

Chapter 10. Writers Use Language, but the Teaching of Writing Requires More than the Teaching of Language

In the United States the teaching of writing largely has been administered through the humanities for a century and a half, with a focus on developing writers, what a writer has to say, and how to design texts that convey that meaning.¹ The traditional name for the field has been composition—which we might understand best if we think of the way the term composition is used in music or the graphic arts. An alternative long-standing name is rhetoric, which highlights the forming of argument or getting one’s ideas and messages across to others in persuasive ways. While I prefer the newer term writing studies, composition is the tradition I came out of, focusing on students expressing their messages, thoughts, meanings, and arguments. In this tradition I learned my craft of teaching and formed my sense of researchable and important questions. In many other countries, the teaching of writing has developed within the study of languages and linguistics with a concern for developing students’ abilities to use the appropriate forms and resources of language to express their meanings. Accordingly, the focus has been on introducing students to the general resources and forms of acceptable writing rather than on advancing students’ abilities to use those resources to build their own meanings and ideas. This essay explains to writing teachers coming from the language and linguistics approach the alternative approach towards the teaching of writing coming out of composition, which is centrally concerned with students developing as individuals and thinkers so they can contribute unique, productive statements to collectivities. To writing teachers in the US much of what I present may seem familiar and reflect a perspective they may have gained from many alternative sources. For them, nonetheless, this essay may have the value of aggregating some of the approaches current in the US while highlighting the contrast with some of the language-focused approaches elsewhere.

The Many Things Writers Do

Language is the material writers work with, the material they use to form their intentions and ideas, the material they keep revising and polishing, the material they share with their readers. The invention of writing, the symbols that humans

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have been developing and transforming over five thousand years, and the various tools of inscription, means of reproduction, and forms of distribution we have developed have allowed us to work ever more conveniently and expansively with language while sharing it more readily with others. Writing, as well, has helped us regularize and make more accessible the resources of language in the form of dictionaries, grammars, and guidebooks. Writing has supported the refinement and extension of language. So it is not surprising that the teaching of writing often becomes the responsibility of language teachers who then perceive it as one of four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Writing comes last on the list and is typically taught last and less after students have developed the other three skills.

Yet writing entails much more than familiarity with the resources of language. Nonetheless, in literary studies writing is also often treated as an afterthought to reading after students learn to appreciate the creativity and expressiveness of published, canonical authors. Students often are thought capable only of producing a pale shadow of canonical works. Sometimes, however, the writing of young children is considered as part of their social and personal development, with some attention to the writing process. Even with these occasional additions, however, students are rarely introduced to all they need to develop fully as writers.

Writers are busy people. They need to do a lot of things. They need to know the resources of language as well as the readers' perceptions of different language choices. Writers need to consider what their readers are likely to know, read, think, and feel. Writers need to conceive what they are writing about, what their messages and meanings should be, and for whom in what circumstances. They need to design the structure and substance of their texts. Writers need to draw on their experiences and observations as well as systematically gather evidence. They need to be able to report their knowledge and elaborate their thoughts in coherent ways. They also need to have read widely and understand how their statements fit with and draw on what others have written as well as how their new texts will advance the discussion of previous ones, leading to further statements by others. Writers need to become familiar with the styles and genres of the domains they are working with—whether personal expression to intimates, or advanced biology, or civic discussion of social issues. Writers, as well, need to be able to confront their own processes and give shape to their thoughts and feelings. From the beginning they need to be able to sit down to address the hard and sometimes stressful work of writing, overcoming procrastination and resistances.

Writing engages all these things simultaneously in the course of producing a meaningful, purposeful text. By repeatedly solving the varied problems posed by the what, how, when, and where of writing, students build their capacities as writers. Developing as a writer, however, takes a long time, with many different activities and kinds of supports in many different circumstances. As teachers who see students only a few times over relatively brief periods, we can provide only a few tasks, offer a few tools and guidance, and create a few situations to help students

on that long path. We cannot provide all that is needed in a single course, or even a year, or even one level of schooling. Writing develops across all years of primary, secondary, and tertiary schooling and beyond as people confront writing tasks in their lives, their jobs, and their roles as community members. Writing takes a lifetime to develop. So we should be modest about what we can accomplish in the brief period when students pass through our classes. We offer only small episodes in a much larger story that plays out differently for each student.

