

JREF Challenge FAQ

Written by D.J. Grothe

Thursday, 30 October 2008 12:15 - Last Updated Monday, 31 October 2011 11:17

The JREF Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge "FAQ"

Thanks to Kramer, Beleth and RemieV for helping to compile this document

All correspondence concerning the challenge should be sent to challenge@randi.org . Please do not contact Randi directly.

Please read the Challenge rules and guidelines. Many questions will be answered there, so it is imperative you read this section first!

Rules and Guidelines

Remember, the rules will not be altered for anyone. If you need help understanding the information, please return to this FAQ before sending an e-mail.

1. Challenge History

1.1 How long has this Challenge been open?

The Challenge was first introduced in 1964 when James Randi offered \$1,000 of his own money to the first person who could offer proof of the paranormal. When the word got out, donors began stepping forward to help, and soon the prize had grown to One Million Dollars.

1.2 Where did Randi get this great idea for a Challenge?

During a live radio panel discussion, James Randi was challenged by a parapsychologist to "put [his] money where [his] mouth is", and Randi responded by offering to pay \$1,000 to anyone who could demonstrate paranormal powers in a controlled test.

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1.3 How many people have applied for the Challenge?

Between 1964 and 1982, Randi declared that over 650 people had applied. Between 1997 and February 15, 2005, there had been a total of 360 official, notarized applications. Applications continue to pour in!

1.4 Has anyone ever gotten past the preliminary test?

No. Some people use this fact as a reason not to apply – and yet the protocol is never altered once the applicant agrees to it. In fact, we ask the applicant to design the test.

1.5 Has anyone taken the formal test?

No. Applicants must pass the preliminary test in order to move on to a formal test. So far, no one has ever performed the paranormal ability they claimed to have.

2. Protocols

2.1 Protocols must be “mutually agreed upon,” what does that mean?

Neither the Foundation nor the claimant can force a testing procedure without the approval of the other side. The testing procedure is a negotiation, and no one can put their foot down. If at

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any time it a deadlock is reached, the application process will be terminated, and neither side will be blamed or considered at fault.

2.2 What is the definition of “paranormal” in regards to the Challenge?

Webster’s Online Dictionary defines “paranormal” as “not scientifically explainable; supernatural.”

Within the Challenge, this means that at the time your application is submitted and approved, your claim will be considered paranormal for the duration. If, after testing, it is decided that your ability is either scientifically explainable or will be someday, you needn’t worry. If the JREF has agreed to test you, then your claim is paranormal.

2.3 Does my claim count as paranormal?

Possibly. Read through the JREF forum for a list of previous applicants if you’d like to see whether or not your claim has been tested before. The list can be found at: <http://forums.randi.org/forumdisplay.php?f=43>

Past claims have included: psychic or mediumistic powers, ESP, dowsing, magnetic humans, astrology, faith healing, etc.

If you are submitting a claim that works off a previous assumption, you have to present evidence proving the assumption correct first. For example, a claim of exorcism must have prior proof of the existence of demons, unless the existence of demons would be self-evident during the exorcism. If someone’s head spins ‘round the wrong direction during an exorcism, it is safe to say that demons (or some other entities) are responsible. Projectile vomiting, however, is nasty and probably explainable.

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Some claims are, unfortunately, untestable. For example, claiming that you are able to make someone feel happy by talking to them is untestable, because it is impossible to objectively gauge someone's level of happiness, especially if they have been told that after talking to you they should feel happy.

If your claim is untestable, there is nothing that can be done to alter that status unless you find a new claim or negotiate a protocol in which the results are self-evident and objectively testable.

2.4 Why do you reject claims that might cause injury?

Because the JREF doesn't want anyone to get hurt or die, for both legal and humanitarian reasons. The JREF will not condone or support any claim where injury may occur. We don't even want you to try it at home first.

For example, if you claim you can jump off a ten story building and survive, the JREF is not going to test you at it because people jumping off buildings doesn't normally end well.

2.5 Why can't I submit a religious or spiritual claim?

Because they are, for the most part, untestable. For example, you can look at a series of events – say surviving an automobile crash, surviving a plane crash, surviving a near-drowning and say “This was the hand of God,” but the point of the Challenge isn't to give anecdotal evidence. It is to give something testable. Most religious people believe it's impossible to test God. We're pretty sure they're right, though perhaps for different reasons.

