

# CHRONIC SENSE

An editor's struggle to make sense of...everything.

## Annie Keeghan



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### Location

Massachusetts,

### Birthday

May 15

### Bio

Editor, educational consultant, and writer with a novel looking for a good home.

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FEBRUARY 17, 2012 12:19PM

EDITOR'S PICK

## Afraid of Your Child's Math Textbook? You Should Be.

Tip! **RATE:** 43   990



There may be a reason you can't figure out some of those math problems in your son or daughter's math text and it might have nothing at all to do with you. That math homework you're trying to help your child muddle through might include problems with no possible solution. It could be that key information or steps are missing, that the problem involves a concept your child hasn't yet been introduced to, or that the math problem is structurally unsound for a host of other reasons.

I have worked for over 20 years in educational publishing as a product developer, writer, and editor of curriculum materials for grades K-8. I've worked directly for textbook publishers and supplemental publishers (supplemental being those books that are adjuncts to the text), start-ups and large publishing houses. I've attended countless sales meetings, product meetings, and planning sessions, seen and taken part in the inner workings of a successful textbook from inception to completion. Over the course of my career, I've had the privilege of working with publishers dedicated to producing the best materials possible. Because of them, I was able to produce several successful reading, math, and assessment programs and make a darn good living doing it.

Best of all, I was able to feel proud of those books to which my name was attached. But there are no longer many projects that allow such a feeling to take hold. Why? Because the "new normal" among too many publishers is a severe lack of oversight in the quality of curriculum being produced, and a frightening prevalence of apathy to do anything about it.

The root of problem begins with this key fact: There are only a small number of educational publishers left after rabid buyouts and mergers in the 90s, publishers that all vie for a piece of a four-billion dollar (forbes.com) pie. In recent years, math has become the subject du jour due to government initiatives and efforts to raise the rankings of U.S. students who lag behind in math compared to 30 other industrialized nations. With state and local budgets constrained to unprecedented levels, publishers must compete for fewer available dollars. As a result, many are rushing their products (especially in math) to market to before their competitors, product that in many instances is inherently, tragically flawed.

At one time, a writer in this industry could write a book and receive roughly 6% royalties on sales. The salesperson who sold the product, however, earned (and still

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##### New list

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does) a commission upwards of 17% on the same product. This sort of pay structure never made sense to me; without the product, there'd be nothing to sell, after all. But this disparity serves to illustrate the thinking that has been entrenched industry-wide for decades—that sales and marketing is more valuable than product.

Now, the balance between the budgets for marketing and product development is growing farther and farther apart, and exponentially so. Today, royalties are a thing of the past for most writers and work-for-hire is the norm. Sales staffs still receive their high commissions, but with today's outsourcing, writers and editors are consistently offered less than 20% of what they used to make. As a result, the number of qualified writers and editors is diminishing, and those being contracted by developers and publishers often don't have the necessary skills or experience to produce a text worthy of the publisher's marketing claims.

Here's how it works: Many publishers solicit developers, often on the Internet and from all over the world, looking for the best bid on a project. With competition this fierce, developers are forced to drastically lower their rates just to stay in business (and publishers exploit this fact). Let's say a publisher hires a developer for a certain low-bid fee to produce seven supplemental math books for grades 3-8. The product specs call for each student book and teacher guide to have page counts of roughly 100 pages and 80 pages, respectively. The publisher wants these seven books ready for press in five weeks—over 1,400 pages. To put this in perspective, in the not too recent past at least six months would be allotted for a project of this size. But publishers customarily shrink their deadlines to get a jump on the competition, especially in today's math market. Unreasonable turnaround times are part of the new normal, something that almost guarantees a lack of quality right out of the gate.

Of course, the developer could say no to this ridiculous timeline, but there are plenty of others who will say yes. So, the developer accepts the work and scrambles to put together a team of writers and editors who must have immediate availability, sheepishly offering them a take-it-or-leave-it rate, a mere pittance of what they could once demand. As is the case for the developer, for each writer or editor who declines, there are scores in the wings who will say yes just to survive. Those who do accept the inferior pay and grueling schedule often do so without the ability to review the product specs to know what they're getting into. That's because the specs are still being hashed out by the publisher and developer even as the project begins. And when product specs are "complete", they are often vague, contradictory, and in need of extensive reworking since they were hastily put together by people juggling far too many projects already.

Given the five-week turnaround time, one book is often broken up among several different writers, a practice which assures a lack of consistency and structure throughout a single book. But I'm being picky. Midway through the writing, the developer realizes that even more writers are needed in order to meet the deadline. Sometimes, in the rush to complete the project, there is no time to discuss resumes and qualifications; there's a schedule to keep and the developer's bottom line is starting to dwindle. What often happens is that writers overstate their abilities and haven't the first clue about state educational standards, Common Core State Standards, or those put out by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, a knowledge of which is essential to produce a worthy math book or text, a knowledge of which should be demanded by developers and publishers alike.

Educational publishing is a small world, and the pool of qualified writers and editors has always been comparatively small to that of mass market or trade publishing. Now with fewer of us willing to accept these conditions, that pool is drying up. Over the last few years I've stopped developing and writing educational books; there's no longer any satisfaction in the work, no demand or appreciation for a product well crafted, no way to make a decent living or produce something that I feel proud to have my name attached to. The day I heard myself ask a publisher *not* to include my name or that of my company's in the credits of the book I'd consulted on (the final product was nothing like what was originally conceived) came the sad realization that my career as I'd known it was dying. I'd heard whisperings for years from other writers and editors working for other publishers about this "new normal," but I didn't understand until I saw with my own eyes what they'd been telling me. I finally understood all their frustration and angst, the conflicted feelings of weighing the need of a paycheck against principle, the feeling of trying to improve a product even if it meant bucking heads with those in charge, people who weren't going to appreciate the effort or compensate appropriately anyway.

