

## Chem Speak and Shop Talk: A Formula for Chaos

Sonja Sherritze

613 Park Avenue, Hoboken, NJ 07030

Like many aspiring editors, I “got into” scientific publishing by accident. Thinking I was smart for coming to the realization that journalism (my major in college) would be stressful, unglamorous, and low-paying, I concluded (erroneously) that publishing would at least be glamorous. It just so happened that my first job was assisting a biology editor—so the barrage of corporate and technical terms began.

After less than a year and a half of learning the publishing lingo (pub speak) and struggling with the language of biologists (bio speak), I was informed that upper management didn’t want to continue paying the exorbitant rent at our building on Fifth Avenue in lower Manhattan, so the company was moving to California—“to consolidate its editorial divisions”—or some such company line. Lucky for me it was not long after this announcement that I learned about a job at a rival publishing company, working for a senior chemistry editor.

Keep in mind that my lack of proficiency in chemistry dates back to high school, when Thomas Dolby’s one-hit wonder, *She Blinded Me with Science*, infected the classroom. For several weeks in 11th grade, I would enter the lab and intone “she blinded me with!” to which my lab partner, on cue, would boom “Science!”

The chemistry job was what headhunters annoyingly refer to as a “lateral move” so I was doubly dubious, but the bearded, bespectacled, sneaker-clad super editor known as “Dr. Ted” was surprisingly charming. When he asked if the job sounded like something I was interested in doing, I candidly blurted out “not forever” to which he casually replied, “You don’t have to stay for that long.”

After our extremely un-scientific discussion—which seemed in retrospect like the antithesis of the classic interview—I accepted the offer and was shocked to discover that I had been chosen over a person who had the same credentials I had plus a degree in chemistry. I reckoned it must have been my brilliant, professional answers that got me the job, but Dr. Ted’s explanation for hiring me was that, he and I “had chemistry”.

Unfortunately, despite the bond (to use another bad chemistry pun) between Dr. Ted and me, the subject matter was even more baffling to me than biology. At the first job I could at least understand the titles (cancer research and genetics, for example) if not the *contents* of the books and journals we were publishing. In stark contrast, the chemistry “list,” as we say in the biz, consisted of specialized monographs on things like terpenes, ketenes, and pyrimidines.

Even the chemists’ hip and trendy buzzwords were more obtuse. The biologists, for instance, had gone berserk over PCR (polymerase chain reaction), which we all know from the Simpson trial is a technique for DNA analysis. The chemists, on the other hand, were going gaga over buckyballs, which nobody outside of the ACS had ever heard of, and which looked to me like tinkertoys. But to be fair, I had the same reaction to almost any visual representation of a chemical structure.

Dr. Ted occasionally attempted to shed some light on the subject for me. While there were about 20 different sub-topics of chemistry listed in the official company subject classification manual, our stuff (he informed me) could be primitively classified as either “organic” chemistry, “inorganic” chemistry, or polymer science (“macromolecules”). To my mind these terms meant alive, dead, and big, respectively. But it wasn’t long before books about the transition metals started being touted as material that was relevant to both organic **and** inorganic chemists, and I was hopelessly confused.

I learned quickly, however, that some of the normally benevolent chemists became extremely agitated if they discovered that their publishing contact people didn’t know anything about chemistry. And so the only solution was to be cool, feign worldliness, and sprinkle one’s language with chem speak.

The necessity to attempt (or at least pretend) to know something about the subject was made painfully clear to me one day when Dr. Ted sent me on a mission to Princeton University. Accompanying me was Chaz, a new associate editor who was a whiz with journals but was still relatively baffled by books. Our mission was to meet with the Princeton professor to discuss a long-standing series of books he edited for us on heterocyclic chemistry.

The Princeton professor greeted us politely, despite what must have been disappointment that Dr. Ted was not along for the ride, and chatted amicably with us until Chaz asked him what, exactly, is heterocyclic chemistry?

All sorts of alternative questions presented themselves to me while the professor recovered himself and attempted an explanation for the two visitors who were by now apparently idiots. What’s your favorite heterocycle? How do heterocycles affect our daily life? Is there such a thing as a homocycle? (Yes, there is. But don’t ask me to define it.) Any one of these ridiculous questions would have been preferable to the outright request for a definition.

I have to admire Chaz for his honesty, though, and in point of fact there have been other times when the same basic question has *not* resulted in catastrophe. There was the time some years later (at my third job in scientific publishing) when editorial, marketing, and production—departments that we refer to as though they are individual people—assembled to meet with the editor of a publication devoted to main group chemistry.

