**How to Become a Better Player**

Like nearly all activities in which score is kept, scholars’ bowl is fun to play on a casual, social level without investing significant time in improving one's ability. Nonetheless, it is a competitive endeavor, and no national championship has ever been won by a team, however intelligent and educated, that had just sat down to play for the very first time. Winning consistently at the highest level has only been brought about by diligent, directed preparations.

There are approximately ten suggested methods that players have successfully used to improve themselves. These suggestions should be equally applicable to any level of play (middle school, high school, community college, college), though the actual material that one should study will vary.

1. **Competing**. The most obvious (and most enjoyable) route to improvement as a player is actually competing in scholars’ bowl matches. In addition to simply hearing questions (and their answers!), there is no substitute for real tournaments when it comes to the non-knowledge-related parts of the game: working together on bonuses, developing the intuition to anticipate questions, shaking off the effects of a bad buzz, and simply hearing and processing clues in the rapid-fire way in which they are often delivered.

In short, play as frequently as you can, whether it is in a actual match or a practice match. It is important to remember that a practice match should flow just like an actual match. This is most important for beginning players who need to develop a sense of "what comes up" and "when should I buzz." As players mature and begin attending harder tournaments, the value of more concentrated, knowledge-based preparation (i.e., "studying") rises, but in the beginning, there is nothing better than actual matches.

1. **Practicing**. Real competition is better, but practice can fulfill some of the same objectives. If you have a choice of practice materials, you'll want to choose those that are similar to those at the competitions you will be entering and that are as hard as possible without being demoralizing; harder questions will expose you to more answers and more clues, which serve players better in the long run than packets in which nine-tenths of the bonus points are converted. For formats, like SAACA's, that feature both tossups and bonuses, it is important to resist the temptation to only play tossups if the true goal is improvement; bonuses contain the harder questions and the harder clues and there is a great deal of value in just knowing that a certain answer exists--oftentimes a difficult tossup can be answered at the end, on the giveaway clue, without knowing anything substantive about the subject. In addition, it is a fact that new topics enter the scholars’ bowl "canon" as bonus parts and eventually become tossup answers. Practicing on bonuses will introduce you to these topics earlier rather than later.

SAACA does not recommend practicing with one-fact, Trivial-Pursuit-style questions if the goal is team improvement; these questions do not represent quiz bowl as played at the level of competition and the impressive reaction speed that might be realized is simply not equal to the benefit that could be gained from practicing on more complex questions. Please note that SAACA has no opinion whatsoever on the value of things done for fun or in order to attract new players or as fundraisers; if you enjoy playing one-clue tossups or Trivial Pursuit, that's absolutely fine, but it will not serve to raise the level of your scholars’ bowl play to that required of true super tournament winners.

Most super tournament teams practice four to six hours per week with new questions whenever they can obtain them. Again, there is no obligation to work this hard to participate in and enjoy quiz bowl, but if you want to win all of your competitions, it will probably take that much commitment from yourself and your teammates. This means SERIOUS practices are necessary. Having “fun” and practicing BAD BEHAVIOR often results in bad results (ie. not winning).

1. **Writing Questions**. Writing questions is a traditional and proven way of improving as a player; few things fix new facts in a way that is as likely to assist their recall during matches as actually framing questions that use them. That said, writing questions is very time-consuming (and writing competition-quality questions even more so); experienced players sometimes question its return per invested-hour when compared with other approaches.

Question writing is most useful in your weakest areas as a player; those are the areas in which reading (or at least skimming) reference works, verifying facts, and thinking of ways to connect the subject to what you are already know are most valuable. It's easier to write questions in your fields of expertise, but doesn't produce as much improvement. It never hurts to write two or three questions on the same subject, just to cover the material and phrase the clues in different ways. Take careful note of interesting anecdotes or links to other subjects--these will also appeal to other people and will be chosen as lead-ins to their own questions on the topic. Also note the first things listed in encyclopedia articles; these will often be the facts that end up as giveaways.

1. **Studying You Gotta Know Lists**. Each month NAQT publishes a [short article of topics that players "gotta know"](file:///C%3A%5CYouGottaKnow). For example, "[You Gotta Know These Economists](file:///C%3A%5CYouGottaKnow%5Ceconomists.html)." These contain eight to twelve items that come up over and over again in scholars’ bowl, either because of their intrinsic importance (mostly) or their idiosyncratic appeal. A winning team would be expected to know nearly everything on the lists from their giveaways. A high school team that knew everything on the lists would probably be in a position to do extremely well at nationals. There's obviously a lot more that gets asked about than what is in the articles, but measured in terms of points-earned-per-fact-learned, these are the subjects to start with.
2. **Reading**. SAACA hopes that scholars’ bowl will introduce players to new ideas, books, disciplines, and interests, but concedes that that actually reading the novels, dramas, and (to a lesser extent) poems that come up is a very inefficient way to improve as a player (though it is very worthwhile for other reasons). That said, SAACA emphasizes plot-based literature questions (rather than title-author matching) and knowing the entire plot of a novel becomes increasingly important at higher levels of play (high school and college play in general); for better-known works, it is also true at the level of regular-season high school play. Teams would do well to have players who have collectively read everything on our list of most [frequently asked works of literature](file:///C%3A%5CYouGottaKnow%5Cliterature.html); questions about these works will not hesitate to ask about characters, settings, plot points, and general themes, with the detail required increasing at each level of play. Conversely, for works that come up less often, knowing the author, the name of the major character, and the single most important plot element, will often garner for the full 30 points on a bonus.

