

On writing better literature questions


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 Created	
 Tags	Published

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Introduction & Basics

This article is written by Caroline Mao and created as a literature writing resource for WORKSHOP, a three-dot difficulty set which aims to mentor new writers. As such, it is primarily intended as advice for writing literature questions at that difficulty. While some of this advice is not applicable at different difficulty levels or sets which operate on different models, and a significant amount is WORKSHOP-specific, you may still find much of it helpful for other sets.

For ease of referencing, this article is divided into sections based on each step of the writing process. While you can read this entire document at once, you may also find it helpful to refer to the table of contents and skip around to whatever sections suit your current needs best. I've also included comments for definition/concept clarifications or other helpful notes. Click a highlight to see its comments.

Though this may include advice helpful for all categories, it is not intended to cover universal basics, like constructing your sentences to flow well, writing clues which are uniquely identifying, or making sure your answerline is the appropriate difficulty. The WORKSHOP manual includes information on this.

Much of my advice is not objective or universally applicable. This is written specifically for a set I'm editing and thus adheres to my own work style and preferred methods. It is also intended for beginning writers, though I hope writers of all skill levels will get something out of it.

The Big Picture: Questions to consider

Before you begin writing, think about the following. There is not necessarily a single right answer; it's meant to help frame your perspective.

- **How do people engage with and learn about literature?** Do they read it casually, for leisure? Study it in classes? Go to events about literature? Hear about it from friends or social media? Stare at SparkNotes in the hopes they can power a tossup this Saturday? Which ways of learning should you reward?
- **How do people read?** Closely, examining it on a word or sentence level? Searching for overarching themes or motifs? Skimming to get the basics of what's happening? Just for fun, without necessarily thinking about it critically (not that they're mutually exclusive)? From start to finish, out of order, or reading only excerpts which snag their attention? Which ways of reading should we reward?
- **What inspires authors to write?** From another angle, what do people write about? Broadly, the same topics have inspired writers to write since the beginning of time: love, death,

politics, religion, health, family, friendship, romance, sexuality, food, the body, nature, etc. Try to look at authors at the higher level of what they're trying to convey instead of immediately breaking them down into plot details and character names.

- **Why do we remember certain writers, but not others?** The quizbowl canon asks about certain writers but not others—why? Is it because of how good a writer they are? How innovative? How relevant what they're writing about is? How much we can relate to them? How much they conform to our own personal tastes, biases, and background? How much they're discussed in certain contexts (e.g. academia)? How important they were considered at the time? How privileged they were? How easy it is to write questions about them?
- **What makes a writer or work worth being asked about?** In essence, 1. why are they important, and 2. why are they suitable to be asked about in quizbowl? These questions overlap, but they aren't the same. This is an especially good question to ask yourself when writing your hard parts and lead-ins, or anything that's canon-expanding.

Basic Advice

Cool, I just asked you a bunch of super abstract questions, but we do actually need to get around to deciding your answerline and laying out each of your clues. Here's some basics:

- If you can read the material you're asking about, and it is worth the time investment (or you just find it really interesting!), **read it**. See Finding sources.
 - If you've read it, pick memorable clues. If you cannot remember something you want to clue happening when you read it (unless you read it a long time ago), then don't expect the player to do so either.
 - **On memorable clues:** what you remember well may not what others necessarily remember well! Please check outside sources—if the thing you are cluing has been written about before, particularly in an academic context, then that's a good sign others find it memorable and significant as well.
 - If you can't read it, then generally, you should try to ensure your first 2-3 clues are from a source that isn't Wikipedia, and preferably not SparkNotes either. This is somewhat difficulty-dependent, e.g. if you're cluing from harder works early on, the knowledge it tests of that harder work should accordingly be easier to find on the Internet.
 - **Remember to include easy and middle clues as well!!** The last half of your tossup (at minimum) is things that **should** have come up before, because the vast

majority of players have not read these works and this is where they will be buzzing.