So, like many of my fellow colleagues, I've taken a step back, chosen not to be a party



Planned  
Parenthood  
Changed My Life  
posted by: Sarah  
Fister Gale

to something so fundamentally backward. The only work I accept is copyediting, and only when the money is decent (which isn't often) and when the developer is at least committed to producing curriculum of quality (which also isn't often). Most of the work I've been offered in the past few years is in math, the subject du jour I spoke of. Copyediting, the work I generally do now, is the final stage of editing before the product goes to press, where only a check for grammar, punctuation and things of this nature should be required. Content editing is a whole other expertise, one that is done after the writing where the content editor reviews the writer's work for accuracy, sense, and structure, and makes sure the material adheres to the product specs. When I'm hired to copyedit, the profound errors I see in content are often staggering enough that grammar and punctuation seem immaterial. Sometimes the content in the student materials is so poor—steps omitted, unclear directions, concepts introduced when they're not developed till later in the text, distorted interpretations of math terms and applications—that it boggles the mind it got past a content editor. With so many errors rampant at this stage of editing, rewriting is hastily done and it's only inevitable that some errors will show up in the final printed product. And with a different copyeditor on each book, there are those who don't even think about, or have the experience to recognize, the content issues so they go unaddressed. For a rate of four dollars a page, most copyeditors will do only what they were hired to do—look for errors and in grammar and punctuation and move on. There's a mortgage due after all.

When I point out critical errors in content to a developer's project manager, there's generally a pause at the other end of the phone. I'm ruining their day, handing them a problem they don't want, can't possibly address given their resources and time. Some do their best; they'll ask me to make corrections and bump up my rate a bit. Some will ask me to make notes so that they can fix the errors and do the rewrites themselves on their own time. Others will simply sigh, "The publisher knows it's bad. Just do the best you can." *The publisher knows it's bad*. And yet, it doesn't seem to matter. That's because the sales and marketing team is already at work developing videos, brochures, webinars, catalog copy, and whatever else their bloated budgets will allow in order to sell what doesn't actually exist—a quality product.

And speaking of the printed product, there's one more step before we get there—production. These are the people who typeset the books and get them ready for press. India is a favored venue for some publishers because workers are available on three shifts and work fast, but mostly because the price is far cheaper than in the U.S. As editors, we often have to compensate for language barriers by color coding our instructions to the production staff or using simple language that is still frequently misunderstood, resulting in further unintended errors that often make it into the final product because there's no time left in the schedule, no money left to pay someone, to do a final and thorough review in the manner it should be, and used to be, done.

You may be wondering by now where students fit into the grand plan of these practices. Let's write and solve an equation to find out: Poorly-executed product ( $x$ ) + a greater concentration of money spent on marketing to maximize profits ( $y$ ) = nowhere, that's where.

One must conclude that students and their education, if this is judged against product quality, is becoming an increasingly low priority. Not only don't some publishers care, some have no problem expressing their lack of concern. Example: I received an email from a senior math executive of a well-established publisher responding to a concern I raised about the lack of correlations in a particular math series to the Common Core State Standards, correlations that were part of the product specs. The reason they were part of the product specs is because Common Core State Standards have been officially adopted by 43 states ([ascd.org](http://ascd.org)) and publishers are racing to make sure their products address them. This is how the senior executive answered my query: "It doesn't matter if there aren't enough correlations; our marketing materials say only that we 'expose' students to Common Core."

Not only did this top-level "professional" have no problem stating this, she had no problem *committing it to writing*. Buyer beware: Read that marketing copy *very* carefully.

One math series out there is from a well-known textbook publisher incorporating the success of a particular math approach in another country (that's a hint) into their textbooks. A while back, a group of us was hired to edit and adapt the product for the English-speaking market since it was written overseas. Not much time passed before it was clear that what the product required was not editing but extensive rewriting. One math exercise in a chapter I was assigned called for students to use a math formula to calculate *their level of attractiveness*, using a mathematical ratio of 1:1.618 (otherwise

known as *phi* or divine proportion), a formula scientists have devised to set standards of beauty. Math can be tough enough for some kids without having to learn that, on top of struggling to apply math formulas to their face, they are also inherently unattractive. Talk about installing math phobia! No publisher in their right mind would allow such a problem to slip into their math books, but what does it say about the hiring practices of publishers and their developers when a writer who believes that such an exercise *is* appropriate gets a contract? The project was scrapped, but only temporarily. The publisher felt the writers just needed more time to clean up their work. Yeah, that's all they needed. Meanwhile, the marketing for the product was already developed, prominent on the web and in mass media. And customers likely believed it because of the publisher's reputation.

A more recent math project I was hired to edit was not only full of content errors, the books were so peculiar in the execution of math concepts and instruction that I hadn't seen anything like it in all my 20+ years of experience. I asked the project manager if she'd ever seen math approached in this manner. She gave a resigned groan and said no, but this was what the publisher wanted. The books in question were a series of supplemental products designed for struggling students, which is sadly ironic because students of all abilities will indeed struggle to complete the lessons in these books. How could this happen, you might ask? Well, the books were published by a company that was reorganized a few years ago in order to boost profits. That's when the bulk of the product development staff was let go and the budget for their department slashed. Meanwhile, the marketing and sales departments swelled, as did their budgets. And though many of those in charge now have lofty MBAs, few have little, if any, experience in publishing of any kind, never taught in a classroom, and haven't the first clue of how to build a coherent educational book from start to finish. The lust for the bottom line—that is how this happens.

At the end of this project, the same project manager mused to me aloud, "I want to know who buys this crap." Crap. That was the word *she* used after all her exhausting efforts trying to make a silk purse out of this pig's ear. My reply to her was, "I want to know who buys it *twice*." Because that's the only way educational publishers make money, on repeat sales. Those books are out there now in print, on the shelves in the publisher's warehouse, being packed and shipped to a school near you. So who are you people who choose to buy these books? Identify yourselves. Because you, too, a part of the problem.

