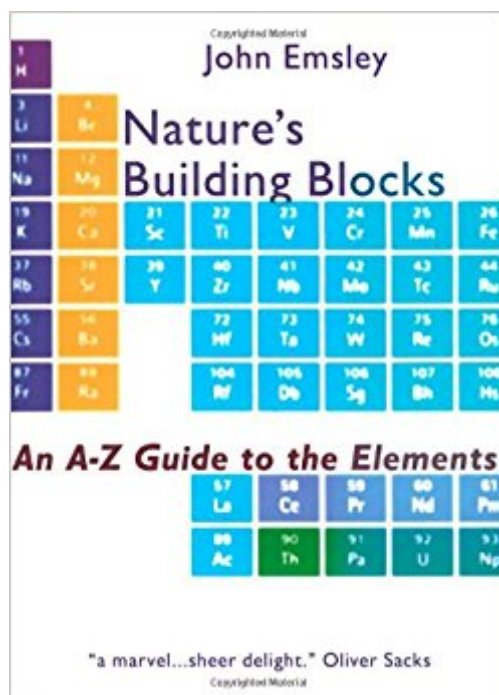


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# Nature's Building Blocks: An A-Z Guide To The Elements



## Synopsis

What is the most common element in the universe? Can you name the noble gases? Everything we see around us is made of chemical elements, but most of us know little about them. Penned by award-winning science writer John Emsley, *Nature's Building Blocks* explains the what, why and wherefore of the chemical elements. Arranged alphabetically, from Actinium to Zirconium, it is a complete guide to all 115 of those that are currently known, with more extensive coverage of those elements we encounter in our everyday life. The entry on each element reveals where it came from, what role it may have in the human body, and the foods that contain it. There are also sections on its discovery, its part in human health or illness, the uses and misuses to which it is put, and its environmental role. Readers discover that the Earth consists of around 90 elements, some of which are abundant, such as the silicon and oxygen of rocks and soils, while some are so rare that they make gold seem cheap. Our own bodies contain about 30 elements, some in abundance, some in trace amounts; some vital to our health, and some that are positively harmful. A list of the main scientific data, and outline properties, are given for every element and each section ends with an "Element of Surprise," which highlights some unexpected way in which each element influences our everyday life. Both a reliable reference source and a high browsable account of the elements, *Nature's Building Blocks* offers a pleasurable tour of the very essence of our material world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Written by the author of *The Elements* (3d ed., Oxford, 1999), a data book on chemical elements

created for scientists, this work is aimed at a general audience. All of the elements are covered, from actinium to zirconium to an element thought to exist but not yet synthesized (element 119). The alphabetically arranged entries range in length from two (Actinium) to nine pages (Hydrogen). Elements of atomic number 101 and above are discussed in a single entry for the transactinoid elements. Following brief information on the element's name and pronunciation, each entry is arranged into several sections addressing specific uses or roles. For example, "Food Element" treats the importance of the element in the human diet, and "Element of History" deals with the element's discovery. Also covered are medical, economic, environmental, and chemical aspects. There is even an "Element of Surprise," which highlights some interesting facts. Here and in occasional sidebars we learn that Mozart may have been accidentally poisoned by antimony, cobalt was once used to make invisible ink, silver can be used to sterilize water, mercury was once used to treat syphilis, and Napoleon may have been poisoned by arsenic from the wallpaper at his home on St. Helena. There are many sources of accurate information on the chemical elements. A distinguishing feature of this work is the inclusion of unusual facts that should appeal to the general reader with little science background. It is recommended for special, public, and academic libraries.

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"An astonishingly comprehensive survey of nature's fundamental ingredients.... By combining juicy anecdotes and fun with a wealth of up-to-date reference material, 'Nature's Building Blocks' hits the spot."--Malcolm Browne, New York Times

"A marvel--encyclopedic in scope, but so full of enthusiasm, so engagingly written, that one can open it at any point and read for sheer delight.... I have read and possess many books on the elements, but it is Dr. Emsley's new book which will now sit next to me on my desk."--Oliver Sacks

"Emsley's colorful account of all the elements in the universe is a succinct history of everything.... Emsley drew on 20 years of collected magazine and newspaper articles to produce this marvelous reference work. 'Nature's Building Blocks' is the kind of book people consult in the pursuit of a single fact, but this fact will lead to another and another, drawing the reader in an enjoyable chase from naturally occurring nuclear reactors to human zinc deficiency and on to the number of elements named for one small town in Sweden (four)."--New York Times Book Review