- It can be helpful to use Wikipedia / SparkNotes / etc as a **starting point** to figure out what parts of a text to read or research more deeply, as they can often highlight key moments, themes, and motif in a text. An issue with relying solely on these sources is that they often miss important details and context you'd get from digging more deeply into the text and surrounding scholarship.
- Reading part of the material/key scenes and excerpts rather than the entire thing is also good and efficient in a pinch.
- Vary your bonus structure. People make the first part the hard part too often. It is good to have variation throughout a set so bonuses don't become predictable, and a useful exercise to see the different ways you can structure a bonus (the order of the parts, the difficulty of each part, the type of answerline, etc.). There are many angles from which to approach the same material.
- If you're cluing a quote from long fiction (or even from longer short works), it should be important or highlight something overarching which is important—a quote likely to be studied if you're reading it in class/writing a paper on it. Otherwise, it's probably quite hard to remember.
- If your clue consists of a secondary source (i.e. of the "[scholar] argues [interpretation] of this work" form), pick one you can justify to yourself as significant instead of just using the first paper on Google. It should actually be studied / important in academia. It should be credible, not a random Blogspot post. If it looks sketchy, try to verify that it's true by finding the book or checking other sources.
 - Reading secondary sources can also be quite helpful for isolating memorable information or important elements of a work. It is less important in this case (where the detail from the work is what matters and is clued) that the source you use be academically significant, though it should still be credible.
- Make an effort to **write on marginalized writers** (POC, women, etc). Diversity should never be an afterthought. See: Diversity.
- It's fine if not everything is thematically coherent, but I'm still going to encourage you to make questions as thematically coherent as possible. **It is easier to plan a question to be thematically coherent from the start than to edit it to be themed later.**

- **If you want to write a common link**, have a justification for doing so, namely 1. clear ideas of what you want to clue and 2. an argument for why the thing you're tossing up should actually be linked. Sometimes you can't make it perfectly coherent and that's OK, but do what you can.
 - Example: 2020 WORKSHOP has a tossup on wolves where the first half of the clues are about stories adapted from Little Red Riding Hood, and it draws mostly from British short fiction. A tossup just cluing every time a wolf has existed in literature does not do much to comment on the literary significance of wolves and is poorly linked.
- if you want to toss up a work that is already tossed up very often, consider whether you want to just write a normal standard tossup—which is perfectly fine, as long as the clues are still evocative and interesting—or take a more specific approach (highlight certain themes, discuss its literary history, etc).
- **Interesting clues > interesting answerlines.**
- If you don't know what's significant in a work, a place to start is to look at **what academic scholarship of that work discusses**. Scholars often know better than you what is significant, since they've spent much more time studying that work / field.
- When you propose an answerline, I'm more likely to approve it if I know (or at least have a vague sense of) what clues you have in mind.
- **Don't talk to people outside the set about what you're reading. It's super tempting but players can figure out what you're writing on this way.**
- Don't be afraid to ask me questions or just chat about books! ❤️

Ideation

Getting ideas

If you don't write down your question ideas somewhere, start a document for that now. Even if you can't come up with an idea right now, the WORKSHOP production process is over half a year long, and you will likely come up with many ideas during that timespan. A couple good places to start: "What do I know about that I really like and want other people to know?" and "What do I wish I knew more about?"

There is a lot of value to simply writing your ideas down, even though it is unlikely all (or even most) of them will be good. You get better at coming up with ideas by actually coming up with

ideas, writing them down, evaluating them, and iterating on them until they're better.

Selecting your topic and answerline

I pair topic and answerline together because one of them may come before the other. You may immediately know you want to toss up x but don't know what to clue, or you may have a general sense of what you'd like to write about but aren't sure of the exact answerline. Or you may have no idea what you want to write at all.

If you're sure about your answerline, feel free to move to Construction. If you only know your topic, read the following. If you have no idea what you want to write about, go start or stare at that question doc, read books or stuff about books, or ask me for help.

