

# THE INFORMATION PUMP

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## What is the Information Pump?

- The Information Pump is a parlor game, in which players give their impressions and evaluations — typically of a picture, object, or a new idea.
- It can be played live (with players seated around a table) or via web-mediation (with players communicating through computer terminals).
- Today, the topic will be wines.

## How does it differ from an ordinary group discussion, or chat room?

- Instead of simply voicing opinions, the players pose and answer each other's questions and get "points" according to how well they do.
- Playing well means communicating your subjective experience of the wine to the other players. There is no right or wrong answer in any objective sense.
- As a player, you score points both for: (1) the quality of your questions and (2) the quality of your responses to other players' questions. The scoring system is fine-tuned so that it pays to tell the truth and think hard.

## What do you need to play the game?

- one wine bottle (at least)
- $n \geq 2$  willing wine tasters
- $m \geq 1$  control players or 'Dummies,' who do not taste the wine
- a spreadsheet to keep score

You must also set the order in which tasters will pose questions (e.g., clockwise around the table) and the total number of questions. For a half-hour game, you might aim for about 8-20 questions.

Although you can play with two tasters and one Dummy, it works better with 4-6 tasters and 2-3 Dummies.

If you are playing around a table, it is good to intersperse the tasters and Dummies.

Before starting, you may want to share some background information with the Dummies. This could be general (e.g., that the tasters are tasting a red wine), or more specific (e.g., that the tasters are tasting a particular grape or region).

## What happens during a round?

- The taster whose turn it is to lead on this round either proposes a question or passes (e.g., to the taster on the right). Eventually, one taster (the author) submits a question to the group and privately designates a personal answer to the question.
- The question can be about anything whatsoever. For the purposes of the game, the author's answer is considered "the truth."
- The other players (tasters and Dummies) may then ask clarifying questions, about the meaning of the words, etc.. The author can reply or decline to reply.
- When no one has any further clarifying questions, all players except the author privately guess the true answer, using a 5 point rating scale, where,

1 = surely No,  
2 = probably No,  
3 = no idea,  
4 = probably Yes,  
5 = surely Yes.

- The author then reveals the true answer and the round is scored.
- In theory, the players' guesses should remain private, and players should calculate their own scores. In practice, it may be easier to have a moderator solicit the guesses and enter them into a scoring spreadsheet.

## How is the round scored?

- The guessing players (tasters and Dummies) win or lose \$\$ according to the accuracy of their guesses:

| Guess | Score if true answer is Yes | Score if true answer is No |
|-------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1     | -50¢                        | +25¢                       |
| 2     | -10¢                        | +10¢                       |
| 3     | 0                           | 0                          |
| 4     | +10                         | -10¢                       |
| 5     | +25¢                        | -50¢                       |

- The author of the question wins or loses \$\$ depending on whether the tasters were more accurate than the dummies in guessing the true answer. Precisely,

Author's score = tasters' total score - [(n-1)/m] x Dummies' total score.

The author's score is the difference between other tasters' earnings and Dummies' earnings, scaled to compensate for different numbers of tasters and Dummies.

- The score in each round depends only on what happens in that round, but the individual players' scores are cumulated across rounds.

- At the end of the game, the cumulated scores of the tasters can be compared, to pick the ‘Top Taster.’ Similarly, the cumulated scores of Dummies can be compared, to pick the ‘Top Dummy.’ However, because the Dummies are at a disadvantage, their scores cannot be directly compared to the scores of the tasters.

## **TIPS ON STRATEGY**

### **As author**

- Your question should mystify the Dummies but also have some chance of being figured out by other tasters. Because the Dummies are no dummies they may well remember answers to earlier questions, so you should avoid drawing on information that has already been revealed. In essence, you will score points for presenting statements that other tasters recognize that as relevant, and are “fresh” given what others have already said.
- A good question communicates something to the other players. Any carelessness, ambiguity or outright deception will hurt your score on average.
- Clarity in language will improve the score of both tasters and Dummies, but on average it will improve the score of tasters more than the score of Dummies. Hence it is to your advantage to answer clarifying questions, but do so in such a way that it does not tip the answer.
- Generally, it is better to propose a question rather than pass when your turn comes. Once someone has cashed in with a particular question, the later tasters cannot ‘recycle it.’ Good questions get used up fast.
- If you feel that you have run out of questions, don’t give up – be creative. You would be surprised what can work in this game. On average you will not lose by posing a question, no matter how weird or obscure.

### **As guessing player (taster or Dummy)**

- Your rating should reflect your personal level of confidence. If you are at least 85% certain that you know the right answer, then go with a “1” or a “5”. If you are less sure, go with a “2” or a “4.”
- Keep track on what has been said, and use the information to make sharper guesses. This is especially important for a Dummy, who has nothing else to go by.

## **WHAT HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED BY THE END OF THE GAME?**

Imagine that the game goes on for a very long time.

At some point, the Dummies should become as accurate as the tasters and the well of new questions will run dry.

We can then treat the discussion log — the list of questions, clarifications, and answers — as an informational substitute for the wine-tasting experience.