

The standardized blues

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"I didn't even know that 'coquette' is a word!" I yell through the door to my roommate. "Ha ha ha, coquette," he laughs.

"No man, for real; it means a flirt, like a TLB," I reply, reading the definition from the open book in my lap.

"Whatever Ball, why don't you quit yanking on your, what was that word again?"

"Coquette. Oh, shut up man," I say as I close my book and flush.

I set my word list back down next to the toilet; maybe tomorrow I'll get through the D's.

What could drive a student like me to study vocabulary during his daily movement?

Let my first clarify that I am a man who thoroughly enjoys his time in the bathroom. I

like to occupy myself on my porcelain throne in a number of ways: deep thought,

recreational reading, smugly chatting on the phone (yeah Mom, I think there's

something up with the network, I hear a bit of an echo too). However, studying

vocabulary is not my idea of a good time; quantum mechanics maybe, but certainly not a subject as utterly useless as vocabulary.

Wait a minute Ball, isn't vocabulary important to you as a writer? Sure, just as important as accessories to a Scion (my point being that it's still a dumb-looking car, no matter what you put on it). I could fill my columns up with words straight from the GRE high-frequency word list, but I'd still just be writing self-deprecating crap; albeit nobody would understand what I mean when I describe Chuck Amato's plan to get the football team back on track as "chimerical."

Well done dear reader, you caught me: I was looking at a GRE vocabulary list, and it just so happens that the impending GRE's are driving me to study silly words in the toilet. I say GRE's in the plural because I am in the unfortunate situation of having to take both a regular exam and a paper based subject exam.

As if all this vocabulary and early high school math weren't bad enough, somebody had the bright idea to test any poor sod that decides to try his hand at studying physics in grad school on four years of a standard undergraduate degree program in physics.

Everybody, there's a reason that a standard undergraduate degree program in physics lasts four years: unlike a communications curriculum (yeah, I went there), a physics curriculum has four years of difficult and worthwhile material. I politely suggest to any man that believes that he can design a multiple choice test to fairly evaluate my knowledge of physics that he first beat Chuck Norris two out of three at truth or dare.

However, I guess I must admit that on a certain level I do enjoy an academic challenge.

I think that under normal circumstances I could kind of get a kick out of this whole GRE subject test thing: I mean, I do like to think that, after three and a half years, I kind of know my stuff.

Unfortunately, it seems as if ETS (the organization that administers the GRE) has gone to extraordinary measures to obliterate any possibility of normal circumstances. The subject tests (on various topics including physics) are only offered three times a year, and this November's test is not being offered anywhere in Raleigh. Or Chapel Hill. Or Durham. In fact, the closest testing center is in Greensboro. Basically, anybody that needs to take a test in November is going to have to wake up at some sinful time and drive an hour and a half through Saturday morning football traffic (did I mention the test is on Homecoming), to take an exam they don't want to have to do in the first place.

Sure, there are worse things in the world; genocide and maraschino cherries come to mind. I just want to bring this up in a public forum; I've tried bringing up the issue with ETS, but complaining to a bureaucracy is about as satisfying as scratching your back with an ostrich feather. Instead, I'll call them out here and send an admittedly tongue-in-cheek warning: do you remember Steve Buscemi in *Billy Madison*?

Because that's how I feel right about now: slighted by both ETS and the academic community that puts up with the shortcomings of standardized testing. I admit that

impersonal standardized testing may have some place in undergraduate admissions, beyond keeping kids out of college (by my way of thinking, a low score on the SAT is an indication that a kid should probably stay in school after high school). In graduate admissions, standardizing testing, particularly in individual subjects, is something that should be done carefully, personably and sparingly.

When it comes right down to it, as a senior trying to finish a couple of degrees, apply to grad schools, participate in my community and still have some fun, I hardly have the time or money to waste on the GRE's. Too bad there's nothing I can do about it. Right?

Lament with Ball in his ephemeral melancholy at viewpoint@technicianonline.com