

Ægis Questions, Inc.



Writers' Handbook
2008-2009

Introduction

Thanks for joining us in our quest to improve high-school quizbowl questions. We are confident that you share our general principles for good question-writing. However, because we produce question packets *collectively*, we must ensure that certain conventions are followed as uniformly as possible by all our writers. To that end, we have written this Writers' Handbook to lay out exactly how we operate, and exactly what we do and don't want in Aegis-written questions. We hope you enjoy being on the team!



Mathew Laird,
Director



Carlo Angiuli,
Director



Nick Matchen,
Director

How Aegis Works

Messrs. Laird, Angiuli, and Matchen constitute the Board of Directors of Aegis Questions, Inc. We are the only writers with access to everyone's questions, and we compile packets ourselves. We also handle communication with customers, financial matters, and any other administrative issues.

The role of everyone else in the company is simply to write questions! First and foremost, write what you know and enjoy. Questions turn out much better when the writer actually knows about the subject. We have enough writers that everyone can specialize.

You should write questions whenever you can, because we always need more. But as we assemble packets, we might also ask you to fill particular gaps, like writing several history tossups for our deadline in two weeks.

Question writers are invited to converse with the Directors about Aegis business or offer up suggestions—we'd love your input. But don't feel that you need to worry about the front end. We're generally on top of things, and we'll be sure to let you know when we need help.

Question Submission

You may be wondering how question submission will be handled. We will only accept questions written in QED: Question Editing Database. QED is a web application written entirely by our own Carlo Angiuli, a full-featured question management system that handles everything from inputting questions to generating round files. It can be found at <http://www.aegisquestions.com/qed.pl>. (This feeds to our internal database. There is also an open public demo of QED—do not write questions in it!)

When you write questions, they go into our collective database, but you can only see or edit the questions you have written. (Click on existing questions in List view to edit them.) Be bold writing questions; if you want assistance with any question you have written, flag it with a comment in QED and we'll get back to you with suggestions. If we run across a question of yours that needs work, we'll flag it to get your attention. (You can unflag it yourself after addressing our concerns.) Remember, the worst that can happen to a question is that we don't use it.

Don't forget that you relinquish all rights to your questions upon entering them in our database, and that we may edit or use those questions at any time for any purpose. As we put questions into packets, they will be hidden from your view, so don't be alarmed if large numbers of your questions disappear at once. It's actually a good thing!

Payment

Twice during each season, we will send checks to our question writers—once in January, and again in May. We pay our writers 75 cents for each question *that we use during the season*. In addition, at the end of each season, we also purchase any unused questions in the database that we plan to use in future seasons.

As an incentive to write more, we now have bonuses in addition to the 75 cents we pay per question. You get a \$5 bonus if you write 25 questions, another \$5 for writing 50, another \$5 for writing 75, and another \$10 for writing 100 or more.

Any questions that remain unpurchased and unused are returned to their writers and purged from our database. *You do not get paid for questions returned to you, as they were not and will not be used.* In return for not getting paid, however, you do regain full rights to those questions. They're yours now: keep 'em, publish 'em, or even fix 'em up if they were bad, and resubmit them next year! If you're feeling particularly ambitious, feel free to ask us why we didn't use any of them—we'd be glad to answer.

Style Guide

Read this style guide through carefully! Some of what follow are general pointers about what is and isn't a good question. Others are specific ways we want you to do things, like how to format answers. Make sure to read through this carefully.

Tossups

What's a good question? A good tossup is pyramidal, which means that it starts with hard clues and ends with easy clues. They uniquely identify the answer from the first, or at most, second clue. They are fairly long, 4-6 lines in this font. (Depending on your computer, that should approximately take up the whole question box in QED.) The idea is that a player with deep knowledge of the answer gets the tossup early, a player with moderate knowledge gets it somewhere in the middle, and a player with little knowledge of the answer might not get it until the last clue, the giveaway.

Let's look at a good tossup.

