



1. MATHEMATICS

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1.5 MATHEMATICS QUOTES

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[Special Category: Niels Abel](#)

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From: <http://math.furman.edu/~mwoodard/mquot.html>

Abel, Niels H. (1802 - 1829) [Norwegian Mathematician]

[About Gauss' mathematical writing style]

He is like the fox, who effaces his tracks in the sand with his tail.

In G. F. Simmons, *Calculus Gems*, New York: Mcgraw Hill, Inc., 1992, p. 177.

[Karl F. Gauss (1777-1855), German mathematician]

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Special Category: Jean le Rond d'Alembert

From: <http://math.furman.edu/~mwoodard/mquot.html>

D'Alembert, Jean Le Rond (1717-1783) [French mathematician and encyclopedist]
 The mathematician may be compared to a designer of garments, who is utterly oblivious of the creatures whom his garments may fit. To be sure, his art originated in the necessity for clothing such creatures, but this was long ago; to this day a shape will occasionally appear which will fit into the garment as if the garment had been made for it. Then there is no end of surprise and delight.

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Allen, Woody (1935-, American film director, writer, actor):
 Standard mathematics has recently been rendered obsolete by the discovery that for years we have been writing the numeral five backward. This has led to reevaluation of counting as a method of getting from one to ten. Students are taught advanced concepts of Boolean algebra, and formerly unsolvable equations are dealt with by threats of reprisals.

In Howard Eves' *Return to Mathematical Circles*, Boston: Prindle, Weber, and Schmidt, 1988.

Anglin, W.S.

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From: rww <richardw+#NoSpam.pitt.edu>

"Like other occult techniques of divination, the statistical method has a private jargon deliberately contrived to obscure its methods from non-practitioners." -- G. O. Ashley

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From: "tmw" <tmw#NoSpam.chariot.net.au>

Although I am not stupid, the mathematical side of my brain is like dumb notes upon a damaged piano.

~ Margot Asquith 1864-1945, *More or Less About Myself* (1934)

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Special Category: St. Augustine de Hippo

"The good Christian should beware of mathematicians and all those who

make empty prophecies. The danger already exists that mathematicians have made a covenant with the devil to darken the spirit and confine man in the bonds of Hell." -- St. Augustine (354-430)

P.S. Augustine did really say that, but in his time there was no difference between mathematicans and astrologists. Astrologists told the future, which was diabolic.

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[Special Category: St. Augustine de Hippo](#)

If I am given a formula, and I am ignorant of its meaning, it cannot teach me anything, but if I already know it what does the formula teach me?

- St. Augustine (354-430), De Magistro ch X, 23.

[Mircea Radu notified me that signum in this context should be translated as sign/symbol and not as formula and that this chapter has nothing to do with mathematics. ;-(]

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[Special Category: Charles Babbage](#)

From: "Frank Bohan" <franbo#NoSpam.globalnet.co.uk>

Babbage, Charles (1792-1871, English mathematician and inventor of computer)

On two occasions I have been asked [by members of Parliament], 'Pray, Mr. Babbage, if you put into the machine wrong figures, will the right answers come out?' I am not able rightly to apprehend the kind of confusion of ideas that could provoke such a question.

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[Special Category: Charles Babbage](#)

Babbage, Charles (1792-1871, English mathematician and inventor of computer)

Every moment dies a man,

Every moment 1 1/16 is born.

(Parody of Tennyson's 'Vision of Sin' in an unpublished letter to the poet)

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892 English poet):

Every moment dies a man,

Every moment one is born

In: Vision of Sin (1842)

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The cowboys have a way of trussing up a steer or a pugnacious bronco which fixes the brute so that it can neither move nor think. This is the hog-tie, and it is what Euclid did to geometry. -- Eric Temple Bell

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Bell, Eric Temple (1883-1960)

"Obvious" is the most dangerous word in mathematics.

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From: scotth9999#NoSpam.aol.com (ScottH9999)

"Our paper became a monograph. When we had completed the details, we rewrote everything so that no one could tell how we came upon our ideas or why. This is the standard in mathematics."

--David Berlinski, "Black Mischief" (1988).

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A mathematician's reputation rests on the number of bad proofs he has given. - A.S. Besicovich, A Mathematicians miscellany, 1953

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Bolyai, Wolfgang (1775-1856)

[To son János:]

For God's sake, please give it up. Fear it no less than the sensual passion, because it, too, may take up all your time and deprive you of your health, peace of mind and happiness in life.

