

# The Top Ten Lateral Thinking Puzzles

Compiled by Paul Sloane

## Introduction

Lateral thinking puzzles are strange situations in which you are given a little information and then have to find the explanation. They are solved through a dialogue between the quizmaster who sets the puzzle and the solver or solvers who try to figure out the answer. The puzzles as stated generally do not contain sufficient information for the solver to uncover the solution. So a key part of the process is the asking of questions. The questions can receive one of only three possible answers – yes, no or irrelevant.

When one line of enquiry reaches an end then another approach is needed, often from a completely new direction. This is where the lateral thinking comes in.

Some people find it frustrating that for any puzzle it is possible to construct various answers which fit the initial statement of the puzzle. However, for a good lateral thinking puzzle, the proper answer will be the best in the sense of the most apt and satisfying. When you hear the right answer to a good puzzle of this type you should want to kick yourself for not working it out!

This kind of puzzle teaches you to check your assumptions about any situation. You need to be open-minded, flexible and creative in your questioning and able to put lots of different clues and pieces of information together. Once you reach a viable solution you keep going in order to refine it or replace it with a better solution. This is lateral thinking!

Paul Sloane has written 20 books of lateral thinking puzzles including Lateral Thinking Puzzlers. Many of the books are co-authored with Des MacHale

This list contains some of the most renowned and representative lateral thinking puzzles from his books.

## The Puzzles

### 1. The Man in the Elevator

A man lives on the tenth floor of a building. Every day he takes the elevator to go down to the ground floor to go to work or to go shopping. When he returns he takes the elevator to the seventh floor and walks up the stairs to reach his apartment on the tenth floor. He hates walking so why does he do it?

This is probably the best known and most celebrated of all lateral thinking puzzles. It is a true classic. Although there are many possible solutions which fit the initial conditions, only the canonical answer is truly satisfying.

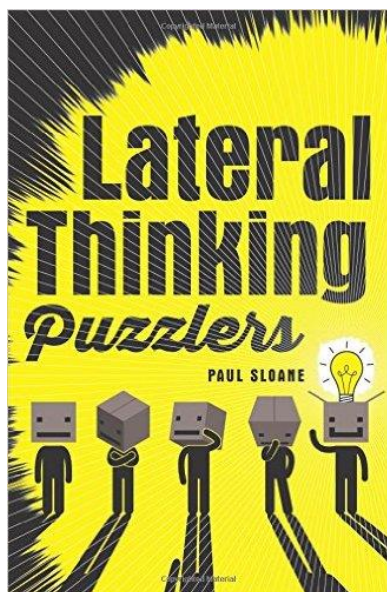
### 2. The Man in the Bar

A man walks into a bar and asks the barman for a glass of water. The barman pulls out a gun and points it at the man. The man says 'Thank you' and walks out.

This puzzle has claims to be the best of the genre. It is simple in its statement, absolutely baffling and yet with a completely satisfying solution. Most people struggle very hard to solve this one yet they like the answer when they hear it or have the satisfaction of figuring it out.

### 3. The Man who Hanged Himself

There is a large wooden barn which is completely empty except for a dead man hanging from the middle of the central rafter. The rope around his neck is ten feet long and his feet are three feet off the ground. The nearest wall is 20 feet away from the man. It is not possible to climb up the walls or along the rafters. The man hanged himself. How did he do it?



### 4. Death in a Field

A man is lying dead in a field. Next to him there is an unopened package. There is no other creature in the field. How did he die?

### 5. The Deadly Dish

Two men went into a restaurant. They both ordered the same dish from the menu. After they tasted it, one of the men went outside the restaurant and shot himself. Why?

## 6. The Coal, Carrot and Scarf

Five pieces of coal, a carrot and a scarf are lying on the lawn. Nobody put them on the lawn but there is a perfectly logical reason why they should be there. What is it?

## 7. Trouble with Sons

A woman had two sons who were born on the same hour of the same day of the same month of the same year. But they were not twins. How could this be so?

## 8. Push that Car

A man pushed his car. He stopped when he reached a hotel at which point he knew he was bankrupt. Why?