Tossup: Fine Arts (Music)

Though its 1904 premiere was not very successful, it is now one of the most frequently performed operas. The tragic events begin when Goro, the matchmaker, sets up a local girl with a naval lieutenant, despite the protestations of the girl's family and Sharpless, the American consul. After the lieutenant leaves, he marries an American wife, abandoning the title character, who commits seppuku. Name this opera about a Japanese geisha girl and her devotion to Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton, written by Giacomo Puccini.

Answer: **Madama Butterfly** (*accept Madame Butterfly*)

The first clue about its premiere gives a date and genre, which gives important context to a good music player—if you're really up on your music, you know there were only so many operas written in the early 20th century, and not many are very popular. In fact, an outstanding player will already be thinking about Puccini.

A player who has seen the opera recently might remember Goro. A player who knows the opera well will remember that the trouble started with a matchmaker, and will probably buzz on the fact that a girl was set up with a naval lieutenant, one of the major characters in the opera. If you're not quite so on top of things, you might be helped by the fact that the lieutenant marries an American after being set up with Cio-Cio San.

Most players will be helped by the fact that there is a title character, and that she commits seppuku, a fact which immediately places the opera in Japan. The giveaway clue is that it's about a geisha girl (how many operas have a title Japanese geisha girl?).

If you're totally clueless about opera and still haven't buzzed, maybe mentioning Puccini will get you guessing. (And hopefully not guessing Turandot.)

Bonuses

What's in a good bonus? It's not as clear. Most teams should be able to get at least 5 points on a bonus, but only teams deep in a subject should be getting 20s. All four parts should be clearly related, but they shouldn't be cookie-cutter copies (like the same math problem with different numbers).

Bonus: Social Studies (World History)

Identify the following international icons of despotism.

A: This man organized his supporters, the Blackshirts, into a "March on Rome" that resulted in his installation as Prime Minister.

B: This brutal authoritarian president of Uganda called himself "Conqueror of the British Empire".

C: This man established the People's Republic of China in 1949, and ruled until his death in 1976.

D: This dictator of Haiti deliberately modeled his image on that of the voodoo spirit of death Baron Samedi in order to keep the rural population of his island in fear.

Answers: A: **Benito Mussolini** B: **Idi Amin** C: **Mao Zedong** (*accept Mao Tse-tung; prompt Zedong or Tse-tung*) D: **François "Papa Doc" Duvalier** (*prompt "Papa Doc"*)

It's pretty easy to get at least one of these parts, probably Mao. Some of the parts are rather difficult, especially Amin and Duvalier, so only a really strong team will get all four parts. All the parts are like very short tossups—none of them bog down, but each gives multiple clues toward the answer. Keep the parts short! There's nothing worse than a never-ending bonus. Try to avoid list bonuses like "Given the work, name the author" where each part is a single title, year, or person.

Above all, avoid bonuses like this:

Bonus: Literature (Literature)

Identify the following about a famous novel.

A: In this novel, the town of Umuofia is led by a courageous and wealthy man, who ends up hanging himself when he finds that he has failed his fellow Igbo people.

B: This man wrote that novel.

C: The village of Umuofia is supposed to be located in this real-life country, the home country of the novel's author.

D: The title of the work comes from this 1920 poem.

Answers: A: **Things Fall Apart** B: **Chinua Achebe** C: **Nigeria** D: **The Second Coming**

The writer of this bonus probably just read *Things Fall Apart* in English class. With the answers in front of you, the bonus doesn't seem all that hard. But now take away the answers, and read it again. The bonus never actually says what it's about! Many decent teams would zero this bonus—if you don't know what's going on from the beginning, you get none of the parts right! Bonuses like this that keep teams in the dark are no good.

Bonuses in this vein often suffer from another big problem—all the questions are on a very narrow subject. If a team knows much about *Things Fall Apart*, they get 20 points. If they don't, they get zero. Try not to write bonuses where everyone will know nothing or everything.

One thing's for sure when writing bonuses: creativity is a plus. Shake things up. If you're writing a math bonus on finding areas, then give different measurements each time—once, give the side length; another time, give the apothem and radius.

