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## Information Privilege Exploring an Interdisciplinary Barrier

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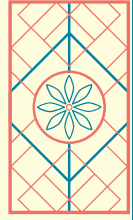
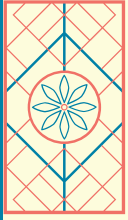
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# Information privilege

Exploring an interdisciplinary barrier

*Amber Sewell (she/her)*

Teaching & Learning Librarian | University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
AAC&U Conference on Diversity, Equity, and Student Success | 2023

Hello, and thank you for joining me! My name is Amber Sewell, I use she/her pronouns, and I'm a Teaching and Learning Librarian at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Today I'll be facilitating a discussion about information privilege, and together we'll explore this interdisciplinary barrier.

# Land Acknowledgment

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas, or UNLV, is situated on the stolen homelands of the Nuwu-Southern Paiute People; we honor the land itself, those who have stewarded it for generations, and for the opportunity to study, learn, work, and be in community with this land.

**Donate to Tribal Minds**

<https://tribalminds.org/donation-form/>

Before we get started, I wanted to acknowledge that all of this work was done at UNLV, which is situated on the stolen homelands of the Nuwu-Southern Paiute People. At the same time, I want to acknowledge that land acknowledgments are often performative and frame colonialism as a thing of the past. To honor that colonialism is an ongoing, current issue with impacts on the people living in these lands today, I have donated to a local non-profit here in Vegas, Tribal Minds, and encourage you to do the same.

# Agenda

- Information privilege + students
- Information privilege + UNLV students
- Information privilege + teaching
- Get to know your students' privileges & barriers

Today we'll be talking, first of all, about what is information privilege and why should we care? Then we'll be approaching it through a couple of different lenses. First, how information privilege impacts students' experiences. Then we'll take that anecdotal information and see some actual data about how UNLV students enrolled in English 102 have experienced information privileges and barriers. We'll next talk about how information privilege impacts our teaching practices, and finally, informed with all of these excellent conversations, we'll discuss ways for you to get to know your students' information privileges and barriers.

# What is information privilege?

## Why does it matter?

So, to get started, what is information privilege? It was defined in 2014 in Char Booth's blog, where they described it as the “concept of information privilege situates information literacy in a sociocultural context of justice and access”. The definition they developed is quite hefty: they defined information privilege as, "Information as the media and messages that underlie individual and collective awareness and knowledge building; privilege as the advantages, opportunities, rights, and affordances granted by status and positionality via class, race, gender, culture, sexuality, occupation, institutional affiliation, and political perspective."

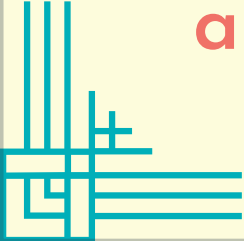
That's a lot to work with, and as researchers have engaged with that concept, they have really latched on to the access piece. Evanson & Hare defined information privilege in their 2018 study as: “The affordance or opportunity to access information others cannot is called information privilege.”

The focus on the access piece makes sense because this work exists solely in academic libraries right now.

This concept matters as individuals who are navigating the world. As instructors it can inform our teaching practices. I work with colleagues doing great work with anti-deficit thinking practices, and information privilege really intersects with that work because it helps us gain a more empathetic and informed perspective of our students as whole people whose experience outside the classroom impacts their positions as students.

But it's also important to facilitate conversations with students about the concept.






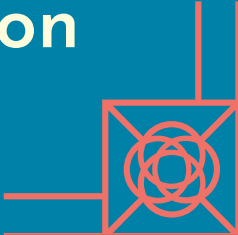
“[c]hallenging unquestioned and entrenched social and structural systems through information privilege... becomes a library application of feminist and critical pedagogy”

Char Booth, 2014

Char Booth, in their blog post defining information privilege, talked about why it's so important to them to talk with students about the concepts, because "challenging unquestioned and entrenched social and structural systems through information privilege... becomes a library application of feminist and critical pedagogy."