The meeting was intended to instill confidence in our new “academic” editor—another peculiar publishing term for journal editors who may or may not be affiliated with academic institutions. The idea was to show the “AE” what an intelligent, talented bunch of professionals he would be working with. About halfway through the meeting the “in-house editor” (IHE) responsible for acquiring the project asked the academic editor to define main group chemistry for us. Panic seized the participants of the meeting when the AE produced a pocket-sized periodic table of the elements and began pointing to various columns. Hands were clenched when the IHE joked that there would be a quiz

later. But amazingly enough we all survived, and some of us actually learned something.

For it is this lack of knowledge about the material that contributes (in part) to the classic publisher's errors on promotional material and dust jackets. There was the time, for instance, that fluorine was misspelled on the back cover, as if to suggest that the book was about the physical properties of flour. And let us not forget the book on chemical group *theory*, which was inadvertently promoted as group *therapy*—a mistake, Dr. Ted observed, that was probably made by somebody participating in group therapy.

Despite the embarrassments that result from ignorance, however, nothing (except for the words "electronic publishing") frightens publishers of scientific books and journals more than the thought of trying to understand what it is that they're publishing. This, you see, is why we have pub-speak. If we can't understand *their* language, then by gum we'll invent our own.

And this is why we have two-hour long meetings about the covers of books, even though 90% of all chemists don't really care what the fronts of their books look like. (The remaining 10 percent will want a glossy four-color jacket, which is not in the budget and which will never be approved by management because marketing has already "projected" that the book will sell only 500 copies.)

I learned from Dr. Ted, you see, that we have two-hour long meetings about the *cover* because we don't understand or want to talk about what's *inside* the book. Cover design meetings, therefore, provide an excellent forum for publishing professionals to begin sentences with, "Well, if we screen the green and do a drop-out white. . ." The problem with the focus on things like covers is that we sometimes get a little carried away.

A case in point is the infamous trip to Princeton. Some time after the initial revelation that we didn't know what we were talking about, Chaz brought up the subject of the heterocyclic series cover design—a distinctive, if subdued, dark red cover for a series that has been in existence since the 1950's. Under direct orders from management, Chaz asked the Princeton professor about the possibility of changing this design.

With thinly veiled bewilderment, the professor gestured vaguely in the direction of his imposing eight-foot tall bookcase, which consisted of some 75 perfectly aligned, *identical* volumes. Suddenly I felt like we had just asked the editor of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to come up with something a little snazzier for the last third of the alphabet.

Fortunately for all concerned, the professor was victorious and the cover remains unchanged to this day. But the overt and covert battles between author and publisher rage on daily, and the scientists must be as baffled by our language as we are by theirs. Publisher's contracts, after all, are as convoluted as some organic reactions, and the guidelines for submitting scientific/technical manuscripts to publishers are sometimes longer than the books themselves. Authors are not always aware of it, but the publishing process in general has about as many steps as there are elements in the periodic table.

Come to think of it, there are a number of similarities between the two professions. For all of the publishers' verbal disdain for scientific jargon, I can't help but be amused by the incessant talk about "launching" books and "forecasting" sales. Our method might not be scientific, but it turns out that we have "strategic objectives," "initiatives" and "incentives" for cranking out about as much chemical literature as is necessary to keep up with academia's "publish or perish" requirements.

To compensate for our verbosity, however, we publishing types utilize a lot of two- and three-letter abbreviations, which we flail about with the same regularity as chemists' two-letter abbreviations for the elements. Some favorites are LOI (letter of interest), CRC (camera-ready copy), and AQ (author's questionnaire), in addition to the more common EIC (editor-in-chief) and TOC (table of contents). There are also some creative uses of verbs, like the ever-popular "pub" (meaning publish) and "ABI," which is actually a misappropriated noun (advanced book information sheet) that is violently thrust into statements like "we can't ABI the book until it launches, because it won't pub in time."

So you see, it isn't necessary to have a PhD in chemistry in order to be a successful chemistry editor—just as chemists don't need publishing degrees in order to publish their books. Having a working knowledge of the other's language helps both sides, though. Scientists who edit journals and other serial publications tend to pick up more of the publishing vocabulary than single-book authors, because these editors, for better and for worse, have ongoing relationships with us pub-speak artists.

So the next time I'm attending a luncheon for an up-and-coming journal and some board member starts babbling to me about B (boron), I can feel comfortable telling him that the IHE needs the CV and AQ of the EIC, along with the TOC, so we can have the CRC in order to launch in time to ABI so we can pub before ACS.