

The Style Invitational

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

Week 698: Let's Get Personnel



BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Willingly or not, many of us have found ourselves in the job market of late, the luckier ones finally cadging an invitation into that little chair on the other side of the big desk for the sweat-buckets ritual of the job interview. Often, interviewers pull out some favorite questions they offer to every applicant, in hopes of revealing some undiscovered corners of the job-seeker's personality, or maybe just to make him squirm. This week: **Send us some humorously creative questions that a job interviewer would ask an applicant. Or conversely, send some questions it might be fun to ask the interviewer.**

Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. First runner-up receives one of the stupidest gadgets we've ever come across: a battery-powered pink plastic fan in the shape of a pig that uses virtually all its power to make noise, because you literally can't feel the air blow on your neck if you hold it up to your chin.

Other runners-up win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable Mentions (or whatever they're called that week) get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Magnets. One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Jan. 29. Put "Week 698" in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published Feb. 18. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. This week's Honorable Mentions name is by Dave Prevar. The revised title for next week's contest is by Kevin Dopart.

REPORT FROM WEEK 694

In which we asked readers to supply a downbeat interpretation of a not especially downbeat piece of writing: Elizabeth Kolbert of the New Yorker, who inspired this contest by lamenting the tragic fatalism of "Goodnight Moon," eat your heart out, dear.

4 "If You're Happy and You Know It" is an unconsciously thoughtless insult to toddlers around the world who have neither hands nor feet. (David Kleinbard, Jersey City)

3 "The Secret Garden": Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, but not always: Anyone with a moral compass must agree that young Colin should not be messing around in his mother's "secret garden," symbolically or otherwise. (Jeff Brechlin, Eagan, Minn.)

2 The winner of "The Ultimate Guide to Prank University," a book of juvenile practical jokes: In the nihilist world of Peter Rabbit, McGregor's garden is the anti-Eden — where food equals death. McGregor is the wrathful God who, having expelled his children from the garden, would destroy any who attempt to return. Peter enters the garden clothed and exits naked in a symbolic unbirthing, but there is no salvation for him, nor for any of us. (Brendan Beary, Great Mills)



AND THE WINNER OF THE INKER

Yes, Annie, the sun will come out tomorrow. And tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time. Duh-uh! And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Thanks for reminding me, you chirpy little pisher. (Cy Gardner, Arlington)

THE BUMMER CROP

"The Sound of Music": In this tragic tale, the church is deprived of the services of a musically gifted nun who could have brought more people to God, all because an oversexed man made her hear the call of the flesh and the allure of the stage. (Stephen Dudzik, Olney)

A Cinderella story, indeed! A mentally abused woman finally is able to escape the sadistic whims of her stepfamily and marry a wealthy man — a man who, after hours of intimate contact, by the next morning has no idea what she looks like. Their relationship is destined to be as fragile as a glass slipper. (Allison Bucca, Beltsville)

What mother would sing death threats to her baby? Yet how many moms — night after night, in deceptively soothing tones — threaten to stick their infants in a tree, and then casually hint of the impending doom from the dangerously overloaded couch? It's no wonder that the lyricist wishes to remain anonymous. (Jeffrey Martin, Rockville)

We used to cluck indulgently about Henny Penny's frantic doomsaying. But it was all too prophetic: Now the ocean is rising four feet every year — so the sky IS falling! (Marty McCullen, Gettysburg, Pa.)

It is obvious that Mike Mulligan and his steam shovel are digging their own graves. And yet they live on, serving the world above while trapped perpetually underground. What is life? What is death? This book leaves these enigmas unanswered, observing only that one's work is merely a march to the tomb. (Brendan Beary)

But in the end, it is all an illusion: George Bailey isn't saved; his inevitable end is only delayed. For where is George now? Dead. Mary? Dead. Uncle Billy? Dead. Mr. Potter? Dead. Harry? Dead. The men on the ship Harry saved? Dead. Marty, Bert, Ernie? Dead, dead, dead. Violet Bick, dead, too. Life is only a brief spark that separates two dark abysses. Merry Christmas. There's the bridge, right over there. (Phil Batten, Alexandria)

"Little House on the Prairie" books: Impelled by the arrogant mentality of Manifest Destiny, a family leaves behind a swath of death and destruction: slaughtering the wildlife, trampling the prairies and displacing indigenous peoples. (Lois Bagnoli and Melissa Yorks, Gaithersburg)

Paddington Bear illustrates the trouble with the British immigration system. Not only in the United States, it seems, can an illegal Hispanic immigrant be taken in by a local family, remain unemployed, survive on handouts, cause local destruction, and still avoid deportation. — Lou Dobbs (Richard Wong, Derwood; Martin Bancroft, Rochester, N.Y.)