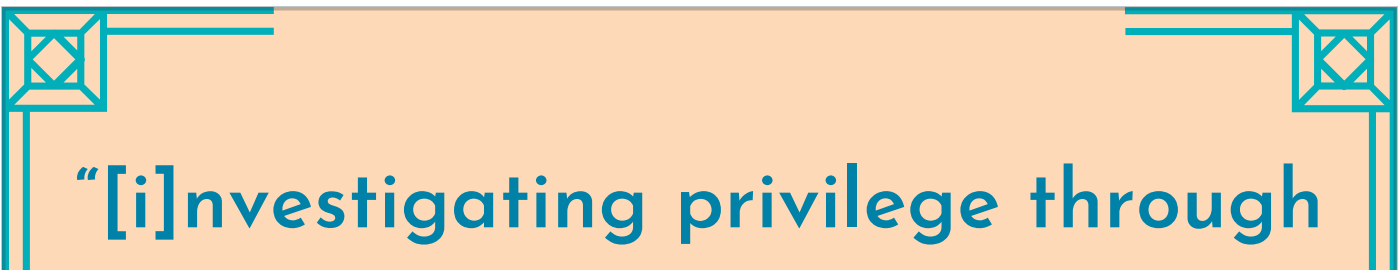
**“students must understand the systemic issues that create information privilege to become ethical and informed participants in our 21st-century information landscape”**



Evanson & Hare, 2018

In their 2018 article, Evanson and Hare also addressed why it was important for them to facilitate conversations about information privilege with their students, because, they said, "students must understand the systemic issues that create information privilege to become ethical and informed participants in our 21st-century information landscape."





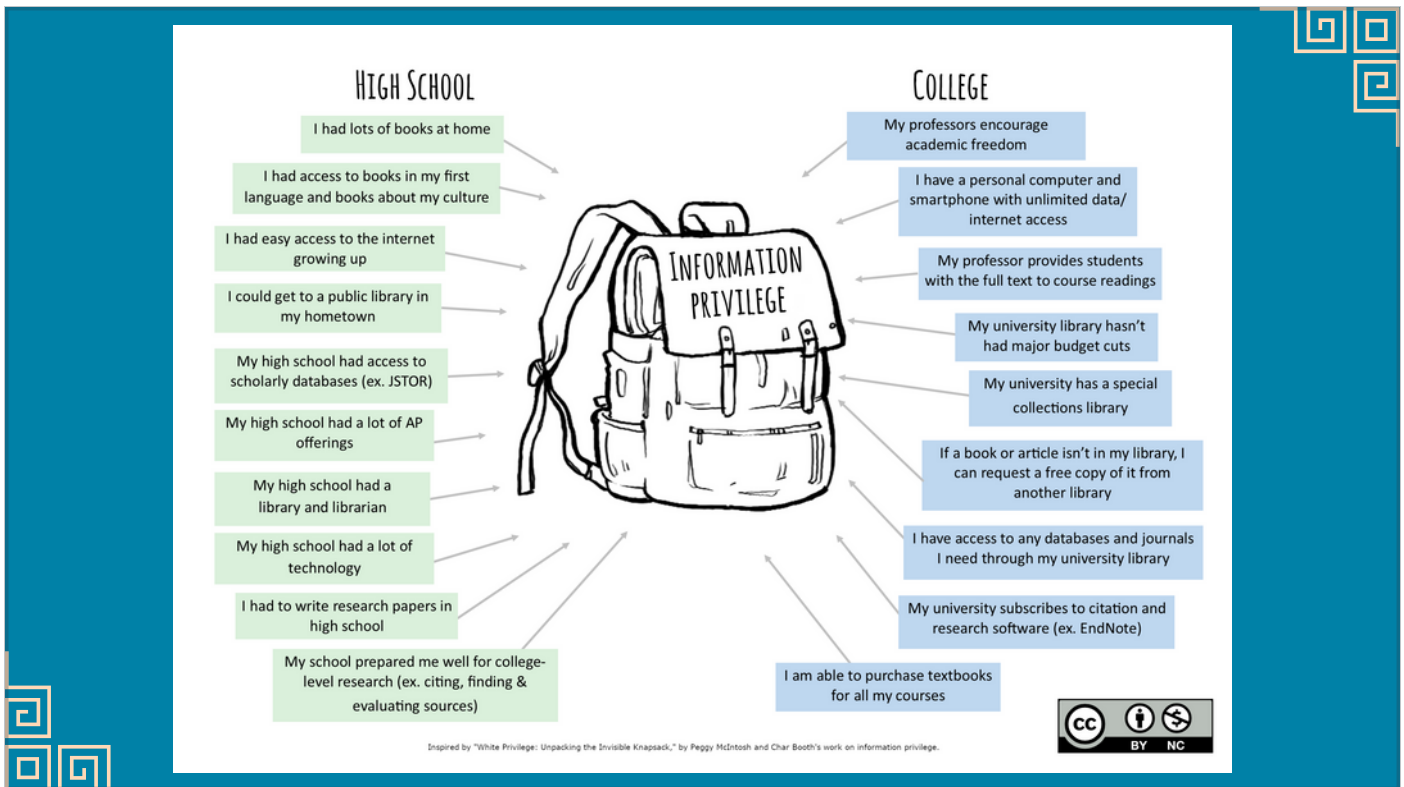
**“[i]nvestigating privilege through access to information helps students realize the myths they may have held depending on their background or perspective...”**

