



# The Trivial Warfare Guide to Improving Your Trivia Score

## Introduction

Hello. My name is Jonathan Oakes and I'm the producer of the Trivial Warfare podcast. The show focuses on recreating the experience of having a great time enjoying a pub quiz with your friends. I'd love for you to give us a try. You can find the show at [www.trivialwarfare.com](http://www.trivialwarfare.com) or you can search for Trivial Warfare in your favorite podcast app. By the way, that's the end of the promotional stuff until the very end. So if you've made it this far it is safe to keep going.



I've been playing trivia games for years, and the one thing I've learned that stands out over everything else is that I don't know nearly as much as I think I do. In fact, none of us do. The key thing to remember is this – **you don't always have to know the answer to get a question right**. Many times you have all of the information that you need to arrive at a right answer, it's just a matter of unlocking it and understanding how what you *do know* relates to the question. That's exactly why I've written this guide. I've developed a reputation for pulling answers out of thin air on our show, and I want to help you do the same thing.

Before we get started I'd like to make it clear that this isn't a beginner's guide. You're not going to find a list of basics that you need to memorize here. This guide is focused on examining the way that you approach answering questions and on giving you strategies to improve your overall game. Additionally, this guide is focused on you as an individual player. As the famous poet Sean Combs once said, "We can't change the world unless we change ourselves".

Let's get cracking

**Key Fact #1** – What you *don't know* will always outweigh what you *do know*.

## **Brainstorming**

You've probably heard of brainstorming before. It's an exercise where an individual or a group of people try to come up with a great idea or a solution to a problem by sharing as many ideas as they can and jotting them all down. There is one critical rule to a successful brainstorming session. The rule is this – there should be **NO NEGATIVITY!**

There are a couple of good reasons for this. First, **negativity shuts down the creative process**. It stops it dead in its tracks. Additionally, sometimes a bad idea is the thing that has the *seed of greatness* in it that is necessary to springboard you towards the BEST idea!

So if you're trying to get better at answering questions and winning trivia games, why does brainstorming matter to you?

It matters because the external brainstorming process is almost identical to the internal process you should be going through when you're trying to figure out an answer that you don't know.

I can't even begin tell you how many times I've seen this play out. A person hears a question and their first thought is *Oh Crap, I don't know!* Panic begins to set in. They can't think of a single answer that makes any sense at all. Eventually they cry uncle or throw in the towel to save themselves from experiencing the embarrassment of giving an answer that isn't even in the ballpark.

What you see there is a mental shutdown. Mental shutdown is a symptom of panic and negativity. As a trivia player you can't afford a mental shutdown. There is no quicker way to ensure that you won't answer correctly than panicking and telling yourself that you don't know the answer.

You want to be like a person in a brainstorming session instead. Cut the negativity off at the very onset by changing the way you talk to yourself. Never tell yourself, *I don't know this*. A better alternative is to say, *I don't know this off the top of my head, but I can probably figure it out*. Look, I know this sounds like stupid new age mumbo jumbo. Just trust me on this. The way you frame the situation in your head makes a difference in how your brain approaches the problem. **This one change gives you a real advantage over a lot of other trivia players out there.**

The whole point of brainstorming is to get your mind revved up so it can generate as many ideas as possible. You need to get your brain moving quickly from one idea to another. Don't stop that process by taking time out to criticize a stupid thought. Sure it was stupid, so what? At least it was helping you build momentum towards generating more potential answers. As soon as you shut it down, you have stopped your momentum, and it can be hard to get it started again.

Every idea you come up with increases your chances of coming up with the right answer. Even if you don't think of the perfect answer, the process of thinking through multiple options increases your likelihood of thinking of something that has an association with the right answer. For example, you might not know for a fact that the answer to a question is 'Gone with the Wind'. However, if your brainstorming process leads you to think about books or movies related to the Civil War and reconstruction, then you will have a better chance of guessing 'Gone with the Wind' than you would if you hadn't gotten there.