2.6 I'd like to change a rule.

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No. The Challenge rules are in place for a reason. When you fill out the JREF Challenge application, you are entering into a contract. The JREF doesn't cut corners or make exceptions. Not even for you.

The Challenge guidelines are not that difficult to meet. One issue that comes up often is the new rule describing the need for a media presence. Many excuses have been offered as to why this is impossible.

Here is a list of common issues:

Issue 1: I don't want the publicity.

Response: You will get the publicity if you pass the Challenge, which you believe you can do. If you don't want publicity, it's best not to apply at all.

Issue 2: I've never been featured in a news story.

Response: Newspapers and news stations love human interest stories. Contact one and ask that they run your story. If you can really perform what you claim, that should be no problem!

Issue 3: You didn't used to have this rule. Why do you have it now?

Response: The JREF has spent valuable time and resources investigating claims that were submitted by people who were obviously suffering from a mental ailment. These people need medical help, not encouragement. By requiring media presence, the JREF ensures that only those people who make an impact on society will be tested, and the individuals who are mentally ill receive no encouragement to continue their delusions.

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2.7 This particular rule shouldn't apply to me.

It does. Again, the application is a contract.

3. Prize Money

3.1 I heard the prize money doesn't really exist and that it's all just a scam.

The short answer: The money is real.

The medium-length answer: The money is held with the Evercore Trust Company. Anyone can verify that the money exists by requesting the information in writing from the JREF. They will in turn forward you the most recent account statement from Evercore Trust.

The long answer: The JREF is a 'tax exempt' organization, so they are required by law to have a level of financial transparency. That means that the public can request things like an annual report and copies of JREF's 990 (the tax return non-profits file). Go to <http://tfcny.fdncenter.org/990s/990search/eseach.php>

(search for Randi, 2005 is

[here](#)

.) to look up JREF's 990. Contained within these types of documents is enough information to verify that the organization does indeed have special assets in a reserved account to cover the prize, should it ever be won. The contract between the claimant and JREF is binding enough that the JREF

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must

pay the prize if someone wins it. This is a published, legal obligation, not just a casual offer. We have no choice in the matter. As a savvy applicant, all you need to do is verify that the organization has the funds to cover the prize. Also, if JREF were not able to hold up its end of the bargain, the IRS would investigate and pull the JREF's tax exempt status. It would mean severe penalties for the JREF, and Randi himself would also be personally liable and subject to potential incarceration. Rest assured: The money is there.

Long answer, continued: The JREF prize fund is maintained in a way that is similar to an endowment fund. Non-profits often create reserves of assets called endowments to build up enough money to take care of the organization in the case of bad financial times, or to save up money for a project down the road, like building a new facility or starting a large new program that would require a lot of capital. Endowment funds are held in a separate account designated, "James Randi Educational Foundation Prize Account." This prevents the JREF from accidentally spending the prize money. It is never a good idea to just let large sums of money sit in a savings account for years and years, so most non-profits invest their endowment funds. The way they invest it is really not important. JREF invests in bonds, which is fine. If a claimant wins the prize, it must be awarded within ten days, as per the Challenge rules and the legally binding contract entered into when the application was signed.

I know you are going to ask, "What if the bonds cannot be easily liquidated?" If the JREF did not pay a winning claimant in a reasonable amount of time, we would be open to a lawsuit for breach of contract. The claimant *will* be paid. The JREF states that the funds are held in immediately negotiable bonds so that a claimant can feel at ease about the ability of the JREF to pay. The fact that the JREF will do so is going above and beyond the requirements of the law and the generally accepted practices of good, responsible non-profits. It is an enormous act of good faith on JREF's part. The million dollars exist. Arguments to the contrary are utterly pointless, and they will *not* be entertained by the JREF.

3.2 I still don't buy it.

It's important to realize that if at this point you still doubt that the money exists, your doubt is in the entire American bond system in general, and not with the JREF. There is really no more evidence the JREF can provide you.

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Should you remain unconvinced of the existence of the prize funds, you are free to choose *not* to apply. The JREF will under no circumstances go beyond the aforementioned measures in providing proof of the prize fund's existence. As stated clearly in the Challenge rules, "The JREF will not cater to such vanities."

3.3 If I pass the formal test and win the Challenge, how will I be paid?

The first \$10,000 of the prize money will be paid by check, as stated in the Challenge rules, immediately upon successful demonstration of the claim. Arrangements will be made to liquidate the remaining \$990,000 and present it to the winner within ten days of passing the formal test.