Charissa Powell, 2020

Charissa Powell, who taught a semester-long first-year seminar course about information privilege, explained that she wanted to explore this topic with students because "investigating privilege through access to information helps students realize the myths they may have held depending on their background or perspective." And as higher ed educators, that's part of what we hope to do, right, is expand our students' perspective about the world and their place in it.

Information privilege allows us to bring whole personhood into the conversation. Like Jermaine Singleton mentioned in his talk yesterday, a false barrier exists between the classroom and the real world, and considering the influence information privilege has for ourselves and our students is a way to acknowledge that intersection. It also allows us to critically examine structures by thinking about the individuals and groups that influence information creation, production, and dissemination.

One thing we note with these reasons for discussing information privilege with students is again that emphasis on access.



This graphic may be familiar to many of you. It's the invisible knapsack, originally developed for demonstrating how white privilege manifests. This has been adapted for information privilege based on Char Booth's work. And we can see here some ways to more solidly engage with the concept by looking at how information privilege manifests. So in high school, whether you had easy access to the Internet, whether you had access to books in your first language or that reflected your lived experience. We see some ways this goes beyond access, like whether you had to write research papers. In college, we again talk about access in terms of course materials and Internet, access to databases and citation software, and whether or not your professors encourage academic freedom.

And here the interdisciplinary nature of information privilege really becomes obvious, right, because we know access to course materials or good Internet connection impacts all of our students. We see this in the conversations and initiatives we have around open access or open educational resources.

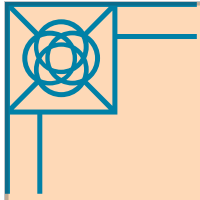


# My take on information privilege

My idea for a take on an information privilege game, inspired by Evanson and Hare's, was really shaped by my own experience with it. For me, those barriers arose way before the access piece. I did not do research papers in high school, and failed the first one I wrote in undergrad. And it wasn't because I didn't know how to get to a PDF or how to search in a database; I didn't even know they existed. So when I was thinking about how I would facilitate these conversations, I knew I would start several steps before access.

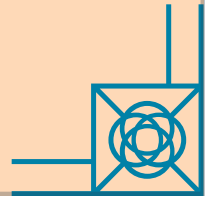
So when I was thinking about designing a game, my idea was to have a choose-your-own-adventure game where you have 4-5 characters who are all in the same English 102 course. Depending on which character you choose, you have to make decisions based on that character's level of information privilege. For instance, you may play as a student whose parents both went to college, so when they're struggling with their assignment, their parents are able to suggest and normalize ways for them to get a help. Another student maybe had plans to go to the library to study with their peers, but just before they set out their boss texts them and says a shift has opened up. Now that student has to decide whether to work on the assignment or pick up the shift that might make it easier to pay their phone bill.

And those are just examples set in higher education. Information privilege impacts our lives outside the classroom, too. Think about a teen wanting to explore their sexuality. If they are a cis/het individual, there are going to be tons of resources out there for how to navigate those relationships and find models. For someone who is ace or aromantic, that's going to be a much greater challenge, not to mention if you're, say, polyamorous and are looking for informative models of those relationships.



# Domains of Information Privilege

Awareness  
Experience  
Access



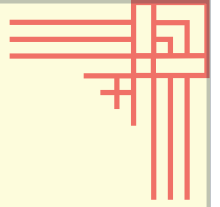
In execution, however, it felt gross to try to write narratives about student experiences' that didn't align with my own. Last summer, I had the opportunity to participate in the Institute for Research Design in Librarianship, and gathering those student narratives for use in game design was my project.