A great way to vary the topic and keep teams interested is to write sneakily-themed bonuses like the one below. A team can miss the theme and still get several parts right; if they get the theme, it makes the other parts easier, and the bonus more interesting.

Bonus: Literature (Literature)

Answer these related literature questions.

A: This man read his poem "The Gift Outright" at JFK's inauguration.

B: This man is the estranged husband of Hester Prynne.

C: This play is about a bar full of alcoholics waiting for salesman Theodore 'Hickey' Hickman.

D: This is a dangerous fictional material that only melts at 114.4 degrees Fahrenheit. It was invented by Kurt Vonnegut for his novel *Cat's Cradle*.

Answers: A: **Robert Lee Frost** B: **Roger Chillingworth** C: **The Iceman Cometh**

D: **Ice-nine**

Another thing. People have different styles of forming bonus parts. You could make each part fill-in-the-blank, like: "(BLANK) is the first stage of mitosis." Or maybe you prefer the command, "Name the first stage of mitosis." Or you could just say, "This is the first stage of mitosis." While all three might have some merit, *Aegis will use the latter method, using a pronoun in each part to refer to the answer to be given*. Notice that all the parts in the three example bonuses (even the bad one!) follow this convention.

Formatting Questions and Answers

There exist many legitimate ways of formatting questions and answers. *Follow ours.* We will get mad at you if we have to reformat all of your answers, and you don't want us mad at you. QED only allows plain-text input, to ensure that all the questions are formatted in exactly the same way. This means you have to learn a few special codes. Don't worry, this is really, really simple.

Pronunciation guides or any other notes to the moderator, if necessary, are included as italicized parenthetical statements. Start and end them using square brackets, [and]. When the rounds are actually printed, the square brackets are automagically turned into parentheses, and their contents italicized.

For pronunciation guides, simply write the phonetic pronunciation, don't start with "Pronounced:" or anything like that. In other words, type it like this:

Lech Walesa [vuh-WEN-suh] was a Polish electrician before he led this labor union.

The necessary parts of answers are underlined. Underlines are started and ended with an underscore, . The words in between two underscores are automagically underlined when rounds are printed. Do not enclose unnecessary parts in parentheses; the underlines are how we indicate what is and what isn't necessary. You can start and stop underlines multiple times if necessary.

_F_ranklin Delano _Roosevelt_

Moderator comments (remember, square brackets) are often used in answers to indicate alternate answers, promptable answers, or specifically excluded answers. To accept an alternate answer, simply write "Accept blah" as a moderator comment. When writing prompts, write "Prompt blah" or "Prompt on blah." To specifically exclude an answer, write "Do not accept blah." (Writing things like "Moderator: Blah is also an acceptable answer" gets us mad at you. Don't try it at home. Follow these specific phrasings.)

For multiple accepts, prompts, or do-not-accepts that apply to a single answer, write them in the same moderator comment, separated by commas or semicolons.

Sometimes also-accepts or prompts have necessary and unnecessary parts. If that's the case, you should *use underlines within* the moderator comments. (If the whole alternate answer is necessary, or it's a person's name, no underlines are required.) For example:

Cinderella [accept La _Cenerentola_]

To sum it up:

Thomas _Jefferson_ [accept William _Jefferson Clinton_, prompt on Jefferson Airplane, do not accept Jefferson Davis]

I wonder what *that* tossup was like.

Formatting Bonuses

There has been one glaring omission in this section—how to format bonuses. A bonus question should have a lead-in and (usually) four parts; each of these should be separated with a single line break. The answers should go in the Answer box, all separated by line breaks. Do not put “A:” “B:” “C:” and “D:” in front of the bonus parts or answers! The bonus gets automatically formatted correctly when printed. For example:

Identify the following international icons of despotism.
This man organized his supporters, the Blackshirts, into a "March on Rome" that resulted in his installation as Prime Minister.
This brutal authoritarian president of Uganda called himself "Conqueror of the British Empire".
This man established the People's Republic of China in 1949, and ruled until his death in 1976.
This dictator of Haiti deliberately modeled his image on that of the voodoo spirit of death Baron Samedi in order to keep the rural population of his island in fear.

