

Notes about the Gradwrite Writing Guide

Welcome to the Abbreviated Gradwrite Writing Guide! Unlike our full writing guide (which you can find [here](#)), this document is meant more as a short handbook serving as a crash course and reference to best principles in writing questions. Detailed justifications for writing conventions are omitted from this document, as well as information about Chains and Mystery Links, which benefit from the extended presentation provided in the main writing guide.

Just reading this handbook will get you quite far towards writing good trivia questions, and we suggest making your way through it so that you can hit the ground running with your first questions for Gradwrite! Nevertheless, a strong understanding of the reasons behind the conventions here is extremely valuable both in motivating your writing as well as in preparing for a future editing role. We therefore strongly recommend that you read the full writing guide if you have the time. If you are interested in writing Chains or Mystery Links, please refer to the relevant sections in the main writing guide.

Part I of the writing guide concerns basic principles to which all of your questions should adhere. Part II deals with principles pertaining to particular question types. Later parts of the guide presuppose knowledge of the earlier parts.

All of the Guiding Principles in this guide are worded as commands. While almost all of these rules have exceptions, when starting to write questions for Gradwrite it is worth trying to follow these rules as closely as possible. Strict as the Guiding Principles may seem on paper, in practice there's always plenty of room for writers to stamp their own distinctive style onto their packs.

Basic Conventions

Guiding Principle: Questions should almost always be phrased as a question, not a statement, unless you've written a special category and explicitly explained its format to players. Even spelling questions should be phrased as a question (for example, "How would you spell the name of the best-selling brand of Japanese mayonnaise, 'kewpie'?"). The one major exception is for questions which ask for a subset of the possible answers (e.g., "name two of the three..."); you may word these as statements if necessary. Questions should be grammatically correct sentences, unless that has been explicitly explained.

Guiding Principle: Questions should always be one sentence, unless you've explicitly explained that format to players. This also means that questions should be short enough that players aren't struggling to parse the question, which often happens when writers try to stuff too many clues into a single question. In general, varying your question length is a good idea!

Guiding Principle: Questions should *not* explicitly list out the set of potential answers like a multiple choice question on a quiz. This means no true or false questions. Questions which ask for a member of a small set (e.g., "Which Canadian territory...") are fine.

Guiding Principle: Questions should be clear and precise—we don't like to use terms like "related to" or "associated with". Instead, precisely describe what that relation or association is.

Difficulty

The Golden Rule of Trivia Writing: Your questions are harder than you think they are.

Guiding Principle: When judging the difficulty of your questions, think about how hard the question *will be*, not how hard it *should be*. For example, a question about the fundamentals of a well-known, popular field will be easier than a question about the fundamentals of a less well-known field, because the second one will be converted (that is, answered correctly) less often.

This principle is especially important when considering questions that ask about course material from upper-year courses, particularly the sciences. A significant number of teams will not feature any players in grade 12: this automatically makes many questions about grade 12 sciences or things like philosophy skew hard, even if they are about core content from those courses.

At Gradwrite, we use a four-point difficulty scale to assess our questions, where our easiest questions are marked as 1 and our hardest questions are marked as 4. (We only

ever use whole numbers to rate difficulty.) We typically say that a question marked as difficulty 1 is “1-gettable”, a difficulty 2 question is “2-gettable”, and so on. As explained above, this scale is a conversion-based scale. What that means is that difficulty doesn’t directly depend on the actual content of the question, but instead, on what fraction of the teams at a tournament will get your question correct. A 1-gettable question is a question that gets very high conversion, not a question that’s “fundamental to the field”.

Guiding Principle (The “Good Trivia” Exception): Every once in a while, if a question asks about content that everyone, not just specialists in particular categories, will find interesting, it is alright to include regardless of its difficulty. The question should be interesting to pretty much anyone, regardless of other knowledge—the information contained in the question and answer alone should be enough to paint a vivid and interesting picture in the mind of almost every player. Questions that presuppose knowledge of a particular person, work, war, region, or concept rarely qualify, unless the presupposed knowledge is practically universal.

Don’t swerve!

Definition: A swerve is a question which encourages knowledgeable players to buzz in early with a particular answer before “swerving” and asking for something else entirely.

Guiding Principle: When writing a question, you should always make sure that your question encourages players with more knowledge to buzz in early. Always double-check your questions to make sure they aren’t swerves.

How can you avoid accidentally writing swerves into your packs? One easy solution is to just put what you’re asking for at the start of the question. You might write something like “What author described the title character ‘buying the flowers herself’ at the beginning of *Mrs Dalloway*?”. Things get very boring, though, when every question starts that way, and it doesn’t allow players to demonstrate their skill for predicting where a question is going. Good packs consist of a mix of questions that begin with an indication of what they’re asking for (like “What author...”) and questions that don’t. How can you be sure, though, that those questions which don’t make it immediately clear what they’re asking for aren’t swerves?