4. Making Application

4.1 How do I apply?

First, make sure you qualify by reading the rules and guidelines. If you do, print out and sign the application, and have it notarized. Send it with your affidavits, proof of media presence, a self-addressed, stamped envelope, and a summary in three paragraphs or less of the nature of your claim, the conditions required to perform it, and the accuracy rates with which you can perform it, to:

Million Dollar Challenge 7095 Hollywood Boulevard, #1170 Hollywood CA 90028-6035 United States

The application should be typed, and filled out in comprehensible English. If you are not a native English speaker, you should have a translator help you with the application process as

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any misunderstandings will cause delays.

The Challenge Application, once it is signed by James Randi, is a legally binding contract.

4.2 What should I do before I apply?

See a physician for a physical and mental workup to ensure you are up to the task of taking the Challenge. Some of the people who apply for the Challenge are mentally ill, and this is a point that has the potential to be examined during the application process. Tell your physician about your paranormal ability and get their feedback as well.

Test your power at home, in a controlled setting like the one described in your protocol. Bring along skeptics, too. It is best to be able to demonstrate your ability reliably before you apply.

Keep in mind that if you cannot reliably perform your claim on command, it will be difficult to perform during the Challenge test.

Jot down lots of notes regarding “hits” and “misses” to make sure you aren’t retrospectively improving your results.

4.3 What kinds of communication will I receive during my application process?

When your application has been looked over and processed, you will receive either a letter or e-mail from the JREF about any concerns or protocol alterations that might be helpful.

This is a long process, so please do not send an e-mail asking about updates. That will only

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delay the process further. Your application was not the only one received, and it takes time to create workable protocols.

Once you have received your letter or e-mail either asking for clarification or approving the protocol you have outlined, the protocol will be forwarded to James Randi for his approval.

If Randi approves it, the details for a preliminary test will be put in place. Again, this is a long process.

4.4 How long does an application take to process?

This depends on the number of applications received, how workable your protocol is, and how testable your claim is.

4.5 Can't I just e-mail the application?

No. Applications must be sent through postal mail to the JREF, as there is no way to notarize e-mail. You may, however e-mail a copy of your application to challenge@randi.org , but this will only serve as a reference to the official challenge application.

4.6 How much of my application is confidential?

It isn't. The JREF reserves the right to publish any and all materials regarding the Challenge.

4.7 Who else has applied?

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Lots of people! Some of the application information is available on the JREF's forum, but the majority of it is on file at the JREF. You can make an appointment to visit the Foundation and view the applications by contacting a JREF representative.

4.8 If I am asked to provide affidavits, who should I get to supply them?

You should approach individuals of an academic standing who are not related to you. The affidavits must be from individuals who are familiar with the scientific method and logical deduction, and can witness your claim from an unbiased standpoint and offer their feedback.

You may consider e-mailing professors at a nearby University. Some would-be applicants have noted that most academics do not believe in the paranormal, and would therefore not be the right type of person to approach with paranormal claims. However, that is kind of the point – an academic's opinion will not be swayed by a desire to believe, and the evidence will be taken at its own value.

The affidavit should read something like the following:

I have personally witnessed the phenomenon claimed by "(applicant's name)" in his/her application for the JREF One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge, and I can offer no rational explanation for it.

4.9 If my claim involves healing or diagnosing, can I use affidavits from those I have healed or diagnosed?

No. Remember, the point of affidavits is to have responses from unbiased individuals.

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5. Processing

5.1 What happens next?

You may receive communications from the JREF about the nature of your claim. The JREF will want extremely specific details about the precise scope of your ability.

If the protocol you submitted with your application does not qualify as a true test of the ability, the JREF will offer up alternate testing ideas until one can be agreed upon.

5.2 What happens between the preliminary test and the official test?

The protocol itself will not be changed, and neither will any of the documents you and the JREF have agreed upon. The final test may be longer, or require more conclusive results through more sets of the test to ensure that the preliminary test was not a fluke.

All tests are videotaped and stored. You will be asked to state, on camera, that the protocol is fair prior to the test. You will be asked to state it again afterward. If you do not feel that the protocol is fair beforehand, you are not obligated to continue the test. However, if you do not agree with the protocol, you must let the JREF know before the actual testing stage.

5.3 Who pays for all this?

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You do. The JREF is a non-profit organization, and simply does not have the resources to pay travel and testing expenses for every single claimant. We will work with you as much as possible, and try to test near you, but in the end, if you're convinced you're going to win a million dollars, travel shouldn't be that much of an issue.