### **WARNING**

A popular saying among trivia players is that your first answer is probably right. This is meant to remind us to trust our instincts and to avoid getting cute. Over the years I've come to trust my gut and I believe that there is some validity to this saying.

**But there's a problem with it.** Many times people apply this logic *too quickly*. I frequently see people who answer a question very quickly and then say that they are going with the first thing they thought of. Most of the time it would be more accurate to say that they are going with the **ONLY** thing that they've thought of.

If you're not sure that your answer is right then **going with your first instinct is no excuse for not thinking an answer through thoroughly**. It is far better to work through the full brainstorming process to give yourself a chance to work your way to a right answer than to answer with the first thing you've thought of. At the end of your thought process, you still have the liberty to revert back to your first thought. But at least at that point you can be certain that you have given yourself the best opportunity to be right.

**Key Fact #2** – Panic and negativity make it difficult to generate potential answers.

## **Questions and Clues**

I've learned a lot about writing trivia questions since starting the show. One thing I've learned is that the best trivia questions give you multiple places to dig into to try and arrive at an answer. Now, to be fair, you won't always get great questions. It depends on the quality of the game you're playing and on the person asking the questions. A fair rule of thumb is that the harder the question is, the more likely it will contain extra information for you to use.

Have you ever wondered why question writers go through the time and effort to write questions with clues in them? The truth is that question writers are not necessarily trying to stump you. It would be very easy to write games full of questions that nobody knows the answers to. The problem with this is that nobody would buy that game, nobody would watch, nobody would listen, and nobody would play. It's just no fun trying to answer a bunch of questions that you have no chance at getting right. On the other hand, if you get every question right then that's no fun either. The question writers are trying to strike a balance so that their questions are challenging enough so that people are proud of themselves for knowing or figuring out the answer, but not so challenging that it's not fun for people who aren't experts in the topic.

Let me give you an example of some different ways a writer can modify a question for the audience. All of the questions below are versions of the same theme.

1. Who wrote *Charlotte's Web*?
2. What colorful author wrote *Charlotte's Web*?
3. What co-author of the *Elements of Style* is also known for writing the children's book *Charlotte's Web*?
4. E.B. White is famous for writing what well-known children's book?
5. Wilbur was the protagonist in what E.B. White children's classic?

**Question 1** - This is the baseline question. Either you know it, or you don't. There's nothing here to help you figure out an answer.

**Question 2** – The question writer gave us a lot more to work with here. Colorful could mean that it was written by someone known for being very creative in the fictional worlds they created, someone like Roald Dahl. It could also mean that they were eccentric in their personal life. Lastly (and most probably) it could be a more direct clue meaning that their name is also a color. If that's true, we are immediately able to narrow down our answer to someone with a name like Black, Brown, Green, White, Gray, etc.

That still leaves you with a decent sized list, but picking from a list of 10 names gives you an infinitely better chance of answering correctly even if you have no idea which one to choose. If you interpret this clue correctly you have a much greater likelihood of remembering that there is an author named White than you do if you don't recognize the clue.

**Question 3** – One common way for a question writer to ease the difficulty of a trivia question is to add another piece of challenging trivia to it. In this case, if you knew who wrote *Charlotte's Web*, then you were already in the clear. But if you didn't know that, then you might know that Strunk and White wrote *The Elements of Style*, a popular reference book for writers and journalists. If that's the case then you've got at least a 50% chance of being right and also a good chance at remembering that the answer is White after thinking of his name.

**Question 4** This is the most similar to question 1. When a questioner makes the decision to give you the author and ask for the book title, or vice versa, he is aiming to find the sweet spot where the question is challenging but not impossible. Sometimes neither option offers the right level of challenge and so the questioner will add an additional clue to make it a better fit. That's why the extra tidbit that it's a well-known children's book is so important. If you don't already know the answer then this piece of information allows you to narrow your range of guesses to popular children's books where you don't know the author. If you happen to know which children's books are written by Dahl, Blume, Rowling and others you can eliminate those to narrow down your list of options. This gives you a better chance of guessing something like *Charlotte's Web*.