Don't get me wrong; there are many responsible educational publishers out there, publishers who are careful to hire teachers or those with a background in education and publishing to produce their materials. But they are becoming the minority. Teachers, curriculum specialists, parents, home schoolers, and anyone interested in the education of this generation of children need to beware. There are those who are capitalizing on established reputations to produce low-budget, low-quality materials with a high-concentration on disingenuous marketing all in the name of priority one—profit. Meanwhile, the people qualified to develop and write sound educational products are leaving the industry in droves to pursue more profitable careers at Wendy's and Wal-Mart.

And so, I say to parents: Take a good look at the materials your children are bringing home. And to educators: Look at what you're purchasing. Don't be satisfied with the classic "thumb through" and don't take those marketing materials or the sales pitch at face value. Take the time to study the materials; match them to your state's desired standards and preferred benchmarks. If they're not a good fit, take a pass and develop your own if you must. The only way kids are going to become better educated through the materials you buy, to increase their rankings among those 30 other countries, is to break the cycle and stop buying those books that are—there's no other way to put it—crap.

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**AUTHOR TAGS:** [education](#), [educational publishing](#), [math](#), [homework](#), [math](#), [textbook publishing](#), [common core](#), [math standards](#), [nctm](#), [textbook publishers](#)

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## Comments [Post a comment](#)

Such an excellent, *excellent* internal look at what is going on. Thank you for exposing the truth. I hope this piece gets hundreds, thousands of readers. I'm familiar with the problem from another point - that of shrinking budgets for purchasing any new books. When I taught ELA there were years when I was limited to one class set of books that had to be shared among four classes. Consequently no books could be taken home by the students. The school turned to purchasing magazines such as Scholastic Scope and Voices - a simplified, readers digest version of great works of literature. We didn't even have a decent grammar and literature work book which forced me to write my own and have it printed through the school. I collected not a penny from that, only the satisfaction that the students had a book they could take home and study from.

Your post illustrates just one more example of the attitude towards greed versus education and the askewed values of this society.

R♥



[Fusuna](#)

FEBRUARY 17, 2012 04:30 PM

I hate to admit it at the end of this blistering post, but I work in sales and marketing for a textbook publisher (math, even!?!). I have seen first-hand the drive for profits over the drive for student achievement (read *The Tyranny of Textbooks* for a book-length exposition on your main ideas here).

That said, a couple of differing opinions:

- 1) Salespeople are not raking it in either. The supply and demand issues leading to poor pay for developers is true in sales as well. Lower base salaries, higher quotas, and quicker triggers to fire when numbers aren't reached are an everyday part of our lives.
- 2) Sales and marketing budgets are astronomical because the expenses pay off more than investments in product. Sadly, most teachers are not curriculum experts and are swayed by the surface pitches. Teachers make the decisions, but are not the users (students) nor are they spending their own money. As a result, products that make their lives easier and that come with free meals and gifts are the most successful.

Your points are accurate, but blame can be spread to the entire system of how materials are developed, published, purchased, and used.



[Haysmathman](#)

FEBRUARY 17, 2012 07:14 PM

Super-interesting post. I have a loathing for educational publishers. I get reams of brochures for educational materials and I throw them all away. I teach high-school English in the Bronx. I and most of the teachers at my school make up our own curricula--the math teachers, too. I use novels, poems, etc., of course, but for non-fiction I turn to editorials and any other type of news or factual articles from the internet. In my school if teachers rely on following a textbook they are looked down on--because we all know what the quality is like. My principal purchased a computerized program for writing put out by the loathed Pearson and all the teachers were horrified. He did pay a lot of money for it but no one uses it. There are entire schools who don't use any textbooks at all--you can get anything on the internet and it's all up-to-date. I bought a \$50 textbook from Pearson during graduate school and it left blank, lined paper for me at the end so I could take notes. Really? I can get a notebook for a dollar. It also told me where I should stop and reflect, and how I should do it. Crap is the operative word, but the good news is most teachers I know are fully aware of this--let's hope the teachers I know aren't just a minority.



*ManhattanWhiteGirl*  
FEBRUARY 18, 2012 07:56 AM

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Thanks for the feedback, all the more meaningful since all of you have some first-hand experience in this industry in one way or other.

@FusunA: THANK YOU for such kind praise! So disappointing to read of your experiences in the classroom. If only dedication to one's job could be measured in other ways beyond satisfaction. The public at large has no idea how much time (and how much of their own money!) teachers devote to their students beyond the typical school day.

@Haysmathman: You raise some additional valid insights; unfortunate that your field is also experiencing the pressure to produce under extreme circumstances.

@ManhattanWhiteGirl: Bless you for teaching in one of the most challenging districts in the U.S. Most of the teachers I know do exactly what you say-- download materials off the Internet for free and adapt them for their students. As if teachers didn't have enough to do...

AK



*Annie Keeghan*  
FEBRUARY 18, 2012 05:34 PM

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I wish I could say that I was shocked but after looking at the editing alone in some of my textbooks....yikes! I can't believe I had to pay such a big mark up on some of them.



*WendyLynn*  
FEBRUARY 18, 2012 10:47 PM

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Wonderful, informative post. When I taught high school English, I created my own materials and barely touched the horrible literature textbooks we were given.



*Lisa DeBusk*  
FEBRUARY 18, 2012 11:18 PM

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This points to an essential problem in the US educational system. There is no national curriculum.

Further, too often, important questions about curriculum end up in the hands of harried teachers or the school committee, which may have not a single member with any training or experience in education.

By the time the text book ends up in your kid's hands, the school's committed to it for a number of years, because they probably don't have the budget to dump them even if they turn out to be awful.

Criteria for choosing textbooks is something that doesn't need to be reinvented in every town or school district. The fragmented nature of the US education system means that it is, and the school districts that don't make good choices are harming their students and adding to the bottom line of publishers with a dysfunctional process and flawed product.



*Malusinka*  
FEBRUARY 19, 2012 01:35 AM

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Textbook publishing is just another industry thrashing around in its death throes until the new paradigm takes hold. What new paradigm you might ask? Well, that remains to be seen. But my guess is that it will be one that incorporates the web and mobile devices to provide a new menu of alternatives to the deplorable morass you detail.



