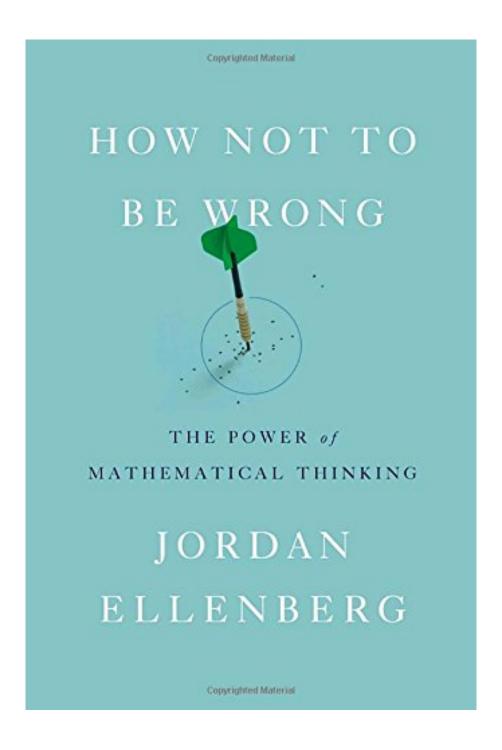


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The Freakonomics of math--a math-world superstar unveils the hidden beauty and logic of the world and puts its power in our hands

The math we learn in school can seem like a dull set of rules, laid down by the ancients and not to be questioned. In How Not to Be Wrong, Jordan Ellenberg shows us how terribly limiting this view is: Math isn't confined to abstract incidents that never occur in real life, but rather touches everything we do--the whole world is shot through with it.

Math allows us to see the hidden structures underneath the messy and chaotic surface of our world. It's a science of not being wrong, hammered out by centuries of hard work and argument. Armed with the tools of mathematics, we can see through to the true meaning of information we take for granted: How early should you get to the airport? What does "public opinion" really represent? Why do tall parents have shorter children? Who really won Florida in 2000? And how likely are you, really, to develop cancer?

How Not to Be Wrong presents the surprising revelations behind all of these questions and many more, using the mathematician's method of analyzing life and exposing the hard-won insights of the academic community to the layman--minus the jargon. Ellenberg chases mathematical threads through a vast range of time and space, from the everyday to the cosmic, encountering, among other things, baseball, Reaganomics, daring lottery schemes, Voltaire, the replicability crisis in psychology, Italian Renaissance painting, artificial languages, the development of non-Euclidean geometry, the coming obesity apocalypse, Antonin Scalia's views on crime and punishment, the psychology of slime molds, what Facebook can and can't figure out about you, and the existence of God.

Ellenberg pulls from history as well as from the latest theoretical developments to provide those not trained in math with the knowledge they need. Math, as Ellenberg says, is "an atomic-powered prosthesis that you attach to your common sense, vastly multiplying its reach and strength." With the tools of mathematics in hand, you can understand the world in a deeper, more meaningful way. How Not to Be Wrong will show you how.

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Features

• Penguin Press

From Booklist

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Most helpful customer reviews

269 of 291 people found the following review helpful.

"Mathematics is the extension of common sense by other means."

By BHB

I run across a lot of books that I add to my to-be-read list and then forget about until after their publication dates or I stumble upon the book in the library or bookstore. How Not to Be Wrong was initially one of those books, but it sounded so good that I found myself obsessively thinking about it and started a search for a prepublication copy. Since I'm not a librarian, didn't win a copy via First Reads, and don't have friends at Penguin Press, it took some time and effort, but having procured a copy and read it, I can say that it was well worth my time and \$6.00. How Not to Be Wrong is a catchy title, but for me, this book is really about the subtitle, The Power of Mathematical Thinking.

Ellenberg deftly explains why mathematics is important, gives the reader myriad examples applicable to our own lives, and also tells us what math can't do. He writes, "Mathematics is the extension of common sense by other means", and proceeds to expound upon an incredible number of interesting subjects and how mathematics can help us better understand these topics, such as obesity, economics, reproducibility, the lottery, error-correcting codes, and the existence (or not) of God. He writes in a compelling, explanatory way that I think anyone with an interest in mathematics and/or simply understanding things more completely will be able to grasp. Ellenberg writes "Do the Math" for Slate, and it's evident in his column and this book that he knows how to explain mathematical ideas to non-mathematicians, and even more so, seems to enjoy

doing so with great enthusiasm. I won't pretend that I understood everything discussed in this book, but it's such an excellent book that I also bought the hardcover (so I have an index which my pre-pub copy does not), and reread the book so I do have a much more thorough understanding. I've wished for a book like this for a long time, and I'd like to thank Jordan Ellenberg for writing it for me!

15 of 16 people found the following review helpful.

It helps to be a math major

By Norman A. West

My mistake. I thought is was going to be a more popularized version of the interface between mathematics the real world. It was there, I suppose, but the math was over my head and I felt somewhere between bewildered and stupid. Not an unusual condition for me, but the book didn't help much. I struggled through about half of it before deciding it was just too much work. I think my son-in-law might enjoy it more.

If you are going to enjoy the book, you should have an interest in mathematics for mathematics's sake and make the judgement of the book on that basis.

I'm probably not being fair to the author. It's a good book, but you should be aware of what you're getting.

26 of 28 people found the following review helpful.

Good book, but tends too focus on Misuse of Mathematics in Polls and Politics

By J. Groen

There are some interesting anecdotes in this book on the power of mathematical thinking. And, there are some mind twisting concepts. Here are two for you:

- Does .9999... = 1?

- Does the series +1-1+1-1+1-1... = 1/2?

There are additional concepts like this that will excite your mathematical mind (and I only recommend this book for individuals interested in mathematics). However, most of the book covers probability and statistics - e.g. expected value, Baynesian decision theory, hypothesis testing, etc. (which I love but you might not..) And, the book covers it with a political perspective, i.e. what is wrong with political polls and why statistics are mis-used in politics, etc.

I disagree with the reviews that mention this author's bias against conservatives. Although he may be a liberal, he doesn't bias his writing too much in any direction.

However, the continual discussion of use and misuse of mathematics in politics can get tiring.

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