

Being a Professional Mathematician

The public image of professional mathematicians – worksheet

- 1) Draw a sketch of a mathematician.

What do the sketches say about your idea of a mathematician?

Search Microsoft clipart or Google Images for “mathematician”. What kind of images come up?

- 2) What do mathematical jokes tell us about being a mathematician?

Consider (some of) the following jokes at www.BeingAMathematician.org/Jokes:

- Three logicians go into a bar... (Spiked Math)
- The Null Hypothesis (xkcd)
-

And four jokes that are part of mathematicians’ folklore:

- The mathematician, the doctor and the lawyer
- The mathematician, the engineer and the computer scientist
- The racehorse study
- Putting out a fire

In each case:

i) Explain the point of the joke

ii) Do you think it is funny?

iii) Would a non-mathematician think it is funny?

iv) Does it present a positive image of a mathematician?

v) Does it make assumptions about the age, gender and other characteristics of the mathematician?

Analyse other jokes about mathematicians in the same way.

Why do professional communities tell jokes about their profession?

- 3) What images of mathematicians are available to the general public?

- What (contemporary and historical) mathematicians are known to the public?
- Think of TV programmes, films, novels etc involving (real or fictitious) mathematicians. Do these appeal to mathematicians, non-mathematicians or both?

What are typical characteristics of fictional mathematicians?

How are they used by their creators? For example, are fictional mathematicians generally

- Intelligent
- Attractive
- Evil
- Introverted
- Ambitious
- Successful

How are “scientists” portrayed in fiction and popular culture? Is that different from “mathematicians”?

Do the characteristics of these (real or fictional) publicly-known mathematicians match those of real mathematicians you have come across?

Do they match the characteristics of mathematicians you have identified in answering the previous questions?

What impression of mathematicians is conveyed in recent biographies of mathematicians such as Paul Erdos, Simon Norton and Grigori Perelman?

4) How do people respond in social situations when you tell them you are studying maths?

Which aspects of the responses are positive and which are negative?

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