**In defence of the five-paragraph essay: Argumentative writing as one of the essential skills of a democratic citizen in a post-totalitarian country**

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**Abstract**

Teaching writing to students of English at the university level in Slovakia poses several challenges to its instructors. As future teachers and translators, graduates from departments of English and American studies should be proficient EFL writers. A fundamental question faced by every teacher in this situation is what students should be taught and how. Research shows that writing in a second or foreign language is informed by several factors, including the phenomenon known as language culture. For Slovak students, bridging the gap between L1 and L2 writing cultures is a challenge, as the English rhetorical style differs significantly from the traditional forms of writing taught in this country. This paper deals with argumentative writing as part of the Anglo-American language culture – it reviews its principal characteristics, describes its role in the education systems of the United States and Britain, and explains why this style of writing is particularly beneficial for English language students studying for a degree in a post-totalitarian country.

**Key words:** argumentative writing, persuasive writing, second-language writing, foreign language writing, language culture, contrastive rhetoric, English writing style, English rhetorical style, Anglo-American writing style, five-paragraph essay, argumentative essay, English language teachers, English language translators

Writing with the aim to persuade does not have an acknowledged place in the Slovak educational system, and the chances that anybody in this country encountered anything like the five-paragraph essay during their school days are remote. It is obvious that Slovaks are taught to write differently, and the reasons for this seem to be both cultural and historical. Slovak students of English do not take to argumentative writing naturally, and they often find the Anglo-American style of writing rather rigid, or even plain.[[1]](#footnote-1) But what exactly is this English rhetorical style, and where do native speakers use it? What characteristic features does it have, and how is it taught in British and American schools and universities? Most importantly, does it make sense to teach it to foreign students of English? This paper looks at argumentative writing as part of the Anglo-American language culture and explores its potential benefits in teaching English as a foreign language. It argues that argumentative writing is one of the essential skills of a democratic citizen. Students of English studying for a degree as teachers and translators are ideally placed to learn and disseminate this skill within the Slovak education system.

The influence of one’s native culture on the process of writing in a non-mother tongue has been acknowledged by scholars for at least half a century. Texts written in English by speakers of other languages have received more attention than those composed in any other lingua franca today. Instructors of rhetoric and composition in the United States began to reflect on their students’ second-language texts back in the 1960s.[[2]](#footnote-2) Contrastive rhetoric – then an emerging scholarly discipline ­– began to investigate differences between English and other languages beyond the sentence level, concentrating mainly on German, French, Spanish and Russian. By the end of the century, scholars in Britain and the USA had explored the language cultures of several of their immigrant communities, including those of China, Korea and Vietnam.[[3]](#footnote-3) Their findings informed the methodology of teaching English as a second language (TESL). Outside the Anglophone zone, in the areas where English is taught as a foreign language (TEFL), the greatest interest in contrastive rhetoric has come from Arab and Chinese scholars.[[4]](#footnote-4) This should come as no surprise, as these two great cultures of the East are very different from the English-speaking cultures of the West. Since the writing culture of a nation is primarily generated within its educational system, Arab researchers have subjected the traditional ways of learning in their countries to rigorous scrutiny.[[5]](#footnote-5) With the exception of the work by Latin American scholars, national research into contrastive rhetoric with a view to informing TEFL methodology is still in its infancy. In Slovakia, the field of contrastive rhetoric is virtually non-existent, and the only attempts to research differences between English and Slovak have so far been conducted by linguists at sentence level. The influence of culture, history and the country’s system of education on the way EFL students write in English has not been properly investigated in any relevant study.