[Bolyai's father urging him to give up work on non-Euclidian geometry.]

In P. Davis and R. Hersh The Mathematical Experience , Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981, p. 220.

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[Special Category: Definitions and terms](#)

"A person who can, within a year, solve $x^2 - 92y^2 = 1$ is a mathematician."

-- Brahmagupta

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[Special Category: Nicolaus Copernicus](#)

From: <http://math.furman.edu/~mwoodard/mquot.html>
Copernicus, Nicholas (1473-1543)
Mathematics is written for mathematicians.

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[Special Category: Charles Darwin](#)
[Special Category: Definitions and terms](#)

From: ph2008#NoSpam.mail.bris.ac.uk (CJ. Bradfield)p
hilosophy:

"A mathematician is a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat which isn't there" - Charles R. Darwin (1809-1882) [English biologist]

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From: "Havard Fosseng" <havardf#NoSpam.usit.uio.no>
@A: R. Drabek
@Q: Math is like love -- a simple idea but it can get complicated.

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[Special Category: Arthur Eddington](#)

From: (The Sanity Inspector)

Proof is an idol before which the mathematician tortures himself.
-- Sir Arthur Eddington

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[Special Category: Albert Einstein](#)

As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain, and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.

-- Albert Einstein (1879-1955) [German physicist]

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From: (The Sanity Inspector)
Mathematicians are like lovers. Grant a mathematician the least principle, and he will draw from it a consequence which you must also grant him, and from this consequence another.
-- Bernard Le Bovier Fontelle

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I've heard that the government wants to put a tax on the mathematically ignorant. Funny, I thought that's what the lottery was!
-- Gallagher

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From: rww <richardw+#NoSpam.pitt.edu>
"The laws of probability, so true in general, so fallacious in particular."
-- Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) [British historian]

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Thomas Godfrey, a self-taught mathematician, great in his way . . . knew little out of his way, and was not a pleasing companion; as, like most great mathematicians I have met with, he expected universal precision in everything said, or was forever denying or distinguishing upon trifles, to the disturbance of all conversation.
-- Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), Autobiography

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[Special Category: Karl F. Gauss](#)

From: <http://math.furman.edu/~mwoodard/mquot.html>
Gauss, when asked how soon he expected to reach certain mathematical conclusions, that he had them long ago, all he was worrying about was how to reach them! [Karl F. Gauss (1777-1855), German mathematician]

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[Special Category: Karl F. Gauss](#)

From: kjwest4#NoSpam.shore.net (ken)

"To avoid the clamor of the Boetians".

C.F. Gauss, on why he did not immediately reveal his discovery of non-euclidean geometry.

[Karl F. Gauss (1777-1855), German mathematician]

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Halmos, Paul R.

I remember one occasion when I tried to add a little seasoning to a review, but I wasn't allowed to. The paper was by Dorothy Maharam, and it was a perfectly sound contribution to abstract measure theory. The domains of the underlying measures were not sets but elements of more general Boolean algebras, and their range consisted not of positive numbers but of certain abstract equivalence classes. My proposed first sentence was:

"The author discusses valueless measures in pointless spaces."

In: I want to be a Mathematician, Washington: MAA Spectrum, 1985, p. 120.

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Anyone who cannot cope with mathematics is not fully human. At best he is a tolerable subhuman who has learned to wear shoes, bathe and not make messes in the house. -- Lazarus Long, "Time Enough for Love", (Robert A. Heinlein (1907-19??) [US science-fiction writer])

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Hempel, Carl G.

...to characterize the import of pure geometry, we might use the standard form of a movie-disclaimer: No portrayal of the characteristics of geometrical figures or of the spatial properties of relationships of actual bodies is intended, and any similarities between the primitive concepts and their customary geometrical connotations are purely coincidental.

"Geometry and Empirical Science" in J. R. Newman (ed.) The World of Mathematics, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956.

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[Special Category: David Hilbert](#)

[Special Category: Definitions and terms](#)

From: "Ed C" <zendam#NoSpam.snet.net>

Hilbert, David (1862-1943)

Mathematics is a game played according to certain simple rules with meaningless marks on paper.

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From: dougk <tz750#NoSpam.FlyingW.net>

To understand this* for sense it is not required that a man should be a geometrician or a logician, but that he should be mad.

--Thomas Hobbes

[*This is that the volume generated by revolving the region under $1/x$ from 1 to infinity has finite volume.]

