

# editor's note



**I LOVE WHEN I GET TO HEAR A REALLY REMARKABLE SPEAKER.** Sometimes the speaker is simply awe-inspiring, such as Gene Krantz, the mission control specialist on Apollo 13, who keynoted the Steel Conference back in 2006. Sometimes the talk is inspirational, such as Duane Miller's talk last year on "Important Lessons They Didn't Teach Me At College" (which you can view online at [www.aisc.org/2008nascconline](http://www.aisc.org/2008nascconline)).

And sometimes the speaker has a simple message but with the potential for a tremendous impact. At the recent Structures Congress (presented by the Structural Engineering Institute), Professor John Breen from the University of Texas at Austin compared the current building codes to the old "Code of the West." Besides being both entertaining and engaging, Breen had an important message: The language used to express today's building codes and specifications is too complex.

Note that Breen wasn't criticizing the content of the current specifications; rather, he was criticizing how they were written.

Specifically, his contention was that some codes and specifications are written in language that only a post-doc could love. To support his argument, he cited the Gunning fog index, a test designed to measure the readability of a sample of English writing. The test, which was developed by businessman Robert Gunning in 1952, posits that a fog index of around 12 approximates the reading level of a high school senior.

The index is calculated with the following algorithm:

1. Take a sample passage of at least 100 words.
2. Find the average sentence length.
3. Count the number of words with three or more syllables (complex words); don't include compound words (such as butterfly) or proper nouns.
4. Add the average sentence length to the percentage of complex works.
5. Multiply by 0.4.

(Of course, today it's easier to visit Google, type in "Gunning fog index calculator," and find a website that lets you paste in a block of text and which then calculates the fog index. For example, according to one of these online calculators, this editorial has a fog index of 10.14 – which is just about perfect for readability by an educated audience.)

According to Breen (and what added impact to his talk was that he was a major contributor to both ASCE 7 and ACI 318), some structural codes have a fog index as high as 29!

Will Breen's keynote talk have an impact on future codes? Judging by the buzz it generated both at the conference and afterwards, I think it will. And if it does, future generations of designers and code officials will know who to thank.

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