

The Flame Challenge



What is Time?

Alan Alda, the Center for Communicating Science — and 11-year-olds around the country — are seeking answers from scientists to a timeless question: What is time?

That is the question for this year's edition of the Flame Challenge, an international contest that asks scientists to communicate complex science in ways that interest and inform an 11-year-old. After screening for scientific accuracy, the entries will be judged by thousands of 11-year-olds in schools around the world. The winning scientists will be brought to New York to be honored in June at the World Science Festival. Entries can be written, video or graphic. For rules and other information, see the links at the right.



The Flame Challenge began last spring with Alan Alda's childhood query: What is a flame?

"When I asked what a flame was at the age of 11," Alan said, "I was probably younger in some ways than most 11-year-olds are now. They're asking a very deep question this year ("What is Time?!). It's going to be fun to see how scientists around the world answer that one in everyday language."

[Alan's Message to Scientists](#)

[Alan's Message to Student Judges](#)

Who Wants to Know?



This year we asked kids to suggest questions. Many around the country asked: "What is time?" Some used exactly those words and others asked things like: How do you make a time machine? Why can't you go back in time? Is time an arrow? Is it a wave? How can you tell what time it is without looking at a clock? Can we transcend space and time? How many dimensions are there? How do we age? How did time begin?



Sydney Allison (top left), 11, a sixth-grader in Reno, Nev., and



Simon O'Rourke (bottom left), 10, a fourth-grader in Mamaroneck, N.Y., were selected to represent these questioners. Simon explained his idea of time this way: *"The people who thought of time did it just to explain movements, like a year is just the movement of the earth around the sun, and a day is just the movement of the earth. And that's what I think time might be. That's the best I can explain it."*

About Time

"What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know."

– Saint Augustine

It's a deep question, and it has no simple answer. But science is more about the unknowns than the knowns. So this may be an chance for you to communicate something about the scientific process, not only about the knowledge generated by the process.

The deadline for entries is March 1, but please don't wait for the last minute. One thing we do know about time: There's always less of it than you think.

Schools: The Clock Is Ticking

Even if your school participated last year, you still need to register for this year's challenge. Sign up your school to judge the Flame Challenge by clicking on this link: [Register Today](#)
Please get your registrations in as soon as possible!

Timely Support

Many thanks to our Flame Challenge sponsors, the [American Chemical Society](#) and the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#) (AAAS), two nonprofit organizations working to improve communication of science.



Scenes From Last Time

To give you a sense of the fun and excitement of the Flame Challenge, here is a video snapshot of last year's contest.

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