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From: "Havard Fosseng" <havardf#NoSpam.usit.uio.no>

@Q: All the limitative Theorems of metamathematics and the theory of computation suggest that once the ability to represent your own structure has reached a certain critical point, that is the kiss of death: it guarantees that you can never represent yourself totally. Godel's Incompleteness Theorem, Church's Undecidability Theorem, Turing's Halting Problem, Tarski's Truth Theorem-- all have the flavour of some ancient fairy tale which warns you that `To seek self-knowledge is to embark on a journey which . . . will always be incomplete, cannot be charted on a map, will never halt, cannot be described.

@A: Douglas R. Hofstadter

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The power of dealing with numbers is a kind of "detached lever" arrangement , which may be put into a mighty poor watch. I suppose it is as common as the power of moving ears voluntarily, which is a moderately rare endowment.

-- Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894) [US writer]

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From: scotth9999#NoSpam.aol.com (ScottH9999)

"Mathematics: A tentative agreement that two and two make four."
--Elbert Hubbard (1859-1915; American writer)

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From: chollanamdo#NoSpam.mindspring.com (The Sanity Inspector)

We have to come back to something like ordinary language after all when we want to talk about mathematics!
--Sir Harold Jeffreys

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From: Joachim Verhagen

Mathematics is the Queen of Science but she isn't very Pure; she keeps having babies by handsome young upstarts and various frog princes.
--Donald Kingsbury (In "psychohistorical crisis", 2001)

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Kleinhenz, Robert J.

When asked what it was like to set about proving something, the mathematician likened proving a theorem to seeing the peak of a mountain and trying to climb to the top. One establishes a base camp and begins scaling the mountain's sheer face, encountering obstacles at every turn, often retracing one's steps and struggling every foot of the journey. Finally when the top is reached, one stands examining the peak, taking in the view of the surrounding countryside and then noting the automobile road up the other side!

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From: dylan#NoSpam.minerva.cis.yale.edu (Dylan Howard)

Stand firm in your refusal to remain conscious during algebra. In real life, I assure you, there is no such thing as algebra"
-- Fran Lebowitz (1946- ;American writer)

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Special Category: Lev Landau

Wir Mathematiker sind alle ein biszchen meschugge.

(We mathematicans are all a bit crazy).

-- Edmund Landau

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From: "Frank Bohan" <franbo#NoSpam.globalnet.co.uk>

Landau, Edmund.

[Asked for a testimony to the effect that Emmy Noether was a great woman mathematician, he said:]

I can testify that she is a great mathematician, but that she is a woman, I cannot swear.

J.E. Littlewood, A Mathematician's Miscellany, Methuen and Co ltd., 1953.

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Littlewood, J. E. (1885 -1977)

A good mathematical joke is better, and better mathematics, than a dozen mediocre papers.

A Mathematician's Miscellany, Methuen and Co. ltd., 1953.

(I do not know if Littlewood would have considered this list "good mathematical jokes", but I could not resist including this.)

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Special Category: Godfrey H. Hardy

Littlewood, J. E. (1885 -1977)

I read in the proof sheets of Hardy on Ramanujan: "As someone said, each of the positive integers was one of his personal friends." My reaction was, "I wonder who said that; I wish I had." In the next proof-sheets I read (what now stands), "It was Littlewood who said..."

A Mathematician's Miscellany, Methuen Co. Ltd, 1953.

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From: "Frank Bohan" <franbo#NoSpam.globalnet.co.uk>

Mathematics is inadequate to describe the universe, since mathematics is an abstraction from natural phenomena. Also, mathematics may predict things

which don't exist, or are impossible in nature.
-- Ludovico delle Colombe Criticizing Galileo.

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Luther, Martin (1483-1546)
Medicine makes people ill, mathematics make them sad and theology makes them sinful.

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From: "Christopher Brown" <cbrown#NoSpam.chem1.chem.dal.ca>
The mathematician who pursues his studies without clear views of this matter, must often have the uncomfortable feeling that his paper and pencil surpass him in intelligence.

