

What is a Flame? Winner | www.nytimes.com/2012/06/05/science/what-is-a-flame-winner-melts-jargon-at-science-festival.html?arc=recyp

Ben Ames, winner of a contest to explain a flame in terms that an 11-year-old could understand, was flummoxed when asked what he would say to someone who asked him what a flame was.

"Argh," he said after a pause. "It's really hard to do this without visuals."

Mr. Ames's winning entry, announced Saturday at the World Science Festival in New York, indeed incorporated visuals — a seven-and-a-half-minute animated video of a scientist explaining fire and flames to someone chained in hell.

"It must be torture being around all these flames and not knowing what they are," the narrating scientist says helpfully before launching into how the chemical reactions generate heat and different colors of the flame.

The contest grew out of a question — "What is a flame?" — that the actor Alan Alda asked his teacher when he was 11. The teacher could only answer, "It's oxidation."

The answer, while correct, was meaningless — jargon without context. Despite that disappointment, Mr. Alda has remained interested in science, serving as host of the PBS program "Scientific American Frontiers" and playing a leading role in establishing the Center for Communicative Science at Stony Brook University.

When the journal Science asked Mr. Alda to write an editorial on the importance of scientists' communicating what they do, Mr. Alda cast out the flame question as a challenge to explain the complicated in everyday words. The Stony Brook center set up a Web site to collect entries.

It received more than 800, from 30 nations.

Only after proposing the contest did Mr. Alda learn that this was a question that many scientific and engineering luminaries have tried to tackle.

"I didn't really understand what a difficult thing that is to answer," he said in an interview.

Michael Faraday, the 19th-century British physicist who first explained many of the basics of electromagnetism, gave six lectures titled "A Chemical History of a Candle." He wrote, "There is not a law under which any part of this universe is governed which does not come into play and is touched upon in these phenomena."

Buckminster Fuller, the architect and inventor best known for geodesic domes, also tried to come up with an explanation to satisfy a child's question. "Fire is the sun unwinding from the tree's log," he said, explaining how energy captured through photosynthesis is released when wood is burned.

Fittingly, the flame contest entries were judged by 11-year-olds, in 131 schools in the

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