

MA121, Spring 2008 — Optional Writing Assignment

The Background: As you all know, our syllabus claimed that we would have a writing assignment (maybe even more than one) along with everything else. In the end, I decided that it would be one assignment too many. As I mentioned in email, this means the weighting of your grades will get redistributed as follows:

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| quizzes | 10% |
| homework | 25% |
| four midterm tests | 35% |
| final exam | 30% |

A few of you, however, have told me you would *like* to have such an assignment, if only as a chance to improve your grade. So this is your optional writing assignment. Should you choose to do it, the grade you get will be averaged together with your other midterm grades, so that in effect this assignment counts as a fifth midterm.

The Assignment: Mathematics is a human activity, something done by people known as mathematicians. Every bit of mathematics that you have learned was created by someone at some point. But when we learn mathematics, it often comes at us cleansed of any sign of the original human authors. That's inherent in the subject, in a way, since the core idea in mathematics is precisely to blast away the surface detail to reveal the logical (and abstract) understructure. Still, it's kind of a pity not to acknowledge the men and women who helped create the subject.

This assignment is your chance to do that. You are asked to do the following

- a. Choose a mathematician. It will be more fun, I think, if you choose someone who lived not too long ago.
- b. Investigate this person's biography. (For mathematicians who died before 1960 or so, one of the best sources is the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, which is in the Miller Library reference area. There are

also good online sources. Don't use just one source; instead, check one against the other.)

- c. Find one interesting story about your mathematician. The story doesn't need to be documentably true, but it shouldn't be sheer fabrication either. Try to find an *interesting* story.
- d. Write a two-page paper about your chosen mathematician. The paper should have two parts. The first part should be factual: a brief account explaining who this is, what the historical period is, and what this person did. The second part should be your story (or anecdote, or juicy bit of gossip); you should strive to tell it well.

Should you choose to write this, please turn it in at my office **no later than Wednesday, May 14.**

I will grade your essays taking into consideration the quality of your writing, the accuracy of your facts, and the story you choose to tell. Your goal is to *keep me interested*. If the story you tell is new to me, that will motivate me to give you some bonus points.

As always, document everything. Indicate your sources, don't quote without attribution, and think critically: just because a book (or worse, a web site) says something doesn't mean it's true.

Good luck, and have fun!