What Can Teachers Do?

Teachers must make choices as to what is needed at the moment, what will help students best to continue on their journey as developing writers, and what we can provide given our situations, including the curriculum, institutional structures, and coordination with other teachers. So what are some of the things we can do during our brief contact with students? The following suggestions reflect an approach I have come up with over years. Many of these suggestions are based on the ideas, practices, and research of colleagues, so I don't claim originality or credit for much, but the suggestions do reflect my way of going about teaching. They are meant to be practical, but they do not look for quick fixes or overwhelming immediate results. Rather they seek to set in motion and encourage more enduring processes that may pay off long after students have left our classes. I do not have any way of knowing whether this payoff actually happens and for how many students. But I do know that writing development is something that occurs within each individual student, depending on what they hope to accomplish, their motivation, the kinds of communication they want to make, the meanings they find within themselves, and their persistence in bringing their messages forward. Once they no longer have us teachers standing over their shoulder, anything that does not enter into their personal development and understanding as writers, anything that is performed only to satisfy an idiosyncratically demanding teacher with a red grading pen, is not likely to endure.

As teachers we can create an atmosphere and community that will encourage students to create their meanings. We can offer tasks and puzzles that can foster problem solving. We can be receptive, attentive, and supportive as their meanings emerge. We can even give students clues and tools to solve writing problems. But developing as writers is something they do, not something we can make them do. Even the narrow desire to get good grades is something that students feel or they don't, with varying degrees of competitive passion and energy. Then once they finish the class and grades have been earned, such extrinsic motives fade.

One of the first and fundamental things that writers can experience and that can continue to grow throughout their lives is that writing can share ideas with others, enlist readers in meanings, and coordinate successful activities. This reaching out can start at an early age, with simple messages and feelings shared with people close by, and then expand and get more complex as engagement in

academics, community, and profession grow. The scope and focus of reaching out can change as life opportunities and conditions change, but the underlying dynamic and motive is the same. Each writing task poses myriad problems which must be solved in the context of the situation, and the writer must find those problems worth solving to do the work. Through solving problems, students' motives and skills grow as they learn to analyze each situation and develop successful strategies, tricks, and formulations to speak to the moment.

This experience of communicating and sharing depends on the writer's sense that they are writing about something they have a stake in. This means that the tasks teachers set should tap into something of significance in the students' lives as well as provide them with some degree of choice for them to locate a particular issue, idea, experience, cooperation, or project that they find meaningful and can commit to. This has the triple effect of finding a well of meaning in themselves to draw on, activating and coordinating personally available cognitive and emotional resources, and mobilizing persistence. In addition, the right task can lead to intrinsic rewards of fresh thinking and discoveries (see Michele Eodice et al., 2017).

Part of setting an engaging task is locating areas that students already know something about and have some authority in. People generally know most about their own lives and the people and community around them, so writing tasks built on students' immediate lives are a good starting point. As students mature, however, they can also discuss much more with authority, whether it is what they have learned in their various courses, their hobbies or sports, their consumer worlds, their part-time or summer jobs, or their community organizations. They can dig into interesting topics through interviews or library research. The more they know about something, the less they will need to fill their assignments with empty words, shallow opinions, or fabrications. And the more the students share thoughts about concepts they really know about, the more they will be interested in having readers understand their knowledge and perspectives.

Finding topics they are interested in writing about and about which they have something to say may require students looking into themselves through free writing, meditation, or other ways of surfacing and gaining confidence in their thoughts. Supportive questioning from the instructor and their peers can draw them out and create the atmosphere within which their thoughts grow and find words to articulate their ideas. Speaking their ideas out loud can give them the courage to elaborate and make the best case for them in writing. They realize their ideas and experiences may make sense and are worth writing about. As well, as they hear themselves talk, without anyone pointing out the problems to them, they may be able to locate contradictions or gaps or become aware of the need to substantiate claims.

