



Discussions

Style Conversational Week 1048: Give a silly answer, you get a silly question (we hope)

By **Pat Myers**, Style Invitational editor
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The contest used to begin, repeatedly: “You are on ‘Jeopardy!’ These are the answers. What are the questions?” And as you can see from this [PDF of Week 91](#) — already the fourth time the Czar had run this contest — the 12 answers were printed on a graphic resembling a “Jeopardy!” board, with Bob Staake’s rather scary-looking caricature of Alex Trebek gesturing disturbedly.

We continued this format for literally dozens of these contests, until we finally acknowledged that the contest had much more in common with Johnny Carson’s [Carnac the Magnificent](#) bits (and Steve Allen’s before him), in which the hugely hatted Carnac would say an “answer” (“Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice”) and then reveal the question (“Name all the people who voted for President Carter”).

In whatever comparison, the Invitational has done this contest more than 30 times over the past two decades, and it’s produced a good set of results every single time. That’s probably because we’re basically offering 12 mini-contests, and if one or two don’t pan out, there are still lots left to choose from.

In my [Style Conversational from Week 995](#), the last time we ran this contest, I shared the winners of the first and the most recent Ask Backwardses, plus those from a couple of ones with unusual themes. Here are some more classics from the archives:

From Week 91, above:

Fifth Runner-Up: Answer: Spelling, Punctuation and Gas.

Question: What are the first three items on a skywriter’s preflight checklist? (Robert E. McCarthy)

Fourth Runner-Up: Answer: Moses, Jesus and [Cool “Disco” Dan](#).

Question: Who is Marion Barry going to need help from to clean up Washington? (Mary K. and Larry T. Phillips, Falls Church) [M.K. Phillips, by the way, showed up at our most recent Loser Brunch, after more than a decade away from Loserdom]

Third Runner-Up: Answer: Mrs. Howell, but not Gilligan. Question: What is one way of bowing out of the Mary Ann-Ginger debate? (Paul Kondis, Alexandria)

Second Runner-Up: Answer: The Kid Who Plays D.J. on “Roseanne.”

Question: What is the name of the kid who plays D.J. on “Roseanne”? (Allen R. Breon, Columbia; Michael Rosman, Chevy Chase)

First Runner-Up: Answer: The Kid Who Plays D.J. on “Roseanne.”

Question: To whom is [Robert Shapiro](#) attempting to shift suspicion based on a startling similarity in nicknames? (Greg Pryor, Washington)



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And the winner of the Buzz Saw Clock: Answer: Spelling, Punctuation and Gas.

Question: What are three things related to the use of a colon? (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

A contest that I judged way back in 1995, when I filled in for the Czar for four weeks:

REPORT FROM Week 125, "Ask Backward VI," in which we yet again asked for snappy questions to stupid answers, and received well over 2,000 entries, hundreds of them noting what Hugh Grant was wearing, and the noise he was making, that night in the BMW. Important notice: This competition — which has been determined in a statistically rigorous survey to be the No. 1 Sunday reading material among men who leave for the office at 4:45 a.m. and who insist on giving the date as "02 November," even in conversation — will no longer appall our readers with puerile cracks about urine or other intimate waste material. Our humor shall be droll — not drool. Scatological humor is entirely unacceptable within these columns and will not be considered, let alone rewarded.

Fourth runner-up: Here's a hint: It's yellow. What is part of the last question on the West Virginia urologists' licensing exam? (Gene Van Pelt, Verona, Va.)

Third runner-up: Colon Powell: Who was No. 1 on Saddam Hussein's enemies list? (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

Second runner-up: The world is my dumpster: What's the motto of the guy I saw jetting down I-66, tossing an empty cigarette pack from a car adorned with a bumper sticker that said "My kid beat up your honor student"? (Mike Thring, Leesburg)

First runner-up: [a graphic thing we can't replicate right this minute]

And the winner of the book "Dave Barry Slept Here," printed in Japanese:

Colon Powell: Who is America counting on to eliminate waste in government? (Elden Carnahan, Laurel)

Above-the-fold entries From Week 284 (1998):

Abraham, Martin and Sid. Question: Who were a president, a king and a Caesar? (Dave Zarrow, Herndon)

Salvatore "The Glazed Ham" Fondolini. Question: What did Salvatore "Prosciutto" Fondolini change his name to when he left the old country and came to America? (Barry Blyveis, Columbia)

Salvatore "The Glazed Ham" Fondolini. Question: Who rubs out his enemies by elevating their low-density lipoproteins? (Jonathan Paul, Garrett Park)

It's About the Size of a Watermelon. Question: According to DoD-STD-9283, Sub-paragraph 4b, how big is a watermelon? (Barney Kaufman, Manassas)

The Ford Phlegm. Question: What vehicle will Ford dealers be hawking this fall? (Roger M. Firestone, Oakton)

The Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy's Underpants. Question: What is holier-than-thou? (Jami Cashell, Charles Town, W.Va.)