That's how to input a bonus question. Notice the parts are not lettered or numbered! That gets added later. The answer box should look like this:

Benito _Mussolini_
Idi _Amin_
Mao Zedong [accept Mao Tse-tung; prompt Zedong or Tse-tung]
François "Papa Doc" _Duvalier_ [prompt "Papa Doc"]

Easy, huh? Now what if you want to write a bonus where all four answers can be given in any order?

Don't do it. Turn your concept into a better bonus where you actually describe each part.

One last thing: sometimes you want a moderator comment to appear before all four answers, because there's something important they should know about all four parts. If that's the case, you can use square brackets at the very beginning of the Answer box, on the same line as answer A, but before the actual answer! Behold:

[Do not accept or prompt fractions as answers]_.123_
4.25

That gets turned into:

Answers: (*Do not accept or prompt fractions as answers*) A: **.123** B: **4.25**

One More Thing: ACF-Style Bonuses

What is an ACF bonus, you ask? Quite simply, ACF format comprises the majority of college quizbowl. If you've ever played an NAQT round, then you've experienced mACF ("modified" ACF) bonuses. These bonuses consist of three parts worth ten points each, which do not normally rebound. A few notable tournaments in Illinois do use rebounds in their mACF bonuses, including UIUC Earlybird, and IHSSBCA Kickoffs, along with PACE NSC.

We believe that ACF format is a superior method for testing knowledge, and offers writers more creative ways to structure bonuses. Since each bonus is read one part at a time, writers can easily reference facts from one part in subsequent parts. For example:

Bonus: Literature (Literature)

Identify the following about a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

1. Winning as a first-year candidate in 1938, she was selected without due consideration, and is considered a failure of a selection by the Swedish Academy.

Answer: **Pearl S. Buck**

2. Along with the Japanese occupation of China, this is the work that catapulted Buck into prominence, a novel featuring Wang Lung and O-Lan.

Answer: **The Good Earth**

3. Under the pseudonym John Sedges, The Good Earth was released together with two of Buck's other works to form this trilogy.

Answer: **The House of Earth Trilogy**

This eliminates the need for confusing wordings, like: "...the book from part two was released together with two of the author from part one's other works..." mACF bonuses also make rounds go by much quicker. There is no longer a long lull while teams are conferring, and the whole team is much more involved during the entirety of the bonus.

Because of the tournaments we write, we need our writers to contribute some mACF bonuses in addition to normal Illinois-style bonuses. The good news is that you can input this type of bonus into QED exactly the same way that you would input a three-part Illinois bonus. Simply select 'ACF' (instead of the usual 'Bonus') from the choices at the top of the page, and it will be automagically formatted as an ACF bonus as we compile packets.

Some Dos and Don'ts

- ✓ **Don't** write hoses. At the *very beginning* of the question, be sure to use a pronoun that establishes exactly what the question is looking for—an author? A novel? A character? A player should be able to buzz in on the first clue and know what type of answer is sought.
- ✓ **Do** keep quotes to a minimum, and especially **don't** write lit crit tossups. It's perfectly acceptable to use famous quotes, or quote people directly involved in an event, if the quote provides a useful clue toward the answer. But whatever you do, don't write tossups on Macbeth that begin "Critic John Smith once said, 'This is a truly wonderful play that quite dramatically exhibits the pathos of the human condition.'" Trust us, it's obnoxious, and doesn't actually help any players. No lit crit tossups!
- ✓ **Don't** waste your time writing questions we'll never, ever, ever conceivably use. This especially applies to Miscellaneous topics. You just watched your favorite episode of *The Simpsons* and you want to write a bonus on four things that happened in the episode. Please don't. But while we're on this subject:
- ✓ **Don't** write too much Miscellaneous. **Do** write good Miscellaneous questions when you write them. Everyone can write bad pop culture; it's really easy. We take pride in our awesome Miscellaneous questions. Continue the tradition.
- ✓ **Do** use the imperative (a command) to lead into a tossup's giveaway clue. **Don't** use the phrase "For ten points" or "FTP." For example, end a question with "Name this author of Paradise Lost." The giveaway clue of a tossup should be in a command which asks directly for the answer of the question, describing it very plainly.
- ✓ **Don't** make your sentence structures too complex, because moderators can very easily miss the logic of your sentence, confusing themselves and both teams.
- ✓ **Do** include more commas than you would usually use in writing, whenever necessary to direct a verbal pause or to set off clauses, so that the moderator reads the question correctly the first time. This helps a lot.
- ✓ **Do** use quotes around titles of works when it could be unclear that they are titles. *We do not underline or italicize works in questions*, because it gets too messy to read. Sometimes capitalizing works is enough to set them off from the rest of the sentence, especially if they're very famous or have very short titles. But if it could be confusing what's a title and what's part of your sentence, then use quotes around the titles.
- ✓ **Don't** write three-part bonuses unless you're *sure* it's a great question and there's no other way it will work. Nobody likes three-part bonuses. If there was a Bonus family, Three-Part Bonus would be the child Mr. and Mrs. Bonus "forgot" at the mall and never got around to picking up.

