

What's in a Word?

By GABRIELLA ECHIMOF

Professor Lau Z. Ryder III enjoyed making a grand entrance, so on this fine first day of class, he entered the lecture hall from the back door, adjusted his bowtie, and walked slowly and pompously down the center aisle. He knew that this way all of the students could easily see him and marvel at him. As he approached the lectern at the front of the lecture hall, he placed his laptop in the docking station, turned the power on, and looked up at the students. "Good morning, class!" he said jovially.

"Good morning," came the less-than-enthusiastic reply.

"Welcome to Technical Writing 101," he continued. "As I stand here before you in all of my splendor, I invite you to embark on an exciting journey with me—a journey that will teach you about the marvel that is known as technical writing! Are there any questions?"

A young woman in the third row shyly raised her hand. Professor Ryder peered over the sea of faces and finally noticed her. He pointed to her and said condescendingly, "Ah, yes, my dear. And what is your name?"

"My name is Claire, sir. Claire Riding."

"What a lovely name. But please, don't let me hinder you. What is your question?"

"Will be we learning about the principles of effective writing?" she asked.

"Bah!" the professor retorted. "No, my dear, there is no room for such nonsense in my class! By the end of this semester, you will have forgotten everything you have ever learned about the principles of effective writing! We will learn to write from the heart."

"But..."

Professor Ryder ignored her and turned to his laptop.

"Let me demonstrate." As he typed on his laptop, the following words appeared on the overhead screen:

Press the Enter key.

Professor Ryder looked at the words on the screen and continued his monologue. "Now take the statement, 'Press the Enter Key.' What is that? It is a bland and boring statement that tells you absolutely nothing! Now tell me *your* thoughts about this rubbish."

A young man in the first row responded, "It's clear and to the point."

"Nonsense," came the professor's indignant reply. "If everyone wrote like that, we would still be living in caves! Now let me show you how it can be improved. I will rewrite this statement and make it sparkle! Give me a minute and you'll see what I mean!"

Professor Ryder thought for a moment and then he began to type some words on his laptop. As he furiously typed, the following words, like magic, appeared on the overhead screen:

With the left or right index finger, apply minimally-resistive g-force pressure upon the keyboard protuberance that displays the ingress-directed appellation.

Looking very pleased with himself, Professor Ryder looked up from his laptop, pointed to the screen, and announced, "Now *that*, my friends, is excellent technical writing! Don't you agree? I've taken a simple, four-word statement and transformed it into a twenty-two-word masterpiece. Ah yes, if only everyone had my gifts!"

He paused, scratched his nose, and then continued, "This is technical writing of the highest caliber! Yes, I can tell you're all really impressed. Well, I don't blame you. You're all probably wondering if you will ever be able to write like that. Not to worry. By the time I'm finished with you, my friends, you will all be writing like that!"

With a flourish, he gathered his things and strode triumphantly from the room. This time, however, he used the front door of the lecture hall. You see, he also enjoyed making a grand exit.

The students, meanwhile, sat in stupefied silence and continued staring at the screen.