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Guesstimation: Solving The World's Problems On The Back Of A Cocktail Napkin



Synopsis

Guesstimation is a book that unlocks the power of approximation--it's popular mathematics rounded to the nearest power of ten! The ability to estimate is an important skill in daily life. More and more leading businesses today use estimation questions in interviews to test applicants' abilities to think on their feet. Guesstimation enables anyone with basic math and science skills to estimate virtually anything--quickly--using plausible assumptions and elementary arithmetic. Lawrence Weinstein and John Adam present an eclectic array of estimation problems that range from devilishly simple to quite sophisticated and from serious real-world concerns to downright silly ones. How long would it take a running faucet to fill the inverted dome of the Capitol? What is the total length of all the pickles consumed in the US in one year? What are the relative merits of internal-combustion and electric cars, of coal and nuclear energy? The problems are marvelously diverse, yet the skills to solve them are the same. The authors show how easy it is to derive useful ballpark estimates by breaking complex problems into simpler, more manageable ones--and how there can be many paths to the right answer. The book is written in a question-and-answer format with lots of hints along the way. It includes a handy appendix summarizing the few formulas and basic science concepts needed, and its small size and French-fold design make it conveniently portable. Illustrated with humorous pen-and-ink sketches, Guesstimation will delight popular-math enthusiasts and is ideal for the classroom.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you can do basic arithmetic with one-digit numbers - add, subtract, multiply, divide - you can be a math genius. Maybe not genius, but you can still blow the doors off most people, and build up a healthy amount of BS-proofing, just by learning how to apply the skills you already have. This book offers dozens of worked examples, using pretty much just the math you learned by sixth grade. Weinstein and Adam chose a format that's easy to pick up and thumb through. They present each poser on one page, with hints to help you get started. A few extra facts "to hang things on" appear at the back of the book: the sun is about 10^{11} meters away, a billion seconds is about 30 years, things like that. Then, the next page or two after the problem works out its answer, often more than one way. For example: could we create a human chain from Earth to the sun? Well, the sun is about 10^{11} meters away, and a person is about 10^0 meters from fingertip to fingertip with arms stretched out. (For back-of-the-envelope purposes, you can often skip the leading digits of numbers.) So, the distance from earth to sun is about 10^{11} people-widths, but the Earth's human population is just under 10^{10} . Answer: We'd certainly come up short. Some questions, like that one, are silly factoids. Others have more pressing social importance. How much funding does a subsidized school lunch program need per year? How many acres of farmland would it take to fuel your car with ethanol? How much landfill area does your town need for the next decade? When political special interests start throwing numbers around to answer these questions, are they lying to you? Even if you don't have exact numbers to work with, the way you get the answer is what matters, and you know exactly what assumptions you've made.

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