After you as the instructor serve as an initial sounding board for ideas, as drafts emerge, an important role for you is to be a sympathetic but challenging reader for student texts. In school and university settings the teacher is inevitably an important reader, if not the most important. We should keep in mind that

more often than not, students are writing for us, to be read by us. In fact, throughout my education, until I was on the other side of the desk, only occasionally did I write for anyone other than the teacher or myself. Even when I wrote for peers or others, it was almost always under the eye of a teacher. While writing became increasingly important for myself to develop my own ideas, the opinion of the teacher always loomed large—with my ideas and writing flowering when I received thoughtful and sympathetic, though often precisely critical responses from teachers who could point me to real limits or flaws to work on in my writing. I inevitably came to respect those teachers because by their entering into my world of meanings they showed me that I could then enter safely and expansively into theirs—I trusted their world. I did my best writing for them. Those teachers who gave me only vague admonitions to go further with no other hints about what they were looking for gave me no help. If they could not identify a muted potential that I could elaborate, I didn't trust they knew what they were looking for or even that they paid much attention to what I wrote. I could sometimes see as challenges those teachers who did not seem interested in my thoughts if trying to reach them forced me to elaborate thoughts and make meanings clearer. But if repeated attempts only led to conflict or disinterest, I retreated to just fulfilling requirements. I did not see much in their worlds that would resonate with mine, and I lost interest and motivation. They may have had more to offer than what I could see at the time, but at the moment, when I had the opportunity to grow and learn, I did not find them inspiring. And without inspiration, writing plods.

So writing is a very personal communication, especially in a school setting, where we teachers want students to open their minds to the worlds we offer. Students write to us, so we need to take what they say seriously, showing a curiosity about their reasoning, taking their ideas, experiences, and evidence as worthy of attention, even if that means expressing doubts, concerns, or confusions or needing to ask for clarification or elaboration. Of course, our level of response needs to be calibrated according to the student's grade, age, and individual personality so that our feedback will be understood and meaningful, and not rejected out of hand. While we may miscalibrate, as long as the relationship remains dialogic, the student knows we are taking them seriously as a person and a writer. Likewise, among classmates you can foster a receptiveness and attentiveness on their parts to give critical yet helpful questioning to understand and take seriously other students' work.

This dialogic, challenging trust can even happen at the lowest grades and can be provided even by the youngest peers. Mirta Castedo and Emilia Ferreiro (2010) made this point forcefully in a study of early primary students in Argentina. First and third grade elementary children were asked to bring photographs of their family and events and write captions for them. Their peers then helped improve each other's captions. When confronted with low information captions like "that's me and my mommy," even first graders could ask questions to satisfy their curiosity: "What is her name? When was this? Where were you? Was it a special

day?” The third graders of course asked more detailed questions and could elaborate captions more, but even the youngest could discover how their words could be more communicative.

The teacher of course with more experience can know even better what kinds of questions to ask to bring out the young writer’s story. I have tried to cultivate asking the right question that would help deepen and make more coherent each student’s account, whether a story about a family event or a middle school science paper on the formation of the planets or a senior university thesis analyzing the politics and operations of a local town board. As teachers, we can respond to students’ passion for their topics even if the topics were not ones we would find compelling in themselves. Every time students experience the satisfactions of creating and sharing meaning, they are drawn further into crafting their language with precision and subtlety. When ideas matter, when helping the reader to understand matters, getting the details of language right begins to matter.

Engagement With Writing and Time on Task

Growth as a writer requires much time on task, so students recognize, confront, and try to resolve the many puzzles that are needed to turn their communicative impulses and emergent meaning into fully realized texts that engage and satisfy the readers’ curiosities about their meaning. For most texts this requires many stages of work. Time on task starts early, with locating ideas, producing intermediate formulations, drafting text, and revising. To engage in this lengthy and challenging process requires developing commitment to the emerging text. I often spend much time in class and in student-teacher conferences asking students about what ideas they have for papers long before the assignments are due. Those who are ready to talk can start to test out their ideas and directions; for the others these discussions wake them up to the presence of the writing task and remind them they are already within a writing episode—a time when the project should be cooking in their minds. Sometimes I devote class time for freewriting about the topic. After discussion, I may ask students to write down a sentence or paragraph about their idea. Although I give them the option of changing their ideas later, most stay with their early commitments. When they do ask to switch topics closer to the due date, I usually find out it is because they have run into some difficulty in how to proceed, which we can then typically work out in our dialog. Sometimes they really only are asking about a minor refocusing or slight adjustment, which comes from them understanding their topic better. Then all I need to do is assure them that they are still on track. As the project advances, I may ask for more elaborate work plans, a list of things they need to read or find out, notes, sketches, or tentative outlines. Depending on the assignment, these preliminary kinds of writing may be a few days, a week, or even a month or more in advance of the deadline.