As you can probably guess, reading summaries of works of literature is often rewarded.

1. **Reference Works**. Another good way to prepare is by reading [reference works](file:///C%3A%5CReferences) that go over wide swathes of history or learning; particularly good are those that purport to enumerate what everybody should have learned (or be in the process of learning). These would include *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* and *An Incomplete Education*. Similarly useful are works that link together developments and ideas from different disciplines (such as *A Short History of Everything*) or which are general histories of one kind of knowledge (like *The Discoverers*). These often derive much of their entertainment value from interesting facts and anecdotes about discoverers or discoveries and it is exactly those anecdotes that tend to find their way into questions. It's also true that there aren't so many of these books around--you are likely to read some that are also used as references by the people, whoever they may be, who are writing the questions for your next tournament.

Clearly writers who use any of these popular sources should make doubly sure that their questions aren't merely summaries of the articles and don't duplicate any of the peculiar phrases found in them!

1. **Lists**. The most stereotypical, most mocked, and least fun means of preparing for tournaments is studying lists of facts. There are many good topics: foreign capitals, Nobel Prize winners, geologic periods, European monarchs, Chinese dynasties, authors of novels, artists of paintings, nicknames of symphonies, vice presidents of presidents, and so forth. Even just a few practice games will suggest many other common linkages that could be put into tabular form and memorized.

This is a powerful tool for those with the proper motivation, but it is best leavened with reading, question writing, and actual gameplay, because the time spent on the pure lists of facts will go much further with mental structures to which to attach them. Learning that [Christopher Isherwood](http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/isherwoo.htm) wrote *Goodbye to Berlin* will not stick in the mind nearly so well if you know nothing else about him. Conversely knowing something about Isherwood will make it easier to buzz on the words "wrote *Goodbye*" if the previous clues in the question suggest 1930s' Germany.

Don't be afraid to study lists if you think that your team has a shot at greatness; nearly all top-echelon players have done so at some point in their careers. Just don't allow lists to become the principal focus of your preparation.

1. **Notebooks**. A technique that several players have used with great success is taking a pocket notebook to tournaments and practices. The idea is not to record every single unknown fact for later memorization, but to make a list of answers of which you have never, or only vaguely, heard. After the tournament, you should go through the notebook and look up basic information (an online encyclopedia article, perhaps) about each one so that you will at least know the giveaway clues if the answer comes up again. Even better would be the practice of writing a question or two about each new topic to cement the knowledge.

This is more useful than it sounds because once a topic has come up in quiz bowl it is very likely to do so again. This is good in the sense that players are exposed to a great deal more information and have undoubtedly learned much to stay competitive, but it has also raised the bar for new players and new schools looking to get involved.. Everything that you ever hear a question on, you *will* eventually hear another question on, so take the time to learn at least the basic facts behind every answer you encounter.

1. **Current Events**. A significant element of SAACA play consists of questions about current events, with about 50% of the material pertaining to the United States and 50% to the rest of the world. You can prepare for these by subscribing to--and reading--just about any newspaper, news magazine, or [Internet news site](http://news.google.com). Almost all such questions will be from the past 18 months, with most focusing on the previous six.

SAACA emphasizes events of major importance--diplomatic initiatives, economic policies, elections, military actions, natural disasters, scientific discoveries, etc--and will ask relatively few questions about scandals or crimes. It shouldn't be hard to pick out the major news threads of the past several months and make notes of the people, places, groups, and ideas involved. At the very least, you'll want to be able to name the most recent Nobel Prize winners, the [current cabinet](http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/cabinet.html), the [presidents and/or prime ministers of major countries](file:///C%3A%5CYouGottaKnow%5Cworld-leaders.html), recent Supreme Court decisions, and prominent [senators](http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm) and [governors](http://www.nga.org/governors/1%2C1169%2C%2C00.html).

1. **Visual Art**. Knowledge of the fine arts is an important part of a well-rounded education . [Looking up those works](http://www.artchive.com/) would be an excellent way to have a good shot at the half-dozen-or-so painting and sculpture tossups per tournament. Sometimes a question will describe the composition, detail, symbolism, and style of works of art (rather than just asking for their creators), so you'll want to make sure you can recognize the painting or sculpture from a description.

These are ten ideas that have worked for players in the past and which we recommend to teams interested in taking their game to the next level.