

INTRODUCTION

This essay guide began life as a list. For almost ten years I have been scribbling down student essay mistakes, and the resulting master list forms the backbone of this booklet. It is based primarily on my experience grading assignments of 300 to 1500 words for which no secondary sources were allowed. Because the errors and shortcomings I highlight here recur with each class of essays, they are clearly endemic to Slovenian students. They are also easily preventable.

[...]

Individuality dies when almost every student relies the same few terms – or, worse, when so many first-year students structure their essays “Firstly...,” “Secondly...,” “Thirdly...,” and “In conclusion...” The result is that each essay sounds like it has been written according to the same dull formula. I am talking about form, not content and ideas (which remain highly personal and exciting). Have you ever tried out one of those poetry-generating web pages? You plug in a noun, a pronoun, some verbs, and the electronic template churns out comic or romantic verse. Fun at first, it is not entertainment for an entire weekend. And neither is it enjoyable when sparkling thought is dulled by sameness of form. The essay form is rigid enough. Why make it more so by plugging all arguments into a template meant for *matura* survival?

[...]

This guide consists of six sections: 1) Structure, 2) Argument, 3) Mechanics, 4) Style, 5) Vocabulary, and 6) Exercises. It is practical, not theoretical, and negative in the sense that almost every point is illustrated by a (slightly changed) example from student writing or something I have proofread or translated. These are all errors with simple solutions, which I also provide. The improvements are ordinary rather than stellar, and therefore within the grasp of any student of English.

In the first two chapters I focus on particular errors, the loose screws instead of the nuts and bolts of producing an essay. There are already many fine guides out there, aimed at both native speakers of English and specifically at Slovenian students. My discussion of essay structure, including the all-important thesis, is merely an addition to what you have already been taught. The most valuable part of chapter 1 will be the examples of thesis statements gone wrong or common mistakes in the opening paragraph.

Chapter 2, on argument, makes a case for building your literature essay around quotations. Almost half of the essays I receive do not quote directly from the poem or play being analysed. This is poor strategy. Direct quotations are the strongest possible evidence in a literature essay; quoting directly is also an excellent way of keeping on topic. Examining the writer’s individual words promotes analysis and interpretation instead of simply re-telling the story. In other words, it is not “Sara said X at the dinner table,” but “by saying X at the dinner table *Sara was implying that...*” (Perhaps an argument can be made that a thesis is well-founded gossip). The chapter concludes with common weak arguments – some of which sound elegant and convincing in Slovenian – and suggests ways of improving them.

[...]

There is a short batch of exercises in chapter 6, focusing on argument, mechanics, and style. With questions about mechanics, it’s a matter of right or wrong (ah, back to the blissful clarity of English at *gimnazija...*); with the other exercises, things are murkier. The suggested solutions are intended as food for thought. You will surely come up with other acceptable solutions. If you can justify your answers to yourself, that’s a good sign. If you can justify them to your roommate, you have a very kind roommate who is a good listener.

[...]

CHAPTER ONE – STRUCTURE

Here's how my high school English teacher taught us how to write an essay: "Class, say what you're going to say. Say it. Say what you've said." Then he assigned us a five paragraph paper on *Macbeth*. At the time we all thought him draconian, tyrannical, and a fair match for Lady Macbeth herself. His point was simply that the essay form is rigid and therefore straightforward and easy to grasp: construct an argument and prove it.

[...]

Mention not the Need

There is no need to mention the circumstances that led to the production of your essay – the teacher said, "Write an essay." You said, "Wonderful! At last! I was getting impatient."

This introduction is farcical because it implies extreme forgetfulness on the part of the educator:

**"This essay, which was assigned to the class as our first home assignment, looks at symbolism in Blake's 'Sick Rose.'"

Preferable is: "This essay looks at symbolism in Blake's 'Sick Rose.'"

...or the Type of Essay

When the course is called "Literary Interpretation," it is comical to write a title like this:

The Theme of Decayed Love in 'The Sick Rose.'
****[Interpretive Essay]**

Every essay I wrote at university was an interpretative essay, and there was never a need to remind professor or self what my task was. This fact remains the same. (In general language courses, where you will be writing various types of essay throughout the year, such specification will often be welcome.)

[...]

CHAPTER TWO – ARGUMENT

In terms of strategy, the biggest mistake students make is not quoting directly from the literature. This is like trying to convince a jury that Mr Smith committed murder without mentioning that Mr Smith's fingerprints were on the murder weapon, that he had a motive, and that he forgot his passport at the scene of the crime. It is equally poor strategy to write an essay on "The Sick Rose" without bothering to use Blake's own words. In extreme cases, I ask myself whether the student actually read the poem.

Quoting directly from the poem or story is ideal for reasons of persuasion, representation, and focus.

[...]

Always Analyze and Interpret

Make sure to interpret every quotation you provide. Even if it seems obvious how and why your quotation backs up your point, make sure that the reader can see the relevance. Also, know that analysing is not the same as paraphrasing the quotation.