Research into Anglo-American language culture has shown that its writing style possesses specific textual features that set it apart from other writing traditions. According to Kaplan, the key element of English rhetoric is logic – a cultural thought pattern he believed to be culture-specific, not universal.[[6]](#footnote-6) When it comes to arrangement of points, or ideas, English non-literary discourse favours linearity, regardless of whether the writer structures their text deductively or the other way round.[[7]](#footnote-7) At paragraph level, English writers tend to keep to the rule ‘one paragraph – one idea’. It is customary to start a paragraph with a statement of contents, also known as a topic sentence. Digressions are quite rare, and they are regarded by native speakers as bad style or un-English.[[8]](#footnote-8) This culture of writing manifests itself throughout all walks of life, not least in Anglo-American academia. The suggestion that people from other language cultures are taught to write differently is borne out by plenty of research. According to Siepmann, for example, French and Germans scholars make far less use of topic sentences than their Anglo-American counterparts.[[9]](#footnote-9) It is the German writing tradition, however, that diverges from the Anglo-American norms of discourse the most. Three characteristic features of the Teutonic language culture stand out: (1) – emphasis on subject-matter knowledge by the author, coupled with a greater tolerance of digression, (2) – implicit textual coherence (e.g. lack of topic sentences, cohesive devices, etc.), and (3) – reader responsibility (i.e. the author’s heavy reliance on the reader’s world knowledge to decode meaning in the text).[[10]](#footnote-10) Interestingly, this style of writing bears a conspicuous resemblance to the way Slovaks write at tertiary level both in their own language as well as in English.