*whirlwind*  
FEBRUARY 19, 2012 01:49 AM

Wow, Annie. Just wow. I'm helping my son through 8th grade algebra, dusting off my own very rusty algebra, and occasionally we find problems in the answer key that are wrong. I thought it was me. I'm no math whiz now, but I did make it to calculus in college, and I'm kind of amazed at how much algebra I remember.

It's kind of blowing my mind that the book really is wrong in places.

This situation reminds me of Big Pharma, developing the drugs that are profitable, not necessarily the drugs we need. Thanks for the excellent article.



*froggy*

FEBRUARY 19, 2012 04:50 AM

I don't have kids and have no school attachments so have nothing to add, but I find it fascinating because the kids caught in this morass are the future leaders of this country. Scary because many of them are being taught to defend their lack of education proudly.



*phyllis45's Bright Eyes*

FEBRUARY 19, 2012 05:13 AM

Thanks for posting this. It doesn't surprise me to learn any of this, given my extensive experience with American higher education that is committed to a race to the bottom in everything except cost, which continues to soar.

How much has eighth-grade math changed in the past fifty years? Why don't they take a textbook that is in the public domain, scan it, and use that?



*Patrick Hahn*

FEBRUARY 19, 2012 07:01 AM

Patrick --

Aside from the probable sexism of the 50s and quite possible racism, copyright runs for 70 years after the death of the author, or if it was a work for hire, as most textbooks were, 95 years after publishing.

Which means those 1950s math books are not in the public domain and are still protected by copyright.



*Malusinka*

FEBRUARY 19, 2012 03:24 PM

Many of the textbooks are just plain awful, but some of the alternatives are worse.

One of my kids was issued a math text, but didn't so much as crack it all year because the teacher preferred to "develop" her "own" materials, which for her meant locating someone else's developed product on the internet, stealing it [we stumbled across a few of the originals during a search for home practice materials]and hand-writing instructions at the top. [This was not an uncommon practice, even from teacher to teacher within the school itself.] Unfortunately, these materials were chock-full of errors, and worse, this particular teacher [20 years experience!] adhered to the "presentation" method of teaching, meaning she'd present the material but not actually explain/teach it [which probably explains the 20%+ "special education" rate for that class]. Based on her written instructions, it was pretty clear that she didn't understand how to actually do the work she was paid to teach. [Answer keys must have been her saving grace; I don't know for sure, because she refused to send completed tests home. As a matter of fact, we *never* saw so much as a single graded paper from her class.]

The worst of it is that in some districts, nothing works as a fix, especially in smaller, rural areas. Detailed, diplomatic, fact-based evidence-supported explanations to the powers that be don't work [including pointing out materials errors], and end with you being labeled as a problem parent. The new attitude in public education seems to be that kids are lazy and don't want

to learn, teachers are infallible and omniscient, the school district and administrators are all-powerful and immune from the [admittedly] weak consequences of education law violations, and parents are stupid, troublesome non-educator beings who couldn't possibly have any intelligent thoughts on education or recognize a textbook error if it landed on their nose and started to wiggle. [Granted, I live in NYS, and our teacher/education issues tend to be somewhat different than those of the majority of the nation. And yes, I'm a tad bitter about it.]

I remember reading that there are similar widespread issues with college textbooks. It's frightening to think that, in some schools, the teachers and/or administrators who may have been educated with bad materials get to choose which texts the school buys, and which questionably-sourced materials of dubious quality are actually used. There are serious problems at every level of public education, but I'm glad you highlighted this one.



*Julie Morse*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 05:34 AM

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Education is quite definitely NOT a priority in the american educational "system."

Keep them stupid enough to accept lower paying jobs at a decreasing dollar value and make it easy to justify endless war.

The best and the brightest has been replaced by the worst, the stupidest, and those must gullible to accept the need for war with no end.

The light at the end of the tunnel has flickered and can no longer be re-ignited.

-R-

PS- studied math through to differential equations.



*markinjan*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 05:54 AM

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I should add that I don't have an issue with teachers using free, quality materials they find on the internet; I do have a problem if they're using someone's work without permission. I definitely have a problem with teacher quality [I've met some that are excellent, but they are few and far between], relevancy/content of curriculum, quality of materials, and salary of the administrators who are supposed to be providing oversight/quality control for all of the above, but don't.

FusunA, I still cannot believe some of the books they make the kids read, just because they were cheap enough to buy a classroom's worth. Walmart recently stocked around 20 classics for a dollar apiece; I'm hoping this will become a regular thing.

Hays--It sounds like textbook sales is similar to pharmaceutical sales, where they cater lunches for the provider offices, distribute samples, pens, coffee mugs, notepads, stethoscopes and even black doctor bags full of diagnostic tools, all to promote their products.

Manhattan, I love that you incorporate real-world reading. It's a great habit for the kids to develop, particularly if they're also learning how to evaluate the credibility of sources, which doesn't seem to be a priority in our district.

Malusinka--I asked once why my kids were never asked to use their VERY expensive textbook for a particular subject; I was told that the textbook was terrible [probably was], and that the school only bought it because they're required to regularly replace textbooks. I did wonder why, if they knew they weren't going to use a book at all, they didn't at least buy the cheapest one available! Nice to know that the bulk of the book money is spent on texts that likely won't ever be used, and there's no money left to buy enough copies of books that the kids might actually want to read.



