



From the President

Writing articles for professional publications

Occasionally, people email me with interesting mathematical ideas or insights from their teaching and I love receiving these emails. It is a great privilege when people share such things with me. Sometimes they are in response to an article that I've written, and sometimes people just share their thoughts with me because they think (rightly) that I would be interested. I often respond by suggesting that they consider turning what they have written into an article and sending it to one of the MA's many publications: usually *Primary Mathematics*, *Mathematics in School*, *Mathematical Gazette*, *SymmetryPlus*, *Equals* or elsewhere. Sometimes they ask me to help by commenting on drafts and it is very rewarding to see such pieces eventually appear in print. However, quite often people decline to do this, for various reasons, and I thought I might try to address some of those reservations in this column. Perhaps this might encourage more MA members to contribute in different ways to MA publications.

1. *I am too busy*

It is pretty hard to argue with this one. I take it as a given that everyone I know is hugely busy, especially those in education who jobs are heavily student-facing. We all know that teachers have increasingly hectic and stressful jobs in schools, and many academics experience immense pressures in their institutions. Even retired people frequently find that juggling their various family and other commitments can make them feel busier than when they were in a full-time job! So, we can take it for granted that everyone is super-busy.

However, if you can somehow find the time to think about something mathematics- or teaching-related, and put an email together with some coherent thoughts in it, then perhaps it doesn't need to take much more than this to transform it into an article that others might benefit from. If all you have time for is a brief thought, idea or comment, it might still make an interesting 'Letter to the Editor' or short 'filler' piece that Editors are always keen to receive to fit into a spare bit of space

at the bottom of a page. The best answer to the question, "How long should an article be?" is that it should be as long as necessary – and no longer! Less is often more. When someone sits down 'to write an article', they might think that aiming for anything less than 1000 words just isn't 'enough'. But when you start, instead, with some thought or insight, then there is absolutely no need to 'pad it out'. I very much enjoy short 'single point' articles, and perhaps it would be good to have on balance more shorter articles that would give a voice to a larger number of members of the MA?



2. *I have nothing profound enough to say*

What might seem obvious to one person seems profound to another.

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In conversations about teaching and mathematics, I often hear people say, “I’d never thought of it like that before” or “I can’t believe I didn’t know that!” One person says, “I always do it this way” and another person replies, “I’ve *never* done it that way!” The best gauge as to whether what you might have to say is ‘interesting’ is whether you can interest someone else with it, so sharing your ideas (maybe before writing them up) with a trusted colleague is a great way to ‘test the water’.

Asking someone their opinion before you take the time to write 1000 words on it makes it easier for them to be honest and say, actually, that they think that it is quite well known, or perhaps not that interesting to the intended readership. Then the person can step back and perhaps ‘pitch’ a different idea. It’s much harder for the reader to be honest in this way when someone has clearly already invested a lot of time and effort in polishing a longer piece, with perhaps carefully-made drawings and equations all nicely set. Getting feedback at an early stage on your initial ideas can be really useful – possibly from several different people whose views you trust. Another possible benefit of asking someone to look at your idea – before fully writing it up – is that they may have something substantial to contribute to it, which might suggest that you co-author something together.

I wrote in the October *MA News* about imposter syndrome in relation to presenting at branch events or conference sessions, and much of that applies to writing for professional journals as well. I am always pleased to read a great article in one of the MA’s publications, and then look at the author name and think, “I don’t think I know that person – I wonder who they are?”

3. Everything has been said many times before

It is possible to spend a very long time trying to find out whether what you want to say has ever been said before. You could easily spend longer doing this than writing the article itself! I once spent a long time trying to find research on mathematical inequalities (i.e. learners’ understandings of the ‘greater than’ and ‘less than’ signs) amid vast amounts of writing and research to do with issues of educational ‘inequality’ in mathematics. Despite the ever-increasing cleverness of search engine algorithms, it can still be very hard to search for ‘an idea’.

Most good ideas are not really ‘new’, and people may well have been saying similar things from time to time for hundreds or even thousands of years. I think that often that doesn’t really matter. It is not like publishing

a mathematical proof, where we really need to be sure if anyone has ever proved the result that way before. With professional conversations about mathematics and teaching, you could take it as a given that at some point somewhere someone will have said something a bit like what you want to say. Ideas come and go in cycles and as a community we end up having similar debates to those that were had decades previously.