Deeply embedded in the mindset of a native speaker, the Anglo-American writing style is cultivated throughout British and American educational systems. The most practiced piece of writing, whether in secondary school or university, is the essay. If the writer’s purpose is just to explain an idea (or a process) in a concise and objective way, it is referred to as an expository essay. Far more frequently, however, students are asked to write an argumentative essay. Its fundamental purpose is to make an original claim about a topic. Argumentative essays tend to be longer; they require independent research, and the author’s claims must be backed by evidence. Such claims, known as theses (sing. thesis), are often contentious, even provocative, inviting the author’s peers to respond to them.[[11]](#footnote-11) As Wentzel explains, this style of writing is essential in the social sciences, where interaction between different ideas is crucial.[[12]](#footnote-12) For decades, students in the Anglophone world have been introduced to argumentative writing through the five-paragraph essay. As its name suggests, it consists of five paragraphs – one forming the introduction, three making up the body and one bringing up the rear as a conclusion. The format is typically used by American high-school teachers in grades 9–12, but it continues to be used at the undergraduate level, especially in community colleges.[[13]](#footnote-13) It is not uncommon to find educational institutions in both Britain and the United States where kids begin their argumentative writing at the age of seven.[[14]](#footnote-14) One of the reasons why Anglo-American educators insist on drilling five-paragraph essays so early is that they prepare their youngsters to write as scientists and scholars at university level. It remains a fact that most of the scholarly discourse produced by native speakers of English in today’s academia is written along argumentative lines.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The dominant position of the Anglo-American rhetorical tradition in the world of English has drawn its critics from Anglophone and non-English-speaking countries alike. It has been suggested that contrastive rhetoric, with its emphasis on writing differences between languages, promotes dichotomies between East and West, reinforcing presumptions of the latter’s cultural superiority. The five-paragraph essay itself has also come under scrutiny, and its place in the American educational system has been somewhat challenged over the last decade.[[16]](#footnote-16) A minority of scholars have accused proponents of English rhetorical style in academia of Anglo-American ethnocentricity, or even worse – of language imperialism.[[17]](#footnote-17) In appreciation of these challenges, practitioners of comparative research into language cultures dropped the word ‘contrastive’ from the name of their discipline and rebranded it as ‘intercultural rhetoric’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Kaplan’s strong view of cultural thought patterns was abandoned, and the influence of the mother tongue in second-language writing was reconceptualised as ‘learned cultural preferences’.[[19]](#footnote-19) The benefits of teaching Anglo-American style per se have not been directly challenged, though. Siepmann maintains that plurality of writing cultures ought to be preserved but urges non-native writers in English to meet the target readers’ expectations.[[20]](#footnote-20) Hyland argues that teaching English rhetorical style to foreign students with a view to sensitising them to writing differences can facilitate cross-cultural understanding.[[21]](#footnote-21) Equally encouraging is the fast-growing research into social contexts in which second-language writing occurs. This has identified several variables – such as language of instruction, or beliefs of the teacher – which may positively influence learners’ attitudes to writing in L2.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The ongoing debate raises the question to what extent Anglo-American style of rhetoric should be adopted in non-literary contexts by students of English in countries like Slovakia. What is noticeably absent from the conversation is a discussion of how writing in L2 is influenced by one’s political culture. A pertinent question in this connection is to what extent a nation should try and preserve its non-literary writing culture if it has been heavily influenced by its totalitarian past. Slovak literacy began to develop, institutionally, after WWI, and the Slovak language reached its maturity in the second half of the 20th century. Unfortunately, more than forty years of that development (1948–1989) were marred by the dictatorial rule of the Communist Party, leaving an indelible mark on the way people were taught to write. Argumentative writing with the writer as a social investigator at its centre were anathema to the state ideology of totalitarian Czechoslovakia. A culture of silence, which permeated all stages of the educational system, encouraged people to obfuscate, rather than to argue. As a result, verbiage flourished in schools and academia, but meaning remained elusive as writers struggled to avoid offending the Party’s ideologues. The lesson learnt in this country is that language culture is reflective of the political regime in which it develops. Needless to say, the advent of the 21st century, with political demagoguery spread through social media, has detracted little from this time-honoured observation. Unsurprisingly, the writing classroom was once referred to in the United States as a ‘laboratory for democracy’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Don Rothman, the coiner of this phrase, saw the art of persuasion through non-violent means as one of the essential skills of a democratic citizen. The added social value of this critical thinking skill is that it encourages civic engagement and fosters community cohesion.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Students of English studying for a degree in a post-totalitarian country seem to be ideally placed to learn and disseminate the skill of argumentative writing. There are two main reasons why they may become effective agents of change if the non-literary writing culture in this country is to shed its legacy of a totalitarian past. The first is their proficiency in the English language. Learning to write is a process which requires professional expertise and adequate resources. Both are most readily available through the medium of English. Instructors and scholars in departments of English, whether native-born or Slovak, have the required knowledge in the field of contrastive rhetoric that may be imparted to their students. The best teaching materials on the market – e.g. coursebooks, readers and software applications – are also available in this language. The second reason has to do with the nature of the profession students of English are being trained for. As practitioners of their trades, teachers and translators can become effective promoters of argumentative writing. English teachers in secondary schools can introduce Slovak pupils to argumentative writing through the five-paragraph essay. The format lends itself easily as a basic scaffold for pupils to think about their opinion about a topic, the reasons why they hold it and the way in which they want to communicate it to their audience. Translators, for their part, can work with their academic clients to sensitise them to the norms of English rhetorical style, thus helping them succeed as scholars in the world of academia.[[25]](#footnote-25) In other words, as cultural ambassadors whose job is to mediate between cultures, English language teachers and translators can tap into the potential of a foreign culture and use its achievements for the advancement of their own.

On balance, the benefits of teaching argumentative writing to EFL students seem self-evident. Decades of contrastive research into English and other language cultures have accumulated a body of knowledge Slovak researchers can use if they want to undertake their own investigations. The paucity of homegrown theory does not need to be an obstacle when it comes to practical dissemination. Textual features of English rhetorical style have been meticulously described in American and British literature, and the writing methodology of teaching argument is readily available in the English language as well. Students of English at the tertiary level in Slovakia are well-suited to learning the skill of persuasive writing. They are motivated, well-resourced and can be trained by professionals in the field. The easiest way to introduce them to this subject matter is through the five-paragraph essay. Writing instructors in departments of English and American studies can draw on the plethora of practical guidelines published by every American institution of higher education. Perhaps the most important rationale for teaching argumentative writing in a post-totalitarian country is that it is one of the essential skills of a democratic citizen. Among other things, it fosters public-spiritedness and enhances community cohesion.