A non-exhaustive list of answerline types:

- Works: Make sure it is of appropriate difficulty; checking if it's been tossed up at this difficulty before is a good benchmark, but you can ask me if you're unsure.
 - Regarding hypercanonical works where all the clues have been mined to death: Either find a fresh approach (hint: try to look for clues which aren't plot details or character names), or toss up something else, like the author or a common link.
 - Regarding short works (e.g. short stories): are there enough substantial, difficulty-appropriate clues which you can arrange in pyramidal order, and are they all memorable enough to be buzzable? You probably can't make sure they're all well-themed or it might be too transparent or unoriginal, but that's fine.
 - Quotes are fine, but they should be significant to the story and remembered by someone who's read it closely. Don't make this quotebowl.
- Authors: Try not to write about more than 2 works, *maybe* 3, unless you're cluing entirely short works (e.g. poems, short stories) or something else insubstantial that can't have several clues about a single work. Deep clues about well-known or moderately known works are generally better than surface clues about obscure ones, since they reward people engaging deeply with the author.
 - **This is not a hard and fast limit.** When you are selecting a lesser-known work by an author, carefully evaluate why that work deserves to be mentioned. "To artificially make this tossup harder" or "I can't find enough fresh clues on their better-known works" is not a good reason; it should have genuine importance.

- Common links: Common links are somewhat loosely defined as answerlines on a common element in certain works of literature, such as weddings in British poetry or robots from R.U.R. (examples from WORKSHOP 2021). Try to confine yourself to a subcategory (e.g. British) and either 1. genre (e.g. short fiction) or 2. time period or possibly 3. author. However, if you can't, **don't force it**. Trying to confine yourself too narrowly when the canon doesn't allow it is a good way to get frustrated, and many excellent common links have been written on a wide array of works and areas.
 - Creative ambition's a key trait to great writers, but before you get there, avoid risking playability over creativity.
 - If you never write a common link for WORKSHOP, that's fine. Quizbowl is too obsessed with them.
- Characters: should be important to the work(s) they're part of and distinguishable from other characters. It should be easy to quickly remember their name, and in general, they should be memorable enough to justify asking about them instead of the work they're featured in. All clues should clearly uniquely identify that character, i.e. they can't be easily mixed up with someone else.
- Languages/countries: A good way to ask about less canonical authors, often from underrepresented countries. The main problem is there's not that many languages or countries compared to the number of authors or works, so there's only so many tossups we can have on these before you risk overlapping with an answerline in another category or making the question fraudable from narrowing down the answerspace, so write these in moderation.

There are obviously many other types of answerlines, such as genres, specific elements of a work (e.g. the green light from *The Great Gatsby*), or literary movements; this list is not comprehensive.

Consider the set as a whole

If there are already five literature tossups on (for example) countries, I am unlikely to approve a sixth. Check the answerline spreadsheet to see how the answerlines are shaping up. If there's a dearth of one type of answerline, try focusing your efforts there.

Final note on answerlines

If you cannot write a tossup on a standard answerline (e.g. a well-known canonical novel) with difficulty-appropriate clues that are buzzable and arranged in pyramidal order, do not try to go

for a nonstandard answerline until you have that nailed down.

Construction

Cool, hopefully you have an answerline! So let's get started with constructing your question.

Determine your approach

The general body of your questions will typically be drawn from plot details and character names, or quotes if it's shorter, like a poem. This is fine and good, but for many works, you may run into some difficulty finding fresh clues that haven't been mined to death already. As mentioned, you may also want your tossup to have more of a theme or otherwise highlight key motifs and ideas in literature (whether in an author's body of work, a specific work, literature in general, etc.), particularly on answerlines that have already come up many times before.

There is far more to a work than a linear sequence of plot clues. Below is a non-exhaustive list of topics to draw inspiration from, but I recommend that you don't draw from it so heavily it makes your tossup too difficult or top-heavy—*playability comes first*, including before originality. **Remember to ask yourself, "How would a person know about these things, and why should I reward that knowledge?"**

- Innovations developed by the writer
- Translations and how accurately they convey or add to the original work
- Literary tradition, history, and culture
- How their life influenced their writing
 - How their writing references or was impacted by events in their life—this should not simply be a bunch of autobiographical clues, especially since many autobiographical clues are unimportant or not uniquely identifying
- Literary form, devices, craft, technique (especially applicable to poetry)
- Common themes: politics, religion, the writer's relationships, family, nature, historical events from their time, gender/sexuality
- For drama: stage directions, adaptations, and design choices
- Motifs (make sure it's not transparent, i.e. it is not so obvious that it clearly points to a specific work)

- Iconic scenes, objects, or characters
- Commentary the writer wrote on their work
- Extra material related to the work, such as sequels, drafts with extra content, post-scripts, reflective essays
- The influence other people, including other writers, had on a work
- Allusions made by the work, or later work alluding to it
- Publication history
- Modern/contemporary interpretations and retellings
- Literary criticism of the work
- Just do lots of research on the writer/work! **See what was important to them.** Often, this means instead of trying to dig out tiny details in the hopes they'll become your lead-in, you zoom out to get an overarching sense of what they cared about and then zoom back in to focus your clues around that.