**Question 5** – Given this much information, the question becomes less challenging and would typically be found in the set of easier questions. Here you know it's a "classic". You're given the author's name, and by default you know that the protagonist is one of the main characters, meaning you've been given a main character's name. You might see this type of question when the question writer thinks the answer is not well known so they are giving you as much information as they can.

**Key Fact #3** – Question Writers are invested in giving you enough information to make the question answerable

## **Where and When?**

Once you start intentionally looking for clues in questions you'll find two categories of clues that stand out above the others – Location and Time. These clues stand out because knowing where or when something happened allows you to narrow down the potential answers to any question significantly. Many times, using the extra information provided in the question, you can narrow down your answers to a pick between two or three possible choices even when you don't know anything about the subject of the question you've been asked.

For example, let's say you get the following question – *What Norwegian artist's 1885 work 'The Sick Child' was inspired by the death of his 15 year old sister Sophie?* If you're like me, you've never heard of *The Sick Child*, and you don't know which artist had a sister named Sophie who died when she was 15. If there are no clues in this question then I'm going to be completely stumped. However, because of the clues I have a chance. I'm personally only aware of one truly noteworthy Norwegian artist. I don't really know when he lived, but it doesn't sound too far-fetched that he could be working in 1885. Based on this my educated guess would be Edvard Munch, and in this case I would be correct.

In cases like this, the clue can be much more important than the actual question. This question is cut and dry when you look at it like that. The question could have been - *Name a Norwegian artist*. I'm going to guess Munch every time, and well over half of the time I'm going to be correct. Why? Because Munch is the only Norwegian artist with the amount of fame and notoriety necessary to be worthy of a trivia question. The same concept holds true with Norwegian playwrights. If someone asks you a question where they want you to name a Norwegian playwright, then the answer will be Henrik Ibsen the vast majority of the time.

Munch and Ibsen fit into something that I call an **Answer Family**. In their case they fit into a very small answer family of famous Norwegians that also includes composer Edvard Grieg (In the Hall of the Mountain King) and explorer/adventurer Thor Heyerdahl. When I hear a clue in a question indicating that the answer is a Norwegian, there's a very good chance that one of these guys is going to be my answer.

**Key Fact #4** – The best trivia players *use every piece of information available* to arrive at an answer.

## **Answer Families**

The concept of an Answer Family is simple and should work for you regardless of what you know going in. Simply put, by organizing the things you are learning or that you already know into groups of related information, you will find it easier to recall them when you need to.

Let's use Beat Poetry as an example. I know *very little* about Beat Poetry. I know that it's a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century poetry movement that featured significant drug use, particularly LSD. I know two main guys, Allen Ginsburg who wrote *Howl* and Jack Kerouac who wrote *On the Road*. The last thing that I think I know is that this was probably the movement that inspired "beatniks" who are strikingly similar to modern day hipsters. That's it, that's all I really know about Beat Poetry.

In other words, my answer family for Beat is only a few words:

Ginsberg  
Howl  
Kerouac  
On the Road  
Beat Generation  
Beatnik  
1950's  
LSD

That's not a lot, but with that information I'm typically able to answer a minimum of 50% of the Beat questions that come my way, if not closer to 75%. This is possible because over half of the questions you will receive related to this topic will have one of the words on this list as a clue, and the correct answer will be one of the other words on the list. By organizing these guys into an Answer Family, I'm more likely to remember them *and* more likely to be able to take advantage of a clue placed in a trivia question.

Remember, there is an infinite amount of information that you can learn about seemingly any topic you can name. The way to get better at trivia is not to use your limited time learning as much as you can about a single topic. You're better served to learn a little bit about many different topics. The easiest way to do that is to categorize the information into answer families. This will not only help your brainstorming ability, but it will also help you when it comes to our last topic – Answer Stickiness.