Often I find it especially useful to engage students with the material, experiential world they live in: people and events they have witnessed or evidence they

have gathered in a way appropriate to the task. This evidence could come simply from walking through their neighborhood or talking with people about their histories, struggles, work, or accomplishments. Or it could come from systematic data collection on environmental conditions or from designing and conducting a survey. This engagement with the facts of the world provides students with content; even more, it can trigger the excitement of discovery and the desire to share what they have found out or experienced. Further the reported facts focus and constrain speculative impulses or repetition of unexamined opinions and beliefs. In looking carefully and precisely at the world they live in, students can discover what is news to them and may be news to their readers. Reality is one of the most powerful heuristics there is.

This up-front work in the earliest stages of writing episodes can have big payoffs in the quality of the text at the end. I often find the most productive work I do with students is to discuss plans and help them discover what it is they actually have seen and experienced. This early focusing frequently sheds away wordy phrases, digressions, or irrelevancies—without a lot of instruction or correction from me. As students get a better idea of where they want to go, they are propelled to get there faster. I find I have many fewer corrections or suggestions at the end if I get students engaged and focused early. What suggestions I have made on interim drafts they have already incorporated and they have figured out all the rest on their own.

Because students become familiar with classrooms and relationships with teachers and peers from their earliest years of schooling, the dynamics of school writing often become tacit and unmarked and seem just the way things are. The basic genres and styles of school writing become familiar over the years so that they seem natural and synonymous with writing. Students as well are quick to pick up on the particulars of the expectations and quirks of each new teacher, often sharing among themselves how to keep this particular idiosyncratic person happy. But of course, schools are actually very particular, if not even peculiar, institutions. They are not like law offices, or auto repair shops, or social media platforms, or even academic conferences in the disciplines related to school subjects. Language or literature classes where writing typically is taught are even more particular, differing from physics or history classes. So often in secondary and higher education, it is valuable to point out to students the difference between school writing and writing in other spheres, as well as the differences in their various subjects. These contrasts make explicit the particularities of genres and styles and even more why the genres are the way they are. This helps students understand what they might try to accomplish within their writing, how it fits this situation, and what they might gain from it. The assignments may start to make more sense to them, and they will be better able to understand the problems they need to solve. This type of explanation will also make them more aware, thoughtful, and analytic about the expectations, styles, and genres in their other classes and the other situations they might write for outside or beyond school. This sort of discussion also helps them understand that these forms and expectations are vessels

within which they can shape their meanings and even what kinds of meanings are appropriate to each situation.

This differentiation of styles, genres, and expectations can begin even in early grades, as children recognize the differences between a holiday card for the family and the report to teachers of a classroom science experiment about growing plants. These distinctions of course can increase in specificity and complexity in more advanced grades. As students come to see genres in their contexts, they also get clearer ideas of what they need to include in them and what they need to communicate through them. Students may also over time start to internalize some of these differences, so they may spontaneously produce the kinds of meaning that fit different circumstances using the appropriate resources of language and meanings. They will start to see in greater detail why and how they are being asked to think and write in the history class, the physics class, or the home skills class. These contrasts will also help them adapt more quickly to the needs of their jobs or community engagements rather than continuing to write as they do for their Spanish or English classes.

Self-Regulation, Procrastination, and Process

Writers can also develop by having greater awareness and control over the process of writing. I am not here advocating the rigid models sometimes taught under the name of process writing, which may force students into practices which don't fit their way of working or the particular task at hand, though these models at least can make students aware that there is a process and that multiple kinds of work can occur at different times. I am more interested in building self-regulation of how one produces writing over time. Being better able to guide one's actions and thoughts as one produces successful writing will lead to more effective productions. While students may first be introduced to management of processes with the teacher acting as a kind of external superego, students can come to understand their own way of working and how they can regulate their own processes in different situations. I have already suggested some ways I try to get students to think early about their assignments and engage in various kinds of interim work, but ultimately the students need to internalize and adapt their own procedures to work best for them. Simply asking students to discuss their processes helps students begin to be more intentional in their self-regulation.