Lay out your clues

Everyone has a different approach to how they write. Some start with the FTP and write backwards to the leadin, others with the lead-in and then go down to the FTP, and others write down various clues they encounter and then arrange them into pyramidal order. Some people will start with tons of clues from preliminary research and whittle it down to just the ones they need; others will start out with a few and then add clues as they go along and do their research.

You should do what works best for you, and try a couple different strategies to see what fits you. If you're really stuck and feel like you know nothing about your answerline, start with the FTP and write backwards. You'll usually go, "Hey, I do know something after all," and it's nice to be staring at the beginnings of a question instead of a judgmental blank screen.

I often do a very basic outline of all my clues and their order before I begin writing, so I don't have to worry too much about specifics until I have the overarching ideas down, but everyone has their approach—do what works for you.

After finishing your question

Do a proofread and make sure your spelling, grammar, and formatting is correct. Drop it in the Literature Google Doc. Ta-da — you wrote a question!

If you're concerned about anything in particular or want feedback on a specific thing, feel free to mention it in a comment (assign it to me as an action item/include my email) or message me on Discord. Same for if I'm taking too long to send feedback or if something's urgent.

Revision

Also see: How to respond to feedback.

Your first draft is likely not perfect. And that's okay! To quote from Amy Ko's [How to be creative](#) article:

"Your best idea will probably be your 100th idea and not your first, because it will incorporate all of the wonderful things about the first 99 ideas. So start generating those bad ideas, figuring out what's wrong with them, and then making better ones.

How do you figure out what's wrong with those bad ideas? **Externalize often.** The more you express those ideas—in words, in sketches, in prototypes, in demos [well, only in words]—the more visible those flaws will be to you and other people [me, your editor]."

Slight exaggeration in that you do not need 100 ideas, but the principle applies: your first draft probably isn't your best, but the flaws in your writing aren't visible (and therefore fixable) until you actually write. You're here to learn, and that isn't limited to WORKSHOP, a program meant specifically for new writers. I've been writing and editing since 2018, and I'm still learning, often from my own writers.

None of the players will see that first draft (unless your first draft is perfect and needed no editing) and they therefore cannot judge you for it, only judge you for what the final product looks like—which will depend on your revisions.

Apply feedback to all your questions. If I leave a comment on your question (or someone else's, even) with some generalizable advice, please apply it to your other questions too. This is how you improve as a writer!

Communication

Interpersonal skills are sadly widely underemphasized in quizbowl, but they're essential to making sure question production runs smoothly and people will want to work with you again in the future.

I will respond to anything faster (request for answerline approval, request for feedback on a draft, etc.) if you tag me on Google Docs with my email, since it will notify me in my inbox.

Getting answerlines approved

Most of the time, I'll just approve your answerline if it's difficulty-appropriate and doesn't overlap with anything else. I would highly prefer that you already have some basic ideas of what you want to write about and that you note it either in the cell or as a comment there.

As slots fill up, I will also be more wary about approving too many answerlines of the same type or general subcategory (e.g. "we already have three tossups on literary movements," "we have two questions on British detective fiction already," etc.).

Please check if your answerline overlaps with anything else in the set. I try to check for this if I can, but ultimately it's up to you, and I really don't like having to either 1. discard your question or 2. ask some poor writer to change their question because it overlaps with something you wrote.

Some math: in 2021 WORKSHOP, there were 107 lit questions. Assuming it takes 3 minutes to look through the spreadsheet and all the questions in the literature doc, and I check every one of those for overlap, that's 5.35 hours I've spent on checking for overlap. I'd rather spend those 5.35 hours giving people feedback.

Responding to feedback

At some point, I will probably ask you to make a change you disagree with. I encourage you to tell me why you disagree. If you can provide sources (e.g. "here's a widely cited paper explaining the significance of this detail"), numbers (e.g. "this isn't that hard, I found x hits for this on aseemsdb"), or other facts, even better.