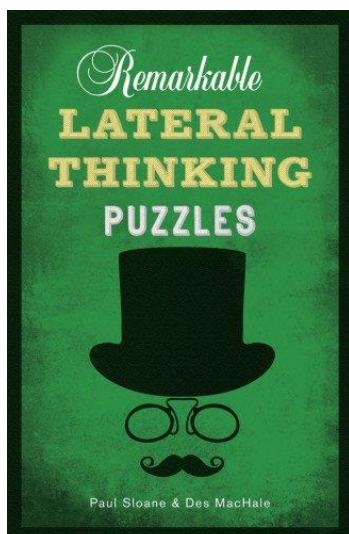
## 9. The Arm of the Postal Service

One day a man received a parcel in the post. Carefully packed inside was a human arm. He examined it, repacked it and then sent it on to another man. The second man also carefully examined the arm before taking it to the woods and burying it. Why did they do this?

This one probably has more variations than any other. A great one to puzzle out. It requires plenty of good questions.

## 10. Heaven

A man died and went to Heaven. There were thousands of other people there. They were all naked and all looked as they did at the age of 21. He looked around to see if there was anyone he recognised. He saw a couple and he knew immediately that they were Adam and Eve. How did he know?



## The Answers

### 1. The man in the Elevator

The man is (of course) a dwarf. Variants of this puzzle include the clue that on rainy days he goes up in the elevator to the tenth floor (he uses his umbrella!)

### 2. The Man in the Bar

The man had hiccups. The barman recognized this from his speech and drew the gun in order to give him a shock. It worked and cured the hiccups – so the man no longer needed the water.

This is a simple puzzle to state but a difficult one to solve. It is a perfect example of a seemingly irrational and incongruous situation having a simple and complete explanation. Amazingly this classic puzzle seems to work in different cultures and languages.

### 3. The Man who Hanged Himself

He climbed on a block of ice which has since melted.

This one is often stated with the clue of a puddle of water, but surely this is too much assistance. It is one of several problems which depend on the change of state of water (snow or ice to water or steam).

### 4. Death in a Field

The man had jumped from a plane but his parachute had failed to open. It is the unopened package.

This is sometimes given with the following rather elegant clue – as he approached the centre of the field he knew he was going to die. This is another of the top classics which is right up there with ‘The Man in the Bar’. If the solver is thinking along the wrong lines (i.e. in the two dimensions of the ground) then the lateral jump to the third dimension can be tough to make.

### 5. The Deadly Dish

The dish that the two men ordered was albatross. They had been stranded many years earlier on a desert island. When the man tasted albatross he realized that he had never tasted it before. This meant that the meat he had been given on the island was not albatross as he had been told. He correctly deduced that he had eaten the flesh of his son who had died when they first reached the island.

This has something in common with No. 9 below but is in my opinion even better. It is fiendishly difficult to figure out from a standing start. A beautiful aspect of this problem is the subtle fact that he shot himself because he did not recognise the taste of the dish!

#### 6. The Coal, Carrot and Scarf

They were used by children who made a snowman. The snow has now melted.

Another change of state puzzle. After this you should be on the look-out for them!

#### 7. Trouble with Sons

They were two of a set of triplets (or quadruplets etc.)

This simple little puzzle stumps many people. They try outlandish solutions involving test-tube babies or surrogate mothers. Why does the brain search for complex solutions when there is a much simpler one available?

#### 8. Push that Car

He was playing Monopoly.

#### 9. The Arm of the Postal Service

The three men had been stranded on a desert island. Desperate for food, they had agreed to amputate their left arms in order to eat them. They swore an oath that each would have his left arm cut off. One of them was a doctor and he cut the arms off his two companions. They were then rescued. But his oath was still binding so he later had to have his arm amputated and sent to his colleagues.

This is often told with a further twist whereby a doctor pays a tramp a large sum in order to amputate the tramp's arm which the doctor then sends to another man who inspects it etc. This variation can make for a long night of questioning!

#### 10. Heaven

He recognized Adam and Eve as the only people without navels. Because they were not born of women, they had never had umbilical cords and so they never had navels.

*Lateral Thinking Puzzlers by Paul Sloane*

*Remarkable Lateral Thinking Puzzles by Paul Sloane and Des MacHale*

*Are published by Sterling Publishing*