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New York Times reporter speaks about science

By [Justin Myers](#), Reporter. Posted [October 17, 2006](#).

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MU professor H.R.

Chandrasekhar and New York Times reporter Claudia Dreifus discuss physics after Dreifus gave a lecture entitled 'Science, Scientists and Science Writing' on Saturday in the Life Sciences Center.

After covering wars and America's political system, Claudia Dreifus faced her biggest challenge when she had to interview a world-renowned mathematician.

"I sat in my hotel, the London Hilton, vomiting with fear. And I had covered wars, but of this, I was really afraid," she said.

On Saturday morning, as part of the weekly Saturday Morning Science Series, people filed into the Life Sciences Center's Monsanto Auditorium to hear Dreifus speak about her interview with Sir Roger Penrose and how she made the switch to science reporting.

Although Dreifus is not a scientist, she is a contributing writer for The New York Times.

After she lost her job as a well-known political interviewer for the Times, the paper's science editor asked Dreifus to switch to science reporting. Needing

work, Dreifus accepted the job despite her aversion to the topic.

Besides, she thought it couldn't be that difficult.

"Good journalists are really smart generalists," Dreifus said.

Still, she said, math and science weren't her strong points, especially in high school.

As it turned out, Dreifus soon fell in love with her new position to open up science and scientists to the general public.

"By being playful with science, I invited others in," she said.

She said scientists are fascinating people.

"Their stories are gripping, many of their discoveries are pivotal in changing our lives, and many of them work like artists," Dreifus said. "A lot of them are very good about talking about it, and more than that, they want to talk about it because nobody else is asking them about it."

Dreifus said scientific literacy is important because so many contemporary policy issues deal with science and technology.

“We live in a time when science is about as important as it’s ever been, in terms of politics, and about as misunderstood as it’s ever been,” she said.

She told the audience that education in science and math isn’t as strong as it should be.

“We require more science and math, but the more that they’re required, it seems the worse it’s taught,” she said. “And I think some of this hostility that the general public has toward science comes from the type of science and the kind of alienating science they’ve gotten in their schooling.”

H R. Chandrasekhar, MU chairman of physics and astronomy, agreed.

“The need for science will never go away because there’s a need for it,” Chandrasekhar said. “If you don’t do it, someone else will do it. So it will all happen. But the question is, will it happen the way you want it? Do you lead or do you follow?”

Wouter Montfrooij, who organizes the weekly lecture series, said the lectures are educational.

“The aim is to make it [science] accessible, like the presenters are not supposed to use equations, and their mandate is to get the audience enthused about what they’re doing,” he said.

Dreifus said she sees the job as enormous fun.

“It has to do with why I’m a journalist,” she said. “I’m a journalist to experience life and to look at life and get their stories out.”