An important part of the self-management of writing processes is to recognize and address the procrastination almost all of us feel when faced with the difficult and uncertain task of writing. Not only can each writing task seem a tall and strenuous mountain to climb, but also often we have little sense of the height and shape of the mountain when we begin. At times only the pressure of an impending deadline gets us moving, leaving us little time to work through our ideas and solve the many problems posed by a difficult piece of writing. Sometimes the challenge seems so great that we never start. While giving the benefit of avoiding

the immediate challenges, of course this avoidance creates other problems. So procrastination is important to address, for unless you begin to write, little learning or development of writing takes place.

When students do not have much self-regulation and find it difficult to write on their own, I have them do most of their writing in class, especially for the early stages. At times, if I ask students to do the work at home and bring it in, I get a low compliance rate—even if these are not particularly resistant or unproductive students. They just can't get down to the work of writing. But if I get them writing in my presence or the presence of their peers at the start, they are much more efficient, and over time they can start to write on their own even in the face of anxieties and uncertainties. Making the tasks at each level more specific—such as writing down three possible topics, putting a check next to the best alternative, and adding a short explanation of the choice—helps get them going. At first, I limit what they are asked to do on their own at home to some simpler follow-up tasks, only gradually increasing their independent work as they become capable of directing themselves as writers. Even having students discuss or share their ideas with peers or create mutual responsibility on collaborative tasks helps bring students out of their private struggles and uncertainties to get down to the work.

At some point, especially with more advanced students, I find it valuable to explicitly discuss with students the problems and challenges of procrastination, sometimes sharing my own experience and getting them to discuss their favorite ways of wasting time while avoiding writing. We then discuss the different ways we concentrate, whether it is meditation, working in a specific favorite spot, organizing our desks, listening to certain kinds of music, or going to a coffee shop. We also discuss the benefit of sometimes temporarily turning away from tasks to figure out preliminary challenges, to find some information, or just because at the moment we cannot concentrate on the task or because we get exhausted. Such discussions turn an obstacle into a problem to be solved, each in our own way.

Levels of Work

Staying on task involves attention to many levels of work which I can help students recognize and self-manage. Starting to think and articulate ideas and plans early and often, even though it may seem like a long time from when the final product is due, gives the writer something to work with and interrogate. Spending too much time too early on word-level revision can distract the writer from getting ideas down on the page; it can also waste time and energy on formulations that will never make it to the final text. Writing drafts, then, provides concrete language which the writer can start elaborating, cutting, and rearranging.

This gradual process of the emergence of the writing frees the writer to be exploratory in the early stages. Coherence isn't necessarily needed as the writer explores different possibilities, unsure of how they fit together or even if they do. But as the shape of the text emerges, the writer can see what pieces might

fit together and how—leading to new insights. The statements that are not so relevant may become more obvious—to be either subordinated or just dropped entirely. As coherence of the ideas and reasoning develop and the line of argument gains clarity, the writer can also spot more easily what points might require clarification, what additional evidence or examples would make the ideas more persuasive and forceful, or what additional connecting points might be needed.

Once this coherence emerges it can then direct the writer to look back at the beginning, to recast the introduction to engage the reader in the main direction more rapidly and forcefully. When I find the important ideas emerge clearly only near the end of a text, I suggest to the student that they treat this early version as a discovery draft and that they move the ideas of the last paragraph or sentences to the start of the essay and build from there. This reorganization points the reader in the right direction from the beginning, gives the piece greater coherence, creates more energy and force for the whole text. I also suggest to writers that they can elaborate the ending by not just repeating the opening or summarizing what the paper has said but by transforming that message to what one can now see from the end of the journey, how the journey fits together to show new thoughts.

The character of the work changes as ideas and materials become external. The writer no longer needs to pull out impulses from deep in one's mind but rather can improve the words on the page or screen. As meaning choices are made, questions of word choice and grammatical form start to become clearer, and the writer can become more certain of what they want to put on the page. The writer can even start imagining the experience of the reader, seeing whether each sentence and paragraph flows smoothly and coherently from the previous and leads to the next, whether there is sufficient explanation and exemplification, whether the text moves along, offering the rewards of enough news and insight to keep the reader engaged.

