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FEATURED ARTICLE

What Is... Curiosity? How Libraries Build *Jeopardy!* Champions

By Raymond Goslow

When I found out in October 2021 that I was going to represent Kennesaw State University in the *Jeopardy!* National College Championship, I knew that I had big shoes to fill - after all, librarians had been on a bit of a *Jeopardy!* hot streak in the previous couple years. Emma Boettcher, a user experience librarian at the University of Chicago, took down James Holzhauer in 2019 just one game before he would have likely surpassed Ken Jennings's all-time regular-season winnings records (Jacobs, 2019). Soon after, Veronica Vichit-Vadakan, a reference librarian at Portland Community College, won four games in 2020 before being invited back for 2021's Tournament of

Champions, where she entered as an underdog but made it all the way to the finals (Proctor, 2021). Little did anyone know that Amy Schneider's winning streak, still under wraps to the general public at that time, would eventually be snapped at 40 games by Rhone Talsma, a multimedia librarian at Chicago Ridge Public Library (Zalusky, 2022).

As it turned out, of course, my performance in the tournament would be one to make yesteryear's librarians of *Jeopardy!* Proud—I won my quarterfinal and semifinal games in dominating runaway victories, then made a strong comeback in the finals after falling



Raymond Goslow (right) with *Jeopardy!* host Mayim Bialik. Image Courtesy of *Jeopardy!* Productions, Inc.

behind early to finish in a close second place and walk away with \$100,000. But even though I lived up to the expectations set by librarians who had previously appeared on the show, the expectations themselves deserve a closer look. What exactly are the skills needed to succeed on *Jeopardy!*, and does librarianship actually have anything to do with them?

The core competencies of a *Jeopardy!* champion were pithily summarized by Jaskaran Singh, winner of the *Jeopardy!* National College Championship, as “buzz fast and know things” (*Jeopardy!*, 2022). Anyone with even a passing familiarity with the show’s format would agree with his assessment—a successful contestant needs a strong knowledge base to be able to attempt to buzz in as much as possible and a lightning-quick trigger finger to beat other, equally knowledgeable contestants to the punch. In fact, for many years, fans of the show assumed that buzzer speed was the most important ingredient; the general assumption was that most of the time all three contestants knew the correct response, and it was only split-second differences in reaction time that were determining who got the chance to give it.

In January 2022, however, *Jeopardy!* began publishing daily box scores for each game, which revealed for the first time how often contestants were actually attempting to buzz in. This data proved once and for all that the game is not just a reflex contest with a thin outer coat of trivia. For the 20 games aired during the month of February 2022, the average contestant attempted to buzz in only 58% of the time (*Jeopardy!*, n.d.); given that far more than 58% of clues each night have at least one contestant attempt to respond, this means that real and substantive differences in knowledge play a large role in determining the victor in a game of *Jeopardy!*.

That is good news for any librarians with aspirations to become *Jeopardy!* champions! I cannot say my career in libraries has done much to give me razor-sharp reflexes, but it certainly

has exposed me to a wide variety of information I never would have encountered on my own. That exposure, I think, is the key to what makes the library a crucible for *Jeopardy!* contestants. Just as a worker in a candy shop cannot help but go home carrying a sugary aroma, information will inevitably rub off on a librarian every single day. *Jeopardy!*’s recent librarian champions confirm that dealing with a wide variety of information in the course of their daily work prepared them for *Jeopardy!*. Veronica Vichit-Vadakan explained her work as a reference librarian in an academic library by saying, “You never know what random question people will ask you...[s]tudents are struggling across all different disciplines to find the information they need, and it can be really helpful as a librarian to have a lot of facts at hand to help them out” (Proctor, 2021); Rhone Talsma put it even more succinctly: “[W]orking at a reference desk, you’re always on *Jeopardy!*” (Zalusky, 2022).

My own experience in the library dovetails with theirs. I spent my first two years as a public library staff member working part-time in the children’s department, where one of my many duties was to help kids and their parents with reference questions. My favorite questions were never those that I could answer off the top of my head; instead, I got the most fulfillment when I had to teach myself something new to even know what to look for. I certainly had no pre-existing knowledge about careers in dentistry when I was hired, but I got a crash course in DDSes, DMDs, and everything in between when a young man asked me for help finding such information for a school project. Working in the library pushes a person out of their comfort zone in just the right ways to sharpen them up for *Jeopardy!*.

That well-roundedness that library work cultivates pays dividends on the *Jeopardy!* stage. Even the most knowledgeable specialist in any given field would likely fall flat if they faced a board full of categories unrelated to their area of expertise, since *Jeopardy!* is tailor-

made to reward those whose information toolbox is wide-ranging (I have noticed while watching the show that being too familiar with a category can actually be detrimental, as my first ideas for a response tend to draw on more obscure material than a contestant would be expected to know). One of the best ways to find a Daily Double, which can often be the key to making a come-from-behind victory or cementing a runaway lead, is by bouncing between categories among the high-value clues where the Daily Double is more likely to be found. That strategy can only be used effectively, though, by someone who has the broad-based knowledge needed to switch between topics every few seconds and not miss a beat.

The power of library resources to forge *Jeopardy!* champions has even helped super-champions who were not themselves librarians. James Holzhauer has explained that a major part of his preparation for his record-breaking run involved reading children's nonfiction books from the library to absorb the basics of a topic as quickly as possible (Springen, 2019). One of Amy Schneider's many contestant anecdotes while she was on the show involved her parents' rule for her as a child that she could only check out as many library books as she could physically carry home herself (Freeman, 2021)—a restriction that she likely bumped up against many a time, considering the wide range of knowledge she displayed in her 40 victories.

The ties between librarianship and *Jeopardy!* are based on more than just speculation and personal testimony, though—they have actually been examined academically. The previously mentioned *Jeopardy!*-winning librarian Emma

Boettcher used an information science approach to *Jeopardy!* clues as the basis for her master's thesis, finding that metadata aspects of a clue such as the complexity of its syntax or whether it contains visual media play a significant role in determining how difficult it is to answer (Boettcher, 2016). There is so much to a game of *Jeopardy!* to appeal to the information-minded brain that the existence of J-Archive, an entirely fan-constructed online database containing decades of clues, categories, and contestants, should come as no surprise (D'Addario, 2011).

Ultimately, though, no matter how well they might prepare a person to succeed on *Jeopardy!*, the library's resources cannot provide much help with the hardest part of the *Jeopardy!* journey: getting invited to appear on the show at all. The final piece of the puzzle, as cliché as it sounds, is you. I started as a volunteer in the library at the age of 16, but I did not take my first steps towards *Jeopardy!* that day—I had been preparing one way or another for my entire life just by having a passionate curiosity for the world around me. In my experience, the optimism and joy that come along with being perpetually *interested* eventually come back around to make you *interesting*; specifically, the exact brand of interesting that any casting director would fall over themselves to have on an entertainment show like *Jeopardy!*. And lucky for any librarian reading this, curiosity is an attribute you probably already have in spades—in fact, it might just be the reason you ended up in the library in the first place.

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