

Knowledge Bowl vs Quizbowl

Knowledge Bowl and quizbowl are both team knowledge-based competitions, but they have significant differences and different advantages. As a result, different students prefer different formats.

Knowledge Bowl	Quizbowl
Three teams of four per room	Two teams of four per room
Anyone can buzz from any team and anyone can answer on all questions	Toss-ups: Anyone can buzz, and the buzzer is the only one who can answer. Bonuses: Asked to only one team; anyone can answer.
All teams play all questions	A strong team may play all questions, but a weaker team may only be active for $\frac{1}{4}$ of the questions and be watching their opponents asked bonus questions for the remaining $\frac{3}{4}$ of the questions.
Correct answers: 1 point	Correct answers: 15 points for particularly early buzz, 10 points otherwise
Incorrect answers: no penalty	Incorrect answers: -5 points for buzz before end of question, no penalty otherwise
Questions follow multiple formats	Toss-up questions all follow one format: pyramidal; Bonus questions all follow another: themed delayed.
Designed to match teams by skill level so that all rounds are competitive	Designed to match disparate skill levels, resulting in some blowout rounds

Mechanics

In Knowledge Bowl, the tournament begins with a multiple choice written, taken as a team. After that, the rounds are read out loud to rooms of three teams, where a team can buzz at any point, stopping the reading, and be allowed to answer. Every team plays every question. Final rankings are determined by cumulative scores.

In quizbowl, all rounds are identical with toss-up questions being read out loud to rooms with two teams. Individuals can buzz at any time, stopping the reading, and answer the question. If the answer is correct, the team receives three additional bonus questions following a theme that only they get to answer. Final rankings are mostly determined by binary win-loss records with the actual scores only mattering in order to break a tie.

Opponent Matching

Knowledge Bowl tournaments are typically run in a “power-matched” format: after each round, teams are sorted by their cumulative scores, and the top three scores face each other in the top room, 4-6 in the second room, 7-9 in the third, and so on. In this way, teams are sorted to face other teams of similar skill level. This means that nearly every round is competitive. If you have state-championship caliber teams and teams who have never played before at the same tournament, they naturally never face each other in a round.

In quizbowl tournaments, play typically begins with splitting teams into brackets with very disparate skill levels so that each team plays the full variety of opponent strengths, including matching new teams with state champions. The tournament may then be rebracketed for a second set of rounds to bring teams of similar strength together.

There are benefits and drawbacks to both styles. In quizbowl, weak teams get to see how strong teams play. But that could also be viewed negatively: weak teams get crushed by strong teams. Because $\frac{3}{4}$ of the questions are bonus questions, a weaker team may only be active for $\frac{1}{4}$ of the questions (the toss-ups) and spend the rest of the round watching the other team play (the bonuses). In general, getting crushed is not fun, and playing a much weaker team is boring.

In Knowledge Bowl, teams always face other teams of similar skill. This means teams must be actively engaged every round: teams should never feel disconsolate and thus disengaged or bored and thus disengaged. The downside is that while teams will see teams that are slightly stronger, they will never see how much stronger teams play.

The opponent-matching policies also influence final rankings. In quizbowl, the binary win-loss record is the main determiner of rankings. This can lead to a greater influence of chance because winning a round by 5 points is the same as winning by 200, even though the 5-point round could probably have gone either way, while the 200-point round was a clear win. This influence of chance can make the rounds more exciting, but also makes them a less reliable metric. In Knowledge Bowl, cumulative scores across the tournament typically determine rankings, and while the scores in any one round can be noisy, the cumulative scores across the tournament are more reliable. This may make the final rounds less exciting, but it also makes the final rankings more meaningful.

Question Styles

Knowledge Bowl questions come in many formats and in many difficulty levels. A tournament packet contains a mix of questions from easy to nearly impossible. This ensures that all levels of teams can answer a sufficient number of questions so that the game is fun, but it also allows the strongest teams to answer more questions correctly, so that power matched tournaments work properly: the scores in the top room are generally higher than in the second (that is, fewer

questions go unanswered in the top room), which are higher than in the third, and so on, allowing teams to play against other evenly matched teams while still producing total scores well-correlated with performance.

These are some of the main formats of Knowledge Bowl questions:

Short: Short questions are brief with one or two clues, but they can be anything from obvious to difficult. For example: Who was the second president of the United States? John Adams

Pyramidal: Pyramidal questions have many clues, ordered from most obscure to most obvious. The question always clearly states what will be asked first (e.g. “This artist ...” or “The protagonist of this novel ...”), and the first clue always restricts the question to a single correct answer. For example: What US president, the only one to receive a US Patent, was the first president not born in one of the original colonies, famously debated Stephen Douglas, and was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth? Lincoln

At the beginning, we’re told the question wants a US President. Then, we’re given clues in order from most esoteric to most obvious:

1. Only president to receive a patent (very obscure)
2. First president not born in one of the original colonies (known, but not commonly so)
3. Debated Stephen Douglas (mostly known)
4. Assassinated by John Wilkes Booth (very obvious)

Narrowing Net: Narrowing net questions begin with ambiguity about the answer and progressively narrow down the possibilities to a single answer. While they aren’t deceptive about what they will ask, they don’t initially provide enough information to know the answer for sure and allow teams to pick a level of risk when they buzz. For example: What US president who served in the 1800s was assassinated 16 years after Lincoln? Garfield

The narrowing process in this example is as follows:

1. “What US president”: There are 46 possible answers.
2. “who served in the 1800s”: 23 possible answers (but some are more likely than others!)
3. “was assassinated”: Just 3: Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley. Could buzz with a 1 in 3 risk.
4. “16 years after Lincoln”: Just Garfield.

