My Summer at *The Conversation*

Tamar Lichter Blanks

When I meet new people and I tell them that I'm a PhD candidate in mathematics, they often tell me about their own struggles with math. Sometimes they say things like "I'm not a math person" or "I hated math in school." I get the sense that they see math as a test of talent: you can get the answer, or you can't. You're good at it, or you're not.

When I started college, I had that kind of perspective too—at least at first. Without realizing what I was getting into, I registered for a proof-based calculus class, which was full of freshmen like me who didn't know anything about proofs. On the first day of class, someone asked the professor which calculator we would need. He answered, "We aren't really going to use numbers in this class." I had no idea what that could mean, and certainly not what to expect from the course.

It was totally unlike any math class I had taken before. I loved it. It showed me something that mathematicians know well: that doing math is a creative, puzzle-like, and open-ended process, basically the opposite of memorizing multiplication tables and reducing fractions. And now that I knew about it, I wanted to share that side of math with everyone.

I started writing about math. For three years, as I took the classes I needed for the math major, I also wrote a "Math in Plain English" column for a school publication. I loved breaking down the basics—probability, the integers, the meaning of the "=" sign—and tackling more human, philosophical questions, like "is math fiction?" and "is math art?" I enjoyed illustrating mathematical ideas in a way that even a self-proclaimed "not math person" could appreciate, and sharing the conceptual kind of math that I was learning in my classes.

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More information on the AMS-AAAS Mass Media Fellowship can be found at `https://www.ams.org/massmediafellow`.

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When I graduated college and started a math PhD, I tried to continue blogging, but it was hard to do. I basically stopped writing. I was busy with school, and it was difficult to write without any sort of structure or peer group. But I missed writing about math. When I heard about the AAAS Mass Media Fellowship, it sounded amazing. I poured all the time I could find into the application.

I was thrilled when I found out that I'd gotten the fellowship and would be sponsored by the AMS. I spent my summer working at a nonprofit news website called *The Conversation*, where my role was part writer, part editor.

For my first article, I took a deep dive into the life of mathematician Emmy Noether, in honor of the 100th anniversary of her landmark paper on ideal theory in rings. I learned about her contributions to math and physics, but also, how she struggled to get even a basic academic lecturer job as a woman in Germany in the early 1900s, how the Nazis took away her hard-earned position because she was Jewish, and how she taught, until her death at age 53, at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania.

The article I wrote was about both Noether's life and the math she developed. The part I had the most fun writing was an explanation of ring theory, in which I compared mathematical rings to croissants in a bakery. When an editor at *The Conversation* said that she had been telling her husband about ring theory in the car that day, it felt like a win.

In my editing role, I got involved in stories on a range of science topics: teens and empathy, Lyme disease antibodies, COVID-19 and schools, and the health effects of racism. *The Conversation*'s articles on any topic are always written by researchers on that topic—that's why, as an algebraist, I was qualified to write about Noether's work—so the authors I edited were scientists, not journalists. I found it rewarding to guide each person through the process of explaining their research to a lay reader. With every round of discussion and editing, the articles would get clearer and more engaging, until they were ready to publish.

My fellowship experience was mostly remote, but I always felt like I was part of an open, friendly office. Throughout the summer, the other editors offered lunchtime brown-bag sessions on topics like fact-checking, choosing images to fit a story, and constructing a narrative. As the person with the most background in math on *The Conversation*'s editorial team, I gave a talk about how journalists might avoid getting fooled by statistical fallacies. I learned how to write a science story that's timely and clearly answers the question, "Why is this being published now?" And I learned how to write a good lede, or article opening, that grabs a reader's attention and gets them interested in the story.

Now that I'm back in the swing of my PhD work, I'm even more grateful for the perspective and skills I gained over the summer. Ever since that first calculus class, I've believed math is something anyone can enjoy. I'm excited to keep sharing it.

Tamar Lichter Blanks

Credits

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