



Dear Publishing Professional,

I had more to say this time, so here's my first 6-page letter.

Two important mindset changes for publishers

From rented to owned audiences. Relying on external platforms puts you at the mercy of algorithm changes, policy shifts, or cost increases that can suddenly reduce reach and revenue. **Cultivate direct relationships with your customers through email, memberships, and community engagement.**

From web traffic to engagement. Traffic as the measure of success is a relic of the ad-based thinking of the early days of the internet. Publishers need to shift to deeper and more targeted engagement metrics. **Find the right people, not just a lot of people, and grab and keep their interest.**

Why ChatGPT struggles with math

A friend asked ChatGPT whether St. Patrick's Day always fall within Lent. ChatGPT gave a completely wrong and nonsensical response. My friend assumed he might not have worded his question correctly, so he tried again. Still wrong. Even comically so.

This highlights a key limitation of AI. ChatGPT is, first and foremost, a *language* model. It can do math, but it doesn't always recognize when it *should* do math. Sometimes, instead of treating a question as a math problem, it defaults to pattern-matching text, leading to incorrect results.

Why did ChatGPT get it wrong?

The answer to my friend's St. Patrick's Day question requires comparing two sets of dates:

- Lent runs from Ash Wednesday to Easter.
- St. Patrick's Day is always March 17th.

This is a math problem. First you have to determine the possible dates of Easter, which moves around every year. Then you have to calculate when Ash Wednesday would occur, based on the date of Easter. Then you have to check whether March 17th falls within that range.

Instead of running a calculation, ChatGPT seemed to approach my friend's questions as a text-based comparison, which led to an incorrect answer.

How to get better answers from AI

When using ChatGPT (or any AI tool), it's important to know when your question requires a mathematical or logical calculation rather than just text-based or pattern-matching reasoning. If you need an AI to do math, be explicit about it.

Tell it to calculate. Use clear instructions like “Use math to determine the answer.”

Give it structured data. If you provide specific dates and ask for comparisons, it may be more likely to use the correct reasoning process.

Ask the AI to check its own answer. This seems strange, but sometimes you can ask “is the answer you just gave me correct,” and sometimes ChatGPT will discover its own mistake.

Double-check AI-generated answers. If something seems off, verify the response with another source.

Having a basic understanding of how AI processes information can help you avoid misleading answers and use AI tools more effectively.

When you ask an AI to step outside its “comfort zone” — like moving from language analysis to calculations — make sure to give it clear instructions to that effect.

Use ChatGPT to find the perfect words

While strategizing an approach to a difficult conversation with her boss, my daughter said, “Those are good words.” They captured what she wanted to say exactly.

Words don't have a single meaning. They exist in a kind of cloud, with some ideas at the center and others on the edges. They also can convey different emotions in different contexts. The right word can make all the difference, so when I'm working on a sentence that's close — but not exactly right — I use ChatGPT to tighten it up.

Sometimes (not often) I have only a general idea of what I want to say. I might write a prompt along these lines.

“I'm looking for a phrase that's analogous to 'perfect is the enemy of done' but for politics. Can you give me a few ideas?”

ChatGPT will make a few suggestions, and I might go back and forth with it a few times until I feel I've got it right. (In this case I settled on “Ideological purity is the enemy of political progress.”)

LLMs like ChatGPT work by analyzing how words relate to each other in different contexts. They recognize that “king” and “queen” share similarities in some respects and distinctions in others, just as “efficient” and “effective” do.

Sometimes I'll draft a sentence, put it into ChatGPT, and say: “This is almost what I want to say, but I really want to emphasize [a particular nuance]. Can you help me refine it?”

ChatGPT will provide alternate phrasings that help me get closer to exactly what I mean.

Practical uses for finding the right words

There are plenty of business and personal applications where subtle shifts in phrasing can make a big difference:

Professional Conversations – When applying for a job, working through a difficult HR issue, negotiating a raise, or giving feedback to a subordinate, the right wording can shape the tone and outcome of the conversation. You can't stop in the middle of a meeting and say,

“Excuse me while I check with ChatGPT about this,” but you can plan ahead and come up with a few ideas of words and phrases to use and others to avoid.

