

A large photograph of a house on a steep embankment. The house is a two-story structure with a balcony and a chimney. The embankment is reddish-brown soil. Several workers in yellow and blue gear are visible on the slope, some using equipment. A stone retaining wall is visible at the bottom of the slope, adjacent to a body of water. The sky is overcast.

Geo-Strata

January/February 2013

Stability and Performance of Slopes and Embankments

ALSO

Lessons Learned from
Geo-Legends: Charles C. Ladd



Multiple Modifiers

My November/December 2012 column focused on geoprofessionals' need to master the art of foolproof writing, because the consequences of anything less can be so costly. One reader (maybe the only one, for all I know) wrote to inquire why I seem to use hyphenations so much.

The answer is, "Foolproof writing." But to explain why, I need to review some English with you.

Adjectives modify nouns; e.g., in the phrase "red sweater," red is an adjective (but not a good one, given that red embraces a range of colors in the "red family." As such, it is one of those dangerous "subjective modifiers"; i.e., a word that means one thing to the person who uses it but may mean something different to everyone else who reads or hears it).

Adverbs modify verbs, other adverbs, and adjectives. As examples:

- "Thoughtfully" is an adverb modifying the verb "writes" in the sentence, "The GeoCurmudgeon writes thoughtfully."
- "Very" is an adverb modifying the adverb "thoughtfully" in the even better sentence, "The GeoCurmudgeon writes very thoughtfully." (While the intent behind "very" is commendable, it's another subjective modifier; one person's very is not necessarily another's, just as one person's very hot may be 70° F while another's is 90° F.)
- "Red" is an adverb modifying the adjective "hot" in the equally impressive sentence, "The GeoCurmudgeon tackles some red-hot issues."

"Multiple modifiers" connotes the use of two or more modifiers – at least two adjectives, two adverbs, or one of each – to modify another word, typically a noun or verb. And it's these multiple modifiers that foolproof-writing writers need to address.

Consider the sentence: "My sister has dirty blond hair." Is "dirty" an adjective modifying "hair" (making the sentence a

statement about my sister's hygiene), or is it an adverb that modifies "blond" (indicating the shade of blond my sister decided to use on her assumedly clean hair)?

To be considerate of their readers, writers should make their multiple-modifier intent crystal clear. They can do this by separating multiple adjectives with commas and joining adverb-noun pairs (or more than pairs) with hyphens. As such, "My sister has dirty, blond hair" is a reference to the girl's shampoo aversion

while "My sister has dirty-blond hair" indicates her hair color *du jour*. The general exception to this approach is to omit a hyphen when the adverb involved ends in *ly*, because it's obviously an adverb; e.g., "The overly confident writer flunked the test."

Some grammarians will no doubt argue that the intent of some multiple modifiers is so obvious, explanatory punctuation isn't needed. Of course, grammarians don't get sued when it can be alleged that their writing is ambiguous. And that's why I advocate using multiple-modifier punctuation far more rather than less. Consider some of the word pairs that I included in my prior column:

- "Professional-liability insurance": The hyphen makes it clear that we're talking about insurance for a type of liability as opposed to a type of insurance one uses to cover liability issues.
- "English-composition instruction" without the hyphen could indicate instructions in English about composing something, possibly music.
- "Less-experienced personnel," "project-team pariahs," "construction-industry claims," and "second-rate writing" with the hyphens missing would probably make just as much sense. But when one writes quickly – as geoprofessionals do – it's easiest to get into correct habits. And besides, it makes it that much simpler for the reader to gather the writer's intent.

As it so happens, I haven't yet addressed one particularly complex multiple modifier; the one I used is "construction-



“Multiple modifiers” connotes the use of two or more modifiers – at least two adjectives, two adverbs, or one of each – to modify another word, typically a noun or verb.

materials engineering and testing (CoMET) representative.” The hyphen between “construction” and “materials” makes sense because the issue is the engineering and testing of construction materials, as opposed to materials engineering in construction and testing of materials or, possibly, something else. However, because the noun is “representative,” one feasibly could hyphenate the whole thing, to create the compound modifier “construction-materials-engineering-and-testing (CoMET) representative.” Why not do so? Because it would have the same effect as having no hyphens at all. So, in order to help achieve foolproof status, I hyphenated just “construction-materials.”

How you do it is up to you...as long as you make the effort to make your writing as foolproof as it can possibly be. There are a lot of fools out there.

AUTHOR

John P. Bachner is the executive vice president of ASFE/The Geoprofessional Business Association, a not-for-profit association of geotechnical, geologic, environmental, construction materials engineering and testing (CoMET), and related professional services (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoprofessions). ASFE develops programs, services, and materials that its members apply to achieve excellence in their business and professional practices. Contact john@asfe.org



The Borehole Shear™ test is the definitive test for evaluating slope stability, landslide repair methods, foundation bearing capacity, and soil strength behind existing retaining walls. It is the fastest and most effective way to measure soil cohesion and friction angle on an effective stress basis, providing c' and Φ' measurements in minutes instead of hours.

Handy Geotechnical Instruments, Inc. offers four models of Borehole Shear test instruments:

1. Air
2. CO₂
3. Fully automated CO₂
4. Hydraulic (for rocks)

Handy Geotechnical Instruments, Inc.
Madrid, Iowa, U.S.A.
Handygeotech.com



Design/Build
Earth Retention
Foundation Support
Slope Stabilization
Ground Improvement
Dewatering

DBM

Donald B. Murphy Contractors, Inc.
800-562-8460 **WWW.DBMCONTRACTORS.COM**