

1080-01-104

Victor J Katz* (vkatz@udc.edu). *Algebra in Words vs. Algebra in Symbols*. Preliminary report. Some historians insist that a definition of “algebra” must involve the inclusion of symbolism. Under this definition algebra would not exist before the seventeenth century. On the other hand, the classic definition of algebra, given by Euler, among others, is “the science which teaches how to determine unknown quantities by means of those that are known.” Under this definition, Islamic mathematicians from the time of al-Khwārizmī were certainly doing “algebra,” even though all of their procedures were written out entirely in words. But writing everything in words causes problems, particularly when one is solving intricate problems. We will take a look at the difficulties Islamic and medieval European mathematicians had when writing out solutions in words and why, at some point, it became virtually impossible to proceed further. Implications for the teaching of algebra will be considered. (Received January 16, 2012)