Here are some concrete examples of how *not* to quote. If you are focusing on ambiguity in "The Sick Rose," you will probably be drawn to the phrase "crimson bed."

Perhaps assuming that it is too evident to explain, students commonly toss out key phrases without helping the reader decode them in the right way:

***“There is a great deal of ambiguity in this poem, and Blake writes about a ‘crimson bed.’”

The mantra states that there is no right or wrong in literature. You might want to forget this for the length of your essay; here “the right way” means the reading that is most conducive to proving your argument.

Some writers merely throw the quotation into parenthesis:

***“There is a great deal of ambiguity here (‘crimson bed’).”

The reader needs a push – “crimson bed” is an important phrase because a bed can refer to both a place to sleep or frolic *and* a flower bed. It is a brilliant pun (picked up in the soupy film *Bed of Roses*). Never make the mistake of assuming the reader sees everything you do.

“There is much ambiguity in the poem, and the phrase ‘crimson bed’ is an apt pun – it refers to both a typical bed and the flower bed that is home to roses.”

If you follow up each quotation, or precede it, with a clear line of analysis, you will never leave the reader wondering why you chose to highlight those particular words. (On a side note, it is a good idea to mix things up – QUOTATION, then ANALYSIS; ANALYSIS, then QUOTATION, etc. Ending *every* paragraph with a quotation becomes formally monotonous.)

[...]

CHAPTER THREE – MECHANICS

Students seldom refer properly to titles of works. This seemingly trivial typographical issue can lead to confusion. Even after lengthy class discussions on how to cite *The Catcher in the Rye* or “The Sick Rose,” and even if these little rules are explicitly mentioned on the essay handout, errors persist. As infuriating as this is, it is understandable.

It is infuriating because the basic rules are so simple; it is understandable because conventions differ between languages and because transcribing novel or poem titles is not a major area of language acquisition. Better to devote your time to verb charts and vocabulary exercises.

Consistency is also a problem, and not following the patterns established at the outset of your essay is potentially puzzling for the reader. For example, a work should never start life as “The Sick Rose” and three paragraphs later become *The Sick Rose*. If on page 1 you quote Virgil’s Latin, and then an English translation, adhere to this pattern. Do not line dance between “*inter alias* – among other things” and “pluck the day – *carpe diem*.” If y

ou use **bold** type to emphasize something, do not *suddenly decide to use italics for the same purpose*. Finally, write the entire essay in the same font; this can inadvertently occur we **COPY AND PASTE FROM AN INTERNET PRIMARY SOURCE, because we don’t want to type in the entire poem ourselves.**

[...]

Do you see it? Do you? Are you sure?

It is a fashion no-no to wear a muscle shirt that is both tiny and transparent. Keep this in mind when you want to show off biceps. When you want to show off a few words, just italicize them or underline them (if writing by hand). This is too much:

***“The first line of Wendy Cope’s poem ‘Bloody Men’ is, ‘*Bloody* men are like *bloody* buses.”

In this case no italics are necessary (especially since no reader will miss the mild expletive):

“The first line of Wendy Cope’s poem ‘Bloody Men’ is, ‘Bloody men are like bloody buses.’”

Assume your teacher is tired, not comatose. Do not overuse italics, and there is rarely a need to use bold.

[...]

CHAPTER FOUR – STYLE

This lengthy chapter examines style at the crossroads between Slovenian and English. I begin by pointing out the inevitable headaches of progressing beyond high school English. I then highlight three entirely different examples of good style, while considering traditional style rules and their potential shortcomings for non-native speakers. After that, I moan and moan about bad academic prose, and then provide specific examples of awful scholarly writing, along with explanations of why these examples are weak. Then there are a few pages on the complexities of linking words (particularly a concentration of too many *therefores* and *howevers*), before the chapter concludes with the usual catalogue of sins. Except in this case, the sins are not obviously wrong. Because style depends so much on taste and subjectivity, right-or-wrong more often becomes *maybe*.

[...]

TANGLED SYNTAX

If languages could get jealous, English would envy Slovenian’s ability to produce endless sentences. Producing a 100-word Slovenian sentence that is both clear and readable is not that difficult. In contrast, many sales-conscious book editors in New York or London or Sydney get nervous after twenty words per sentence.

It might be possible to render this labyrinthine sentence, with its meandering clauses and numerous asides, into perfectly clear Slovenian:

***“In this passage of T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land,’ we can discern all the elements that assumed various places in subsequent theories of the lyric subject and lyric writing, even if this is in fact a work that approaches prose in terms of length, and that formed two modes, commonly called the confessional and the autonomous, which influenced writers from the early/mid-20th century at least until the postmodern era, when individuals began to put aside such concepts when it came to creation.”

Clear? The passage, though monstrously long, is not brainless. The main idea is that Eliot’s poem anticipates later theories about poetry (“subsequent theories of the lyric subject and lyric writing”), though things have changed more recently (“at least until the postmodern era”). The rest of the information crowds out this main idea, even if it is relevant.