I can't guarantee that your final tossup (and every edit I make to it) will be something you completely agree with, because ultimately, it's up to the editor's discretion, but I will try my best. Sometimes, I'll just say, "I see your point, but could you make this change anyway," or change your question myself.

I tend to offer writers more agency and control over their questions if they are consistently responsive to feedback. If you're a diligent writer who takes good care of revisions, and there's some change that needs to be made, I'll probably ask you if you're okay with the change or if you'd like to do it yourself. If you take months to respond to feedback or never do so at all, I'm

going to go ahead and change it myself. (This is not a judgment of you; it's a practical matter of not wanting to leave all the questions unedited until shortly before the first mirror.)

Giving other people feedback

Questions don't exist in a vacuum—they exist in a set. You're working with other people! While I'm here to provide you all feedback, if you see that I've missed something important (e.g. I didn't catch a factual error, you think a clue is easier than where it's currently placed, etc.) or you have a suggestion (e.g. a writer can't think of a clue and you have an idea for them), feel free to leave a comment on the Google Doc. Make sure to remain civil and kind.

This benefits the writer by giving them more feedback, but it also improves you by forcing you to look at people's writing critically. When looking at your own writing, it's easy to get blinded by your own biases, but you don't have that lens with other people's writing. It's also good to appreciate positive aspects of other people's writing and try to emulate that and put it into your own toolbox. If you see a question you like, it's nice to comment, "Hey, great question!" and maybe make that writer's day.

Finally, if you really want to try giving feedback but are afraid to comment on someone's questions for fear of being wrong or offending them, feel free to comment on mine. I don't intend to write anything for WORKSHOP for the first few months since WORKSHOP is for the writers, but when it gets closer to the end of the set and I need to fill in holes, I typically start writing. I've had first-time writers comment on my writing, and it was useful feedback I've implemented.

If you're feeling shy or uncertain about the prospect of commenting on other people's questions, that's totally fine. Just write your questions, relax, focus on yourself and your writing.

Finally — **it's nice when writers are proactive**, but I don't expect you to be. Writing is already tons of work. It's super time-consuming and requires lots of thought, research, and energy. It's especially hard if it's your first time writing! I will be perfectly happy if you just write your questions and revise them. That being said, the *best* writers I've ever worked with care more about just dumping their own questions into the Google Doc and leaving. They make their revisions on time, reach out to me if they have questions, offer feedback, catch errors, and are invested in what they're doing.

Diversity

This section addresses the importance of writing about marginalized writers, such as people of color, women, and LGBTQ+ people (not at all exhaustive). Virginia Woolf said, "Anonymous was a woman," and she's right, but there are many significant female authors who are also very much not anonymous and who are waiting to be written about.

The current canon favoring white/male/etc. authors is not a reason to write only about white/male/etc. authors. While it is important to not overwhelm players with difficult questions, **we should try to write towards a better, more diverse world whenever possible**—not the world as it is, but the world as it could be, and perhaps should be. For example, while many institutions give more emphasis to male writers, this does not accurately reflect the impact women have had on literature:

- The first named author was a woman (Enheduanna)
- The first novel was written by a woman (Tale of Genji), and it was first translated into modern Japanese by a woman (Yosano Akiko)
- The first autobiography was written by a woman (Book of Margery Kempe)
- The first science fiction novel was written by a woman (Frankenstein), but I guess another woman has a claim to that too (The Blazing World)

Of course, all of the above can be argued. For example, The Golden Ass also has a claim to being the first novel. Whether they were really the first isn't the point I'm trying to make, but rather that women have been at the forefront of literature since forever and they've probably accomplished much more than you think.

Regardless of whether the quizbowl canon accurately reflects the real world, the real world itself doesn't give underrepresented voices the representation they deserve. The NYTimes collected a dataset of over 7,000 books by major publishing houses that were published between 1950 and 2018. Nearly 95 percent of those books were written by white authors. In this sense, the fact 1/1 world literature is standard makes quizbowl far more diverse than the publishing industry today. But we shouldn't seek to emulate the publishing industry or decide that we're satisfied because the average quizbowler can name a lot more Japanese authors than the average non-quizbowler. We can always strive to be better, more fair and more diverse than we currently are.