Absolutely Prohibited

Doing anything in this section may, and likely will, get you immediately fired from Aegis Questions. If you are found to have committed any of these offenses, you will be immediately contacted to discuss the specific circumstances.

Sharing Questions

Do not discuss your questions with *any* current high school players or coaches. You don't know what tournaments or conferences we're writing for, and when we're going to use your questions. We might even use your questions a year after you wrote them! We are in the business of selling certifiably pristine questions to tournaments that believe no players have prior knowledge of the questions. No matter how good your questions are, we can't use them if current players have any information about them.

Plagiarism

Do not plagiarize, intentionally or unintentionally. If you have a reference book open in your lap while you write questions, you might be tempted to include full sentences from the book as clues in your question—don't! Try to weave facts from the book together in your own way to make an interesting and pyramidal question.

We have discovered plagiarism before. We very well might run across the source that you used, especially if you use online resources. And we don't like calling people on plagiarism. It's no fun.

Not Checking Facts

Make sure you check your facts! While we read and edit every question we use, we don't have time to verify the information in those questions; we have to assume it to be true. Don't write questions off the top of your head using facts you vaguely remember from class a year ago. Look up the subject you're writing on, whether in a textbook or reference source. If we find false information while editing your question, we will be uneasy about using your other questions.

Especially check math questions! Nobody likes math questions with wrong answers. Don't expect us to make sure all your math is right. We understand making a mistake here or there, but if your math is consistently flawed, expect some angry emails from us. Customers never fail to complain about any incorrect math questions, so trust us, either we'll catch it, or the players will.

Resources

Need tips for good places to find ideas or information?

<http://www.fraughtmachine.com/refdesk> has categorized links to tons of websites potentially useful as quiz bowl study resources.

<http://www.stanford.edu/~csewell/culture> is the Stanford Culture Guide, a tremendously useful resource with comprehensive lists on every subject in quiz bowl.

<http://en.wikipedia.org> is, yes, Wikipedia, a great place to find ideas and even information. We warn you against relying on Wikipedia as a source for all your question facts, because you should not get all your information from any one source, especially one with questionable accuracy. If all your questions sound like the Wikipedia article on your topics, you will get emails from us on the matter.

<http://www.google.com> is a great place to look when you want another clue about a subject. The Internet is rich with information if you can find it.

Any print reference books you might have are great for ideas and information on a subject. They're easy to flip through, and to keep at your desk whenever you're writing.

Your textbooks are perhaps the best place to find information. They're well-indexed, in-depth, reliable sources with information that students are expected to know. How perfect!

Contact the Directors

Want to talk? You can find your friendly Aegis Directors virtually any time, some way or another.

Technical issues? Contact Carlo. Anything else? Contact any one of us, and we will be sure to share it with the other two if appropriate.

Mathew Laird

Email: mlaird@aegisquestions.com

Carlo Angiuli

Email: carlo@aegisquestions.com

Nick Matchen

Email: nmatchen@aegisquestions.com