*Julie Morse*

A sad amen to all that has been written. Kudos, Annie, for your honesty in telling it (so well) as it really is. After a career in teaching and librarianship, I worked as an editor (content and copy) at a developer no longer in existence. Everything said about math is also true about language arts. I left to freelance write and edit for ed pub nearly 12 years ago now; after the implosion of 2008, I can't make a living at it. Many publishers now post jobs that require expertise in Web whizbang, not content. And content just keeps getting dumbed down. You're so right, Annie--there's no time (and no interest from the publishers) to do anything but shoddy work. When editing, we are sometimes told NOT to change even the errors--just make sure the headings are correct. Another editor calls us dinosaurs--we haven't all died off yet, but the climate has changed and we're certainly not valued or compensated fairly. I've gone to work part-time at the library of a community college, where I see daily the results already in students from "disadvantaged" backgrounds, who spend time and money taking remedial math and writing, get discouraged, and leave to work at McDonald's or Speedway. I'm not terribly hopeful about the state of education. Even in our Eng 111 classes, which are not remedial, students struggle to write a 5-page paper. I wish I knew how to unravel this tangle, but anyone trying to do textbooks the "right" way would not survive in the competitive environment.



*Julie White*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 08:51 AM

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Thoughtfully said, Annie. It is disheartening to be faced with more facts that education has turned into an industry rather than a public service. It discourages my hope that the newest waves of reform will yield any meaningful changes.



*AGentileschi*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 11:14 AM

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Great post.



*tai*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 11:44 AM

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Dear Annie:

As one who has taught in universities (Lit & Writing) for over fifteen years now, I feel so depressed by your honest and disturbing evaluation of Math materials. US student performance in Math & Science across international comparisons has been little short of appalling.

Most politicians are either too busy, too big-money obsessed, too ideologically strait-jacketed, or just plain ignorant to do anything about this problem. Math - I don't get it, they say. Local school boards are, if possible, even worse.

But let's at least get the message out. It took Sputnik back in 1957 to change US (& British) science & math education positively. One might hope 9/11 would have woken us up, but little sign of that. Keep fighting the good fight, Annie!



*Raymond Vince*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 11:44 AM

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Every once in a while I come across a fascinating post. And this was one of them. Absolutely fascinating. And an indictment on a portion of the "education" industry which apparently has forgotten that it's all about providing materials which contribute to education first and profit second.



*Walter Blevins*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 11:59 AM

In addition to being a college professor with concerns about higher ed publishing, I am on my local school board and concerned about choosing good textbooks unlike the ones you describe here. I was wondering if you could provide the names of some publishers that you consider to be reputable or at least better. You did suggest that some were less guilty of sacrificing quality than others, and I would like to make sure we patronize them, whenever we can afford to get new books.



*Shannon Smithey*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 12:05 PM

I left the publishing industry back in 2004. I know from whence you speak, Annie. I've just cross-posted a link to your article in today's Washington Post.



*LeeWhitt*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 01:06 PM

Thanks for this highly informative read. I thought it was just me when I would see oddities in my daughter's 3rd grade math assignments. Often the questions are worded in such a way that it's difficult for me to understand, let alone a nine year old. I'm so tempted to send a copy of this to my daughter's teacher/principle, but I don't know if it would be appropriate. Perhaps they already know.



*bluestocking babe*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 02:08 PM

I'm grateful for the comments and concerns raised here from those interested in the education of this next generation of kids. Just a few comments to add to the "conversation":

@PatrickH: Math per se hasn't changed, but instruction techniques have, and in many ways for the better thanks to NCTM. With their standards and those of Common Core now entering the picture, books from generations past wouldn't measure up. Example: I was a typical "math phobic" student, so when I was hired to work in the math division of major publisher for my first job, I felt certain that I was not qualified (I had a background in reading, not math). However, NCTM has just issued their standards and for the first time in my life, math began to make sense to me; this was because of their approach toward strategic-thinking, something most of us never learned. I ended up loving the job and, in the process, not only lost my phobia but learned to embrace math.

@Sickofstupid: Yes, copyright issues will always be a problem in the classroom and good of you to be aware/concerned. Years ago, I gave the principal of my son's school some print books that I'd developed in reading, thinking she may want to purchase them because of their low per-pupil cost. Imagine my surprise to find my son coming home with photocopies of the lessons from the books as homework!

NY is tough system; you folks have your hands full. But parent-involvement is supposed to be a good thing and nothing can replace a good math foundation learned at an early age. Your concerns are valid. Part of the problem in many districts around the country is that there are few teachers who are qualified to teach math or feel comfortable teaching it. Administrators (or those who choose the textbooks) often depend on the products they buy to make up for this lack of expertise.

@JulieWhite: Thank you for validating the concerns I raised; tragic isn't it, to be labeled a dinosaur for wanting to do the right thing? The dumbing down is rampant, from the teacher guide materials that are produced (so that anyone can teach the material, even a classroom aide), to the student materials. (Some publishers fear that if the material is too hard, no one will buy it; this is a refrain that's long been sung.)

@RaymondVince: I applaud your enthusiasm for the fight. ☹ Politicians are generally useless in the area of education because it's not their area of

expertise. Instead of acknowledging this, they surround themselves with decision-makers who also know nothing about education but plenty about PR, buzzwords, and help their employer get re-elected.

@ShannonSmithy: I've sent you a PM addressing as best I can your concerns; bless your dedication.

@LeeWhitt: Thank you!

@bluestockingbabe: Spread the word, I say. They may know it, but they won't necessarily do anything about it unless they're called out.



*Annie Keeghan*  
FEBRUARY 20, 2012 03:04 PM

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Boy does this resonate with me! I've noticed with both my 4th grade child's Social Studies and Science textbooks (both Houghton Mifflin) an appallingly poor description of topics. Sometimes my child asks me to help her study. In these textbooks I sometimes can't even find a coherent answer to many of the sample questions!! Sometimes the sentences are so poorly written that you're not sure what the author is even claiming to say. Annie, could schools set up a website where teachers, and perhaps parents, can flag problem textbooks and publishers--and highlight the good ones? Then administrators who purchase books could consult such a website and be warned before purchasing more poorly written books? Is there any school book publisher that you think is high quality?



*Margaret Bowen*  
FEBRUARY 20, 2012 03:33 PM

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Rated, shared, not surprised, just sickened. Thank you.



*Samasiam*  
FEBRUARY 20, 2012 03:53 PM

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Hello Annie,

Your post reminds me of the difficulties I had in trying to understand some of my kids' textbooks, even when I knew the subject matter.

