

Alan Alda Asks, What is a Flame?

By **ANDREW C. REVKIN**

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The actor [Alan Alda](#) has long been a student and communicator of science, first through the [Scientific American Frontiers](#) TV program and now as a coach and mentor to scientists eager to convey their work to the public. His main outlet for that work is [The Center for Communicating Science](#), a project of the [School of Journalism](#) at [Stony Brook University](#) on Long Island.



Larry EngelAlan Alda poses with a representation of a Neanderthal in an episode of “[The Human Spark](#).”

His latest effort is described in [a guest editorial](#) in the current edition of the journal *Science* in which he proposes a “[flame challenge](#)”:

Would you be willing to have a go at writing your own explanation of what a flame is—one that an 11-year-old would find intelligible, maybe even fun? The Center for Communicating Science is looking for new ways to light up people’s minds with science, and you might point the way. We’ll try out the entries on real 11-year-olds and see which work best. . . .

So here I am—I’m 11 years old and looking up at you with the wide eyes of curiosity. What is a flame? What’s going on in there? What will you tell me?

This is [a contest](#) with a deadline of April 2. The winning entry will be publicized at the [World Science Festival](#) in New York in June.

I’m going to toss this assignment to my Environmental Science Communication students at Pace University. I’ll also send a note to the [Explainer.net](#) team of [Professor Jay Rosen](#)’s Studio 20 program at New York University and Frank Sesno’s [Planet Forward](#) project at The George Washington University.

Give it a try, and also post your take either below or on YouTube or the like (and post a link).