**Resumé**

Písanie v cudzom jazyku patrí k základným kompetenciám všetkých vysokoškolských programov, ktorých predmetom štúdia je anglický jazyk. Medzi anglistami na Slovensku panuje zhoda, že absolventi učiteľstva a prekladateľstva musia disponovať zvlášť dôkladnou znalosťou písomnej formy cudzieho jazyka. Oveľa problematickejšou sa javí otázka, čo na seminároch písania vyučovať a akou formou. Dlhoročný výskum v oblasti kontrastívnej rétoriky v zahraničí poukazuje na to, že na písanie v cudzom jazyku vplýva niekoľko faktorov. Ukázalo sa, že neliterárny písomný štýl – či už v jazyku cieľovom alebo materinskom, je do značnej miery ovplyvnený kultúrou krajiny v ktorej vznikol. Vďaka tomuto výskumu tiež vieme, čím je anglo-americký písomný štýl charakteristický, a ako sa odlišuje od jazykových kultúr iných krajín. Na tento výskum nadviazali vo svete v 60-tych rokoch minulého storočia odborníci v oblasti TESOL, s cieľom zapracovať poznatky z kontrastívnej retoriky do metodík vyučovania angličtiny na národných úrovniach. Slovensko v tomto výskume zaostáva, pričom doterajšie štúdie v oblasti komparácie písomných štýlov angličtiny a slovenčiny boli zamerané predovšetkým na oblasť gramatiky, respektíve vetnej skladby a morfológie. Článok v krátkosti mapuje genézu výskumu v oblasti kontrastívnej retoriky vo svete a poukazuje na tie črty anglo-amerického štýlu písania, ktoré najviac kontrastujú s tradíciou písania v iných krajinách a na Slovensku. Objasňuje dôvody prečo je argumentatívny štýl písania taký rozšírený v humanitných vedách v anglofónnom svete a do akej miery sa na tomto fakte podieľajú vzdelávacie systémy USA a Veľkej Británie. Zamýšľa sa nad tým, do akej miery a prečo sa tradícia písania na Slovensku líši od jazykovej kultúry anglicky-hovoriacich krajín. Rozoberá charakteristické znaky krátkej – takzvanej päťodsekovej eseje, najjednoduchšej a najrozšírenejšej formy školskej úvahy v anglicky hovoriacich krajinách. Autor článku vysvetľuje dôvody prečo považuje vyučovanie argumentatívneho štýlu v odboroch učiteľstva a prekladateľstva za prínosný. Argumentuje, že takýto štýl písania nie je len formou poznávania cudzej jazykovej kultúry, ale aj základnou kompetenciou demokraticky zmýšľajúceho občana post-totalitnej spoločnosti.