Wondering if you and those likeminded could form a kind of Consumers Union of textbooks to promote the good ones and expose the poor ones. May also be a good idea to have them evaluated by students and parents before schools buy them.



*Spence Blakely*  
FEBRUARY 20, 2012 04:34 PM

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Fabulous piece! Thank you for posting it. My middle-grader is doing Algebra in 6th grade math. I have been kind of worried that he would be beyond my help with homework before high school. (I did make it through Calculus, barely, in high school). Now I have a new perspective. His teacher isn't even using a math textbook and now I'm starting to see why - the industry. Thanks from all us parents out there.



*Jennifer Prestholdt*  
FEBRUARY 20, 2012 05:11 PM

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As an aside, I remember needing to get a new engineering textbook in college, it was the latest edition so I couldn't buy a used book.

The price had jumped from \$35 for the 3rd edition to \$90 for the 4th. My professor knew the author and asked why that had occurred and they were blunt, the author was told it would be used in more colleges if it was more expensive, because that obviously meant it was a "better" textbook than the cheaper alternatives. It proved true.



*anniebw*  
FEBRUARY 20, 2012 06:32 PM

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Math could actually be taught without a textbook by someone who understands mathematical concepts and can do arithmetic. Go figure....



*jackie2*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 07:55 PM

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I've already forwarded your piece to my eighth-grade son's math teacher. My son is in "advanced" math, and she told us recently that many children have to repeat the class in the ninth grade just to stay on target. I wonder how many parents (erroneously) believe their children are getting ahead with textbooks like the ones you cited? It must have a domino effect that skews everything else in our society, including who gets into "talented and gifted" programs. Something like that "crap" could literally determine a child's fate if they don't get the material. I had terrible math teachers as a child, and found out later in life that I actually have a knack for understanding complex theories and ideas. Who knows what I could have accomplished had I had good math teachers—and good books!!

Thank you!!



*Deborah Méndez-Wilson*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 08:00 PM

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My son's textbooks must have been produced by the marketing driven ignoramuses. The teachers are using two textbooks this year because the school is rich enough. They save their money hiring teachers for American teachers. So my poor kid gets more from an hour with non-teacher mom than weeks with teachers and two textbooks.



*nolibrarian*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 08:04 PM

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I also work for a publisher. In sales. I wish we had the marketing power of some of our larger competitors. We don't author any of our programs. We only publish math and science programs that are part of grants of other projects from the National Science Foundation. It is very frustrating when a group of teachers and administrators do their homework and are ready to make real change in the way these subjects are delivered to their students. Only to be nixed at the end so the school can purchase a program from a company that is giving away lots of goodies. Only the most dedicated districts can avoid this type of marketing. Those are our customers. I think I deserve 10 or 12% commission when I find them.



*dave mustaine for president*

FEBRUARY 20, 2012 10:58 PM

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Well-written post, and I verify all you've said. I have been in development and production in educational publishing for over 30 years now, both high school and college. When I worked in high school, I was appalled by the way projects were slapped together. When I started my own development and production company 11 years ago, I decided to focus on college and association publishing and deliberately steered clear of high school. At the college level, we still have authors for most books, and an author, with his or her name on the cover, ensures a better product. Not a perfect product -- I'm quite certain I've never seen one -- but good product. Come on over to the college side Annie. It's still OK over here in development. Production has all gone to India (as you mentioned), so that side of my business is mostly gone. To compensate, I've branched out to developing training products for industry. It is very interesting and lucrative work.



*Laura Horowitz*

FEBRUARY 21, 2012 05:45 AM

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I had no idea. This is very, very interesting. And now I get why my child has no textbooks; everything is worksheets printed off the internet, some of which make sense, some of which don't.





*Charlie Elliott*  
FEBRUARY 22, 2012 11:00 AM

Senator Steinberg of CA wants \$25M for creating Open Source textbooks. Yay!

<http://www.sacbee.com/2011/12/14/4121224/darrell-steinberg-pushes-open.html>



*VicDiesel*  
FEBRUARY 22, 2012 11:18 AM

Some great ideas floating around here—especially love the ideas of databases and a central place to find out about the better textbooks/publishers out there. (Maybe an “Annie’s List” as one emailer suggested. ☺)

Many have asked me to recommend publishers in PMs and here in the comments section. The best advice I can offer anyone interested in the books their school is purchasing is to get involved and find out the process for selection; this is something that varies from district to district, state to state. Set up a parent committee and ask to be part of that selection process; it’s your kids’ education after all and you have that right. Keep in mind that there are many variables that come into play for choosing a textbook—desired correlations to state standards, CCSS (Common Core State Standards), NCTM (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics) standards, etc. (All of these standards are available free on the web, btw). If the textbooks your child is using aren’t top notch, find out what the school is doing about that; a good teacher will adapt any material given to fit the needs to his/her students, especially if they are teaching a subject they are comfortable with (which is not always true for math).

NCTM endorses several math textbooks on their website (NCTM.org), which provides a wealth of information on other math topics as well.

Love that so many people are want to get involved. Keep spreading the word!

AK



*Annie Keeghan*  
FEBRUARY 22, 2012 03:48 PM

"A nation that fails to educate its children soon won't be able to; for who will it have who can do so?"

An incredible opus of a blog, Annie. It is so sad that it will, for the most part, fall on deaf ears and be seen by eyes that have not the light of understanding.

Rated+++++



*skipixieo*  
FEBRUARY 23, 2012 06:18 AM

I worked as a content editor for a major test publisher in the Chicago suburbs. I started out working on an online project, but then I moved onto their state tests. I discovered that their Social Studies passages were rife with wrong dates and factual errors--not to mention atrocious grammar. I couldn't believe what I was reading. It was as if someone had written them from memory and did zero fact checking, even though most of it was easily checked online. Even worse, they had already allowed test items to be written based on these passages, so many of the items were wrong too.