Writing in an Intertextual World

What we as writers have to write does not just rely on what we have directly experienced or witnessed. Through our education, reading, and other media we become familiar with the experiences and thoughts of each other, which we draw on when we write. Reading and other information from outside of us also connects with our readers, who may have learned from similar sources and rely on that information to make sense of and react to what we have written. Writing and reading are part of an ongoing discussion, part of the same literacy game. Some moments we are receptive, other moments we are productive. Yet we are always immersed in a world of texts.

This intertextual field we are part of requires many skills: looking carefully into what others have written, understanding what they meant and what they tell us about the world, evaluating what their evidence is and how sound their reasoning is, seeing how their ideas and observations connect to or differ from the writings of others, understanding how their comments arise from their situations

and beliefs and how those match the situations and beliefs of other writers and ourselves, deciding how relevant their thoughts and facts are to our concerns, making precise connections to what we are writing. We have to learn to select, understand, evaluate, synthesize, and then use our readings. Our readers too will see our text as contributing to ideas they have read elsewhere, so we need to be mindful of how they will place our work into the intertext they have constructed from their reading. Readings can provide us riches, expanding our view and knowledge and resources, but they also can complicate the terrain about which we speak and don't necessarily fit together simply or in ways all readers would agree on. Yet they can inspire us to deeper thought, give us ideas we can use or contend with, provide evidence we can draw on, and expand our vision.

We also need to consider the intertextual domains relevant to each kind of task, as specialized fields each have their significant texts that must be taken into account and that exclude many others that are not part of their worlds. Legal writing depends on the laws of the jurisdiction, prior precedents and opinions, works of legal theory, rules of evidence, and especially other documents filed in this particular case—and little else. Scientific articles primarily draw on recent articles in the specific field and neighboring ones that can be shown to be relevant; rarely can works of history or poetry or journalism be made relevant, not even works of other sciences, nor even articles in the same field that are no longer viewed as being correct or that contain novel and important information. So part of helping students address intertextuality is helping them understand in their specific communicative situations what is appropriate to draw on and how. Then of course there are the rules of giving credit to sources and citation form—which themselves vary from field to field. While citation and giving credit seem to get the most attention and create the most anxiety (often on the theme of plagiarism), they are the most superficial aspects of intertextuality.

When I was just starting out as a writing teacher, I surveyed colleagues in other departments about the writing they assigned. I had the shock of recognition when they reported almost all of the writing they assigned involved writing about texts in their disciplines, whether reporting, evaluating, synthesizing, applying, or reacting. This recognition engaged me in the pedagogy of using sources, resulting in two textbooks: *The Informed Writer* (Bazerman, 1981/2010), and *The Informed Reader* (Bazerman, 1989), along with a related article on the conversational model of reading and writing (Bazerman, 1980). This interest in intertextuality continued throughout my career, and one of my later studies revealed that when graduate students in education used their readings to discuss their observations of their classrooms, the thinking in those sentences was at a more sophisticated level than in the sentences when they didn't (Bazerman et al., 2014).

So in teaching writing it is important to engage students in their reading. While we often do not see reading as part of writing—just another of the four language skills—reading and writing are intertwined, and we need to think about how to engage students more fully in their reading as part of improving their writing.

The Busy-ness of Writers and the Limits of Teaching

As I noted earlier, writers are very busy people, and it takes so much time and effort and work in many dimensions to become skilled in any part of this busy-ness. As teachers of writing, we should be ready to help students develop in any one of these aspects that they might need. All these aspects are always at play in every act of writing, though in our classes, given the ages, skills, and situations of our students, we may be best able to help them advance in one or another dimension. We do what we can, when we can, in those brief moments that we have contact with students within the long trajectory of their writing lives. It is within the students that writing develops; ultimately it is up to the students to determine what they find useful and accept and what they let pass. It is a real trick to be ready with what the students need when they are ready to use it to solve writing problems they are motivated to solve at that moment.

You may have noticed that in this discussion of writing I focused on developing students as writers, not on having them produce ideal texts by whatever standard that might be measured by. Quality is not an absolute but depends on effectiveness in situations. The quality of the texts is a consequence, evidence of how well students are developing and in what dimensions as a result of the practices they are learning to engage in. Language is what students use in writing, but language is not the sole focus of our instruction, for if students don't know why and how they are using language, what do they do with all the fine words and sentences we can teach them?

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