

Acronyms and Abbreviations – A Communications Curse

Don Mercer
Associate Professor, Department of Food Science
University of Guelph

Fortunately, it is not a crime because a lot of us are guilty of it. The “crime” to which I am referring is the overuse of acronyms and abbreviations. Without realizing it, our speech and writing have become laced with these potential roadblocks to effective communications.

Acronyms are rather special abbreviations formed by using the first letter of each word to form a shortened version that can often be pronounced as a word. They are frequently associated with the names of organizations or as alternatives to long chemical names. When used properly, acronyms and other abbreviations can certainly be beneficial. RSVP on an invitation adds a touch of class that just doesn’t come across if we say, “Let us know if you can attend”.

Within the food industry, we can say that EDTA, which is used to prevent spoilage, has received GRAS status from the FDA. This is a lot easier than saying that ethylenediamine tetra-acetic acid is “Generally Recognized as Safe” by the Food and Drug Administration in the United States. However, neither way may be suitable in conversations with the general public. Sadly, this is the way that many individuals with a scientific background try to communicate. The result is a total lack of information exchange and even an alienation between the two groups. We always need to consider our audience whenever we want to express an idea.

I often recall my first discussion with our group’s Director-General shortly after I started working with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada in Ottawa. As we chatted, the topic somehow got around to “AI”. It soon became apparent that we were not on the same wavelength. Laughter resulted when we discovered that I was talking about artificial intelligence and he was talking about artificial insemination! While the conversation was a bit awkward for a while, the situation was a real ice-breaker.

A few years ago, my mother-in-law sent a floral arrangement to a friend who had suffered the loss of a loved one. The florist’s card simply said “TOY”. Since the term was a mystery, my mother-in-law called the florist, who said it meant “thinking of you”. The warmth of the message was lost due to this careless use of an acronym. Another similar situation which I recall hearing about concerned a senior citizen who sent a sympathy card to a friend. She wrote “LOL” before signing her name. Unfortunately, she thought she was indicating “lots of love”, rather than the more common “laughing out loud”.

Many of us can recall experiences where we have tuned-in to talk shows on television or attended meetings where speakers rhyme off acronyms that mean absolutely nothing

to us. They seem to expect that the rest of us will instinctively know what these terms mean and be able to follow their conversation with little or no difficulty. This is certainly not the case. I once sat through a fifteen-minute presentation where the speaker failed to define the acronym in the title of her talk. The acronym for an academic program was repeated numerous times and appeared as a footer on each lecture slide. After she finished, I asked those around me what the acronym meant. Since no one else could help me, I approached the speaker at the break. She was quite surprised to discover that most of the audience was totally lost since it was assumed that all of us would know what the acronym represented.

Sometimes, it seems like I'm trying to push a rope when it comes to reviewing student theses and refereeing papers for publication. The ultimate objective is to communicate research findings to the scientific community – and therein lies the problem. There seems to be no effort to enhance what I call "readability". Many times, a thesis will have two or three pages of abbreviations at the front. Constantly having to flip to this list as you go through eighty to one hundred pages of text can make the thesis essentially unreadable.

While acronyms and abbreviations have their place, they can regularly creep into areas where they do not belong. If you want a challenge, try getting through a day without using any of these devices. It can be trickier than you think.



Acronyms and abbreviations have crept into our speech and writing