When I pointed out these errors, the test developers looked at me like I was an asshole. After all, I was creating a bunch of trouble for them to actually have to go and fix the items and passages. I have no idea if they were fixed or not.

The VP had a policy of having every staff member into her office for lunch. When my turn came, the first thing she said to me was, "What is it you do

again?" I explained, and her response was, "Shouldn't the test developers be doing that?" I said that regardless of whether they should or shouldn't be, they weren't, but that didn't seem to impress her. I knew my days were numbered.

A few months later, I and half of the content editing team were laid off in a "reorganization," partly due to declining funding for NCLB and partly due to an absolute train wreck of a state test to which they'd had to devote countless personnel hours fixing.

I weep for the children.



*The\_Zug*

FEBRUARY 23, 2012 10:08 AM

You're right. You're absolutely right.

There is more.

One way that this situation is subverted, is that someone will push "a new teaching theory" and self-publish the textbook to support it. There is a new "way to teach math" every so many years, as someone in a position of power is finally given a chance to implement his/her own PhD work, and most are junk.

One such piece-of-!&@ was something called "CPM - college prep math" that insisted that the teacher not assist students or explain concepts, just let the students work the guided problems written in complex English that confounded english-language learners.

As a collection of math problems, it had merit; as a teaching system, it was offensive. The textbook, if you want to call that, was utterly unhelpful to a parent hoping to assist the kid. The teacher materials were written to provide a teacher all the things they were legally required to have "lesson plans, example tests, etc" but the teachers were told to sleep-through-class, effectively.

And many of the new-fangled math teaching systems have their own custom-books that sidestep the purchasing process: "if you want to use this system you have to use these books and sign a contract that you will teach exactly as we tell you to, from the books."



*Jeff Bowles*

FEBRUARY 23, 2012 10:37 AM

So...and I may be an idiot for even asking (as in I might have missed the answer staring me right in the face) have children's math texts always been this insane? Because I remember math being a constant struggle for me...until high school. Then my grades improved slightly. I wonder if that had to do with the texts improving? I'm so glad you're shining light on this issue though, because children should never feel frustrated with no cause. What lesson could be learned from faulty math text books?



*PurpleScribe*

FEBRUARY 25, 2012 02:47 AM

I did not know except that my book I used for 2nd grade math was totally a mistake. Thank you for your careful analysis.



*Mango Sherbert*

FEBRUARY 25, 2012 04:15 PM

"a writer in this industry could write a book and receive roughly 6% royalties on sales. The salesperson who sold the product, however, earned (and still does) a commission upwards of 17% on the same product."

The BEST sales person sells 2000 books: 17% of 2000 - 340  
An author sells 200,000 books: 6% of 200,000 - 12,000

If you screw the sales person, 200,000 becomes 32,000.

That is the math of old style book publishing.

"but with today's outsourcing, writers and editors are consistently offered less than 20% of what they used to make"

20% of 6% is 1.2% of royalties. Are you sure about that?

The Internet is going to change textbooks forever. When retired Ph.D.'s in physics and mathematics and chemistry and biology can write a book and publish it online - without help for today's publishers - students win, elementary schools win, middle schools win, high schools win, colleges win.

Consider E.O.Wilson's "Life on Earth" as a demarcation between old 'buggy-whip' views of education publishing and how it will be.

Brick and mortar publishers are grasping at straws to continue the old way.  
We all know it.

Ed



*Ed Bradford*

FEBRUARY 27, 2012 10:13 AM

@Ed: With regard to sales--my point was not about screwing the sales person (and in educational publishing, when a top sales person gets a district-wide adoption for a series of book, that ONE sale alone results in far more than 2,000 books), it's about the disparity and mentality. To the publisher, 17% across the board is reasonable for sales, while only 6% to the author(s), a percentages that is often split among many of the writers. An author "sells" nothing; the author's royalty income is at the mercy of one publisher and one sales department. An author can invest 9 -12 months of unpaid time into a royalty-based project and receive very little in return; I know. And if I had a dollar for every time we produced a product specifically for a sales person who insisted he/she could sell "the hell out of it", I'd have taken a nice early retirement.

As to your question about royalty income and the percentages. Not sure you read close enough; royalties are a thing of the past; the norm now is work-for-hire and it is those rates that are about 20% of what one could make 5+ years ago.



*Annie Keeghan*

FEBRUARY 27, 2012 06:08 PM

This whole business of changing curricula and textbooks all the time is what`s insane. What`s wrong with going back to the texts and curricula of 50 years ago. The students did better back then with slide rules and NO I-phones, tablets, Internet, etc. The response of the American educational system to the scientific-engineering challenge of the Soviet Union and Sputnik back then is a historical fact and could not remotely be replicated today. Today`s students, teachers, schools, etc. couldn`t re-invent the wheel or inclined plane if suddenly there was a crisis which required real understanding and mathematical-scientific acumen. The entire society-educational system is beneath pathos today.



*Jejune Podiatrist*

FEBRUARY 27, 2012 08:16 PM

Politicians (read: more businessmen) are the ones buying the books twice. They could care less what the content is, and are only interested in promoting their own interests. (read: getting superpac funds)



*thegreedyturtle*

FEBRUARY 28, 2012 10:31 AM

Copyrighted material didn't enter the public domain unless published before

1923. That's great if you are looking for classical music or literature, not so great for textbooks.

I worked in textbook publishing production for 5 years in the late 80s and early 90s. It was impossible to notice that every year the books were routinely "dumbed down." Plus, there was one version for the rest of the country and another version for Texas. Let's just say the Texas version was significantly dumbed down compared to the version the rest of the country had. The Texans in charge of such things wouldn't have it any other way. and it was even more so with every new annual edition.

We stuck our necks out to query the editors the year we were assigned the grade school book containing some new versions of classic stories for children. The editors felt the word "porridge" was too difficult for children. We felt that kids LOVE that word and it's ridiculous to dumb down these stories to the point where all the cool traditional language is stripped out. We lost that one, unfortunately.



