

Inspirational Teacher Paul Fry **A Story by David Pogue**

I came to Yale a pretty cocky guy. I'd gotten straight A's my whole life, especially in English. But on assignment after assignment, Professor Fry just would not give me the damn A. I saw him during office hours to complain. His response took me aback. "You're writing like you're trying to impress an English teacher," he told me. "But your heart clearly isn't in it. What you're missing is the persuasive element. You know what? At some level, EVERY KIND of good writing is meant to be persuasive. Everything: An ad. A story. A review. A poem. Even a news story. Every kind of writing is, at its core, meant to bring the reader to the writer's point of view. Next time you write for this class, BELIEVE something, and CONVINCING me of it."

The very next assignment was a doozie. It was about James Joyce's *Ulysses*. By consulting a concordance (a list of every single word in the book and the page numbers of its occurrence), we had to write an entire essay about a SINGLE WORD in *Ulysses*. I picked the word "bat," which appealed to me because it occurred only three times: in the phrases "bat out of hell," "bats in her belfry," and "[Christ] was nailed like a bat to a barndoor." So, almost sarcastically, I came up with this preposterous premise: that for James Joyce, the bat represented the holy Trinity. But the more I worked on it, the more I became convinced that I was right. I even put tracing paper over a map of Dublin and drew the main character's path through the town on the day of the novel. To my delight, the result looked, more or less, like a giant bat. I turned in the paper.

I'll never, ever forget Professor Fry's comments. "Well, you fudged the map a bit. But you did try to persuade me. A." That simple idea was so profound, it's affected everything I've ever written since: 50 how-to books, 2 novels, and of course thousands of newspaper and magazine columns. He was right. And he changed my life.