Elizabeth Nelson

Insiders and Autopilots
How a House, a Wedding, and a French Bulldog Improved My Empathy for New Researchers

Lulu was struggling to breathe. Like many French bulldogs, my friend's new puppy was experiencing brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome (BAOS) and her vet was recommending surgery. Given a choice between scalpels or lasers, my friend was lost and trying to make a significant decision without really understanding the context or knowing how to choose. Swap that medically complex pup with a looming research assignment and many of us could spot similar fear in our students. Writing a good research paper isn't the same as sending a beloved pet into surgery, of course, but this isn't the distress Olympics. Fear, frustration, and doubt don't care about the context that's triggering them when they stomp all over us and block our path to a decision.

Thinking about Lulu's surgery, I started to reflect on some other scary information needs I've encountered. More specifically, I've been thinking about how my skills as a librarian and a "research insider" went on autopilot to save me—and on what that says for how I can better support my students as "research outsiders" who don't yet have those skills.

Back in 2021, planning my wedding meant joy, excitement, and a constant bombardment of demands for instant decisions, without which our vendors and venue could not possibly proceed. For the reception, were we booking a pole tent, a marquee, or a sailcloth—and with warm or warm-white lighting? For the dress, did I want the indiscernible ivory tulle, alabaster organza, or pearl chiffon? The DJ needed access to power of a certain amperage (or wattage?)—well, did we have it or not?! The demands piled up, with each choice requiring time to learn the context before making a decision.

A few months after the wedding, we began house hunting during what we were told was the worst time to be buying a home in recent history. Every decision felt impossible. Which properties were unreasonably overvalued—except, weren't they all? Which neighborhoods fell within the best school districts—and were those "best" labels coming from trustworthy metrics or just racism? And what is a heat pump?? Houses were up Friday and gone by Monday. Suddenly our too-short wedding planning timeline sounded like a peaceful eternity of contemplation.

Throughout both of these milestone experiences, I felt lost without either the contextual experience to make quick choices or the time to make informed ones. But I'm a research "insider" and had my skills as a librarian to fall back on. Identifying and investigating unfamiliar terms to better understand the question and develop keywords has become second nature for me, as I'm sure it has for all of us. Faced with the mental obstacle of my own anxiety, my experience as a researcher leapt into autopilot, helping me identify the information

Elizabeth Nelson is a reference and instruction librarian at Penn State Lehigh Valley, email: ezn80@psu.edu.

needs behind the decisions and seek out the right sources to fill them. However, even with my experience, skill, and critical thinking, I still felt overwhelmed by the need to quickly find the right information and make the right decision.

So how much worse must this feel for students who are struggling with the same feelings and lack a familiar path to follow through them? Students new to research face fear of failure, frustration in struggling with an assignment that asks them to exercise unfamiliar skills, terror of a falling GPA, and shame at the (false) idea that this is hard for them but easy for everyone else. Their research and critical-thinking autopilots are still being trained—by us, in part—and aren't ready to take over when they're overwhelmed by these feelings. Each decision they make in the research process is a new and unfamiliar experience, and each one comes with a potential for failure on a small or large scale. Reflecting on this fear in my own life helped me realize that I, as a librarian, can play a huge part in introducing, scaffolding, and supporting these moments in ways that reduce anxiety and help students train their autopilot and become research insiders.

Which brings us back to Lulu. I apologize for making you wait until the end to find out that her surgery was successful and she's a healthy, snuffly, princess of a dog today. But at the time, my friend had to make a very important decision on a very short deadline in a very unfamiliar context. Her autopilot jumped in with critical thinking skills, identifying the question and the information she'd need to answer it, but then hit a brick wall of unreliable Google results with nowhere to go from there—except to me. Together, we found some PubMed veterinary articles on the outcomes of various surgical options that ultimately helped her make a decision. To my mind, she showed the ideal response I hope to cultivate in my students. Her critical-thinking autopilot activated and took her to the point where she had a clear idea of her question, her options, and the information she needed to find—and then she reached out for help.

If the road to becoming a critical thinker was easy, there'd be no need for librarians to bridge the ravines and provide maps for the best routes. But we can't smooth the way entirely and still expect students to learn to find a traversable path and think their way through rough ground when they encounter it. They need to work through the problems to train their autopilots, but also to learn not to panic, give up, or blame themselves when they hit a point where they need expert help to continue. Being a research insider isn't about being an expert in everything—it's about knowing how to read the map, when to ask for directions, and how to follow them when you get them. As a research insider who helps others gain those skills, I need to remember to reflect on the moments when being a research insider made a scary question easier and take the time to carefully and empathetically support the outsiders on their way in. ✐