How to find clues about minority writers

- **Begin with what we already have in the canon.** Many famous male writers were influenced by women writers (often their wives, sisters, or close friends), if not outright

plagiarizing them and claiming credit. William Wordsworth's "Daffodils" is copied from a description in his sister Dorothy's diaries. F. Scott Fitzgerald ripped sections of *Tender Is the Night* from his wife Zelda's journals. Vera Nabokov gave up her own literary career to help with her husband Vladimir's.

- **Start from a broader level.** You want to write about American short fiction? There's plenty of American short fic writers who are women or people of color; you can easily Google one. (WORKSHOP labels its subdistributions in a lot of detail, partly to help narrow down your ideas.)
- **Be critical of what previous question writers already wrote about core marginalized authors** and use that to approach your question from a new angle. In particular, a lot of foreign language literature written by POC is through a whitewashed lens, e.g. Ezra Pound basically rewriting a lot of the Chinese poems he "translated" even though he didn't know Chinese. And think critically about minority writers—for example, *Things Fall Apart* is an important work of African literature, but it's also received a lot of criticism from female African authors for its misogyny.
- **Research core minority writers' relationships with other writers.** Minority writers are often friends with other minority writers, and often they're enemies too. I learned about Anne Sexton because I liked Sylvia Plath and wanted to know more poets who had similar styles/interests. Derek Walcott and V.S. Naipaul really hate each other, partially due to disagreeing views on their cultures.
- **Make an effort to read more content by marginalized writers** on a daily basis. Diversity will not happen on accident; you need to consciously incorporate it into your thought processes and reading habits.

Keeping questions about marginalized writers difficulty-appropriate

The fact is, however, many minority writers are considered too difficult to toss up. You can't simply throw guidelines about difficulty or playability out the window in the name of diversity. So how do we still represent them?

- Make them your lead-ins / early clues and your hard parts.
- Theme your questions around them.

- For example, [this 2021 WORKSHOP tossup on *The Odyssey*](#) does not demand you know who Emily Wilson is in order to convert it, but a player who knows a lot about the women who've written about or studied *The Odyssey* will be more likely to get it earlier.
- Write about core minority authors from new angles, such as by isolating a specific theme.
- Common links.

Sources

The original work is best for making sure your clues are accurate and memorable.

However, secondary sources can *sometimes* be helpful if they are verified and trustworthy (usually notable academics).

For foreign language literature, try to select translations critically. Ideally, your judgment should balance quality and recognizability. Unfortunately, the best translation is not always the most well-known one. If the best one (or rather, what you judge to be the best) is so different that it's unrecognizable to players who read the more popular translation, pick the more popular one. Side note: examining flaws in translation often makes for interesting harder clues, since it's a huge point of contention in a lot of literature.

Finding sources

Book piracy is bad. The publishing industry is terrible and exploitative, so authors are super broke and piracy makes them more broke. However, we can't all afford to buy every book we want to research. Support authors by borrowing books from libraries (even if they don't have the book you want, they're likely to buy a copy of it). You can check [WorldCat](#) to see if the book you want is in a library near you.

That being said, if you can't find a book or can't go to the library, use [libgen](#), [b-ok](#), or [mobilism](#) to download it. This should cover pretty much every book.

A lot of older books, especially short stories and poems, you can just find on Google.

If you're currently in college, your college probably has a JStor subscription. Take advantage of it for academic sources. (Same goes for a lot of other sites with similar purposes.)

If you want a paywalled academic paper, use Sci-Hub. Also, many academics will be happy to share their paper with you for free if you email them!

Final note

Communication is really important!! It is the #1 problem I run into on sets, far more so than "I don't know how to write," because I can teach you how to do that but I can't teach you to talk to me about the issues you run into as a writer if I do not know they exist.

Hope you enjoyed reading! Let me know if you have any questions or comments. Remember that this is a document targeted toward newer writers, so take things with a grain of salt if you think they're too restrictive; you may find as you mature as a writer that you will outgrow some of this advice, and if so, good for you. :)

Credits

Thank you to Rahul Keyal, Ophir Lifshitz, Olivia Murton, Vishwa Shanmugam, and Matthew Lehmann for reading my drafts of this article and offering their helpful feedback.