"From actinium to zirconium, Emsley marshals the details into a well-organized, user-friendly reference about every little thing that makes up every big thing that makes up the universe as we know it.... A quite useful and even fascinating book in its own way, a lot of fun to flip through during idle moments."--San Francisco Chronicle

"Amusing and finely crafted.... The most amusing sections of the book are the text boxes and the little parting shots at

the end of each chapter, the 'Elements of surprise'.... The elements come alive through stories and anecdotes. Emsley has cast his net wide and drawn on a huge range of material--this is a book for browsing almost at random.... The more general reader will find plenty to be intrigued and amused by.... A fine, amusing and quirky book that will sit as comfortably on an academic's bookshelf as beside the loo, to be browsed and savored in idle moments."--Nature

Excellent. I read first edition about 15 years ago in the library and finally bought the latest version. I always found it my favorite and the interesting tidbits about each element is what makes it for me. Most find this topic boring, so interesting stories is how I can explain to others why I enjoy this book. As I am getting older though, I find the font too small. Obviously, with larger font, this book be much more bulky, but it is what it is.

This book is a great overview of our periodic table. It holds lots of interesting facts and a nice wide range of educational sections for each element without being too technical for non chemists or physicist. This work takes each element and gives you a wealth of information including history, medical, technological, military, and more. As a worker in the social sciences I found this work intelligent and not simplistic without being overly involved to the point of jargon induced confusion. It would be great as a general reference for those of us laymen or knowledge searchers. It would probably be too light and simplistic for people who have had advanced studies on the subject. One particular point I like was the formatting which made it very easy to understand each element. It was a great educational tool for those of us with interest and not the advanced education in the elements.

I've been teaching chemistry for the last three semester at our local community college. Never mind the fact that my major was in neuroscience (emphasis on studying disease in the brain). I had loads of chemistry classes, so it wasn't like I was coming into these classrooms with no previous knowledge. But I've been having problems first of all with the quality of the textbooks recommended to teach with...actually, had to beg the school to get a different book because the chem textbook they were using was very wrong in so many problems and even basic text. Not only was I finding them, but the students were finding them also. The next problem I'm having is the overwhelming emphasis put in general chemistry on math, rather than on the science of chemistry and the elements. Yes, the students need basic algebraic constructs, but if all the teaching in chemistry is mathematically-related, I lose my students very quickly in an area which can be loads of fun to study

(given a great teacher who knows how to teach it...which I luckily had two great teachers in chemistry). So I've been looking at the books being recommended to me by .com, and this is the third book. I liked the other ones. They were fun and had some hilarious history, but first of all I want my students to become really familiar with the periodical table and all of the elements. All the math in the world, without a basic understanding of the elements is going to lead nowhere, especially since my students are usually going into medical fields. This book is clean and concisely written, and I can hardly wait to use it this coming semester. Karen Sadler  
Chemistry  
Community College of Allegheny County

I keep this book by my bedside table, and read an element each night before falling asleep. It's loaded with factoids that will bring a smile to your face and amaze your friends. For example, did you know that even 0.5 microgram of Tellurium will give you bad breath for up to 30 hours? Or that Charles II died of mercury poisoning because he did alchemical experiments in a poorly ventilated room in his palace? I'm reading the book cover-to-cover, but I know that in the future I'll want to dip into it again and again. My only criticism, and it's minor, is that I wish the chapter headings (e.g., "Indium") contained the info summarized in the chemical element table (symbol, atomic number, atomic weight) at the end of the chapter.

This is truly a superb book and provides an interesting read. It provides brief technical descriptions of elements in readable text and does link elements to applications. It thought it would have been enhanced with images/pictures/diagrams (if simple) that help develop understanding of each element. I think this change would not alter the book length a lot as there are blank areas after most of the elements' descriptions. In the next edition I would seriously consider this addition and suddenly the well composed book will then reach a much broader audience: for sure. Great book nonetheless.

way beyond any other book. incredible range and detail of information. if you read one nonfiction book, this should be it

Much more than merely quantifying the elements, this book adds several dimensions of human interest, including war, historical notes, and an element of surprise, an unexpected bonus that makes each element unique. Several appendices rounded out the available compare and contrast items to make the book, overall, both a delight and an informational storehouse. It has no color pictures or graphs, but otherwise is a whole lot more interesting and informative than the average

high school chemistry book. Good for all ages and knowledge levels.

I've read the last edition more than 4 times! John Emsley has done an excellent job! Each element is described as a whole: physical characteristics, appearance, medical use, historical about its past, war/weapons uses, main uses today, curiosities, etc. An excellent way to know what are the "building blocks" of everything around us!

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