Rule of Thumb: If your question hasn’t yet told players what it’s looking for, any descriptions should be descriptions of the correct answer. We could fix the original *Mrs Dalloway* question from earlier by asking “The title character says she will ‘buy the flowers herself’ at the beginning of what novel by Virginia Woolf? A: *Mrs Dalloway*”. This question is no longer a swerve because since the initial description is of *Mrs Dalloway*, the answer to the question is “*Mrs Dalloway*”.

Micropyramidality

Definition: a pyramidal question is one which puts harder clues before easier clues. While we still follow the principle of pyramidity when writing Gradwrite questions, they're only a single sentence long. This means that we need to pay attention to even smaller details (hence micropyramidity) when we think about pyramidity. Sometimes the ordering of a handful of words or using a longer or shorter connecting phrase between clauses can create small differences that give more knowledgeable players the edge they need to buzz in faster.

Guiding Principle: Questions should almost always be micropyramidal. Sometimes, your questions might have only one phrase/clue—this is fine! In that case, you just don't need to worry too much about micropyramidity.

Unique Identification

Definition: a uniquely identifying (or “UI”) question is one which pins down exactly one answer. This doesn't mean that the question can't have multiple things listed as acceptable in its answerline (e.g., an author's pen name and their real name), as long as they're all no more than different names for the same thing. It does mean, though, that it can't have any alternative answers which refer to distinct things.

Guiding Principle: Every question should be uniquely identifying. Even if you think your question has a *best* answer, that isn't good enough—the way the question is phrased needs to be such that there can't be any way a player could argue for a different answer.

Since all questions need to be UI, we typically don't like to write questions where the answer is a description. It also means that you should avoid clues which assert that something is the “most famous” or the “most notable”, or anything else that's not 100% objective.

Useful Trick: If you're struggling to make a question UI, consider cluing something about the way the answer is spelled—the number of letters, the first letter, or something of that kind. Use this sparingly, since it can sometimes feel shoehorned in and shouldn't be an excuse to not write an otherwise not uniquely identifying question, but it can be a good tool to prevent those one or two other answers from slipping in.

Write interesting questions!

Useful Trick: Ask about things that you haven't heard asked about before (and that you care about). This can lead to very hard questions, but if you can cover new topics in reasonable ways, this often leads to very well-received questions. Think about topics that you think are underrepresented in trivia—there might be a lot of askable content there that we just haven't used yet.

Useful Trick: Ask about things that have been asked about before, but in a new way or with new clues. Take a different perspective in approaching the same question topic. Combining questions about well-known subjects in interesting ways can also give them a fresh new feel (perhaps in a mixed set—see the Writing Sets section for more detail).

Useful Trick: Look around you: items in your house, things you do throughout the day, signs you see—almost anything can be asked about in a trivia question. This inspiration can lead to some cool questions that players didn't even imagine might be asked!

Useful Trick: Look at old packs—but sparingly. Old packs can provide plenty of inspiration, but usually when you're doing this, you want to combine it with some of the strategies above too. Can you use an idea from a previous pack, but change the answerline? Can you keep the answerline but use different clues or think about the topic from a different angle? Maybe there's an old question that you think would be pretty clearly bad to include directly in a tournament because it has been asked about far too much. Is there a way you can add new information or change the way it's asked to recast those old questions and teach players something new?

Useful Trick: Put harder clues at the beginning of a question and easier clues at the end. For example, you might write a question about mitochondria which first talks about oxidative phosphorylation, before then mentioning that they're the powerhouse of the cell.

Useful Trick: If an answer is too obscure, try flipping the answerline and a clue in the question. For example, instead of “What Viennese art museum is home to Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*? A: Belvedere”, you might write the easier “What city's Belvedere art museum is home to Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*? A: Vienna”.

Formatting Details

Guiding Principle: Answerlines should leave no room for interpretation. Things like “accept reasonable equivalents” should not be included.

Guiding Principle: Include pronunciation guides in your questions. Most people are not familiar with IPA, so we find the clearest pronunciation guides list syllables as they're commonly written in English, where capitals indicate stress: for example, “Mixolydian

["MIX-oh-LID-ee-an"]". We strongly recommend including pronunciation guides on all spelling questions, even if it seems as though the word would be impossible to mispronounce.

PART II:

PARTICULAR

QUESTION TYPES

Writing Sets, Splits, and Unrevealed Sets

At Gradwrite, we typically use the term “set” as a catch-all term for Sets of 3, Sets of 4, Splits, and Unrevealed Sets. (If we’re talking about a Set of 3 or Set of 4, we’ll say “Set of 3” or “Set of 4”). We also distinguish between two types of sets:

Definition: A pure set (or straight set) is a set whose questions are all about the same topic. For example, a category called “Set of 4: Celtic Myth” whose questions all in fact do test knowledge of Celtic mythology (rather than, for example, a set where one of the questions is about Celtic myth in pop culture) is a pure set.

Definition: A mixed set is a set whose questions test different areas of knowledge. For example, a category called “Set of 4: Red Things”, where the thing linking the questions together is not their topic but something shared between their topics, is a mixed set.