And from Week 514 (2003):

Porky McBeal. Question: What character was played by Calista Blockheart? (Roy Ashley, Washington)

Because it could cause asphyxia. Question: In Scrabble, why should you never come up with "asp" pointing toward a triple word score? (Seth Brown, Williamstown, Mass.)

Chilean Sea Bass, but not George W. Bush. Question: Who knows where Chile is? (Joe Cackler, Falls Church; Sue Lin Chong, Washington)

Answer: Paris, Zurich, and Certain Parts of West Virginia. Question: Where is it not permissible to marry one's sister? (Sanford D. Horn, Alexandria)

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Aaaaand one more: Week 842, 2009:

A. Not even at Wal-Mart. Q. Where can you see a smiling face in Michigan? (Judy Blanchard, Novi, Mich.)

A. Squeeze relish. Q. What is green and always stopping up, but isn't a toilet in a gas station? (Barbara Turner, Takoma Park)

A. William Shakespeare's Flying Circus. Q. What is Sir Francis Bacon's Flying Circus? (Ring Alexander, New York)

A. The Beltsville Kazoo and Drum Corps. Q. What group annually bestows the honor of Comb-Humming Queen? (Dudley Thompson, Cary, N.C.)

So if Ask Backwards is a new contest for you, you now get the idea.

Safety Har-ness*: The results of Week 1044

(*Headline by Beverley Sharp)

In a city where there are far more lawyers than real people, and the real people work in regulatory agencies, it's not a surprise that lots of Losers chimed in with amusingly overcautious or just comically illogical safety rules and warnings.

As I note in the Invite itself, it's just the second blot of Ink for Stan McCoy, and his first since 2005. Stan might not have been Inviting during that time, but he came up with a great joke with the classic Invite quality of requiring the reader to come up with a key phrase in his own head — one that doesn't include any of the words in the entry. (I was a little worried that readers wouldn't get the joke, but a quick survey among people of different generations put me at ease.) Stan's original ink, by the way, in Week 614, was for an odd contest in which we gave [a list of characters](#), mostly product icons, and told people to come up with a pitch for a movie featuring any two or more of them: "At the peak of the Atkins Revolution, young Mr. Potato Head is filled with doubt and self-loathing. But wise Uncle Ben teaches him the ways of the Starch, an all-powerful energy that controls the universe. Together they build the Death Carb and wipe out the revolution, restoring peace and obesity to the galaxy." So Stan gets an [Inkin' Memorial](#) but just missed out on a [FirStink](#) for a first ink.

Loser Mark Raffman, an actual lawyer (and the one who came up with the idea for this contest), gets to play with some [appropriate dreidels](#) this Hanukkah, gorgeously decorated by the extremely motivated Nan Reiner. That's Mark's 81st ink since just Week 979, and his seventh "above the fold." Newcomer Heather Spence — whom we just got to meet at this past Sunday's Loser brunch when she was down from Brooklyn to visit family here — gets her fourth blot of Invite ink, and her first "My Cup Punneth Over" mug or "Almost Valuable Player" Grossery Bag (let me know which one, Heather), with her Big Brotherish bathroom monitor, and Kevin Dopart creeps ever closer to the 1,000-ink mark with some helpful measures to make violent bullying a safe experience.

Some entrants were clearly so well versed in regulatory language that their imitations of it were just *too* good: i.e., long and taxing: In addition to his funny inking entry about replacing schoolyard trees with tree-dressed teachers, First Offender James Adler offered this clever one that's just a bit too bulky for Invite use:

"To prevent eye injury and vision loss, employees with offices located near exterior windows on the East- and South-facing sides of the building (corridors B and C) must wear employer-provided sunglasses from sunrise until four hours thereafter. Additionally, to avoid sunset-related exposure,

employees with offices located on the West facing sides of the building must leave the building no later than 2:00pm. Supervisors are authorized to grant such employees special permission to remain at work for an extra 45 minutes, up to two days per week, but only for reasons of business necessity and only if the employee reads and signs Form O-29 (acknowledging his/her ophthalmological rights) and executes an appropriate waiver of liability.”

See you next ... hmmm, Wednesday or Friday

We'll probably get the Invitational up the day before Thanksgiving next week. If not, it will probably be the day after. Either way, have the happiest of Thanksgivings and Thanksgivukkahs.



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0 Comments



Pat Myers

Pat Myers is editor and judge of The Style Invitational, The Washington Post's page for clever, edgy humor and wordplay. In the role since December 2003, she has posted and judged more than 700 contests. She also writes the weekly Style Conversational column and runs the Style Invitational Devotees page on Facebook. [Follow](#)

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On Friday morning, Beltway drivers were greeted with "Surrender Donald."

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Nicholas Dagostino, 29, "held a very dim view of women," police say.

2 days ago



Opinion

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