

# Alan Alda issues challenge to scientists

Originally published: March 1, 2012 7:21 PM

Updated: March 1, 2012 9:16 PM

By JOIE TYRRELL [joie.tyrrell@newsday.com](mailto:joie.tyrrell@newsday.com)



Photo credit: Getty Images | Actor [Alan Alda](#) speaks during a Q & A at a screening of "Wanderlust" at the [Lincoln Center Theater](#) in New York City. (Feb. 22, 2012)

Award-winning actor [Alan Alda](#) wants scientists to take the jargon out of their communication.

Alda, a founding member of the [Stony Brook University Center for Communicating Science](#), and a visiting professor in the journalism school, has challenged scientists to participate in a contest and clearly answer the question "What is a flame?"

"The Flame Challenge" will be judged by a panel of 11-year-olds that will likely include [Long Island](#) students. It is sponsored by Stony Brook's Center for Communicating Science, which is dedicated to helping scientists learn to communicate effectively with ordinary people.

"We are not saying we are talking about the dumbing down of science," Alda said in an interview Thursday. "What we are interested in is clarity and vividness."

Alda recalled being age 11 and asking his teacher what a flame was. She responded: oxidation. "It really meant something to me, but when she said, 'It's oxidation' and left it as that, I couldn't believe that," Alda said. The teacher was "just giving it another name," he said.

Alda, also a host of [Scientific American Frontiers](#) on [PBS](#), has said scientists should find a better way to communicate their ideas and findings, especially to policy-makers. A few years ago, Alda was at Stony Brook to give a talk on a book he had written and discussed the idea of improving communication for scientists. He said university officials embraced the idea.

Now, the Center for Communicating Science, founded in 2009 and located in Stony Brook's School of Journalism, gives workshops and presentations for scientists at universities, laboratories and meetings nationwide. Alda is deeply committed to the center and has led improvisational classes for graduate students there.

"We help current and future scientists learn to talk and write more clearly and conversationally without lecturing or using a lot of jargon so they are able to explain their work and why it matters in ways nonscientists can understand," said Elizabeth Bass, center director.

Entries are due by April 2, with winners announced in June. Entries can be in writing, video or graphics, playful or serious. For information, entry forms, or if your school would like to participate in judging, visit [flamechallenge.org](http://flamechallenge.org). Winners receive VIP tickets to the World Science Fair from May 30 to June 3 in Manhattan. Alda has written about the contest in the recent issue of *Journal Science*.

"We're also asking children to email us with other questions they would like scientists to answer," Bass said. One will be selected for the next flame challenge.

Questions can be emailed to [communicatingscience@stonybrook.edu](mailto:communicatingscience@stonybrook.edu).

[Appeared in paper on Page A14, as: ALAN ALDA'S BURNING QUESTION

With query on science of flames, actor sparks contest ]