- Mach, Ernst (1838-1916), in "The Economy of Science" in J. R. Newman (ed.) The World of Mathematics

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From: The Sanity Inspector
Mathematics is as little a science as grammar is a language.
-- Ernst Mayr

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From: Don Olivier <don#NoSpam.hsph.harvard.edu>
Sweet Analytics, 'tis thou hast ravished me.
-- Doctor Faustus according to Christopher Marlowe (British dramatist, 1564-1593)

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From: Don Olivier <don#NoSpam.hsph.harvard.edu>
Fast cars, fast women, fast algorithms... what more could a man want?
-- Joe Mattis

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[Special Category: James Clerk Maxwell](#)

From Science Week <http://scienceweek.com>

Mathematicians may flatter themselves that they possess new ideas which mere human language is as yet unable to express. Let them make the effort to express these ideas in appropriate words without the aid of symbols, and if they succeed they will not only lay us laymen under a lasting obligation, but, we venture to say, they will find themselves very much enlightened during the process, and will even be doubtful whether the ideas as expressed in symbols had ever quite found their way out of the equations into their minds.

-- James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879) [Scottish physicist]

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Mathematics contains much that will neither hurt one if one does not know it nor help one if one does know it. - J.B. Mencken

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From: T.Moore#NoSpam.massey.ac.nz (Terry Moore)

Imagine a person with a gift of ridicule [He might say] First that a negative quantity has no logarithm; secondly that a negative quantity has no square root; thirdly that the first non-existent is to the second as the circumference of a circle is to the diameter. - Augustus de Morgan

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[Special Category: John von Neumann](#)

From: Hans de Vreught (J.P.M.deVreught#NoSpam.cs.tudelft.nl)

Young man, in mathematics you don't understand things, you just get used to them.

-- John von Neumann (1903-1957) [Hungarian/US mathematician and scientist]

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From: technochik#NoSpam.webtv.net (Marci Wolcott)

"To speak algebraically, Mr. M. is execrable, but Mr. G. is (x+1)ecrable." --Edgar Allan Poe

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[Special Category: Plato](#)

From: Don Olivier <don#NoSpam.hsph.harvard.edu>

Mathematics is like checkers in being suitable for the young, not too difficult, amusing, and without peril to the state.

-- Plato (c.428-347 B.C) [Greek philosopher]

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[Special Category: Jules Henry Poincaré](#)

[Special Category: Definitions and terms](#)

From: hcheng#NoSpam.gpu5.srv.ualberta.ca (Howard Cheng)

Mathematics is the art of giving the same name to different things.

-- Jules Henri Poincare (1854-1912) [French mathematician]

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[Special Category: Jules Henry Poincaré](#)

On the Gaussian curve:

Experimentalists think that it is a mathematical theorem while the mathematicians believe it to be an experimental fact.

-- Jules Henri Poincare (1854-1912) [French mathematician]

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From: dougk <tz750#NoSpam.FlyingW.net>

[Special Category: Siméon Poisson](#)

Life is good for only two things, discovering mathematics and teaching mathematics.

--Siméon Poisson

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[Special Category: Definitions and terms](#)

Polyá, George (1887, 1985)

Mathematics consists of proving the most obvious thing in the least obvious way.

In N. Rose Mathematical Maxims and Minims, Raleigh NC:Rome Press Inc., 1988.

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Polyá, George (1887, 1985)

The traditional mathematics professor of the popular legend is absentminded. He usually appears in public with a lost umbrella in each hand. He prefers to face the blackboard and to turn his back to the class. He writes a, he says b, he means c; but it should be d. Some of his sayings are handed down from generation to generation.

"In order to solve this differential equation you look at it till a solution occurs to you."

"This principle is so perfectly general that no particular application of it is possible."

"Geometry is the science of correct reasoning on incorrect figures."

"My method to overcome a difficulty is to go round it."

"What is the difference between method and device? A method is a device which you used twice."

How to Solve It. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1945.

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Pordage, Matthew

One of the endearing things about mathematicians is the extent to which they will go to avoid doing any real work.

In H. Eves Return to Mathematical Circles, Boston: Prindle, Weber and Schmidt, 1988.

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From: "Ken Stevenson" <kenstevo#NoSpam.zip.com.au>

If I feel unhappy, I do mathematics to become happy. If I am happy, I do mathematics to keep happy.

P. Turan, "The Work of Alfred Renyi", Matematikai Lapok 21, 1970, pp 199-210

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From: "Havard Fosseng" <havardf#NoSpam.usit.uio.no>
 @A: M. C. Reed.
 @Q: Sex is the mathematics urge sublimated.

