Improving at Quizbowl
(Kevin's Version)

Many people will tell you otherwise, but there is no "right" way to get good at quizbowl. It all depends on what works for you and what your goals are. There are three general steps for getting good at quizbowl: alignment, absorption, and automation. But the way you approach each step is totally up to you.

I: Alignment

If you hear a quizbowl question on a topic, you can expect to hear another question on that same topic in the future. This is because quizbowl questions are not random; they try to ask about things that people are likely to know. Certain topics come up again and again, and it is extremely rare for something to be asked about only once. The body of knowledge that you can expect to be asked about in quizbowl is called the "canon". Every difficulty and category has its own associated canon; you might hear something like the "college canon" or "science canon". *Alignment is about getting a feel for what that canon is.*

You can get a feel for the quizbowl canon if you just read through enough question sets. Certain question sets are better for learning the canon than others. For example, [ACF Fall](#) is a great set for learning the canon, because it is targeted towards younger players and generally does things "by the book". On the other hand, a set like Lederberg is less ideal for learning the canon, since it only contains science questions and attempts to push the boundaries of the canon for stronger players.

My personal favorite alignment method is to take notes on bonuses. Grab a packet for your target difficulty from the [quizbowl packet archive](#), make a copy of a [bonus entry spreadsheet](#), and start recording those bonus totals! Make sure to set some "goal score" for yourself ahead of time. Maybe you want to get at least 10 on every bonus. Maybe you want to get

at least 20 on your best category, but you only want to get 10 on everything else. Whatever you decide, make sure to leave a note on any bonus where you didn't hit that threshold. Describe the parts that you missed so that you can go back through your notes and search for information about them later. Once you're satisfied with the amount of bonuses (somewhere around 40 is probably a good number), you can proceed to absorption.

Now, packet study is not the only way to do alignment. Another way to do alignment is to take advantage of the canons that exist outside of quizbowl. For example, there is some notion of the "Western literary canon" ("classic books"), and there are also fundamentals of every scientific field. A slower but more robust way to improve is to start with a textbook or "survey text" covering a broad topic and use it to start building a mental map for what that topic looks like (Wikipedia pages like American literature work too). A very comprehensive list of academic survey texts can be found in Quizbowl Research and Learning Resources, which is designed for ambitious college players. Using this method will take much longer than packet study, but if you stick with it, you should be able to see the benefits.

II: Absorption

Now that you've gotten yourself aligned with some aspect of the canon, it is time to do some absorption. *Absorption is about actually learning the canon*, and it should be where you expect to spend the bulk of your time. It's also the most fun stage! If you've done alignment correctly, you should have a big list of things in your head that you have to learn about. The cool part about quizbowl is that how you decide to learn things is up to you.

The easiest way to absorb is just using Google / Wikipedia. Did you miss a bonus part on the Hongwu Emperor? Try a Google search and see what comes up! A simple Google search can tell you a lot; and if you're just starting out in a topic, it's not always necessary to get super detailed information.

On the other end of the spectrum, you could just read a book. If you want to get tossups on Othello, there's no better way than just picking up a copy and reading it. This can apply to other subjects as well; you could pick up a science textbook, or some historical primary source.

There are also plenty of things in the middle. YouTube channels and podcasts can be great ways to learn information. You might want to watch a documentary or read summaries of famous books. The possibilities are endless! Anything that contains educational material will eventually get you points in quizbowl; there are many stories about players getting points from watching some kids show or playing some video game.The best players usually use a mix of surface-level scanning and deep dives to get better, usually spending more time on the subjects that they are most interested in. Just make sure to do something that is enjoyable for you.

III: Automation

The problem with cramming a bunch of information in your head is that it often doesn't stick very well. Knowledge is "use it or lose it"; if you just cram a bunch of history facts one day and never think about them again, then you probably won't retain that information. The key is just to practice. Some people find **answering questions** at weekly practices to be sufficient for allowing them to retain information. Simply answering questions is a great way to get better; this can be done on your own or with friends! Other people **create flashcards** for clues that they think will get them points in a game. Still others will **write questions** on things that they've learned; *in my opinion, this is the best way to get better, because it's pretty hard to write a question on something that you don't understand.* The only thing that really matters here is regularity; do something that you think you can keep up with!

In addition, make sure that following the three steps is an ongoing process. If you get into the habit of doing a little bit of quizbowl every week, you'll eventually see big improvement. Gradual, regular practice always beats cramming in the long run.

Final Thoughts

Now that you've read the bulk of this guide, I hope improving at quizbowl is a bit less mysterious. However, no guide would be complete without talking about peers. In reality, the most predictive factor of quizbowl improvement is how much your peers care about improving at quizbowl. If your peers are more casual about it, then it will be harder to find the motivation to get to the next level. And that's totally fine! Quizbowl is supposed to be fun, and everyone has their own way of engaging with the activity. It will just be harder to beat the top teams with a casual mindset.

On the other hand, if your peers are serious about getting better; it will push you to get better as well. Your peers don't even have to be your teammates; it is not too hard to seek out quizbowl friends in the broader community online. In general, it's pretty hard *not* to improve when everyone around you is into quizbowl. This is why the same schools are good from year to year: the students there are socialized into being good quizbowl players. So if you really want to improve, consider finding a quizbowl friend to get good with you! And again, quizbowl is supposed to be fun. If you don't find improving at quizbowl to be enjoyable, then it probably isn't the activity for you. And that's okay! There are plenty of activities in the world, of which quizbowl is only one. But I hope you do find that quizbowl is a special activity, just as I did seven years ago. Even now, I feel like I'm always discovering more things that it has to offer.

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