емкость is Great (Or: What I Learned at the Writing Scientists Workshop)

Jordan Ellenberg

This semester I did something I’ve been meaning to do for a long time: I ran a writers’ workshop, modeled after the many many fiction workshops I attended in college and at the Writing Seminars. But this one wasn’t about crafting a short story that exquisitely limned the emotional landscape of people almost exactly like me and my friends; it was for early-career scientists, and it was aimed at writing the 1000-word general-audience science article, the kind of thing I’ve mostly been writing since I gave up prose fiction a couple of decades ago.

And it worked! Not thanks to me so much as to the committed, insightful, extremely-willing-to-think-hard-about-craft group of eight students I had working with me, on Zoom, from around the US and in a couple of cases elsewhere.

Why did I want to do this? Because over the years a lot of young scientists have asked me how they can get into science writing and how they can combine it with a career in research. And the answer is not so much “here’s an editor you can contact” or “here’s what goes in a pitch letter,” it’s “learn to choose good words and write good sentences in much the same way fiction writers do,” or, even more specifically, “learn how to do that in the context of a very particular kind of 1,000-word chunk of prose.” And that’s what we worked on.

I will probably do this again. It was really fun. And my real hope is that, just as Math Circles went from being a thing a few devoted Russian expats did in Cambridge and Oakland to something that every self-respecting math department runs, there will be Writing Scientists Workshops that don’t involve me at all, where groups of grad students and postdocs get together and read each others’ work seriously and reflectively and train themselves to be outward-facing scientists.

With that in mind, I wrote a pretty thorough account of how I ran the workshop, what we did, what things might usefully be changed, and what we spent our time talking about, here: [https://quomodocumque.files.wordpress.com/2022/06/wsw-post-workshop-summary-2022.pdf](https://quomodocumque.files.wordpress.com/2022/06/wsw-post-workshop-summary-2022.pdf)

I got a lot of useful feedback from the participants, but maybe my favorite was the student who sent back a bullet-point list of all the advice about writing I’d given, filtered through her paraphrase. She’s a Russophone, and one of the bullet points was “емкость is great.” What is емкость? I’ve been asking all my Russian friends. It seems to mean something like “putting a lot of meaning into a few words.” That is, indeed, what the WSW is going for, and it is, indeed, great.

Math is Just the Beginning

Mobashira Farooqi

I am writing to you not as a mathematician. Rather as the National Expansion Manager for the Math Corps, a program that is all about “loving and believing in kids.” Yes, we have the word “Math” in our title, and we do teach mathematics, but we are more interested in helping kids realize their greatness. If our kids grow up to be mathematicians, which they occasionally do, we cheer in excitement. If our kids also grow up to be lawyers, artists, engineers, or social workers, we are equally proud, and again cheer in excitement.

The program is about cultivating kids in an environment that is caring, supportive, and safe, and instilling in them the values we think are important in life. Our focus includes helping kids develop their own courage—the courage to be themselves, the courage to do the right things, and the courage to face their fears. We teach our kids that the road to greatness passes through constant failure—and that failure is a natural and essential part of success. We cherish each child that comes through our program as unique, beautiful, and irreplaceable—celebrating individuality and always encouraging them to be themselves.

I was first introduced to this program and its unique culture in 2005 as a shy, but curious rising 7th grader. Growing up in Detroit, I attended schools where the majority of...