

The Guide I Wish I Had

How to be Better at Quiz Bowl in Seven Easy Steps or Less

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1. Pick a specialty (or specialties).

There is a set range of subjects that will come up in every packet you will ever play (with the exception of themed, trash, or PACE packets). The best way to get on the board as a scorer right away is by picking a specialty and devoting yourself to it.

Here's what you can choose from (or any subcategory within these):

- Literature
- Science
- Fine Arts (visual, music, performance)
- Philosophy
- Religion
- Mythology
- Social Science
- History
- Geography
- Trash
- Current Events

Of course, generalists exist as well. As you play quiz bowl for a number of months/years, you'll find yourself able to answer a wider and wider range of toss-ups. Unless you really try not to, after playing for any significant amount of time, you will become a generalist to some degree. Nevertheless, even the best generalists have subjects that they know a bit better than others.

The best way to pick a specialty is by finding a subject you enjoy learning about, or a subject that you feel you have a pretty good grasp in already, since you have either the base or the desire to learn more.

2. Learn what's needed.

To avoid missing toss-ups on answer line technicalities, know what answer lines require:

- NAMES OF PEOPLE/EVENTS
 - Historical figures – last name, or first name and an epithet
 - Any other real person – last name, unless there are multiple people with the same last name
 - Fictional characters – first or last name

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- Historical events – specific identifiers (not “Battle” or “Plot”)
- Court cases – name(s) of individuals (usually plaintiff) (not polity or institution)
- TITLES OF WORKS
 - Musical compositions – depending on the work, either official name or number (some might be prompted)
 - Artworks – must be exact, leading article optional
 - Written works – must be exact or commonly recognized section, leading article optional
- GENERAL
 - Phenomena – concept or its word forms
 - Sports teams – city or team name
 - Geography – only specific identifiers (not “Mountains” or “River”)
- SCIENCE
 - Experiments – either phenomenon tested, person responsible, or both
 - Effects and laws – only specific identifiers (not “Law” or “Effect”)

NOTE that there are always exceptions or modifiers to these rules, which you’ll come to recognize.

3. Strategy matters.

Listen to the beginning of the question to get a sense of what the toss-up is asking for: a work, a person, an event, a concept? In a well-written tournament, neither the toss-up nor the bonus will contain the answer or answers, respectively, among their clues.

Adapt your playing technique based on how the round is going.

If you hold enough of a margin in the lead to feel comfortable being more aggressive with your buzzes, do so. You might surprise yourself with how often that initial guess you have in your head is correct.

If the game is close, within 200 points (2-4 toss-ups), take extra measures to avoid negging, but you also want to beat the other team to any toss-ups that they’re also able to answer.

If you are losing by so large a margin that you don’t stand a chance at making it up before the end of the round, be aggressive. As long as you’re about 70% sure you know what the answer is, it’s worth the shot of buzzing in. However, do NOT just buzz in early for no reason at all and give an answer for the sake of guessing an answer. You risk locking the rest of your team out from a toss-up they might have gotten.

Don’t freak out when you neg. Being an aggressive buzzer comes with risks and benefits. Often, you’ll see the highest scorers in a tournament are also those that top the neg board.

Bonuses are important. If you get all three parts right, they can take a 10 or a 15 on a toss-up to a 40 or 45 overall for your score. Try not to interrupt the moderator unless you’re a)

100% sure of the answer, or b) trying to hurry. As time passes, you will come to anticipate the parts of a bonus. This can save time, but make sure you always wait long enough to verify what the next part of a bonus is asking for before you shoot off an answer – packets can always surprise you. If you have absolutely no idea of the answer to a bonus, take a wild guess; the answer you think is wrong could actually be correct. As a last resort, when you can't think of a guess and you need to be moving along to get more toss-ups, just tell the moderator "no answer"; those few seconds you saved could mean the difference of getting an additional 45 points of toss-up and bonus (in a timed round).

During a bonus, don't let your suggestions go unheard and make sure to back them up. I can't even tell you how many times someone on the team has said the correct answer, only to have the wrong answer given to the moderator because they were either too quiet or too easily swayed from their suggestion.

Lastly, a round can turn its favor in a matter of minutes. All it takes is 2 negs, 2 powered toss-ups, and 2 thirtied bonuses to make up a difference of 100 points. Until you are winning by a margin either close to or larger than the maximum total points left to be awarded in the round, don't get comfortable.

At least one active player should keep score during the round to ensure that you're always on top of what's happening with the point values. Not only will you not have to bother the moderator every few questions for a score check, you will also be able to help correct score discrepancies should they arise.

