

## **Collegiate Quiz Bowl Beginners' Guide**

### **Introduction:**

Hello and welcome to collegiate quiz bowl! Even if you've had significant experience with high school quiz bowl, starting to play college-level questions can be really daunting. This is normal; becoming a great collegiate player is a process that requires constant effort over many years. Everyone at UVA is welcome to attend practices and compete in tournaments regardless of their skill level, but if you're interested in studying with the intent to improve at quiz bowl, then here are some resources and tips for you. Studying for quiz bowl is not an easy task, but it's one of the most rewarding things that you'll ever invest time into.

The following paragraphs will constitute a brief guide for quiz bowl self-improvement. If you are especially interested in becoming a nationally-competitive player, or just have any questions about this guide, please email me, David Bass, at [djb3ve@virginia.edu](mailto:djb3ve@virginia.edu).

### **The Canon:**

Because quiz bowl question writers (the vast majority of whom are also college students) want to write questions that will be consistently answerable (a.k.a. "convertible") by players, they adhere to an amorphously-defined canon. The canon is different at different difficulty levels. For example, Chinua Achebe is super common in the high school canon because it would be inappropriate to ask most high schoolers about other Nigerian authors, like Soyinka or Adichie, who are common in the college canon. Thus, quiz bowl generally sacrifices originality of questions in exchange for manageable difficulty control. This means that, unless you are studying for the highest levels of collegiate competition, reading from and studying packets recently released on the [packet archive](#) is the best way to study most topics. As a beginner, the best packets to study from are the easiest ones, especially ACF Fall.

### **Studying from packets:**

A packet should be treated more as a series of road signs than as a study guide. When studying from packets, do not copy down clues verbatim or worry about learning every bit of information exactly as it is phrased. Instead, read holistically about the names, terms, and facts that are mentioned in the questions by doing your own research. For example, the clue, "This compound is regenerated by the Chapman cycle," would exist in a disorganized whirlpool of ozone facts in your mind if you don't also go on Google and read an article about the Chapman cycle. Additionally, reading directly-educational sources will best prepare you to answer similar clues in future questions that are phrased differently because future question writers are more likely to take from educational resources than to copy previous questions.

There is no shame in skipping the lead-in clues of tossups or hard parts of bonuses when learning new topics from packets. Pop culture and current events should not be studied directly from packets.

## Carding:

Everyone learns differently. This applies to studying for quiz bowl. That being said, the most surefire way to learn and retain information for quiz bowl is to make flashcards (a.k.a. “carding”). By far, the best way to card is with [Anki](#). Anki uses a method called “spaced repetition” in which flashcards are repeatedly shown to the user at intervals that depend on how easy it is for the user to recall the information on the hidden side of the flashcard. I could go into more detail, but you should really just go ahead and start using Anki right now. Anki is free on desktop and \$25 on mobile.

Anki has a lot of bells and whistles that can be learned from various guides on the Internet, but I recommend only using its most basic features. I make one deck for each subject (e.g. “CS”, “Biology”, “Literature”, “Thought”, etc.), but that is more organizational than obligatory. Cards should be made in the style of quiz bowl clues. Good examples of such cards include (1) “this playwright wrote *The Birthday Party*” // “Harold Pinter,” (2) “Sethe says this quote after being told, ‘You your own best thing.’” // “‘Me? Me?’,” (3) “this compound is the simplest ketone” // “acetone,” (4) “in plant cells, these structures are analogous to animal cells’ gap junctions” // “plasmodesmata.”

It is often helpful to make pairs of cards that are “two sides of the same coin,” e.g. (1) “Super-Kamiokande discovered this phenomenon in 1998” // “neutrino oscillation” and (2) “neutrino oscillation was discovered at this institution” // “Super-Kamiokande.”

In keeping with the idea of making cards emulate question clues, avoid making cards with multiple answers. Cards are best used for “binary association,” in which each card contains one clue paired with one answer.

When making multiple cards about different characteristics of the same thing, it is often helpful to put the additional information in parentheses in the reverse side of the card, e.g. (1) “Mount Saint Helens is this type of volcano” // “stratovolcano (located in Washington)” and (2) “Mount Saint Helens is located in this state” // “Washington (it’s a stratovolcano).” Do not obligate yourself to recall the information in parentheses when reviewing a card, but use it as helpful contextualization upon forgetting the answer to that card.

When carding, it is important to have faith in your own memory. It is easy to slip into a habit of carding every feature of every concept that you study, but this is not optimal. When learning something new, you should trust yourself to be able to recall the general ideas. You should only spend time carding details and non-intuitive facts.

As is implied by the first sentence in this section, carding is not for everyone. If you have an amazing memory, study primarily from books, or just find carding to be fishy, you can still be a great player without ever downloading Anki. Many great players don’t regularly card, but instead have a personalized note-taking system or just store everything in their heads. While it is valid to say, “Carding just isn’t for me,” I implore anyone who is interested in improving at quiz bowl to give it an honest try before passing any judgement. I stubbornly refused to card for years

until I downloaded Anki to memorize vocab for a quiz, fell in love, proceeded to make 11,778 cards (as 19 September 2021), and improved enormously as a quiz bowl player.

### **Specializing:**

Most good quiz bowl players specialize instead of attempting to learn the entire canon. While studying all categories can make you a strong generalist, focusing on a subset of categories will make it easier to acquire sufficiently strong knowledge to consistently outbuzz competitive opponents. If you know the answer to every tossup, but only at the giveaway, then you may get no buzzes against a team with specialists in each category who can buzz earlier in tossups. For example, I primarily study science (generally one-fifth of all questions) so that I can acquire sufficiently deep knowledge to complement my teammates, who specialize in other categories of which I know very little.

When beginning to study, you should choose to only study from questions in certain categories that constitute less than half of the total standard distribution. See the link to ACF's Packet Distribution below for more information on what that looks like. Note that specializing does not require commitment; you are not eternally bound to being a specialist in a given category just because you have attempted learning it in the past.

### **Conclusion:**

I may add more to this guide in the future, but this is all I have for now. Good luck studying and make sure to have fun; being a great quiz bowl player is a labor of love, so don't do anything that reduces your love for either learning or quiz bowl.

Wahoowa,  
David Bass, UVA Academic Competition Club

### **Studying Resources:**

- Quiz bowl packet archive: <https://collegiate.quizbowlpackets.com/>
- More user-friendly, less comprehensive database of questions: <http://www.quizdb.org/>
- Less user-friendly, more comprehensive database of questions: <https://aseemsdb.me/>
- The best computer program for flashcarding (there is also an iPhone app that costs \$25): <https://apps.ankiweb.net/>
- Accessible sets of introductory knowledge about a specific topic: <https://www.naqt.com/you-gotta-know/>
- ACF's Packet Distribution, the gold standard for how often categories appear in quiz bowl: <https://acf-quizbowl.com/distribution/>
- Do not use automated question readers like Protobowl or Quiz Bug 2

### **Other Resources:**

- The primary communication platform of the quiz bowl community: <https://hsquizbowl.org/forums/>
- Annual calendar of quiz bowl tournaments: <https://collegequizbowlcalendar.com/2021/>
- Read about the history of quiz bowl: <https://www.qbwiki.com/>
- Search engine for stats by player and team: <https://hdwhite.org/qb/stats/>
- And, obligatorily: <https://www.wikipedia.org/>

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