[...]

Emoticons

No.

Vary Sentence Length, and Very Lengthy Sentences

To avoid lulling the reader into a single rhythm, vary sentence length. If murder by degrees is your aim, do this: 32, 41, 53, 44. What are those? The number of words in the first four sentences of an academic paper I recently proofread. The second paragraph started more promisingly – a 24-word mini-sausage – but then finished: 34, 46, 45, 62. Notice the sadistic word-count-inflation as the reader tires. This intelligent article was nevertheless as dull as a football chant sung ad infinitum.

Follow long, flowing sentences with shorter ones, as in this passage:

“Dubbing English films based on classic novels is a reduction of choice, as students are deprived of listening to the original language and thus made linguistically limited. Money spent on dubbing is money wasted.”

[...]

CHAPTER FIVE – VOCABULARY

English style guides usually include a list of commonly misused words, they *learn* you (sorry, *teach* you) that *lays* can make people blush if *lies* is intended. Most of you can ignore such glossaries. You have mastered the difference between *fewer than* and *less than*, and understand better than I do that *anyways* is substandard. When I started teaching in Slovenia a few World Cups ago, I never saw *except* for *accept*, and only rarely did I have to stretch *to many* to *too many*. I am now starting to see such errors in formal papers, and this is no doubt due to students’ increasing daily contact with English – including native speakers’ favourite mistakes. Surely the benefits of this outweigh the ills.

Slovenian students have different problems with vocabulary. Some of the words listed in this chapter – which focuses on vocabulary problems in literature papers rather than in general – are simply wrong. These are the easiest to explain. Others sound foreign and even clumsy when overused, and still others sound much stronger, or much weaker, in English than they do in Slovenian. Nuance results in a shift of meaning. Most annoying are those words that seem to ignore their dictionary definition. Though a *paradox* can mean “against received opinion,” and according to some thesauruses *to imply* can be replaced by “to mean/to entail,” these are not typical usages in English literature essays. A *laic* does exist as a noun in English. It’s just that nobody ever says it. For some reason, we seem to prefer *layperson*. By saying *laic*, you risk sounding like me when I speak in the fossilized manner of my Jurassic Slovenian textbook: “*šolski sluga je bil šel...*”

[...]

also – This word is overused in Slovenian; phrases that trumpet occurrences “In Europe and *also* in Slovenia” exhibit an odd sense of geography. When you use *also* in English, make sure it needs to be there.

[...]

in the framework of – Verbose phrases like “in the framework of the criticism on Wordsworth” make it seem like you need to reach the minimum word limit on an essay. This expression can almost always be eliminated from literature essays.

[...]

CHAPTER SIX – EXERCISES

ARGUMENT

Identify the weaknesses in the following arguments, and then consider possible improvements. You can review chapter 2 to remind yourself of the usual traps. Assume that the arguments were not otherwise supported (that is, the author did not smooth things over in subsequent sentences). The terms used in the answers are those used in the guide’s sub-heading so that you can easily look them up.

Example: “The third line of Blake’s ‘The Sick Rose’ is interesting.”

Answer: **Vagueness.** How is the line “interesting”? What do you mean by “interesting”?

Better: “The third line of Blake’s ‘The Sick Rose’ is interesting because it says that the worm ‘flies’ and is therefore a magical worm.”

1. “The deeper, more profound meaning of this poem can only be discovered after many readings.”

[...]

MECHANICS

Repair the following sentences in terms of mechanics (as discussed in chapter 3):

Example: "Hamlet" is a very famous play.

Answer: *Hamlet* is a very famous play. (**Italicize play titles.**)

- 1) Auden writes, "...Let the more loving one be me."

[...]

WHERE DID THINGS GO WRONG?

Identify a weakness in the following.

Example: "In my opinion, Blake's poem 'The Sick Rose' is about a flower."

Answer: This is not "opinion" but fact (even if it is not *only* about a flower).

- 1) "'She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways' Sick Rose' is about a young female who lived in the midst of paths less travelled."

[...]

STYLE

Brush up the following in terms of style and compare your solutions to those offered in the answer section. Try to improve style using as few words as possible. (Reading these aloud will make it easier.)

[...]

- 1) W.H. Auden's "The More Loving One" is not a typical love poem because there is no link made between the stars and the lover ("I can go to hell"). There is also irony ("Admirer as I think I am / Of stars that do not give a damn") as the speaker describes his view on stars.

[...]ARGUMENT (Answers)

The improvements offered here are only possible ways out of these argumentative traps. The invented solutions are only road signs pointing to argument redemption.

1. **The Deeper Meaning** – An entire sentence is wasted on the deeper meaning, without revealing what it is.

If you insist on emphasizing profundity of meaning, highlight the meaning, not the search:

"The deeper meaning, which can only be discovered after many readings, is **X**."