Speaking of “Teachable Moments” . . . Teaching the Ah HaHs!

By Heidi J. Weston

Heidi J. Weston is a reference librarian at the University of Michigan Law Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The following contribution was inspired by a new Perspectives column, “Teachable Moments,” that appeared for the first time in the Fall 1995 issue. (Editor’s reminder: Don’t forget this already popular feature in the current issue; “Teachable Moments” appears on page 99.)

As I sit here in Michigan in mid-January with my socks drying on top of my computer, it occurs to me that what I like so much about legal research, what makes it downright fun, and what inspires me to teach others, are those moments when the bits and pieces of my research suddenly come together in a flash of insight and—KAPOW!—I suddenly understand the whole picture of that particular legal research puzzle. I call such moments “Ah HaHs!” and find that they are eminently “teachable.”

Here are some examples of what I mean by the “Ah HaHs!”:

- Say that a patron brings you a volume of the United States Statutes at Large and asks where he can go to begin compiling a legislative history on the act he is reading. Without hesitating, you flip to the last page of the act and show him the legislative history table that is provided for the act. He says, “Ah HaH!”

- Or say you have been working on a collection development policy for U.S. territories and, in the course of doing work on something completely unrelated, you serendipitously stumble across the appendix in Fundamentals of Legal Research entitled “Legal Research in Territories of the United States.” You say, “Ah HaH!”

- Or a patron doing research on the Clean Water Act asks to see an EPA “guidance” document. You unsuccessfully check the major legal research treatises to find out where “guidance” is published. Remembering your Gov Docs class in library school, you even look in Morehead’s Introduction to United States Government Information Sources. Finally, you take her to the BNA Environment Reporter. While looking at the set, you discover EPA “guidance” documents in the first “Federal Laws” binder of the service. You both say, “Ah HaH!”

Why do I consider these moments “teachable”? For several reasons: First of all, moments when we say “Ah HaH!” are moments when we ourselves are learning. If we can learn from those moments, so can our students. Secondly, there’s a story behind every “Ah HaH.” Tell that story. Your students will be more apt to remember information you convey in story form.

Finally, your discovery of the “Ah HaH” excited you. Excitement is contagious, and by teaching “Ah HaH,” you can get your students jazzed about learning legal research. After your class, they’ll be shaking their heads, saying, “Ah HaH! Legal research really can be fun.”

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