4. Study.

Bring a notebook to practices and tournaments. Write down toss-ups you get to help you form an idea of your strong points (use this to find a specialty) and what you can improve. If you want to throw in a little classic quiz bowl spite, write down what your opponents get, and later take that information to beef up on the topics that they are strongest in to pose better competition. Heck, even do that with your own teammates. While I want us to all be on friendly terms at the very least, nothing makes a team more knowledgeable in less time than the desire to outperform one another (NOTE that this does not necessarily make a better team. As the word "team" suggests, quiz bowl is not an individual activity; you must be able to work together, and well). If you really want to, write down every answer to give yourself a basic sense of what answers come up (you will never see a packet where you have not seen at least some of the toss-ups or bonuses that are in it in some previous packet. The quiz bowl canon simply isn't large enough).

Many players find their greatest improvement comes from writing toss-ups and bonuses; some of the bigger schools in the national circuit host their own tournaments so that their players can get the knowledge from writing x number of packets.

The only kind of studying I'm going to impose on you will be occasional presentations on a pool of topics that I've noticed our team needs to improve on. Sometimes I might ask all of you to write a toss-up and a bonus on a topic of your choice, which you'll pose to the team at a designated practice. If we continue as we have over the past two years, we'll be hosting a middle school science bowl practice tournament around January. We have to write the packets, so each of you will select two topics you want to write on and submit around 2 toss-ups and 2 bonuses a week. Writing middle school science bowl questions is extremely simple but can be invaluable for when we compete in high school science bowl.

Documentaries, Wikipedia, educational radio/television programs/YouTube channels, audiobooks, books themselves, flashcards, and many other methods are all great ways to improve the width and depth of your quiz bowl knowledge. I also cannot stress enough how much looking at actual quiz bowl toss-ups is helpful. By reading old packets, you will become familiar with stock clues and other clues that are characteristic of a particular answer (packets over a decade old are written with different canons and will not be of much help).

5. Practice.

Regardless of whether or not quiz bowl is your absolute favorite activity of the week, coming to practice is essential to developing your abilities. It's all fine and well to read packets on your own to study and see where you'd get answers, but nothing can really compare to a live, competitive environment.

However, I wouldn't be surprised if quiz bowl occupied something of a backseat to most of your daily routines, and there's no problem with that. Missing out on practices here and there is not a huge deal. For the days when you can't make it to practice, or want to get in a little on your own, I recommend a site called Protobowl (www.protobowl.com).

In the lobby, you can play high school level quiz bowl with people from all over the nation and even the world. The questions in this room vary in difficulty from Novice to Nationals and come from a vast database. NOTE that the lobby can be extremely intimidating to new players because there's no telling the skill level of the people you are playing against – they might not even be in high school anymore. There are subject-specific rooms available – use these to brush up on weak spots or strengthen your specialty(ies). In addition, there are rooms for Jeopardy! and Science Bowl, or you can create a room of your own, either by selecting "New Room" from the first menu you will see, or by typing / and then whatever you want after the Protobowl URL. As these can be accessed repeatedly, I advise making a team or school room, if one does not already exist. If you notice any problems with Protobowl, the creator has made a Facebook page (www.facebook.com/protobowl) where you can post requests/questions. He is usually quick to address any concerns.

I have to add a qualifier, however. In the quiz bowl community, Protobowl is an *extremely* controversial study tool. The anonymity factor (there are no accounts) means that there are quite a few people who go on there and behave in a totally inappropriate manner. Mods (when present) will try to discipline accordingly, but nothing is foolproof. The chat function, while it has some filters, is still an outlet through which people can post racist/sexist/homophobic/otherwise derogatory remarks, making for an unpleasant environment. In my own experience, these instances are not common, per se, but are definitely not unheard of. Most issues to do with user behavior in Protobowl can be solved by turning on Distraction Free Mode (currently default), making your own room, or using your team room.

6. Bring your best.

Yes, knowledge matters. Yes, buzzing ability matters. But there's more to quiz bowl than that. As a player, you represent your team, your school, your city, your state and quiz bowl itself. Here's a breakdown of standard quiz bowl etiquette dos/don'ts:

- DO protest an answer if you need to, there's a chance you gave a technically correct alternative answer that wasn't listed in the packet
- DO respect the moderator – don't question final decisions, stop talking when they are reading questions, keep conversation at a minimum between toss-ups and bonuses
- DO respect the other team – don't talk loudly during their bonuses and don't insult them while they're in the room, don't eat loud food items during rounds, shake hands with all players (even non-active ones) after rounds regardless of outcome
- DON'T make loud comments about how you would have answered a toss-up or bonus while you are subbed out
- DO address bonus *suggestions* to your *team*, and the *answer* toward the *moderator*, and only give the moderator one answer as a team

7. Have fun.

Just like with any hobby/activity, it's easiest if you enjoy what you're doing. Don't get stressed about your neg streak, or that the kid next to you is answering more questions. If you really want to change those, there are ways to go about it. If quiz bowl is frustrating or boring, and you can't/won't change that, then playing doesn't do you or anyone else any good. Above all else, quiz bowl is a game, and games are meant to be fun.

That's the ultimate goal here: to learn things that maybe not many other people know, to demonstrate your knowledge and your ability to develop as a player, and to enjoy what you're doing. And if doing that means we win rounds and tournaments, then no one can complain.

