

Writing Good Academic Quiz Bowl Questions

(Taken from Carleton's question-writing guide, written by Eric Hillemann)

GENERAL

In writing full packets, make sure the questions are balanced, both across broad subject categories (literature, history, science, etc.) and also within categories (e.g., history questions should be a mix of American and world history, and not concentrated too much on any particular time period; science questions should be scattered among the various subdivisions, physics, biology, chemistry, etc.)

All information should be correct--an obvious consideration, but faulty factoids do creep into packets on occasion. Use reputable reference works as a check on your personal knowledge. Answers should be precisely targeted, not calling for much interpretation on the part of the moderator as to what is a correct response. Alternative correct answers should be anticipated and provided for the moderator.

Answers should be clearly visible and separated from the question to be read. Underline the part of an answer that is the minimum needed for a correct response. First names of persons should be required only when there is a possibility of confusion. The initial articles "A," "An," or "The" may be dropped from titles when answering, and should not be underlined as necessary to a correct answer.

Questions should be challenging but not impossible. (See below for more on the relative difficulty between most tossups and bonuses.) Questions which merely stump both teams due to obscurity are boring for everybody. Questions which are markedly too easy are also annoying, but less frustrating than ones that are far too esoteric.

Be nice to the moderator: put pronunciation guides into questions where needed, typically for foreign, scientific, or other difficult-to-pronounce terms.

TOSSUPS

85-90% or more of tossups should be answerable by most teams at the event for which the questions are written, if read to completion. Tossups are there to be answered, to get to the bonuses--but should reward the team which can answer them *first*, either by anticipating the direction the question is headed, or by having deeper knowledge of the subject.

Good tossups are generally produced by presenting interesting clues, to something answerable by most teams, arranged in so-called "pyramidal" style: clues generally moving from relatively obscure to increasingly familiar. Typically, the easiest clue should appear as the very last word or last several words of the tossup. The question should use the phrase "for 10 points" somewhere near the end, usually just before the final clue. See the sample questions provided for examples.

Misleading introductions or false lead-ins which invite minus fives are supremely evil--never write a tossup which will predictably penalize knowledge and speed. A made up example:

1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 are the first few terms of the Fibonacci series. For 10 points--the mathematician Fibonacci was a native of what Italian city?

answer: Pisa

This is a lousy question on several counts, including that it has only one clue to its answer. (Good tossups tend to have multiple clues to the eventual answer, presented at multiple "trigger points.") But what makes it absolutely unacceptable is that it misleads a knowledgeable player into buzzing in early to say "Fibonacci" or "Fibonacci series." Questions should never penalize knowledge by tricking a knowledgeable player to buzz in early before an unpredictable change of direction.

Never, ever, mislead with words like "he", "her", "it", "this" and so forth. The first pronoun without an antecedent must always refer to the answer! Example:

Vowing that he would never go to Canossa, the Chancellor of Germany announced a cultural struggle against Roman Catholicism in the 1870s. For 10 points--what three-syllable German noun named this anti-Catholic campaign?

answer: Kulturkampf

This question tricks a player into answering "Bismarck" early. It could be rewritten as:

German Chancellor Bismarck, vowing never to go to Canossa, announced a cultural struggle against Roman Catholicism in the 1870s known--for 10 points--by what three-syllable German noun?

answer: Kulturkampf

Avoid writing overlong tossups. NAQT, which writes for timed-play tournaments, does not allow any tossup to exceed 425 characters, excluding the answer line. For untimed tournaments, such concision is less crucial, but still desirable. One sentence tossups, signalled by beginning the question with a warning such as "For a quick 10 points--", were long in use, but were widely unpopular and have now become quite rare. Most tossups are 2-4 sentences--but the main consideration is overall length, rather than number of sentences.

BONUSES

The quizbowl circuit has moved in recent years almost entirely to bonus questions uniformly worth 30 points. The College Bowl Co. still writes bonuses worth 20 or 25 points, in addition to 30 points, and some rare invitationals may still ask for variable point bonuses. If variable point bonuses are called for, packets should contain roughly equal numbers of each value. In such packets, all bonuses should be clearly marked with their point value, and any subdivided scoring should also be made clear: i.e., for 5 points each, 5 for the first two and 10 for each one after that, etc. Most often, however, packets should consist entirely of 30 point bonuses. (Subdivided scoring still needs to be clear!)

Bonuses can be more difficult than tossups--average teams at a given event might typically expect to convert about 50% of bonus points.

Generally avoid True-False or Yes-No type bonuses, or any multiple choice, especially where there are fewer than four choices. Arranging lists in order, or matching two lists can reward luck and guessing, and should be used sparingly.

The College Bowl Co. is regularly reviled for using one part, one answer bonuses worth 20 or 25 points for a single answer--often for questions that are nothing but tossups labelled as bonuses, complete with giveaway clue at the end. The rest of the quizbowl world now eschews the one part, one answer bonus, and you should too.

Some typical bonus formats are:

Multiple part (usually related by a common theme). The parts of the question may be of varying difficulty, with partial point conversion likely. Take care not to make these questions over lengthy. Example:

For 10 points each--identify the novel from its final sentence.

A. "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

answer: The Great Gatsby [by F. Scott Fitzgerald]

B. "John Thomas says goodnight to Lady Jane a little droopingly, but with a hopeful heart."

answer: Lady Chatterly's Lover [by D. H. Lawrence]

C. "I been there before."

answer: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn [by Mark Twain]

Such questions may be worth 10 points each per three parts, 15 each for two, or other variants, such as 5-10-15, or 5-5-10-10, or whatever seems appropriate. Six parts, worth 5 each, is generally considered too time consuming for use in timed tournaments, but is sometimes used in untimed tournaments. If six-parters are used at all, each part should be very short, such as "For 5 points each--given the opera, name its composer."

One question, multiple answers. You ask for a list of things, and give points for each correct answer. Be sure to specify clearly the number of items for which you are looking, especially if the question will accept "any three of the four", etc. Asking teams to generate long lists with many possible answers (e.g., "name any six OPEC nations", or "name eight Common Market nations for 15 points...") tends to be difficult to moderate and should generally be avoided. A precise and manageable list should be used. Example:

Only five major league pitchers have ever thrown more than 45 consecutive scoreless innings. For 5 points each, and a bonus 5 for all correct--name them.

answer: Carl Hubbell, Bob Gibson, Walter Johnson, Don Drysdale, Orel Hershiser

Progressive (30-20-10) questions. These questions are asked in three parts. Each part is an additional clue to the same answer, and the clues should be arranged from hardest to easiest. The general category is usually given in the original question ("30-20-10. Name the artist.") As a variant, some questions will ask for identification of more than one thing on a 15-10 or 15-5 or 10-5 basis. In all these cases the original clue should already precisely identify one correct answer. (i.e., "He was born in Cleveland in 1915" is unacceptable as a 30 point clue, because there are multiple correct answers at that point--though it may be used as a 20 point clue.) Example:

30-20-10. Name the entertainer.

- A. As a teenager, his stage name was Rockin' Randall. His nickname of "Bocephus" was given him by his father.
- B. He earned a 1991 Emmy for writing and singing the theme for *Monday Night Football*.
- C. At age 15 he sang all the songs on the soundtrack of his father's film biography, *Your Cheatin' Heart*.

answer: Hank Williams, Jr.

As with tossups, avoid unnecessary verbosity. NAQT's maximum length for bonus questions (in timed play) is 650 total characters. Going much beyond that is probably a bad idea.