**Key Fact #5:** It's easier to remember groups of related facts than to remember the same number of unrelated facts.

## Answer Stickiness

I've forgotten more trivia in the last year than I actually know right now. Who is with me? Yeah. It sucks doesn't it? With a limited memory capacity it feels sometimes like for every new piece of information you put in, some other piece of information falls out. But it doesn't have to be that way. The key to avoiding this is finding ways to make answers stickier.

Readers of Malcom Gladwell's great book *Tipping Point* will be familiar with the idea of stickiness. Simply put, stickiness refers to the factors that make something easy to remember (or hard to forget). If you want to get better at trivia you have to find ways to make the information you want to remember stickier. One of the ways to do that is to attach it to other related information in your mind. That's why systems like answer families can help you retrieve answers that would otherwise be lost over time.

I'll give you a personal example that I find interesting. I've noticed that I remember information that we discuss on actual Trivial Warfare episodes at a much higher rate than I do when I read it or hear it somewhere else. I can typically remember who said what and many times even what group of episodes the question was a part of. These are sticky for me because I'm very highly engaged with the information while we're recording. There are other people involved and there are emotions attached to questions and answers (both good and bad). These factors make it easier for me to remember information from the show.

My other primary source of trivia has become our Trivial Warfare Army Facebook group. We have a very engaged group of listeners there, and we go through a bunch of questions posted there each day. However, the thing that I've noticed is that the information I get there is not sticky at all. You could literally ask me the same set of questions a week later, and I might only get one more right than I did the first time I tried them. The reason for this is that even though I'm enjoying testing my knowledge against the questions, I'm not engaging with them at a high level and there is no emotional attachment to them.

The takeaway here is that you can get better at remembering the trivia that you want to remember by engaging with it to a greater degree than just reading it. If you really want to remember a question and answer, you should ask the question to a few friends. You should think about it in terms of how it relates to other things you know about similar topics. You should try and associate the answer to a time and a place. Lastly, you should play games with yourself intentionally designed to test your ability to recall the information a few days later. By doing this you're adding the element of pressure and reinforcement that will help to lock in the information.

**Key Fact #6:** The higher your level of engagement, the more you will remember.

## Summary

Congratulations! You've made it to the end of the guide. Ironically, you can probably only remember two or three of the key lessons at this point. That's why I'm going to summarize them below. Feel free to cherry pick the strategies that are the most helpful and leave the rest behind.

- Trivia is hard enough without making it even harder by shutting your brain down. Try to avoid negative self-talk. You know a lot; use brainstorming to try to connect the things that you do know to the question in order to make an educated guess.
- Don't turn in an answer that's the "first thing that came to mind" if you haven't taken the time to brainstorm and see if anything better presents itself.

- Listen carefully for clues in the questions. Remember, the question writer wants the questions to be challenging, but not impossible. That means there is a good chance there is a clue in the question to help you figure it out.
- If you're going to spend time studying material be sure to focus on Time and Location. Clues revolving around time and location are some of the most frequently used in trivia questions to decrease question difficulty.
- Related information will be easier to remember if you begin grouping it into answer families. Answer families will also help you to take advantage of clues more easily.
- The quickest way to improve your game is to learn a little about many topics rather than learning a lot about very few topics.
- You will do a better job remembering the things that you want to remember if you find a way to engage with them at a greater level than just reading and moving on.

That's it. I hope you found this guide useful. If you want more trivia be sure to check out our show. You can find us at [www.trivialwarfare.com](http://www.trivialwarfare.com). Also, if you're interested in joining our Facebook group you can find us at [www.facebook.com/groups/TrivialWarfareArmy/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/TrivialWarfareArmy/). Lastly, you can find the show on your favorite podcast app by searching for Trivial Warfare.