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From: Bill Thomas <liblanc1#NoSpam.nic.cerf.net>
 As long as algebra is taught in school, there will be prayer in school.
 - Cokie Roberts

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[Special Category: Bertrand \(Arthur William\) Russell](#)

Bertrand (Arthur William) Russell (1872-1970) [British philopher and mathematician]:
 Mathematics may be defined as the subject in which we never know what we are talking about, nor whether what we are saying is true
 -- Bertrand Russell (Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays, 1918)

From: jr3000#NoSpam.aol.com (JR3000)

Mathematics may be defined as the subject in which we never know what we are talking about, nor whether what we are saying is true.
 -Bertrand Russell, *My Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays*, 1918

As, for example:

We may lay it down that, if there were no universe, *all* general propositions would be true;
 for the contradictory of a general proposition is a proposition asserting existence, and would therefore always be false if no universe existed.
 -Bertrand Russell, *An Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, 1919

I have come to believe, though very reluctantly, that it [mathematics] consists of tautologies. I fear that to a mind of sufficient intellectual power, the whole of mathematics would appear trivial...
 I cannot any longer find any mystical satisfaction in the contemplation of mathematical truth.
 -Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, 1959

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It is a pleasant surprise to him [the pure mathematician] and an added problem if he finds that the arts can use his calculations, or that the

senses can verify them, much as if a composer found that the sailors could heave better when singing his songs
-- George Santayana (1863-1952) [US philosopher]

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The summer '87 issue (#55) of The Whole Earth Review contains an article called "Let's Eliminate math From The Schools" by Roger Schank.

"Many very smart people are lousy at mathematics and never quite get over their failure at something so important". - R. Schank

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From: <http://math.furman.edu/~mwoodard/mquot.html>

De Sua, F. (1956)

Suppose we loosely define a religion as any discipline whose foundations rest on an element of faith, irrespective of any element of reason which may be present. Quantum mechanics for example would be a religion under this definition. But mathematics would hold the unique position of being the only branch of theology possessing a rigorous demonstration of the fact that it should be so classified.

In H. Eves, In Mathematical Circles, Boston: Prindle, Weber and Schmidt, 1969.

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McShane, E. J.

There are in this world optimists who feel that any symbol that starts off with an integral sign must necessarily denote something that will have every property that they should like an integral to possess. This of course is quite annoying to us rigorous mathematicians; what is even more annoying is that by doing so they often come up with the right answer.

Bulletin of the American Mathematical Society, v. 69, p. 611, 1963.

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From: anthem#NoSpam.virginia.edu (dark star = Scott Herman)

"Math was always my bad subject. I couldn't convince my teachers that many of my answers were meant ironically." -- writer Calvin Trillin

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From: Haim Guivon <guivon#NoSpam.netvision.net.il>, Ben Webster <bwebste#NoSpam.simons-rock.edu>, Martin Winkler <e9325827#NoSpam.student.tuwien.ac>, Stephen Montgomery-Smith <stephen#NoSpam.showme.missouri.edu>

[Special Category: Leopold Kronecker](#)

Leopold Kronecker [German mathematician, 1823-1891]:
"God made the whole (natural) numbers. The others, were man-made" (approximate translation from German, from memory).
(In Analysis I by Heuser, Kronecker is quoted to have said that)

From: Alain Gottcheiner <agot#NoSpam.ulb.ac.be>
I've seen Weierstrass [German mathematician Weierstrass (1815-1897)] quoted twice [this being no proof, of course] for having said that "God made the whole numbers. The rest of the mathematical works is man-made." , which is a stronger statement.

Is it just possible that Weierstrass knew about Kronecker's utterance, and strengthened it ?

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From: (The Sanity Inspector)
God exists since mathematics is consistent, and the Devil exists since we cannot prove it.
-- Andre Weil

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It is a safe rule to apply that, when a mathematical or philosophical author writes with a misty profundity, he is talking nonsense.
-- Alfred North Whitehead, An Introduction to Mathematics, 1948.

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From: "Havard Fosseng" <havardf#NoSpam.usit.uio.no>
@Q: I will not go so far as to say that to construct a history of thought without profound study of the mathematical ideas of successive epochs is like omitting Hamlet from the play which is named after him. . . But it is certainly analogous to cutting out the part of Ophelia. This simile is singularly exact. For Ophelia

is quite essential to the play, she is very charming-- and a little mad.

@A: Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) [English philosopher and mathematician]

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From: "Richard I. Pelletier" <bitbucket#NoSpam.home.com>
"There are only two kinds of math books. Those you cannot read beyond the first sentence, and those you cannot read beyond the first page."
C.N. Yang, about 1980 I think. (Nobel Prize in Physics, 1957.)

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