Email Subject Lines – You don’t have many words to spare, so you want to make sure you convey the right message efficiently.

A word of caution: ChatGPT doesn’t have real-world performance data on subject lines. It can suggest variations, but it can’t tell you which one will perform better. (Note that I said “can’t” not “won’t.” It may give you such a judgment if you ask. Don’t believe it.)

Marketing and Branding – You can use ChatGPT to get ideas for a tagline, an elevator pitch, or any situation where you only have a few words and they have to convey just the right message.

Personal Relationships – It may seem strange to use a computer to figure out how to talk to a friend, but sometimes we show that we care by thinking and planning ahead. If you’re about to have a difficult conversation, it doesn’t hurt to get ideas.

I’m *not* suggesting that you allow ChatGPT to be the final arbiter in any of these situations. They’re your words. You have to be comfortable with them.

Think of ChatGPT as an upgraded thesaurus, and remember ...

You don’t have to take ChatGPT’s advice.

Get good advice, then make up your own mind.

How a rubber duck can help you solve problems

Kidlin’s law instantly resonated with me.

“If you write a problem down clearly and specifically, you have solved half of it.”

It’s very hard to solve a problem without defining it carefully. Another version goes like this.

“If you can’t write your problem down clearly, you don’t understand it.”

That version follows a rule I learned from C.S. Lewis: if you can’t explain something in clear, simple language, you don’t understand it. **A simple application: avoid jargon.**

I love proverbs, and I love problem-solving mental models and sayings. Kidlin’s Law highlights the importance of clarity in problem-solving. But what if you don’t have clarity yet?

That’s where **Rubber Duck Debugging** comes in. You explain the problem to a rubber duck. That sounds silly, but it helps you organize your thoughts around and your understanding of the problem. That can help you find the solution.

The other benefit of rubber duck debugging is that you’re enjoying a nice hot bath while you do it.

There are a lot of variations on these basic concepts.

Thinking Aloud Protocol — Speaking a problem out loud forces you to slow down and articulate each step. That can make gaps in reasoning more obvious.

The Five Whys — By repeatedly asking “Why?” you can expose the root cause of an issue — especially if you write down the whys and your responses.

Dialectical Thinking — By arguing both sides of an issue you challenge your assumptions and expose blind spots. You end up with a more nuanced understanding of an issue.

The Socratic Method — Ask yourself probing questions, as if you were your own philosophical opponent. (The chorus of voices in my head does that to me *all day long!!*)

Another technique I particularly like is slightly different. It's called **Structured Procrastination**. You work on a problem for a while, then you put it out of your mind and work on something else entirely. Maybe a Sudoku, or a difficult chord progression on the guitar. Then you come back to the original problem.

The idea is that your loud, obnoxious and bumbling conscious mind is getting in the way. You need to allow your quiet, smart, subconscious mind to work on the problem for a while.

Learning these mental models and tricks is crucial for everybody, but especially for those of us with a few grey hairs. The natural plasticity and youthful horsepower of the brain starts to decline, but you can make up for that by thinking smarter, not harder.

An alternative to the cult of Myers Briggs

Among your employees you have some who excel in certain traits. Are you paying attention? Are you identifying them and putting them where they'll be the most effective?

I can't abide Myers Briggs or any of those phony personality tests. They're unscientific, and in my experience, they only do harm.

However, I do believe it makes sense to deploy talent intelligently, and talents and personality types can be similar.

Years ago, when I managed a conference department, I decided to think through the various natural talents of the people on my staff and how those talents could be deployed to the benefit of the organization. One woman was a natural worrier, which got me thinking: how can I deploy her worry?

That raises a larger question. What other tendencies can we identify in our staff, and how can we deploy them to their and our benefit? Here's a list of possibilities to get you thinking.

The Worrier imagines all the ways your grand plan can go wrong, which helps you plan against those contingencies.

The Artist has that magical touch that makes the difference between serviceable images and images that really pop. (I've always wanted someone like that to pick my tie for me.)

The Encourager is always helping people be their best and keep a positive attitude.

