

A writewright writes right

by

John Philip Bachner*

Being with so many of you last October was a great treat. In all candor, however, I wish more senior managers attended the two ASFE *Write Right* seminars I put on, because it's discouraging for staffers to learn what's right, only to be told by a higher-up, "Do it my way." Worse: One higher-up's "my way" may differ from another's. Firms need to develop their own style manuals to achieve consistency. Consistency can save time. And effective style can save your...well, let's just say it can help you conserve your capital.

Geotechnical engineers need to take writing more seriously, I believe, given that they write more than just about all other professionals. And more is riding on the quality of their writing than just about anyone else's. Every word is the equivalent of a number; every sentence the equivalent of a calculation. If they garble their message, the penalty could be thousands of dollars. Compare that with the penalties faced by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists: If they misstate a few facts, they just bury a correction somewhere in the next day's edition.

Be all that as it may, far too many geotechnical engineers commit far too many basic language errors, from failing to make the verb match the subject, to improper spelling, improper grammar, and improper word usage. I guess the following quiz is for the senior managers who didn't bother to attend the *Write Right* seminars, because they didn't need to. Oh? Score five points for each of the 20 questions you answer correctly. If you don't do that well, maybe you should ask CGEA to conduct *Write Right* again in 2008, so you and other senior managers can attend, along with those staffers who didn't make it to 2007's.

1. May I tell him (**who or whom**) is calling?

2. It's (**we or us**).
- 3/4. Between you and (**I or me**), this column is insulting. *Geogram* editorial staff didn't apply (**its, it's, its', or their**) usual good judgment.
5. A pound of feathers and a pound of rocks (**weighs or weigh**) the same.
- 6/7/8. To (**affect or effect**) the change you seek, you will have to achieve the (**affect or effect**) that will (**affect or effect**) the way we conduct the process.
- 9/10. Her (**long unkempt or long, unkempt or long-unkempt**), (**strawberry blond, strawberry, blond or strawberry-blond**) hair was off-putting, to say the least.
11. *In the sentence I am not answering these questions quickly, what part of speech is not? Noun, verb, predicate complement, adjective, adverb, or conjunction?*
- 12/13. Professionals should not (**forego or forgo**) learning more about writing. Society expects good writing to be a (**complement or compliment**) to professionalism.
14. Either John or Patty will take (**his, her, or their**) vacation next week.
15. A variety of options (**make or makes**) deciding difficult.
16. Doug graduated with a (**Bachelor's Degree in Civil Engineering or Bachelor's Degree in civil engineering or bachelor's degree in civil engineering**).
17. Tom, as well as Dick and Harry, (**is or are**) unavailable.
18. You're (**inferring or implying**) by your comments that I'm a dummy.

19. Our field personnel (**inspect or monitor or monitor or observe or observe**) earthwork.
20. Our profession (**is comprised of or comprises**) some very good people.

The answers are shown on page xx .

**John Philip Bachner is the executive vice president of ASFE/The Best People on Earth. CGEA is an ASFE Regional Organization. As a result, all CGEA members are Regional Organization Affiliates of ASFE, and are entitled to a variety of benefits. These benefits include a special ASFE newsletter issued six times each year, special pricing on a variety of ASFE materials, and ASFE-member pricing on programs, such as ASFE's continuing education courses and seminars, some of which are designed to enhance one's writing skills. For details, click to www.asfe.org.*

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ANSWERS

Score 5 points for each correct answer. If you believe that professionals should know how to spell, understand basic grammar, and otherwise understand how to speak and write correctly, then you should concur that scoring anything less than 90 means you need a refresher. If you score less than 90 but do nothing about it... well, form your own conclusions.

1. Who 2. we 3/4. me/its 5. weigh 6/7/8. effect/effect/affect 9/10. long, unkempt/strawberry-blond 11. adverb 12/13. forgo/complement 14. her 15. makes 16. bachelor's degree in civil engineering 17. is 18. implying 19. observe 20. comprises