"The Gift of the Magi": These young marrieds, despite their financial woes, are unable to control their frivolous spending habits, and also fail to communicate effectively. They should seek counseling immediately. — Amy Dickinson (Peter Metrinko, Chantilly)

The decision in "The Joy of Sex" to depict only heterosexual acts conveys a simmering contempt for the gay lifestyle and is a slap in the face of tolerance and diversity. Consigning it to a separate volume demonstrates that to the author, gay sex is not true sex, but something inferior — joyless. Hatred is NOT sexy. (Jon Milstein, Falls Church)

Euclidean geometry describes a soulless world bereft of the milk of human kindness, a world devoid of a Creator's presence. It should not be taught in our public schools. — Kansas State Board of Education (Wilson Varga, Alexandria)

"Norma Rae": An aging textile factory, already faced with foreign sweatshop competition, struggles to stay in business despite an attempt at union organizing that could send it under and ruin the town. Sure, let's applaud once again at that big scene. (Russell Beland, Springfield)

"The Cat in the Hat": An apparently single mother abandons her small children for hours. (Scoring drugs? Fornicating?) The children immediately admit a pandering pleasure-seeker into the home, supervised only by a weak Conscience-figure — a fish, the symbol of Christ! — who can barely inspire the children to engage in a massive coverup moments before Mother's return. The narration concludes by suggesting the option of lying to her about the day's events. Pure Satan-inspired trash, and I do not like it, not one little bit. (Combined from entries by Bob Dalton, Arlington; Michael Levy, Silver Spring; Brendan Beary)

"As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end." And you thought religion would offer you a way out of your bleak, dark, miserably hopeless existence? Amen to that. (Kevin Dopart, Washington)

Next Week: Dead Letters, or Decomposy

For the biggest Loser of Week 698: The feckless pig fan.



BY JULIA EWAN — THE WASHINGTON POST

ASK AMY

Dear Amy:

My young daughter has been friends with "Jenny" for more than a year.

Jenny's mother has graciously hosted us in her home many times. I've tried to contribute food, cleanup, small gifts, etc., but we've both really wanted to try to have the girls play at my home despite Jenny's allergies.

Jenny is allergic to dust and to cats.

We have two cats in our home and as much dust as anyone else.

My friend and I decided to try to have the kids play at my house on a day after my house was professionally cleaned.

The day before their little playdate, I shopped and looked at every label in the grocery store and remembered their personal preferences so as to have a meal they'd like. The next morning I stowed my kitties away, did an extra spin around the house with a mop on the floors and a tape roller on the upholstery.

I sponged down the baseboards in the playroom one extra time.

I thought we'd all had a wonderful, incident-free time.

The next morning, the mother called to tell me that Jenny woke up with itchy eyes. The mother said she had to strip her daughter and give her a long bath. She also said that she found a cat hair on the girl's coat, and that she had to wash all of her clothes, and strip the bed, washing the sheets and linens.

Not a single "thank-you" in the midst of this incident report.

Would you please remind people with allergies that their problems are not only a burden to them? People who try very hard to be gracious hosts to them go an extra mile in preparations.

If that extra mile just simply isn't enough, something like: "Thank you so much for your hospitality, but I'm afraid the severity of Jenny's allergies made the visit a little difficult. I'm disappointed that we won't be able to come again until she outgrows them a bit more" would suffice. *Preferring the Cats*

Because you've offered a script for "Jenny's" mother to follow, I will skip the scripting portion of my answer.

The way in which you present this, Jenny's mother is giving me a rash. I'm not an allergist, but having itchy eyes doesn't sound like a reason to strip the beds. Regardless, she should have thanked you for your efforts.

Unless Jenny's allergies are severe, her mother might need to simmer down a little. It seems that her daughter's condition has made her forget her good manners.

Unfortunately, you have also learned that you can't outwit some allergies with a thorough cleaning. A compromise would be for you to take the girls on outings to parks, museums and puppet shows and let the girls play only at Jenny's house.

Dear Amy:

I have two situations regarding dinner parties in homes. The first is that whenever I invite friends

or family to a dinner party at my place, they always ask if they can bring anything. They mean well, I'm sure, but I find the moment uneasy. After all, I didn't invite them to a potluck dinner. It always seems to me that I handle this poorly when I tell them that they need not bring anything. They get a kind of a miffed look.

Is there a graceful way to handle this? The second one is more perplexing. At a recent dinner in someone else's home, we'd just been seated at the table when the hostess turned to me and asked me to say grace. Amy, I am not religious. I don't do that sort of thing. I had no choice but to decline because I didn't know anything to say.

Talk about an awkward silence! Fortunately, someone chimed in that they would do it.

Am I wrong in thinking the hostess should have discussed this with me before hand?

No Potluck, No Prayers

Offering to bring something to a dinner is a courtesy. Some people do it as a way of offering a very firm RSVP, as in: "I'm so certain that I'll attend your dinner party that I'm even offering to contribute to it!" Your response should be, "I'm all set — just bring yourself." Please don't judge people harshly when they're trying to be helpful.

It would have been good for the hostess to ask you beforehand if you could say grace at the table, but because she didn't, she put you in a position to have to decline. You can assume that she has learned from this and that it won't happen again.

Social awkwardness isn't the worst thing in the world. It is a reminder that we are human and that sometimes we fumble around. The important thing is what happens next, right?

Dear Amy:

The letter by "Perplexed in Denver" regarding the appropriateness of a bride wearing white illustrates a big misconception.