Delayed Question: Delayed questions begin with an exposition that sets a topic area for the question, then finish with the actual question. During the exposition, the question is unknown. For example: The Japanese bombed Pearl harbor on December 7th, 1941. What president signed the Declaration of War on Japan the following day? FDR

Takes a Turn: Takes a turn questions are a special type of Delayed Question, but they look like they’ll ask one thing, then ask another. These are uncommon, but reward careful buzzing. For example: He was the only president elected to four terms, but he died shortly after his fourth inauguration. His wife, however, remained active in politics for another 17 years. Who was she? Eleanor Roosevelt (This is an extreme example for illustrative purposes.)

Early Buzzer: An Early Buzzer question gives some piece of information in the first few words that narrows down the answer to one, two, or three possible answers right away, so that knowledgeable teams can buzz before the question is asked. For example: What grammatical voice is used in the following sentence: The union was preserved by Lincoln. Passive. (There are only two voices, so a knowledgeable team can buzz on the word “voice” and take a 50/50 guess.) Another example: The Fair Deal was an ambitious set of proposals put forward by what US President? Truman (Once the question says “Fair Deal”, the question is most likely going to ask for the president associated with that agenda, so a knowledgeable team can buzz, predicting that the question will ask “what president” eventually.)

Combinations: Many questions are combinations of the previous styles. Here is a Narrowing Net combined with a Pyramidal ending: Who, after serving in the US House of Representatives and later as ambassador to the United Nations, became the 41st President of the United States following 8 years as Regan’s Vice President? George H W Bush
“House of Representatives / ambassador to UN / 41st president” is a narrowing net progression, and “41st president / 8 years as Regan’s Vice President” is a pyramidal ending.

This variety of questions keeps play lively and interesting. Knowledge Bowl requires not just knowledge, but also buzzing skill, question predicting skill, and a solid evaluation of risk and reward when questions are initially ambiguous.

Note that Pyramidal questions are not particularly well-suited to Knowledge-Bowl-type power-matched tournaments. If all questions are fully pyramidal, progressing from esoteric to completely obvious, then all questions will be answered in all rooms. If that were to happen, teams would jump from the bottom room to the top and vice versa each round, with final ranks largely random. Power-matched tournaments rely on having more questions answered in the upper rooms than in the lower rooms, which is why it is important to have a variety of question difficulty levels in a Knowledge Bowl tournament.

Quizbowl takes a very different approach to question styles: all toss-up questions are pyramidal. There is no doubt about the question at any point. Bonus questions are all another style: a set of three themed delayed questions: a short exposition followed by three short questions on the same topic area. Additionally, all questions in a packet are roughly the same level of difficulty. Quizbowl runs head-to-head rooms where the binary win-loss outcome is more important than the scores, rather than power-matched tournaments where total score matters, and pyramidal questions work well in that format. To quizbowl aficionados, the focus on pyramidal questions for toss-ups is a feature, not a limitation. Pyramidal questions very directly reward players with the most in-depth knowledge because they can buzz earlier and still answer correctly. This keeps the focus very specifically on rewarding greater knowledge, seeking to avoid the influence of other factors such as buzzing skill, question prediction, or risk analysis. The pyramidal toss-up questions provide the sole means of access to the bonus questions which are answered as a team. The design of the bonus questions (themed delayed) and how they’re answered (as a team without buzzing pressure) attempt to test a team’s knowledge very purely, minimizing the influence of other skills there, as well.

To Knowledge Bowl aficionados, the variety of question styles is a benefit, not a detriment. You must have strong and deep knowledge to succeed at Knowledge Bowl, but it requires additional skills of recognizing question styles and predicting where the question will go and recognizing when a fast buzz and a risk are worthwhile.

In a sense, if quizbowl and Knowledge Bowl were foot races, quizbowl would be an 800m run: whoever runs the fastest wins. It's very pure. Knowledge Bowl would be more like a steeplechase: you must be a fast runner to win, but you also have to be good at jumping and climbing out of water pits and dealing with wet shoes. The speed is primary, but other skills are important, too. Different people prefer different types of races, and neither type is better.

Both Have Benefits

Both Knowledge Bowl and quizbowl have benefits, and each is more attractive to different students. Schools benefit from playing both formats, and a state where both tournament styles are available provides better opportunities to its students.