*Louisa Finnell*

MARCH 04, 2012 11:13 PM

I agree 100% with the view that the books are horrible, but not at all about the source. The NCTM is the problem. They want "critical thinking" skills, and that's what the publishers publish. The level of math aptitude in the middle school teachers is deficient. In our 6-8 grade school, Connected Mathematics was adopted. This is a series clearly not developed by mathematicians, yet the NCTM endorsed it. The former head of Stanford's math department found 57 uncorrected math errors in the 8th grade books. For example, "The town of Rio Rancho grew from 100,000 residents to 250,000 residents over 10 years. What percentage increase is that?" Book answer: 250%.

When you have blatant errors like that, publishers are following a forced script. Just look who's written the books, all NCTM endorsed, all math teachers getting paid to publish their own books and have the NCTM push them. And the NCTM recommends the books as "extraordinary", or something like that. Don't believe me? Check their site.



*Mike Boylan*

MARCH 05, 2012 01:36 PM

If parents in k-6 are interested in improving the books, I'd suggest going to [www.singaporemath.com](http://www.singaporemath.com). Singapore students finished first in the TIMSS(Third Int'l Math and Science Studies) for 1999 and 2003, so I got their books at that site. The books are in sort of comic book form, small, direct and outstanding. And kind of inexpensive. I home schooled my 8th grader in algebra, when his teacher had him grading 4th grade papers as an assignment. After 6th grade, the Singapore books get kind of integrated, so not as good, e.g, there's no geometry, trig, etc., as they overlap them. You can squeeze out algebra from the 7th grade books. These books are at least 1 to 1.5 years ahead of US books, but as they're small, there's no problem getting through them. One semester of 5th grade is something like 50 pages, and 5"x9". Can't highly recommend them enough. Outstanding. Go to the site and look at samples. No, I don't work for them, and haven't used them in 6 years, but there's no mystery why Singapore kids do so well in math and science. Small books packed with a punch. No BS.



*Mike Boylan*

MARCH 05, 2012 05:09 PM

I could not agree more. Thank you for sharing such a clear picture of the situation here in the US. This is why I incorporated my Australian company, ORIGO Education here in 2004. All the quality "smaller" players were bought out leaving no one to keep the bigger players in check. I currently feel like a very small fish among corporate giants who care less about education and more about share holders. Now that the CCSS: Mathematics has been released and is aligned to us, our conceptual approach will prevail. US elementary students can look forward to better understanding their math and not just following procedures. And with ORIGO, districts will pay a fraction of what

they pay the big companies for inferior products.



*James Burnett*

MARCH 05, 2012 07:34 PM

What is really a crying shame is that there are absolutely wonderful textbooks out there---I used them when I homeschooled. Good solid math, science , literature. I don't remember any of the publishers any more--it's been over 20 years ago--but I was very pleased with the quality. They were junior high books, but when I compared them to public high school books, they were more mature--none of those big, flashy attention getting childish pictures and instead had more "meat." The math was straight forward the way we remembered it, and would easily prepare you for college level math. The science book was full of historical facts, basic science information, and experiments for kids to learn from. The literature had the usual mix of new and classics, but was written on a higher grade level than it's public school contemporary.



*Ruth Thomas*

MARCH 05, 2012 11:12 PM

The trend towards "get it out - quick!" is an acceptance of mediocrity. This approach is completely blind to the checks and balances needed to produce a quality product. It also shows the greatest disregard for the wonderful knowledge, insight and expertise that individuals in any given field have gained over many years. I'm in my mid 50s and am regarded by my peers and co-workers as having solid written language skills. I learnt how to parse a sentence - I know what an adjective is and how to use apostrophes. Sadly, I believe the style of education delivered through the nineties and 2000s, moved away from basic understandings in language, maths and scientific concepts in favour of "discovery learning" leaving our younger generations having no sense of quality in the production of their work. There's a much bigger picture than poor quality control in publishing.



*LucyBinx*

MARCH 06, 2012 03:48 AM

Wow, I'm going to have to look at my daughter's book more carefully, I thought I used to be good at math, but I get stuck with hers sometimes! It is just shameful, no wonder the scores of our children are suffering.



*Anne Cameron Cutri*

MARCH 06, 2012 09:29 AM

@MikeBoylan: I doubt I will be able to change your mind about whether NCTM is the problem, but I would at least like to address a few misstatements in your post.

"[Connected Math] is a series clearly not developed by mathematicians, ..." Mathematicians didn't write the series, but there were mathematicians on the review panel when CMP was initially produced, and mathematicians were involved in the review of the second edition, too.

"...yet the NCTM endorsed it."

This is not true. NCTM has never endorsed a textbook or curriculum. EVER. This is a widely held misperception. NCTM released math standards in 1989, and NSF then funded curricula that were supposed to be based on those standards, but NCTM had no hand in the development of those curricula nor has the Council endorsed them. Some publishers put the NCTM logo on the cover of their books, but they did that without NCTM's permission. And to this day, every publisher says, "Aligned with NCTM standards," but that's not an official endorsement.

"...all math teachers getting paid to publish their own books and have the NCTM push them."

NCTM publishes a large number of books, many written by teachers, but none of them are classroom textbooks. The Council provides professional development materials and supplemental materials, not a curriculum. As for

"getting paid," I think any of NCTM's authors will tell you that the amount of work to produce a book far exceeds the financial rewards they receive.

"And the NCTM recommends the books as 'extraordinary,' or something like that."

In the mid-1990's, a list of "exemplary curricula" was released by the Department of Ed, not NCTM.

"Don't believe me? Check their site."

I know of no place on the NCTM.org site that endorses any textbooks or refers to any curriculum as "extraordinary." Please provide a URL.



*Patrick Vennebush*

MARCH 07, 2012 08:58 AM

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Hey i really enjoyed your post! So much so that i featured it on my site! Thank you!

<http://thepremiertutors.org/2012/03/the-grim-state-of-textbook-writing/>



*thepremiertutors*

MARCH 09, 2012 01:38 PM

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