I think that doesn’t matter, and feeling that you need to find and read everything ever written on the subject before you have the right to speak is an unhelpful obstacle. You don’t have to be the first to say something – you might be the *best* to say it. Or you might say it in a different way or with different emphases. And we all need reminding of important ideas and to hear them expressed in fresh ways from time to time. So, if you want to write an article about ‘teaching negative numbers’, for instance, then you certainly won’t be the first! You might well want to see what people have written recently on the matter in MA journals, but that shouldn’t inhibit you from sharing your own perspective, ideas and experiences.

4. No one will read it anyway

Well, people certainly do read articles, and they often mention to others that they have done so, or tweet about them online. Not only do people read things, but it makes a difference to how we think and, ultimately, to how we work with the learners we teach. So articles do get read – and not just in the immediate time after publishing them but in years to come.

But I think the most helpful way to think about this objection is to get your own value, as author, from the writing process, so that it effectively doesn’t matter what happens after that. By the time I finish writing something, I aim to have got enough out of doing so myself that it really doesn’t matter if that’s the end of the road and no one else gets much from it. As E.M. Forster apparently said, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?”. (Incidentally, this is a good example of one of those ideas that lots of different people seem to have been credited with expressing in slightly different ways – see **3.** above! Joan Didion is quoted as saying, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking”). I tend to write about things I’m unsure or confused about, and the process of writing about it often helps me to reach some kind of conclusion – even if I perhaps end up even more confused than I was at the start!

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Meet the next MA President — Nira Chamberlain

Hello, my name is Nira Chamberlain, and I am very passionate about mathematics.

In the last 30 years I have been working as a specialist mathematical consultant out in Industry. In my role, I must live, breathe, eat, sleep and dream mathematics. Why? Well, my contract states that I must run around the world (now virtually) to do the mathematics that scientists and engineers find challenging and nobody else can do.

One day, just for fun, I decided to do a Part-time PhD in Mathematics at Portsmouth University, which meant I had one foot in industry, the other in academia!

I never considered myself as well-known until one day the ITV Journalist Robert Peston's Charity organisation got in touch with me, asking me to be one of their speakers. The Charity is called Speakers for Schools and at the time the roster included former PMs, Ministers; MPs, members of the House of Lords, FTSE 100 & 250 CEOs. However, my first speaking event didn't go too well. I presented to 200 pupils in a school in London, telling them about the wonders of mathematics, and then afterwards a pupil put their hand up and asked me the question "What is the point of Mathematics?" I had lost my audience completely, but this was the start of me becoming a mathematics communicator. Despite the bad start, I researched, worked, and found ways I could connect school pupils to the beautiful world of mathematics. The world that I lived and operated in. Over the months and years, my talks became more interesting, relevant, and better.

Then one day in 2018, I was invited to take part in a Big Internet Math Off competition. This consisted of British and International maths communicators battling each other to see who could present the most interesting mathematics to the general public. I told the organisers that I was not a full-time maths communicator and what could I do? They said I was interesting and could do what I liked. So I remained true to my presentation style which is tell a story, play some music to reflect the mood and show how brilliant mathematics is! I made it to the final which I won and was named World's Most Interesting Mathematician. In the final, I showed how my MSc thesis mathematical model could explain how the Marvel Superhero Black Panther suit works!

Through this and other events, such as chairing the conference Black Heroes of Mathematics, I have learnt that mathematics is for everybody, and mathematics is indisputably the best subject in the world. My theme for my presidency will focus on the theme – **Mathematics IS Empowering and IS for Everybody!** I hope you will see the vision and turn the dream into reality.

Professor Nira Chamberlain OBE



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The business of writing about it helps me to slow down my thinking and forces me to be a little more explicit and precise about the ideas, even if it doesn't necessarily lead to complete resolution. That is a process that I really value, and – perhaps as with this piece here – even if no one reads it, it has helped me to do the thinking that produced it!

Writing can be a great discipline for developing ideas, and I hope that some of those reading this who haven't previously considered contributing to one of the MA's publications might do so in the future.

Colin Foster
MA President 2022-23.