

ASFE is completing the beta testing of an important new risk management tool called *ASFE's Dr. English*. A Microsoft[®] MSWord[®] plug-in, the device will scan what's been written to look for a variety of "bad" words and phrases that a spell-checker will not catch; e.g.:

- "taboo words" like *certify*, *ensure*, and *safety* that, when used unwisely, can radically expand the scope of a design professional's risks while negating the insurability of the additional exposures;
- absolute words that imply conditions that seldom actually exist, such as *full*, *empty*, *all*, and *maximize*;
- "obscure absolutes," such as *bald* when used to describe someone who actually is affected by male-pattern baldness, *circular* when used to describe a driveway that's far from being round, or *more perfect* when comparing something to a similar item that clearly is not perfect at all;
- "subjective modifiers" that blur communication more than clarify it, because they mean one thing to one person and something else to another person; e.g., *hot*, *heavy*, or *tall*;
- "useless subjective modifiers" that blur communication even more; e.g., *very hot*, *quite heavy*, or *rather tall*;
- useless words, including (most of the time) *different*, *currently*, and *either*;
- clichés that tend to make all who use them sound the same (more or less the definition of a commodity), with *Enclosed please find* and *If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call* being among my favorites;
- "archaisms" that might as well be accompanied by "thou" and "wishest," typified by *amongst*, *towards*, and *in lieu of*;
- "overstuffisms" applied to make writing sound "formal" (whatever that's supposed to mean), with *in regard to*, *with respect to*, *in reference to*, *respecting*, and *concerning*, among others, being favored over the humble *about*; and
- "accidental words" that usually wind up in engineering documents only because they are typos; e.g., *hen*, *hat*, *heir*, and *mater*.

In each case, the new plug-in will highlight the word, suggest alternatives, and provide (on request) back-up information explaining why the word possibly should be replaced.

The original *ASFE's Dr. English* word/phrase list also included "slipshod synonyms" and "hazardous homophones," but we dropped them. The plug-in checked them out whether they were used correctly or not, and that slowed the process severely. Even though a user can modify the dictionary, we feared the first use, were it too slow, would be the last. As such, users will still need to be familiar with certain slipshod synonyms and hazardous homophones, because, when they crop up, users are on their own.

Why should you care? The answer is simple: Everything you write in your professional capacity – from your proposal to your final report, and all the e-mails in-between – can be considered instruments of professional service. As such, every word you use is the equivalent of a number; every sentence is the equivalent of a calculation. If something you write is ambiguous, it could be argued that you negligently misled those who applied it incorrectly.

Short and sweet: While spelling checkers, grammar checkers (be cautious; they don't work that well), and *ASFE's Dr. English* all can be helpful, some words you'll just have to learn on your own. This means you'll need to know the definitions of slipshod synonyms and hazardous homophones and, especially when it comes to the latter, how to spell them. Failing that, you could face some serious problems. Bear in mind that most liability claims arise two or more years after design professionals conclude their services for a project and, at that time, the best evidence is what's in writing. While it may be alleged that you misled some other party, your inadequate spelling could also be used to suggest that you were in too much of a hurry when you delivered your services or that you simply are not much of a professional, given that you still haven't mastered fifth-grade spelling.

Do you need a refresher? Try this 25-question, four-points-per-correct-answer quiz to find out. If you score less than 88, you do.

1. I *imply/infer* from your remarks that you think little of my writing skills.
2. I think we'd be wise to retain legal *council/counsel*.
3. Often when people use "different," the word they really should use is *discreet/discrete*.
4. I had an opportunity to take an ASFE *Write Right* seminar, but I decided to *forgo/forego* it.
5. Utilization rate has to be the *principal/principle* concern.
6. A leather briefcase truly *compliments/complements* a three-piece suit.
7. Look at the answers below if you want to be *apprised/appraised* of your score.
8. Civil engineering wouldn't be what it is today were it not for the profession's *forbears/forebears*.
9. A recent *pole/poll* revealed that our employees do not like our CEO.
10. That lawsuit made me *lose/loose* my appetite.
11. Our ability to complete the work depends on the *whether/weather*.
12. Do you really believe our services will have an *affect/effect* on the outcome?
13. I like fruit for a *dessert/desert*.
14. My wife and I are taking the kids to the *capitol/capital* city.
15. I'd really like to *possess/posses* the ability to spell better.
16. No matter what, though, I'll still have a *roll/role* to play.
17. I like staying abreast of *current/currant* events.
18. "Learn how to spell better" is the *morale/moral* of this story.
19. I wonder who *it's/its* author was.
20. *Your/You're* guess is as good as mine.
21. One way or the other, we'll *home/hone* in on your language deficits.

22. That's far from being a *mute/moot* point.
23. Misspellings look really silly when you see them on high-quality *stationery/stationary*.
24. The low score I'm about to get on this quiz will really *wet/whet* my appetite for some self-improvement.
25. As far as I'm concerned, quizzes like this represent a *decent/descent* into wickedness.

Answers

1)infer 2)counsel 3)discrete 4)forgo 5)principal 6)complements 7)apprised
8)forebears) 9)poll 10)lose 11)weather) 12)effect 13)dessert 14)capital 15)possess
16)role 17)current 18)moral 19)its 20>Your 21)home 22)moot 23)stationery 24)whet
25)descent