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Writing Style—An Editorial Comment

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What is Humanistic Mathematics? This has been the topic of discussion at several gatherings of members of our Humanistic Mathematics Network.

We should, however, set an example and encourage writing designed for clarity and enlightenment rather than for the purpose of impressing people with our erudition.

As those of you who were present know, and the rest of you might well suspect, there is great diversity among our members as to what Humanistic Mathematics is. This diversity of meaning is reflected in the articles of our Newsletter. However, there is one aspect which is common to most, if not all, of our views. That is that mathematics belongs most appropriately in the humanities. In fact, it seems to me that this network started as "Mathematics as a Humanistic Discipline" which I think is more descriptive of what we're about, but that's a topic for another discussion.

The point that I would like to make here is that the philosophy and spirit of the humanities should carry over into our writing. In short, we should write as humans, not as automatons. A recent criticism of a humanistic math article was that it was "informal and conversational". I would take that as a compliment; I think that is how we should be writing. I don't know about you, but I dislike the stilted pseudo-esoteric prose that permeates mathematics writing. I think that is one thing that keeps people from reading about mathematics and drives many capable, intelligent, people away from mathematics.

We should also, as humanists, be tolerant of various writing styles. We should even, I guess, tolerate the writing of the research mathematicians, bless their little hearts, who likely will continue to write in their stilted, stark manner. We should, however, set an example and encourage writing designed for clarity and enlightenment rather than for the purpose of impressing people with our erudition.