

**Tricks of the English essay**  
**Sharif Olorin (siolorin@gmail.com)**  
**<http://tesser.org>**

### **Abstract**

This document was written for students of English Advanced and English Standard at the Higher School Certificate level, with the aim of helping to make a pointless subject less painful. Herein is presented a formula which has worked for me in the composition of essays which meet HSC criteria and are likely to find favour with markers. Hopefully it is also applicable to other courses and countries.

### **The HSC is bullshit**

This is the key realisation required in order to produce top-ranking essays. The English Advanced and English Standard curriculums are designed not to increase proficiency with language, but rather to provide a convenient means by which bureaucrats might rank and label students and discourage independent thought- or so my experience with the HSC has led me to believe.

This document will not provide instruction on the writing of *good* essays; rather, it will include some hints on the writing of essays likely to obtain good marks in the HSC. Note that in the cases of English Standard and English Advanced, these two goals are mutually exclusive. If you want to write good essays (an admirable aspiration), then I suggest that you wait until university.

### **Prose style**

In order to obtain a high essay mark it is critical to impress the marker. In my experience, the easiest way to increase an essay's impact is a modification of writing style.

Formal language is essential. This extends not only to avoiding slang, but to sacrificing clarity for stylistic flow. A clear, plain writing style which presents the requested information unambiguously and well is extremely admirable; however, it is not conducive to a high essay mark.

Sentences consisting of several short, clear words should be replaced by a few longer words. Do not write 'contrast', write 'juxtaposition'; 'model' should be replaced with 'paradigm', and so on. A thesaurus is an invaluable tool. In general, the more obscure the language you use, the better off you will be. It is advantageous to use Greek or Latin for certain key words; even when English would be clearer, Greek or Latin seldom go astray. For example, 'kleos' is applicable to almost any heroic character.

### **Intertextual references**

This is not essential, but I have found it helpful to state connections to works considered 'high literature' or 'classics'. Do not worry if they are not relevant; see 'The HSC is bullshit' above. I would advise reading either the full texts or plot summaries (with quotations) of a few of these:

1. *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* by Homer.

2. *1984* by George Orwell (the adjective ‘Orwellian’ seldom goes astray).
3. *Paradise Lost* by John Milton; this one is particularly valuable, as much of modern literature can be linked back to it - *Frankenstein*, *Blade Runner* and *The Lord of the Rings* are perfect for this.
4. *The Trial* by Franz Kafka (‘Kafkaesque’ is even better than ‘Orwellian’).

### **The thesis**

The thesis is critical. HSC assessments often consist of a non-question like “[text one] and [text two] explore the concept of [topic]. Discuss.” In response to this type of question the ideal thesis is simply a restatement of the question; “[text one] and [text two] explore the concept of [topic] through [point], [point] and [point], thus demonstrating the deep exploration of [topic] that pervades the literary canon.”

On the rare occasions when you are given an actual question, I have explored three approaches to the thesis.

1. You can simply use the thesis that the teacher expects; “the texts demonstrate that [topic] is a critical component of the human experience through an exploration of the nature of humanity itself”, et cetera.

I do not advise this approach, simply because it is the obvious choice. The marker is not likely to even pay attention to what you have written; even the most impressive essays are very unlikely to get the top mark with a thesis such as this.

2. You can reject the expected approach completely. Simply disagree with your teacher here, and argue the opposite point of view. This can work, but it is risky. If your teacher decides that your argument is not solid (it doesn’t matter whether it is or not) you will be heavily penalised.

3. You can subvert the expected approach. This is the method that I have found to work best; take something like “belonging is critical to human experience” and turn it into “belonging is a necessary part of human life, but more often than not it is a negative influence.”

This is the approach that has earned me the highest marks. Make sure that your argument is logically valid; if your prose and structure are correct, this is usually an easy pass.

### **Structure**

This is something that many have trouble with. Review essay structure at Wikipedia; it is likely a better teacher than the person paid by your school. The critical thing here is that *every point must be linked to the thesis, and every statement must relate to the point.*

### **Fin**

Hope that was helpful. If you have any questions or comments, my email is on the first page. :-) Feel free to copy, print, distribute, modify and whatever else you want to do with this document.

Good luck, and don’t let the bastards get you down.