The Skeptic refuses to engage in groupthink and helps you avoid calamity.

The Fixer troubleshoots technical issues, solves puzzles, and finds creative solutions.

The Finisher is driven to complete tasks and wrap things up. He's good for sales or project management.

The Historian keeps a record of past successes, mistakes, and processes, which can keep you from reinventing the wheel or falling into the same pit.

The Connector instinctively sees relationships between people and teams, and breaks down silos.

Related to the connector is **the Connective Tissue**, whose works spans departments and keeps them in sync.

The Devil's Advocate questions assumptions and is crucial for strategic planning and decision-making.

The Enthusiast keeps the energy high, sees opportunities, and inspires momentum.

The Translator can (for example) help marketing understand IT, and vice versa, by understanding both points of view and converting complicated concepts into language the other sides understands and prefers.

The Tinkerer is always trying new tools and methods to improve internal processes.

The Guardian keeps an eye on the company's ethics and long-term sustainability.

One person can fill several of these roles, and most people have a sprinkling of a few or several of these characteristics.

Unlike Myers Briggs, the point of this model isn't to pigeon-hole and classify your entire staff based on their own answers to silly questions. The point is for intelligent managers to know what to look for and to identify those remarkable people whose abilities truly stand out.

They'll be more satisfied in their jobs, and you'll reap the benefits.

Use a change in fulfillment to radically simplify

Fulfillment in the publishing world is enormously complicated. Part of that is due to laudable efforts to accommodate strange subscriber requests or increase revenue with special offers.

Such efforts are great, but you have to ask whether the juice is worth the squeeze.

Learning from the iPad revolution

Back when the iPad was first making waves, many people in the magazine industry thought print was going to die and everybody would be reading magazines on tablets. Many publishers were in a mad rush to convert their magazines so they could be read in apps.

I investigated whether this was a good deal for publishers (generally speaking it was not), but along the way I also reflected on the arrogance of those 20-something programmers at Apple and Amazon who thought they knew how to do magazine fulfillment.

It was amazing how many things they missed. Did they even talk to any subscription professionals, or did they just think (as many people thought back then) that everything was changing, it's a digital world now, and we don't need any of that "old-school thinking"?

Enter Krehbiel's Razor

At first, I thought they just didn't understand how magazine fulfillment worked. But then I realized: Maybe they understood it and rejected it.

You've heard of Occam's razor, which says you should prefer the simpler explanation. You might also know Hanlon's razor, which says never attribute to malice what can be explained by stupidity or incompetence. But do you know Krehbiel's razor — which I learned while investigating all this Apple / app stuff.

Never attribute to malice, stupidity, arrogance, or incompetence what can be explained by a different point of view.

Yes, the guys at Apple and Amazon spoke to circulation professionals, and of course they knew they were radically simplifying things. That was the plan.

A case for radical simplification

Fulfillment is a mad and wondrous thing. I've created an outline of fulfillment services as a starting point for my clients to document exactly what they need and how they need it done. If you'd like a copy of that document, let me know.

If you're a publishing company considering changing fulfillment providers, take a step back and ask: **Have we made this harder than it needs to be?**

Many publishers, especially those with legacy systems, tend to replicate old processes when moving to a new fulfillment provider. Consider this: **instead of just replacing one set of headaches with another, ask if radical simplification is possible.**

- Do you really need all the layers of customization and segmentation you've built up over the years?
- Can you streamline your renewal process to make it easier for subscribers to stay on board?
- Are you adding unnecessary friction to the purchasing process with outdated business rules?
- Would a simplified model improve customer retention and reduce costs?

Tech companies can be disruptors. They like to move fast and break things. In this case, they might have gotten it right. They didn't try to replicate old fulfillment models. They reimagined them. Perhaps it's time for publishers to do the same.

If you're navigating the chaos of changing fulfillment providers, I can help you cut through the complexity and make the process smoother. Let's chat.

Sincerely,



Greg Krehbiel



P.S. -- I'm looking for new clients. If you need help, or know a friend who might, please let me know.

P.P.S. -- That was a lot! I'll probably go back to four pages next time.