The color white for wedding dresses has nothing to do with whether the bride is a virgin. It has to do with the holy sacrament of matrimony. The color for receiving sacraments is usually white to denote the grace received during this ritual. We dress babies in white for baptism, and we put a white pall on the casket to remind us of the departed soul's baptism. These colors are religious symbols, not certificates of purity.

You are right — the colors of the garments have nothing to do with the validity of the sacrament. *Gloria*

"Perplexed" was spending a lot of energy worrying about the prospective bride's virginity, based on the fact that she was choosing to wear white.

In addition to the fact that wearing white does not signify virginity, I thought that because this bothered him so much, he probably shouldn't bear witness to this particular ceremony.

Write to Amy Dickinson at askamy@tribune.com or Ask Amy, Chicago Tribune, TT500, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611.

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TODAY'S HOROSCOPE

Holiday Mathis

Aries (March 21-April 19)
Instead of complaining about that selfish person, be respectfully direct. Ask him or her to share a responsibility, to acknowledge another person for their contribution or to be more of a team player.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)
You put on no airs. When others pretend to be something they're not, it makes you uncomfortable, or you feel sorry for them. Try to have compassion. Everyone is doing his or her best.

Gemini (May 21-June 21)
Your honesty is admirable. However, you should still work out what you're going to say in critical situations. Whether you're selling yourself as a friend, business partner or date, strike all ambivalence from your presentation.

Cancer (June 22-July 22)
You're working on your spiritual self. Be invisible in this endeavor. Anonymous giving and sacred prayers that you don't talk about to anyone will bring you closer to who you really are.

Leo (July 23-Aug. 22)
You'll see conflicts you didn't know were there before. This is

terrific if you're writing a novel. Perhaps it's not so great if you're just trying to get along with your fellow humans. Don't worry. Resolutions are imminent.

Virgo (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)
The organized, direct and efficient manner in which you deal with others might be misconstrued as controlling. Deliver your instructions in the softest, gentlest manner possible.

Libra (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)
Channels of communication may be muddled by your expectations of what you'll hear. Keep an open mind. When loved ones feel free to express themselves around you, they keep coming back.

Scorpio (Oct. 24-Nov. 21)
You'll run into mysteries best left uninvestigated. When someone tells you, "You don't want to know," believe it. Run the other way, and take your curiosity with you.

Sagittarius (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)
What you think is happening may be the opposite of what's really the case. If you're willing to consider that you may be wrong, you'll know the real truth when you see it.

Capricorn (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)
If you're obsessing over something that others think is inconsequential, well, that's their problem. Obsess away. Who knows, maybe the smallest detail makes the biggest difference. Enjoy your obsession.

Aquarius (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)
There's an untold story inside you, and it's starting to create irritation, if not agony. Stories, like splinters under the skin, will bug you until they come out.

Pisces (Feb. 19-March 20)
Father figures help and benefit you. Seek them out, and let them know where you're going and what you need. And if you're not going anywhere and don't need anything, a father figure can help you with that, too.

TODAY'S BIRTHDAY, JAN. 21:
You're unceasingly upbeat this year, which attracts all kinds of fine fortune. It's not that you don't see that there's sadness in the world — it's just that you choose to limit your exposure to it. Take a job you're not qualified for in February. Your contradictions are ultra-lovable in March. Aries and Cancer people are your staunch supporters.
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BRIDGE | Frank Stewart

South dealer N-S vulnerable			
NORTH			
♠	QJ62	♥	A832
♦	AQ4	♣	84
WEST			
♠	4	♥	QJ104
♦	965	♣	K9765
SOUTH			
♠	AK10753	♥	5
♦	J732	♣	AQ

The bidding:			
South	West	North	East
1 ♠	Pass	2 NT	Pass
3 ♥	Pass	4 ♦	Pass
5 ♣	Pass	6 ♠	All Pass

Opening lead: ♥ Q

My friend the English professor says adverbs are fading away, slow but sure. He's kidding, but it's certain that bidding methods change.

Modern players use "limit" double raises. If the opening bid is one spade, a raise to three spades shows about 10 points and four or more trumps. If instead responder wants to force, he uses a gadget his partner has agreed on.

North's 2NT promised opening values with good spade support, and South's three hearts showed a singleton. Then cue-bidding led to a good slam.

When West led the queen of hearts, South took the ace, drew trumps and tried a diamond to dummy's queen. East took the king and led a club, putting South to a guess. South could finesse with the queen, or he could take the ace and rely on a 3-3 diamond break for his 12th trick. He couldn't try both chances. He finessed — the better percentage play — and went down.

After South draws trumps, he can lead a diamond to the ace and return a diamond. If East takes the king, South has three diamond tricks and 12 in all. If East plays low, South takes the jack and leads another diamond, and the 3-3 break gives him the slam. If West had the king of diamonds, he would capture South's jack and lead another heart. South would ruff and take the queen of diamonds, learning whether he needed the club finesse.

South does even better to ruff all of dummy's low hearts before he leads the ace and a low diamond: If West had K-x, he'd be end-played.

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