



Communications

Leaping lasers, it's the stylus philes!

Larry Forbes*

For some time, Tony Roberts ran a series of *Gazette* articles entitled 'The Style Files', in which he outlined his views on what constitutes good writing style in scientific papers. I must apologise to him for appropriating his title for my own perhaps less worthy purposes.

Imagine you are visiting Tasmania for an annual holiday, and you are leaving Launceston to drive South to Hobart. The most straightforward road is the Midland Highway. En route is a little town named Ross, which is known for having one of the oldest bridges in Australia, and you'd like to see it. So you ask someone to show it to you on a map.

There is only one town by that name on that road, so it is easy to find, once pointed out. To your great surprise, however, the person showing it to you circles the word 'Ross' twenty times clockwise with her index finger, before flicking her hand up and down the map randomly and then performing a further eight anti-clockwise oscillations around the name. What would be your reaction?

Many modern mathematics talks and seminars now use computer presentations, in which material is prepared with the aid of Powerpoint or PDF, and projected onto a screen. Points of interest on the slide are often indicated using a laser pointer. And here, in my humble opinion, is where presentations often go horribly wrong.

Just like the person in the travel story above, speakers are often tempted to over-use the laser pointer in quite bizarre ways during a presentation, and the results can be maddeningly distracting. It can be remarkably hard to read a beautifully prepared slide, while that intense little red laser dot is furiously circling the word of interest (which possibly appears only once on the page, anyway). Not infrequently, the laser spot then cavorts drunkenly up and down the page apparently at random, then across the side wall or the ceiling, before returning energetically to circle the favoured word some more. The Australian Ballet, in all its glory, never pirouetted with such enthusiasm.

The purpose of all this laser gymnastics is anything but obvious. It makes the intended feature almost impossible to read, so it adds nothing to the talk. If its purpose is to provide anxious fingers with something to do during a presentation, then may I recommend substituting the laser stylus with rosary beads, as these are almost guaranteed to provide a greater level of comfort. If, on the other hand,

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the purpose is to point out something on a slide, I would suggest that the laser pointer should not actually be turned on. Instead, it would be less distracting and decidedly more entertaining to highlight the intended feature by throwing the pointer accurately at the screen.



Larry Forbes did his PhD degree in Applied Mathematics at Adelaide University, under the supervision of Len Schwartz and Ernie Tuck. After that, he worked for a short time at the Defence Department in Melbourne. There, he studied laser pointers, of the type designed to bring down low-flying aircraft. Later, he took an opportunity to work with Lou Landweber at the University of Iowa, studying the application of integral equations to ship hydrodynamics. This was followed by a stint as an assistant professor in Mathematics at Kansas State University and then 14 years in the Mathematics Department at the University of Queensland. He saw in the new millenium by moving to the University of Tasmania in 2000, where he is now professor of Applied Mathematics in the School of Mathematics and Physics. He has just stepped down as head of school, after eight years in the role, and is looking forward to developing his research interests in fluid mechanics, dynamical systems and modelling medical imaging equipment.