

# Trivia Competition Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Jonah Knobler** (February 19, 2026)

*In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email [expertanalysis@law360.com](mailto:expertanalysis@law360.com).*

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I've been obsessed with trivia as long as I can remember. I always hoped that my trivia skills would get me on Jeopardy! one day, but I never expected them to help me practice law. As it turns out, they did both.

## **A Passion for the Trivial**

I've always had a strange compulsion to collect interesting factoids. My kindergarten drawings were diagrams of the tallest mountains, rarest gemstones and biggest dinosaurs. In grade school, I was the nerdy kid studying the encyclopedia at recess while the other kids played kickball. I dreamed of meeting Alex Trebek the way my classmates dreamed of meeting Michael Jordan.



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By some stroke of luck, my high school's athletic league treated "academic quiz bowl" as a varsity team sport — technically, anyway, if not in terms of social status. Later, I competed in intercollegiate tournaments, where the questions got tougher and the competition got fiercer. Ultimately, I scored a berth in the College Jeopardy! championship, where I appeared for four nights on national TV, finished as first runner-up, and finally met Alex.

My 15 minutes of fame have been over for decades, but I've never gotten over the trivia bug. I compete in LearnedLeague, an online trivia society with players around the world. I enjoy the occasional quiz night at a local pub.

And the fiercest competition of all takes place in front of the TV, where I play along with Jeopardy! against my husband, who is a five-time winner on the show and a Tournament of Champions semifinalist. We're both also lawyers — and that's no coincidence. The competitive trivia world — learning it, playing it and writing it — trains you in the same skills that make good attorneys: rapid mastery of new subjects, precise expression and a forensic sensitivity to how people communicate.

## **Expertise — To a Point**

Every Jeopardy! board or quiz bowl match is a gauntlet of disparate subjects: literature, geography, Renaissance art and particle physics. One lifetime is far too short to become a true expert in all these areas. However, the best trivia players aren't towering authorities in any field of learning — let alone all of them. They are generalists with a unique superpower: the ability to intuit how much they need to know about a subject, then dive in and rapidly learn just enough.

That's exactly what commercial litigation requires. My recent cases have involved subjects as far-flung as heavy-metals toxicology, low-code enterprise software platforms, competition in the premium pet-food market and farming practices in West Africa.

At the start, I knew nothing about any of these topics. Within days, I had to become conversant in all of them. And over the course of each matter, I had to become a quasi-expert. Like trivia competitions, however, winning cases doesn't require Ph.D. level mastery of the underlying subject matter. The trick is knowing how much you need to know and getting up to speed quickly and efficiently.

Trivia taught me the skills I need to do that: to quickly absorb information about a new domain, distinguish signal from noise, and recognize when I've learned the things I'm expected to know. Those skills are crucial, whether you're cramming for the "Potent Potables" category on Jeopardy! or prepping to depose an expert endocrinologist about hypogonadism.

### **The Art of Drafting**

A few years ago, I started smithing — drafting my own trivia questions — for themed LearnedLeague competitions. My first contest, a quiz on classic video games, had almost 1,000 participants. One thing quickly became clear: Precise writing matters. A single ambiguous adjective can lead participants to give a wrong answer, even if they knew the right one. And trivia mavens take these things seriously.

For example, one question that I wrote sought the title of a classic driving game from the 1980s: Rad Racer. As a hint, I mentioned that the game's title was alliterative, but for 18% of participants, that led them to an incorrect answer I hadn't anticipated: Pole Position. In retrospect, the clue that had screamed Rad Racer for me — a Nintendo nerd — implied something very different to Atari aficionados. You can bet they let me know about it.

This experience was a covert master class in legal drafting. As with trivia quizzes, precision matters when drafting a contract, an examination outline or an appellate brief. And in the legal world, the stakes are far higher than punctured egos: Millions of dollars can turn on an ambiguous term.

When writing, I constantly pause and think of all the ways that a superficially obvious phrase might be misconstrued — especially by readers with reference frames different from my own, e.g., the Atari fans of the world. Trivia writing helps me project myself into my readers' shoes and craft language that's clear and unambiguous.

### **Picking Up on the Tells**

The flip side of learning to write trivia questions is learning to read them. I know what you're thinking — how hard can that be? But for good trivia players, question reading is an exercise in amateur psychoanalysis. They ask why the question writer chose those words — what does the exact phrasing reveal about the author's state of mind?

Take a question from a recent LearnedLeague quiz: "'A Perfect Day for Bananafish,' 'For Esmé — With Love and Squalor,' and 'Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes' are three tales that, along with six others, make up a 1953 J.D. Salinger collection published with what two-word name?"

When I first saw this question, I panicked: I didn't recognize any of those titles. Then I

parsed the question more closely. Why did the author point out that the named stories were "three" in number, when that was already evident from listing them? And why did he point out the number of stories — "six" — that weren't listed? Was the precise number of stories somehow relevant? And, come to think of it, why did he use the word "tales," rather than "stories," the usual literary term? Was he consciously avoiding using "stories" in the question?

Only then did I dimly recall seeing the title "Nine Stories" associated with Salinger decades ago. I felt a rush of dopamine as I realized this had to be the answer. And it was.

This skill, too, translates directly to lawyering. Like trivia questions, briefs, deposition testimony and discovery responses routinely have "tells": fingerprints of conscious wordsmithing that give away something important about the speaker's state of mind.

For example, when a brief says that there's no "binding" precedent on point, could that mean that the author is indeed aware of an on-point precedent — albeit unpublished? When an adversary says that a diligent search yielded no responsive "correspondence," might that signal that responsive communications exist that aren't "correspondence" — like voicemails? Trivia sharpens your ear for these linguistic nuances that betray weak arguments or devastating facts.

### **Being a Good Loser**

Finally, there's a humbling side to trivia. No matter how much you study, you'll be wrong — a lot. Sometimes it'll be your fault: You'll misread the question or forget things you once knew. Other times, you'll lose a match just because the categories just didn't break your way. And your mistakes will be displayed for all to see.

Decades later, I still remember the Jeopardy! questions I flubbed in front of an audience of millions — like when my brain blanked on the author of *Lolita* and all I could stammer was "that Russian guy." The best players aren't embarrassed by these moments. They enjoy them, because each wrong answer is an invitation to learn something new — and, hopefully, get the question right next time.

Here, too, trivia is like litigation. No matter how much effort I put into writing a brief or crafting an argument, sometimes I'll lose the motion or the case. Sometimes it'll be because of something I could have done better. And other times, it'll be for reasons beyond my control. Moreover, like my trivia losses, my courtroom losses are public — sometimes highly so. Though I'll never stop being competitive, trivia reminds me to be gracious in defeat, learn what I can from each loss, and not beat myself up when the system doesn't break my way.

There's just one small professional downside to my hobby: When judges ask me things at argument, I need to suppress the urge to answer in the form of a question.

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