

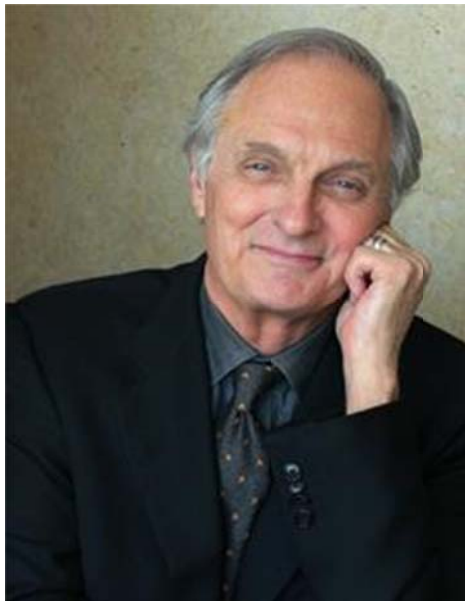
Alan Alda offers scientists 'The Flame Challenge' for kids

• Comments



By [Dan Vergano](#), USA TODAY
Updated 2012-03-01 6:39 PM

Are you as smart as an 11-year-old? How about smart enough to explain how fire works to one of them?



CAPTION

[Ctr. for Communicating Science](#)

Science documentary star Alan Alda (he also played a doctor on a [TV show](#), too, you may recall), is asking scientists to take 'The Flame Challenge' today in the [journal, *Science*](#):

"I'd like to try a playful experiment. 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 writer and actor helped start the [Center for Communicating Science](#) at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, after

working on PBS science documentaries. In an interview with USA TODAY, Alda says he is worried about a widening disconnect between scientific thinking and public understanding of many major issues.

"For the good of all of us, we need scientists to use clarity and precision when they explain their work, but we also need to understand their words," Alda says. "Where will we be if the public is just afraid of knowing how things work? We can't even ask the right questions until we understand what science really says."

Like many involved in communicating science, Alda worries that specialist jargon, "has gotten so bad that even scientists can't understand each other, let alone the public." He fears that the removal of scientific language from everyday speech is turning kids and society away from scientific pursuits, and more widely, from thinking that is based on evidence.

As a playful corrective, Alda offers [his challenge to a scientist](#) to write a good explanation for a flame that a panel of 11-year-old kids can understand. "When I was 11, I asked my teacher what a flame was, I was curious," he says. The answer he received, "it's oxidation," wasn't that helpful, he says. "So, now, I want a scientist to pick up the ball for all those 11-year-old kids out there."