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1. The author of this article has been teaching argumentative writing to English language students at a Slovak university for more than twenty years. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The most influential is the study by Kaplan, in which he analysed six hundred essays written by native speakers of German, French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic at the paragraph level. Robert B. Kaplan, "Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education," *Language learning* 16, no. 1 (1966): 1-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For an informative summary of the above-mentioned writing traditions from an Anglo-American point of view, see Hinkel, Eli, *Second Language Writers' Text* (Milton: Taylor & Francis, 2002), 31-41, https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=5300826. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The author of this article differentiates between ESL and EFL. To Slovak learners, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). Analogically, English language teaching methodologists in this country refer to their field as TEFL. A foreign language is defined as “…any language that is not officially recognized in a given country or state”. Bussmann, Hadumod., Kerstin Kazzazi, and Gregory Trauth, *Routledge dictionary of language and linguistics* (London: Routledge, 2006), 419, www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is borne out by a proliferation of studies in journals of linguistics and second-language acquisition. Arab writers frequently and frankly explore issues affecting L2 writing by Arab students of English such as religious conformity, rote learning or cultural resistance to self-expression. See, for example, Nadia Ahmad Shukri, "Second Language Writing and Culture: Issues and Challenges from the Saudi Learners' Perspective," *Arab World English Journal* 5, no. 3 (2014): 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Logic (in the popular, rather than the logician’s sense of the word) which is the basis of rhetoric, is evolved out of a culture; it is not universal. Rhetoric, then, is not universal either, but varies from culture to culture and even from time to time within a given culture. It is affected by canons of taste within a culture at a given time.” Kaplan goes on to argue that English discourse evolved out of the Anglo-European cultural pattern. The way English writers structure their discourse is Platonic-Aristotelian, developed by philosophers of ancient Greece and perfected by Roman, medieval European and Western thinkers. Kaplan, "Cultural thought patterns," 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Deductive writing is a style of composition wherein the writer opens their piece of writing (or paragraph) with a claim and then uses the ensuing paragraphs (or sentences) to explain, prove and illustrate that claim. In inductive writing the procedure is reverse. In both styles, the flow of ideas (or points) is linear, from the introductory to the last sentence. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In Kaplan’s words “There is nothing in a paragraph that does not belong there; nothing that does not contribute to the central idea.” Kaplan, "Cultural thought patterns," 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Summarising earlier research by Eva Trumpp, Siepmann noted that “Around 63 per cent of English paragraphs start with a topic sentence, whereas the figures for French and German are considerably lower, at 40 and 36 per cent respectively.” Dirk Siepmann, "Academic writing and culture: An overview of differences between English, French and German." *Meta: journal des traducteurs/Meta: Translators' Journal* 51, no. 1 (2006): 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Dirk Siepmann, "Academic writing," 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For a detailed description of both the expository (explanatory) and argumentative essays, see the Oxford Academic Writing Tutor in Diana Lea et al. *Oxford Learner’s Dictionary of Academic English* (London: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 8-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “If all authors had the same view about everything, argumentative writing would not exist as there would be no reason to write anything, because one person could say everything there is to say. But in the social sciences, it does not work this way. There is so much to talk about and discuss. The talking takes place around points where there are different perspectives and room for difference: and this is what argument is all about. Unless there is an