The first thing I had to do during the workshop was operationalize my definition of information privilege, partly to help the mentors understand the concept and partly so I could develop something measurable. To do this, and to reflect the level of complexity of information privilege that I've experienced (and that matched better with the whole, hefty definition Booth put forth), I developed three domains that I felt encompassed the whole of information privilege. These domains are: 1) awareness of information resources, 2) experience with information resources and the research process, and 3) access to information resources. And this access is both can students get to the PDF or article, but from there, can they engage meaningfully with the content of the resource. Together, these three domains situate information privilege within the entire context of the research experience.

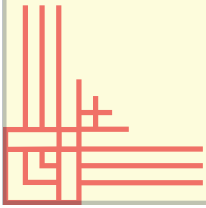
I then created indicators for each of these domains, which I used to create some surveys. This really helped me to develop a language for talking with students about information privilege without using those words. You've already experienced how overwhelming that definition can be, and then with privilege, it can be a word that quickly prevents people from really engaging with the concept.

So that is information privilege both as it exists in the literature and as I am approaching it.

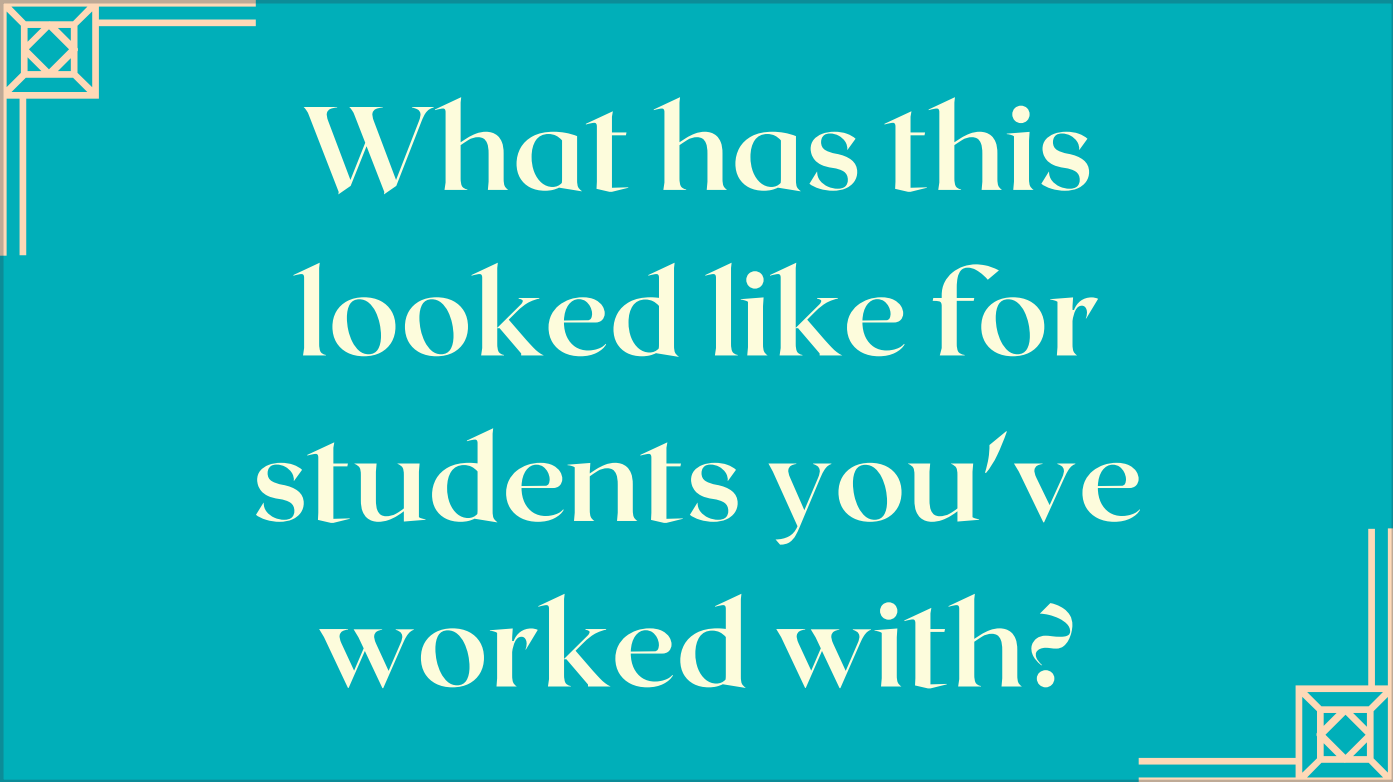
# What did this look like for you as a student?



