Which language lets you move things around more? Slovenian or English?")
8. Don't be a control freak. Discussion can be scary because someone might ask a very tricky question or seem to outshine you during your moment of presentation-glory. Worse, however, is ignoring the audience altogether.
9. Make sure that what you say can't be delivered in paper form – i.e. that your presentation is not merely an essay read loud; even if it's a mere matter of adding humour or faking enthusiasm while the sweat pools in your armpits.

10. Powerpoints (sp?). Nothing to tell you. Students all seem to have grasped that the overheads should be digestible, fun, not overly long and not too distracting.
11. Videos. If you play a clip: keep it short; ending with a clip is dangerous (you want the final statement to be you; no need to compete with Spielberg).
12. You don't always have to end with a bibliography or works cited (even if you do mention your sources, one or two minutes is more than enough).
13. If you say, "In conclusion..." finish up within a minute.
14. Lastly, observe the time limit. If you have twenty minutes to present, don't blab for half an hour.

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