Randi's Personal FAQ

(1) What's the toughest case you've ever had to crack?

None have been particularly difficult. The hardest part has always been to get the claimant to state clearly what he or she thinks they can do, under what conditions, and with what accuracy. Most are very vague about these aspects, and very few have any notion of how a proper test should be conducted. We at JREF sometimes take months getting those matters settled, only to have the applicant suddenly drop out of the negotiations. But the actual solving of what's happening, or why claimants believe that they have powers — if that state of negotiation is ever reached — is easy, because the range of claims is rather small and nothing really new is ever offered. The claims are sometimes interesting variations on very old misconceptions or delusions, but seldom is there anything that surprises us or that requires very much heavy analysis. Of course, there are some situations where not enough information has been given by the applicant, even though we try to get all the needed data, so in these cases we are not able to ever determine what the claim might actually be.

(2) Has there ever been a time when you thought, "This is the one that will take the prize?"

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No. I wish there were some really challenging offers or claims, just to add some excitement to my job, but it's pretty well the same old material, endlessly repeated. And never have I ever even been much surprised at a claim, though I'm often surprised at the fact that anyone is actually fooled by it, even for a moment.

(3) To date, how many persons have been tested for the million-dollar prize offered by JREF?

That's not a simple question to answer. Many hundreds have applied, and most have had to be instructed to reapply — sometimes several times — because they did it incorrectly or incompletely. There are, at any given time, about 40 to 60 applicants being considered, but from experience we know that the vast majority will drop out even before any proper preliminary test can be designed. Of those who get to the preliminary stage, perhaps a third will actually be tested, and some of those will quit before completion. To date, no one has actually passed the simple preliminaries and arrived at the formal test stage, though a couple hundred have completed and failed the preliminaries. So, no one has been formally tested for the big prize, though we're ready and willing.

(4) Why does it appear that you only test persons with very minor and even frivolous claims, and not the prominent "psychic" performers and/or scientists who appear on television and in the media, and who write books about their careers?

We can only test persons who either apply to become claimants for the million-dollar prize, or who will actually submit themselves to undergoing proper test procedures. The "stars" never do this, and in fact they do anything they can to avoid us and our challenge; they would rather just run on about past glories, point to anecdotal evidence, or grandly ignore our genuine offer to test them. The people who do apply are probably honestly convinced of their abilities, and have no fear of discovery. Where are James Van Praagh, Sylvia Browne, George Anderson, John Edward, and the rest of the current "big names"? And why hasn't Uri Geller, the professional

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spoon-bender (remember him from the 70s?) snapped up this easy cash? One can only wonder.

We at JREF must offer to test any and every applicant, because we cannot be the judges of whether a claim is likely to be valid. Only occasionally, we encounter a claim that is just so silly or dangerous, that we do not offer to go ahead with negotiations. Example: a person claimed to be controlling every event in the world just by wagging his head back and forth, and he even sent us a video of himself in action. He also "fed" a spirit living in a black stone, through a hole in that stone. We are tolerant, but not quite naive enough to spend time discussing such a claim.

(5) What harm does it do to simply let people believe in silly things? Why do you take away their pleasant delusions?

The potential harm is very real, and dangerous. Belief in such obvious flummeries as astrology or fortune-telling can appear — quite incorrectly — to give confirmatory results, and that can lead to the victim pursuing more dangerous, expensive, and often health-related scams. Blind belief can be comforting, but it can easily cripple reason and productivity, and stop intellectual progress. We at JREF never try to impose our beliefs or philosophies on others; we only try to inform them, and suggest that there are alternate choices to be made. Examples of personal tragedies resulting from an uncritical embrace of supernatural claims, are plentiful.

(6) Why do you continue to preach critical thinking about the paranormal, superstition, and quackery, if you can't ever really disabuse people of their errors?

We feel that an effort must be made, particularly to get young people thinking critically and bravely about these subjects. Those who have not completely surrendered to careless acceptance of flim-flam, can be brought to think about their decisions, and in many cases can

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and will change their minds. Others, we realize, will retain their delusions because they have so much invested in them. Not to at least try to communicate what we know to be true, would be unethical.

(7) Will you ever win the battle of rationality over superstition?