[bit.ly/DESS\\_infoPrivilege](https://bit.ly/DESS_infoPrivilege)



Now that I've dumped all of this information on you, I think it would be helpful to do some meaning-making with others in the audience. So first, thinking about information privilege, what did this look like for you as a student? You can scan the QR code or use [bit.ly/DESS\\_infoPrivilege](https://bit.ly/DESS_infoPrivilege) to access a Google Doc that has Booth's definition, the information privilege invisible knapsack, and some prompts from an information privilege walk activity.



# What has this looked like for students you've worked with?

Now to put on our educator hats, what has this looked like as you've worked with students?

For me, this has looked like a student that I worked with last week who spent the first 10 minutes talking about how frustrating it was for him to get the time off work to come to a research consultation. His supervisor was really inflexible with any requests, so that meant any time the student needs extra help from the library, the writing center, or tutoring, he has to weigh how that request will impact his relationship to his job.

Another way this manifests is in the popular Internet discourse around students not knowing how to email professors; it's often that they don't know what those norms are, not that they do and are choosing to ignore them. This is a really visible area where information privilege manifests.



# Results from a 2022 study of UNLV undergraduates

So now that we've shared a lot of stories about information privilege, I want to offer some data to help ground these in a shared understanding. In fall of 2022, I conducted a study with undergraduate students at UNLV taking English 102. This was a great course to study because the students all have a shared research assignment that makes studying the manifestations of information privilege easier. In total, I received 129 responses.

# Access

- Only 65.6% of students had reliable Internet access at home.
- 96% of students own a computer and/or smartphone.
- 64% of students bought/rented course materials.

So in the access domain, I asked students where they could access reliable Internet off-campus. I found that only 65.6% of students had reliable Internet access at home. 15% accessed reliable Internet off-campus at the public library. 11% used a restaurant or coffee shop. 1.6% did not have access off-campus.

96% of students did own a computer and/or smartphone, so they have the devices to do work on, but again, this doesn't imply access to data or the Internet.

64% of students were able to buy or rent course materials. Over 22% of students were accessing course materials via open access/instructors providing the materials. 8.8% were borrowing materials either from the library or a friend/classmate. Only 1.6% (2) students reported not being able to access course materials.

One aspect of access and information privilege I hadn't thought of until I was chatting with my supervisor last week was transportation. This is where my privilege was really evident; I've never struggled with transportation to campus, and I spent 10 years at a university where we had a huge non-commuter population. Even if students didn't live on campus, there was a lot of student housing within a 10 mile radius, and there was a free trolley that serviced a lot of that area. Then I came to UNLV, and at our MSI Summit held recently, a student on a panel mentioned that they were often late to class because they didn't have reliable transportation to campus, which is something I will include in future study.



# Experience

- Only 9 students (2.8%) had not used the library so far that semester.
- Most students use the libraries as a study space (32%); second-most reported use was socializing (20.7%).

In the experience domain, only 2.8% of students had not used the library so far in that semester. The survey was deployed in weeks 5-7 of the semester, so even if it was just to grab coffee or use the printers, most students had interacted with the library. Most students use the libraries as a study space, about 32%, and the second-most reported use was socializing at about 21%. Other common uses were grabbing coffee, printing, or even taking a nap.

# Experience



- 56 students (61%) had never located peer-reviewed sources prior to this semester.
- 6 students (6.5%) had located peer-reviewed sources for a first-year seminar course.
- 5 students (5.4%) located peer-reviewed sources in high school.

Thinking about experience with research, 61% of students had never located peer-reviewed sources before that semester, which really aligns with my observations as a teacher in these classes. 6 students had located peer-reviewed sources for a first-year seminar course, and 5 had located peer-reviewed sources in high school. But this doesn't even get into synthesis, or how the students engage with the source. Some first-year seminars or high school experiences, for instance, require the students to find a source to show that they can use the database, but then things end there.

