

Alan Alda's science contest asks: What is color?

December 11 2013, by Frank Eltman



In this April 26, 2013 file photo, actor and sometimes science professor Alan Alda addresses a Communicating Science class on the campus of Stony Brook University, on New York's Long Island. Alan Alda is now posing the question "How do you explain color to an 11-year-old?," to scientists around the world. It's part of a contest he started three years ago called the "Flame Challenge," to encourage scientists to find better ways of clearly explaining how science works to the general public. (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

Alan Alda, the actor-turned-part-time professor, has a new question for scientists to consider: How do you explain color to an 11-year-old?

The television and film star best known for his role in the 1970s TV comedy "MASH," is posing the question as part of the third annual "Flame Challenge." Alda helped organize the international contest as part of his work at the Stony Brook University Center for Communicating Science.

The university on eastern Long Island named the center in Alda's honor earlier this year; its goal is to get [scientists](#) in various disciplines to explain complex concepts in the simplest of ways.

This year's question was selected by Alda after receiving about 800 suggested questions from children. He explained that many question focused on issues about light and color, including the childhood classic: "Why is the sky blue?"

"I'm in awe of the scientists who can bring clarity to these [questions](#) and I'm in awe of the kids who keep the scientists on their toes," Alda said.

Alda, a New York native who has had a lifelong interest in science, started the contest in 2011 by asking scientists: What is a flame? He followed that up last year with: What is time?

Now comes color.

"We want scientists to think about how they can answer the question from their own field—from biology to physics to anthropology or psychology," said Elizabeth Bass, director of the Alda Center. Bass said the answer can be explained from a variety of scientific perspectives, including physics, chemistry, or psychology.



In this April 26, 2013 file photo, actor and sometimes science professor Alan Alda speaks during an interview on the campus of Stony Brook University, on New York's Long Island. Alan Alda is now posing the question "How do you explain color to an 11-year-old?," to scientists around the world. It's part of a contest he started three years ago called the "Flame Challenge," to encourage scientists to find better ways of clearly explaining how science works to the general public. (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

Scientists have a March 1, 2014, deadline to submit their responses, which will then be judged by 11-year-olds logging onto the Flame Challenge website. Last year, 20,000 students around the world served as judges.

Two winners—one a written entry and the second for a video or graphic entry—will receive a free trip to New York City, where they will meet Alda and be honored at the World Science Festival.

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