We think that "war" will never be won, because the scam-artists and the honestly deluded promoters of nonsense are constantly being replaced with others. And though Barnum never said it, there does appear to be "a sucker born every minute." So, we have predators and prey, and that is a natural and expected condition of life; it has ever been thus. The JREF only hopes to teach those who — through no fault of their own — are unaware of certain facts of the real world, to be harder prey for the predators to catch. But there's a difference between winning a "war" and winning a "battle." We win battles every day, when someone walks through our doors and announces that we've added in some way to their understanding of the world. Every class of kids that we speak to, every audience in any part of the world, wins us a battle. That's why we stay with it.

(8) But you're not a scientist. How can you speak on these matters with authority?

Authority does not rest with scientists, when emotion, need, and desperation are involved. Scientists are human beings, too; they can be deceived and self-deceived. We at the JREF are skilled in two directions: we know how people are fooled by others, and we know how people fool themselves. We deal with hard, basic, facts, and we try our best to make them known. We try to protect people from influences that might obscure the true danger of uncritical thinking. We often succeed. And we have very substantial and eminent scientific authorities on hand to provide the advice and specialization we require.

(9) Scientific papers have been written supporting paranormal events and talents. Therefore, how can you deny them?

Scientists can be wrong — sometimes, very wrong. The history of science is replete with serious errors of judgment, bad research, faked results, and simple mistakes, made by scientists in every field. The beauty of science is that it corrects itself by its own nature and design. By this means, science provides us with increasingly clearer views of how the world works. Unfortunately, though science itself is self-correcting, sometimes the scientists involved do not correct themselves. And there is not a single example of a scientific discovery in the field of parapsychology that has been independently replicated. That makes parapsychology absolutely unique in the world of science.

(10) What projects are you working on at this moment?

In some cases, we can't say. Sorry. There are always investigations underway, but because of their very nature, those matters cannot be openly discussed. But, TV specials are being developed and written, books are nearing completion, and lectures are being contracted, all over the world. We try to keep folks informed via our web page — which presently gets about 100,000 page-hits a day, on an average.

(11) If what you say is true, that the supernatural powers being claimed every day in the media are unproven, why is it that scientists themselves don't speak out against those claims?

It's truly a pity that more concerned scientists don't trouble to make statements when they see their colleagues going overboard on some matters. Carl Sagan, Richard Feynman, Isaac Asimov, B.F. Skinner, and a spectrum of scientific luminaries who dared stick their necks out

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and make their opinions clearly heard in the media, are gone now, and we have Michael Shermer, CSICOP, JREF, and other persons and agencies struggling to fill those shoes. We need more clear voices of reason to be heard, more often. It's unfortunately quite true that by and large, scientists tend to prefer to live in "ivory towers," and do not choose to become involved in public controversies. We knock on those tower doors regularly....

(12) Are countries other than the USA also plagued by incredible beliefs and claims of quackery, pseudoscience, and magic?

Oh, yes. It's difficult to determine or define a "silliness factor" for any culture, but we can say that all parts of the Earth are currently getting deeper and deeper into such nonsense. Though the "flavors," languages, and costumes of the beliefs may vary, they are all there in full bloom. In one place, medieval medical notions may be in full effect, while in another location the populace is enamored — at the moment — with summoning up spirits. And, it's not getting any better. Quite the contrary.

A few years ago in Padua, Italy, I attended the annual convention of CICAP — the Comitato Italiano per il Controllo delle Affermazioni sul Paranormale (Italian Committee for Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal). Having thereby attained a bit of a profile in the local press, I became the subject of some angry questions and accusations. One fierce-looking woman approached me festooned with beads and crystals, hair awry and determined to slap me down with The Big Question. Through an interpreter, she demanded that I give her "the chemical formula for the soul." I feel that this person, in common with so many others, really thinks that such a question is one that surely must floor me instantly. She placed her statement, then smiled triumphantly, awaiting my confusion — which did not materialize. I looked her right in the eye and simply told her that she wasn't making sense, and that she did not understand the nature of the matter she was trying to discuss.

It is a delicate matter, this process. While not ridiculing the honestly self-deceived, we must try to show them where they've gone off-track. We also have to handle them firmly but gently, so that we can move on to other matters. The charlatans seldom come to us, but when we must deal with them, we do so with great care, ever conscious of the litigious society we are immersed in, willy-nilly. Of course, when confronted with a particularly incredible claim like "remote viewing" (the current version of "clairvoyance") we can easily stop short and ask

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ourselves just why we are involved with such obvious nonsense. But this is the job we chose to take on, and it has its rewards in the feedback we get from those who have listened, learned, and benefited from our efforts. That's the payoff.

And it's worth the battle.