# Awareness

- Regarding parent/guardian education, the largest category of highest attainment was a high school degree (23.1%).
- 9.6% of respondents' parent(s)/guardian(s) never completed high school.
- 92% were taking ENG 102 for the first time.

One of the questions in the awareness domain was about the highest level of education attained by students' parent or guardian. The largest category of highest attainment was a high school degree, at 23%.

9.6% of respondents' parents or guardians had never completed high school, and this encompasses everything from my single mom didn't start school, to some middle school, to some high school but no degree.

92% of students were taking English 102 for the first time, which was important to collect because it would impact how students responded to especially the experience part of the survey.

And this is what makes information privilege so important, is the intersection of all of these domains. I'm really interested in how people's level of access and awareness impact their experiences, or any other mix of these domains and indicators.



# How might this impact your teaching?

So now that we've talked about information privilege anecdotally and some actual data, let's take a minute to discuss with each other how this impacts our teaching, either reflectively or thinking about moving forward with this new lens.



# How do you build rapport in your classroom?



Thinking about how to take this information and move forward, how do you build rapport in your classrooms?

# Student survey



[bit.ly/DESS\\_ipSurvey](https://bit.ly/DESS_ipSurvey)

Because that's the tricky part, is getting this information from students. I don't know of any students who would be comfortable standing up in class the first or second session and saying that they can't afford the materials, or that they'll have to miss class if a younger sibling or child is sick. So while surveys are definitely not the answer to everything, they can provide an anonymous space for your students to share information that can help you approach your class from a student-informed space.

One day, I would love to see information privilege approached in the same way we'd all ideally approach accessibility. Accommodations help everyone, especially when they are informed directly by the students in class. This survey can help you identify where class policies and approaches can be modified to support your students.

If you have multiple students who don't have reliable access to transportation, who are primary caregivers, maybe that opens up a chance to talk as a class about how to approach attendance or participation. This approach maintains the rigor of the class but accommodates the reality of the students' lives.



# Next steps...

As far as my next steps go, I plan to redesign my study and implement it again in the fall, this time with one survey and series of in-depth interviews with students. I will use this to build my information privilege game, which I hope will help students not only reflect on their own information privileges and barriers, but also those of their peers. (I was that student who wondered how you hadn't done the readings before coming to class until I had to work more.)

I also plan to publish an article reporting on the data.

I love stories and think they are compelling, but I also think it's valuable to not make assumptions about our students' experiences, so the data is just as important.

# Resources

- Booth, C. (2014). "On information privilege," *info-mational*.  
<https://infomational.com/2014/12/01/on-information-privilege/>.
- Hare, S., & Evanson, C. (2018). Information privilege outreach for undergraduate students. *College & Research Libraries*, 79(6), 726-736.  
<https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.6.726>
- Powell, C. (2020). Information privilege and first-year students: A case study from a first-year seminar course using access to information as a lens for exploring privilege. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*.  
<https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2020/information-privilege/>

Here are my sources in case any of you would like to dig a little deeper into information privilege.

Booth, C. (2014). "On information privilege," *info-mational*.  
<https://infomational.com/2014/12/01/on-information-privilege/>.

Hare, S., & Evanson, C. (2018). Information privilege outreach for undergraduate students. *College & Research Libraries*, 79(6), 726-736. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.6.726>

Powell, C. (2020). Information privilege and first-year students: A case study from a first-year seminar course using access to information as a lens for exploring privilege. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*.  
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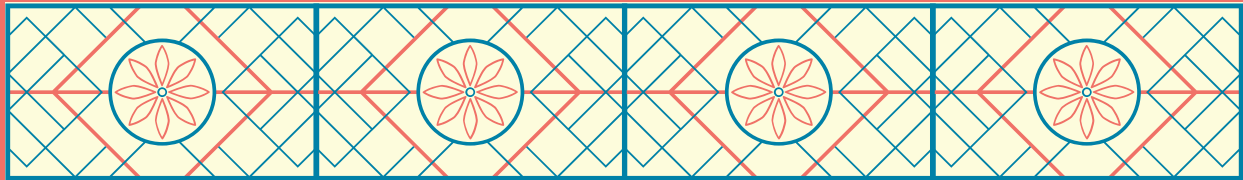




Thank you!

What questions do you  
have?

Thank you very much for your participation and attention! What questions do you have, or what conversations would you like to begin?



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