Where to Study:

- 1) www.naqt.com/YouGottaKnow/ [lists/descriptions of the most common toss-up answers in packets by category]
- 2) quinterest.org [searchable database of quiz bowl questions]
- 3) protobowl.com (the associated Facebook page is www.facebook.com/protobowl) [real time quiz bowl]
- 4) www.facebook.com/qbfod [daily quiz bowl facts]
- 5) www.studystack.com/QuizBowl [sets of flashcards]
- 6) www.shmoop.com/literature/ [literature summaries]
- 7) www.grapesmoker.com/qbdb/ [searchable database of quiz bowl questions]
- 8) www.quizbowldb.com [searchable database of quiz bowl questions]
- 9) www.reddit.com/r/documentaries [links to documentaries]
- 10) www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians [threads where historians answer questions posed by users]
- 11) quizlet.com/class/126519 [sets of flashcards, some of them are locked and cannot be accessed]
- 12) www.quizbowlpackets.com [sets of quiz bowl packets]
- 13) www.sparknotes.com/lit/index.html [literature summaries]
- 14) ai.stanford.edu/~csewell/culture [lists of facts about different subjects by category]
- 15) www.poets.org [poetry collections, NOTE that some very important poems in quiz bowl are not found here]
- 16) etc.usf.edu/lit2go/ [audio versions of classic books in MP3 format]
- 17) www.wikipedia.org [articles about just about anything]
- 18) acequizbowlcamp.com/improve/study-guides/ [study guides provided by the primary quiz bowl summer camp]
- 19) www.pantheon.org [information on 26 different myth systems]
- 20) www.usefultrivia.com [tests your knowledge on certain topics, NOTE some quizzes are far more detailed than quiz bowl toss-ups/cover things that don't come up]
- 21) www.hsapq.com/samples [sets of quiz bowl packets]
- 22) www.youtube.com/user/VideoSparkNotes/videos [animated literature summaries]
- 23) www.youtube.com/user/Vihart/videos [math/music videos]
- 24) www.youtube.com/user/scishow/videos [videos about scientists, concepts, events, subjects, all science related]
- 25) www.youtube.com/user/minuteearth/videos [videos about the planet]
- 26) www.youtube.com/user/minutephysics/videos [videos about physics]
- 27) <https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbm93bHxneDo1NzkyOGZlNjI5NGVmNDE> [plot summaries of various dramas]
- 28) <http://www.historybowl.com/study-guide/> [three history study guides]
- 29) http://www.naxos.com/education/opera_synopses.asp [opera summaries]

This is by no means a comprehensive list; there are countless other available resources that I didn't happen to include

BONUS: QUIZ BOWL LINGO

(So you don't think I'm completely insane when I talk like this)

blitz – to spew multiple answers to a toss-up; legal when it is a creator and his/her work, usually not appreciated, but you have the small chance of arguing for moderators taking the first answer you said if you say the right one and then blitz the wrong answer *mileage may vary*

buzzer block – when you neg a question that one of your teammates would have been able to answer

difficulty drop-off – also known as a **difficulty cliff**; when two parts of a bonus are either easy or hard, and the third part is the exact opposite

fraud – when you have no real knowledge about the toss-up, but hear words that make you think of an answer, buzz based on them, and get it right; can also be based on how often a particular answer comes up in packets; ex. Russian and French names for “War and Peace”

mem – short for **memorized**; also known as **membowl**; when you've heard a similar toss-up and get it solely because you remember what the answer was (especially common on Protobowl, when the same toss-up can come up multiple times)

neg – to buzz in first and get a question incorrect, resulting in the loss of 5 points and locking out your teammates

observer effect – in the rounds you aren't playing, you will always be able to power/answer more toss-ups than in any round you do play

power – to buzz in early enough in a toss-up to receive extra points (15 in NAQT, 20 in PACE)

ppg – points per game, from the toss-ups answered by a player; usually used to determine top scorers in tournaments

prompt – what a moderator says when you have given an answer that is too general or maybe sometimes too specific; ex. prompting “Henry” for “Henry VIII” or “osmosis” for “diffusion”

real knowledge – when you've actually read/studied the subject in question, usually helpful on bonuses that ask for a component of one of the other parts; ex. “Septimus Smith” after “Woolf” and “Mrs. Dalloway”

stock – clues that come up so often for a particular toss-up answer that players reflex buzz based solely on the connection; ex. “pin factory” in “Wealth of Nations”

thirty – to get full points on a bonus; ex. “We thirtied that bonus on European art.”

vulching – short for **vulturing**; buzzing in on a toss-up before the end, after the other team has negged on it; excusable when there's a chance the question could still be in power, inexcusable when you do it solely to beat another member of your team, or when you get it wrong (this is known as “**the cardinal sin**”); known as **swiping** when another member of your team has claimed the toss-up by holding up his/her buzzer and you buzz in and take it instead