    interaction between different ideas, there is no argument.” Arnold Wentzel, *A guide to argumentative research writing and thinking: overcoming challenges* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 56, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1628952. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Elementary school in the United States comprises grades 1 through 5 (ages 6–11), middle school grades 6–8 (ages 11–14). High school spans grades 9 through 12 (ages 14–18). For an example of the importance with which the five-paragraph essay is treated at college level, see the webpage of the Jackson State Community College, Tennessee: “When it comes to writing essays in college, we all need a place to start. Think of the five-paragraph essay as just that. Some students may find this to be a simple process, while others may spend a greater amount of time understanding this basic building block of college writing.” “The five-paragraph essay,” Jackson Community College, accessed August 20, 2021, https://www.jscc.edu/academics/programs/writing-center/writing-resources/five-paragraph-essay.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See the review compiled by the Institute of Education, University of London, of successful American practice regarding teaching argumentative writing to 7-to-14-year-olds. The review was undertaken with the aim to advise the National Curriculum planners in the United Kingdom on improving non-fiction writing. Richard Andrews et al., “Teaching argument writing to 7-to-14-year-olds: an international review of the evidence of successful practice.” Accessed August 17, 2021, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/82431.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Despite variation in form and across disciplines, research papers and dissertations in the Anglophone world adhere to the same principles of argumentative writing as does the five-paragraph essay. What they have in common is that they are all “a product of investigation”, their authors “generate and evaluate evidence” and “identify their audience” in order to persuade the reader of their claim. Of course, the logic in academic writing has to be more rigorous, potential counterarguments have to be refuted by means of facts and sources have to be transparently acknowledged. For details of academic argument see Kathryn Jacobs, *Argumentative Essay QuickStudy Reference Guide to Planning, Researching, and Writing* (Boca Raton: BarCharts Publishing, 2018), 1-3, http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781423238829 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Some of the most frequent objections against this format concern the essay’s alleged “rigidity of conventions” and “stifling of [the] creativity” that writing is supposed to provide. See Sarah N Nafees, "The Five-Paragraph Essay: An In-Depth Exploration of the Genre and its Limitations in Writing Pedagogy." *Honors College Theses*. 42 (2018), 18, https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/honorstheses/42. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Siepmann’s summary of the arguments made by the opponents of English style mention that British and American writers “…loath to inch their way through research articles that violate Anglo-Saxon norms”. Dirk Siepmann, "Academic writing," 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ulla Connor, one of the leading figures in the field suggested term ‘intercultural rhetoric’ back in 2002. “To distinguish between the often-quoted ‘static’ model and the new advances that have been made, it may be useful to begin using the term *intercultural rhetoric* to refer to the current dynamic models of cross-cultural research.” Ulla Connor, *Contrastive Rhetoric: Reaching to Intercultural Rhetoric* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2008), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=622368>, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. From Hyland’s summary of Kaplan’s revised paper *Cultural Thought Patterns Revisited*, published in 1987. See Ken Hyland, *Second Language Writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “Just as foreign-language conversation classes aim to ‘produce’ a learner who can function adequately in the target community through adherence to both social and linguistic conventions, in the same manner it seems only natural to expect non-native writers to make the effort to meet target language readers’ expectations: when in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Dirk Siepmann, "Academic writing," 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. “An appreciation of writing differences, however, can facilitate cross-cultural understandings and help us see that writing difficulties are not problems inherent in students themselves. Moreover, these understandings can support teaching practices that make such differences explicit to students.” Ken Hyland, “Second language,” 50-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Alister Cumming, *Learning to Write in a Second Language: Two Decades of Research*, (Universidad de Murcia, 2001), http://revistas.um.es/ijes/article/view/48331. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This is how former director of the Central California Writing Project, who taught writing at Oakes College, University of California, summarized his pedagogical experience: “The writing classroom, I’d say, is a fine laboratory for certain aspects of democracy, especially those that require us to honor individual intelligence and preference in the context of determining and protecting the larger good.” Rothman specifically emphasized the importance of the skill of nonviolent persuasion: “To the extent that democracy expresses our aspirations to sustain public discourse for the purpose of enhancing the public good, its health depends on nurturing certain habits of mind and skills. Over three decades of teaching writing, I have come to see quite vividly literacy’s potential to enhance democracy, especially around the intellectual and social practices that make nonviolent persuasion possible.” David Brown, "The Writing Classroom as a Laboratory for Democracy: An Interview with Don Rothman," *Higher Education Exchange* (2005): 43-45, [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This is the experience of George E. Newell, David Bloome and Alan Hirvela, who reflected on their teaching practice and research in high-school English language arts classrooms. In their view, argumentative writing was a social practice and a way for an individual to engage with the community in which they live: “Learning to argue, then, can be viewed as becoming socialized to particular social and communicative practices in particular social settings. From this perspective, teaching students to write an argument is not a technical matter, but a matter of socializing students to act, think, value, feel, and use language in particular ways that are shared with others.” George Newell et al., *Teaching and Learning Argumentative Writing in High School English Language Arts Classrooms* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2015), http://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3569339. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. In Slovakia, Slovak-born translators often translate into English as their foreign tongue. There are very few English translators who work from L2 into L1. According to the study conducted by the author of this article in 2014, as much as a half of the annual’s output of the average Slovak translator was into English. Roman Ličko, *Translation into English as a Foreign Language* (Banská Bystrica: Belianum, 2014), p 41-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)