

# When I Was a Contestant on *Jeopardy*

*It doesn't happen that often — some might say never — but when blind luck catches up with you, it can lead to a nice cake walk along a very pretty bridge.*

BRIAN BRENNER

**T**his is *Jeopardy*! Here are today's contestants.

*[Contestants walk one by one into the studio.]*

First, meet Kyle, a brain surgeon and classical stage performer from Chicago, Illinois.

*[Applause.]*

Next, here is Charise, a poet from Berkeley, California.

*[Raucous applause.]*

Finally, meet Brian, a bridge engineer from Burlington, Massachusetts.

*[Very polite applause.]*

And now here is your host, Alex Trebeck!

Alex walks to his podium. He says, "Welcome contestants. Welcome viewers. We have a really exciting show today with terrific participants. Let's meet today's contestants. Hello, Kyle."

"Hello, Alex," Kyle replies.

"Kyle, you have quite an interesting background. I understand that you specialize in an unusual type of brain surgery. That must be quite difficult to do."

Kyle says, "Well, Alex, thanks, but truthfully it's not that hard. Brain surgery is not rocket science. Anyone can become a brain surgeon with enough work, years of training and perseverance."

"I see," Alex says. "Tell us about your work on stage."

"I am lucky to work with a troupe of Shakespearian performers. We've been presenting works of Shakespeare in a simulation of the original Globe Theater north of Chicago."

"That's fascinating. Good luck, Kyle."

*[Applause.]*

"Now let's meet Charise. Charise, you have quite an educational background. You were a triple major in college. That's very impressive. What subjects did you major in?"

"Yes, Alex," says Charise, "I majored in English poetry, ancient Roman history and psychology."

"What a diverse field of study! You should be well prepared for the categories we typically have on *Jeopardy*," Alex says. "Good luck on today's show."

*[Applause.]*

"Now let's meet our final contestant, Brian, a structural engineer from Massachusetts.

Brian, you've also shared with us an interesting story. I understand that you used to take your wife on what you call bridge dates. Can you tell us more about them?"

I answer, "When I first started dating my future wife, Lauren, I would take her to go see bridges that I helped design."

Alex says, "How unusual. That's not a typical date."

"You're right. Lauren was surprised at first. I think she expected to go out to dinner at a nice restaurant and not walk around in the mud up abutment slopes. But after a while, she grew to appreciate the design layouts and the detailing of the bridges."

"I see," Alex says. "Where do you go on dates today?"

I respond, "I think today Lauren prefers to go out to a nice restaurant."

*[Nervous laughter.]*

"OK, contestants, now it's time to play *Jeopardy*. In a moment, I will reveal the six categories on the board. These categories have been developed by our board of experts, and have been selected utterly by chance. Remember that when you provide an answer, it must be in the form of a question."

*[Excited applause. Camera pans to reveal categories on the Jeopardy game board.]*

Alex points at the game board and says, "Let's take a look at our six categories."

Reinforced Concrete
Steel Surface Preparation
Aggregate
CPM
The Finite Element Method
Lateral Loads

Kyle rings his buzzer.

"Yes, Kyle," says Alex.

Kyle asks, "CPM. Does that stand for Cardio-Pulmonary Method?"

"No," says Alex, "CPM stands for Critical Path Method. It's a technique that's frequently

used in the scheduling of engineering projects."

Kyle rings his buzzer again.

"Yes, Kyle," says Alex.

"Alex, these categories do not seem fair."

"I'm so sorry, Kyle. I didn't understand your question."

Kyle rings his buzzer yet again.

"Yes, Kyle," says Alex.

"What is, These categories don't seem fair?"

"How so, Kyle?" asks Alex.

"What is, Because the categories are all based on engineering topics?"

Alex responds, "Kyle, as you know, the categories were selected completely at random. After decades of episodes of *Jeopardy*, with categories such as Elizabethan drama, generals in the Civil War and overall subjects that only liberal arts majors could master, you have to admit that it is statistically possible for us to have a confluence of engineering questions occurring at one time, especially since these topics have never come up before on the show."

Kyle says, "Yes, I suppose that it is theoretically possible."

"Very well then. It's time to play *Jeopardy*," says Alex. "Backstage, we drew lots to decide who would select first. Brian, please choose the first category."

"Alex," I say, "I hardly know where to begin. How about Reinforced Concrete for \$200?"

*[Camera pans to the game board, where the first answer is revealed.]*

After several intense minutes of play, both the *Jeopardy* and Double *Jeopardy* rounds are complete. Alex reviews the scores:

"At the conclusion of Double *Jeopardy*, Charise has minus \$3,200, Kyle has minus \$6,000 and Brian has \$117,400. Brian, I believe your score is an all-time record. You are very knowledgeable about today's randomly selected topics."

"Thank you, Alex," I reply. "You know, it has been a real honor for me to appear on *Jeopardy*. I am so fortunate that the categories were somewhat familiar to me. Usually the categories are subjects like Ancient Greek Mythology and Phonetic Haiku. It's nice that

there were some concrete questions for a change."

"Brian, I know what you mean" Alex agrees. "Now let's prepare for Final Jeopardy. Contestants, in a moment I'll show you the final answer. Although in this case, since both Kyle and Charise are embarrassingly deep in the negative column, there's no point in playing. But let's do it anyway, just for fun. You'll have thirty seconds to write your response. Please be sure it's in the form of a question."

*[Camera pans to the game board.]*

"And now, here is today's Final Jeopardy category: Suspended Spans. Contestants, good luck!"

NOTE — *This essay is not an entirely original idea. There was an episode of the television show Cheers where the mailman, Cliff, is on Jeopardy and all the categories are about collecting the mail or going to a bar — you can view it on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=botdmsQilnU>. But this version is most probably the first to be about structural engineers (for what it's worth).*

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