



Paul Paquet Makes a Case for Trivia

Trivia pro and quizmaster Paul Paquet, author of *The Brain Boosting Trivia Book for Adults*, is one of those people.

“I’ve always had an absolute love of learning,” says Paquet, 58, of Ottawa, Ontario.

Over the past 25 years, Paquet has written more than 135,000 trivia questions across a variety of media: TV shows, books, apps, the board game *Trivial Pursuit*, and his website, triviahalloffame.com. He also qualified to appear on *Jeopardy!*

“I find it interesting to sit down and memorize things like the Chinese dynasties,” says Paquet. “Some people have different memory skills. My brain is wired to memorize facts.”

He’s quick to add that he’s not good at everything. “I’m terrible at fixing things around the house,” he says. “I often joke that if the apocalypse comes, I know who is going to be needed to rebuild society and who is going to be zombie food. I am going to be zombie food.”

Still, there are advantages to knowing a lot of trivia. It’s a conversation starter, stimulates your mind, and provides hours of free entertainment at social events, parties, and family gatherings.

Paquet says his wealth of knowledge comes in handy. Once, when entering the U.S., he told the customs agent he was going to attend a trivia event, and the officer quickly asked, “What are the four state capital cities named after U.S. presidents?”

At first, Paquet thought the agent doubted the purpose of his trip, so he quickly rattled off: Jackson, Mississippi; Lincoln, Nebraska; Jefferson City, Missouri; Madison, Wisconsin. “I realized after I got the four of them correct that he didn’t care. He was just making conversation.”

Developing an Enquiring Mind

Paquet began sharpening his trivia skills at a young age. “I was the weird kid who would read the *World Book Encyclopedia*,” he says.



In grade school, he would sometimes hang out with the recess monitors. “I would quiz them on what I had read,” he says. “At first, they thought I was just a curious kid. Then they realized I was quizzing them on the encyclopedia.”

In 1982, he appeared with his high school team on *Reach for the Top*, a Canadian quiz program. His team won twice.

When he was in his 30s, he started taking the qualifying test for *Jeopardy!* “I did well enough to make the live auditions three or four times, but I wasn’t ever picked,” he says. “My wife, Laura, who also loves trivia, was on the show in 2004.”

Creating the Best Questions

Over time, Paquet turned his interest into a career. In 1998, he started the Ottawa Trivia League, running events at local pubs. Bars pay him to write questions and provide hosts for trivia nights around the city.

One heartwarming outcome of his work: Several couples have met at his trivia events and fallen in love. “It’s a real rush to know there are human beings who wouldn’t be here if their parents hadn’t met answering questions about Taylor Swift.”

He launched his website in 1998. People can order questions in bulk for apps or pub trivia leagues. The pub nights and website “both took off and grew in their own directions,” he says. “It became a full-time job and still is.”

Paquet, who writes about 15 questions a day, is always searching for new material. “I wander around Wikipedia and read *The Economist* a lot,” he says.

Writing good questions is important to his business. “The content of the question is also the marketing of the business,” he says. “If people show up for trivia night and feel dumb and left out, that’s my failure.”

“My goal is for the questions to be entertaining,” says Paquet. “I throw clues in so that people can figure out what the answers are.” He wants to bring out the best in his audience so that participants will say to themselves, Oh, I had that board game when I was six, or I loved that song when I was 20.

Many of the people who attend Paquet’s trivia events are 20 to 30 years younger than he is. “It would be easy for me to ask questions about Talking Heads or *All in the Family*, but now I get to learn about Doja Cat and all the new video games out there,” he says. “People respond to that well.”

Players tend to be best at trivia when answering questions about subjects they care about. “Sports trivia people are the very best because they have so much fun with it,” says Paquet.

He advises trivia players not to take each question so seriously. “When you make a mistake, forget



about it and move on,” he says.

“It doesn’t matter how good you are. There are times when something you know well hides in your brain and will not come out,” Paquet says. “You could stump Ken Jennings [the host of *Jeopardy!* and the highest-earning American game show contestant ever] if you ask him the right question.”

Continuing to Learn

Paquet still works to get better at remembering facts, and he says others can do the same.

The secret to his success is based on concepts from the *Ebbinghaus forgetting curve*, named after German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus. The curve is a graphic representation of the forgetting process, illustrating how information is lost over time when there is no attempt to retain it.

“The idea is, the more often you see a fact over time, the longer you’ll remember it,” says Paquet. “If you see a fact once, you may remember it for a short time. If you see it again, you will remember it longer. If you see it again, you will remember it for even longer still.” Some studies suggest a person needs to revisit the same fact at least seven times before it becomes permanent.

To put this into practice, Paquet uses the *Leitner system*. That is, he studies facts on flashcards kept in an elongated box, similar to a recipe box. He moves the flashcards to different compartments of the box after he reviews them.

“I’m writing cards every day,” he says. “It’s the reason I’ve gotten better in the areas where I was weak, like the Bible, classical music, and Broadway musicals. It has made a huge difference.”

Paquet also tried the AnkiApp, a cross-platform mobile and desktop flashcard app designed to help with learning. He says the app works well for lots of people, but he prefers the Leitner box. “I’ve been able to absorb much more than I would otherwise,” he says. “I train, in a sense, and I have fun doing it.”

When he’s training, Paquet says, “I can practically feel the synapses in my brain lighting up and making connections. I can’t say if I’m staving off dementia, but I do feel sharper now than I did 25 years ago.”

Research from the National Institute on Aging says Paquet could be onto something. There is evidence suggesting cognitive training might help delay or slow age-related cognitive decline. Cognitive training involves structured activities designed to enhance memory, reasoning, and speed of processing.

“If the 58-year-old me and 26-year-old me were doing a head-to-head contest, I’m pretty sure the 58-year-old would win,” he says. “I might not be as fast at remembering facts, but I do feel like I know more than I did.”



RESOURCES

Want to test—or expand—your own trivia knowledge? Here are a few places to start.

- *Sporcle.com*. This website boasts “the world’s largest quiz community.” Play a quiz, create your own, or join a live, virtual event to compete against other players across the globe.
- *Ultimate Trivia: Volume 1* by Donna Hoke. Hoke provides more than 800 questions and answers on a wide range of topics, from history and literature to food and nature.
- *Boardlandia.com*. Depending on your interests, you can find trivia card games that focus on almost any topic, including U.S. national parks, cats, dogs, Egyptology, world history, movie facts, and vintage brand logos.



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