Guiding Principle: Splits should always be pure sets, and the title of a Split should always be very clear. For example, you wouldn’t want to have a Split whose title is “Power” and then have it be a mixed set about the word “power” in different contexts. Even if it is a pure set about, say, power in physics, you should make sure to title the split “Power in Physics” to eliminate the possibility of a player mistaking it for a set about power in some other context.

This doesn’t mean that you should avoid mixed sets altogether! Mixed sets are a great opportunity to show how clever and creative you are. At Gradwrite, we try to write most (but certainly not all) of our Sets of 3, Sets of 4, and Unrevealed Sets as mixed sets.

Guiding Principle: Mixed sets should include as many different areas of knowledge as possible.

Guiding Principle: Almost every set should have at least one 1-gettable question and at least one 3- or 4-gettable question. In general, the other questions in the set should be somewhere between 1- and 3-gettable. In cases where there are exceptions to this rule, they come from leaving out the 3- or 4-gettable question, never the 1-gettable question.

When, then, is it fine to leave out the hard question?

Rule of Thumb: If a mixed set would be made worse by making one of the questions harder, it's alright for all of the questions to be easy or medium-difficulty.

Guiding Principle: Questions should *not* be a single word or phrase. In particular, try to avoid sets of the form “given X, name Y”.

Guiding Principle: Whenever possible, try to have diverse answerlines within a set, and make sure that your questions clue their answers in different ways. This means that even in a set like “Split: African Rivers”, not all of the answerlines should be rivers. Even just one or two questions that ask for a different type of thing (e.g., a country, a city, etc.) can make a big difference. It also means that even if your answers aren't all rivers, there should be at least a couple of questions in the set that don't boil down to just testing associations between cities and the rivers they lie on.

Guiding Principle: Sets should be something over and above their constituent questions.

There are lots of ways to achieve this, but we'll highlight two of the most common:

Tight theming can make a set feel inspired. For example, “Set of 4: Religions” is pretty boring—at that point, it might be better to just spread the questions out as Blitzes throughout the rest of the packs—but the specificity of “Set of 4: African and Afro-Caribbean Religions” makes it compelling.

A more subtle way of making your sets interesting is by making it possible for players to buzz on some questions in the set earlier than they would be able to if the question was a Blitz. For example, as a Blitz, the question “What is the NATO phonetic code word for the letter Y? A: Yankee” is impossible to buzz on until the last word. In the category “Set of 4: The Letter Y”, though, players who are paying attention can buzz in by “code word”, or even as early as “NATO” with a bit of anticipation.

In short, there should be some reason why the questions in your set deserve to be in a set together, rather than just being used as Blitzes.

Guiding Principle: Within a set, write and order questions to vary question length, mixing long and short questions.

Writing Double Jumps

Definition: The first question of a Double Jump is called the first jump. The second question in a Double Jump is called the second jump.

Guiding Principle: The first jump of a Double Jump should be easy—ideally, 1- or 2-gettable.

Guiding Principle: The second jump of a Double Jump should be clearly harder than the first jump. A good rule of thumb is that the difficulty rating of the second jump should be at least 2 points higher than the difficulty rating of the first jump. The hardest questions in a tournament will often be among the second jumps of Double Jumps.

Guiding Principle: Double Jumps should have a coherent, tight theme. This certainly means that the second jump should clue the same knowledge as the first: no pivots from ocean currents to electrical currents. More generally, your second jump should aim to dive deeper into the specific topic of the first jump.

Writing Jackpots

Guiding Principle: Every part of a Jackpot should be uniquely identifying. Moreover, each clue should be useful in a meaningful way to someone who knows a lot about the answer. It's hard to describe exactly what this means, but it's pretty clear what doesn't work; putting the answerline's birthday as the first clue, for example, is both not uniquely identifying and not that meaningful or interesting.

Guiding Principle: Each clue in a Jackpot should be clearly easier than previous clues. This has two parts: you should order the clues from hardest to easiest, of course, but it's also extremely important that the clues are of meaningfully different difficulties.

Guiding Principle: The first part of your Jackpot should be converted by very few teams, but most (if not all) teams should know the right answer by the end of Part 4. This means that the answer to any Jackpot needs to be something that's very well-known.

Definition: A fraudable question is one whose answer can be guessed (or “frauded”) by players who don't actually know the clues mentioned.

Guiding Principle: Jackpot clues, especially early Jackpot clues, absolutely cannot be fraudable. The most common things to check for when trying to determine if clues are fraudable are names and groups. For example, if you're asking for a country and have lots of names in the question, players may be able to recognize the language the names come from and guess correctly despite not knowing the actual clues. Similarly, if you're asking for a member of a group and the answer is the only famous member (or clearly the most famous member) of that group, players may decide to throw out a guess which just happens to be correct. The same problem arises with small groups, because

players can use the process of elimination—a Jackpot that starts off by asking “What Canadian territory...”, for example, will cause lots of problems.