

# How to Teach Grammar, Analytical Thinking, and Writing: A Method That Works

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**G**rammar and writing are so inextricably linked as to be virtually synonymous. To study one is to study the other. I came to this awareness as I worked to bring my instructional activities closer in line with the tasks students faced in putting their thoughts down on paper. In other words, as I explored the reasons behind students' difficulties with organization, coherence, and revision, and as I developed strategies for addressing the root causes, I found I was teaching grammar—not usage—but grammar, the relationship between structure and meaning. Furthermore, as my students and I explored together the

relation between structure and meaning, I realized why twentieth century researchers concluded that direct instruction in grammar had no impact upon writing. Quite simply, the grammar instruction in these studies was not related to writing. It merely taught prescription (usage and rules) and description (noun, verb, prepositional phrase), the naming of parts. I realized also why the “in-context” approach to grammar instruction advocated today has negligible impact upon writing. It consists of little more than guided application of rules that teachers seem mysteriously to pull out of a hat in order to correct errors they detect in a piece of writing. Both traditional and in-context approaches to grammar instruction fail for exactly the same reason: they treat grammar as something that exists apart from and outside of the writing process itself. The fact that much grammar *instruction* is apart and unrelated to writing does not lead logically, however, to the conclusion that *grammar itself* is not related to writing. And the fact that grammar and writing are intricately related becomes abundantly clear the more closely we align our methods of teaching writing with the nature of the composing process.

In essence, prose writing is about forging relationships between and among ideas expressed in

language structures called sentences. An idea (meaning) must be arranged in a sentence. In order to verify whether or not an intended meaning is precisely and clearly expressed in the sentence, whether or not the relationships between and among its parts are clear, writers must analyze what they have written. The ability to analyze sentences, to understand how the parts work together to convey desired meaning, emphasis, and effect is thus central to the writing process. It can even aid invention, for the discrimination and precision it entails can help to forge logical and creative insights into subject matter—hence, the idea of writing as learning and thinking.

I did not understand this when I first began teaching sixteen years ago. On the contrary, I ardently believed that one taught students to write simply by encouraging them to write and revise. I fully embraced the process approaches to teaching advocated by Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, and others, which, with their emphasis on revision, conveyed the message that everyone could produce a clear, coherent, effective written product simply by taking the time to improve upon drafts. So I set up a writing workshop in my sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grade classes. My students kept journals, shared feedback about drafts of their work in peer

groups, and cherished the class time in which their voices were shared and heard.

But their voices on paper were not always coherent. Generalizations abounded, supporting details were lacking, thoughts were not arranged, relationships between ideas were unclear, thoughts were connected by “and” to the almost total exclusion of other conjunctions, sentences were awkward and confusing, and periods seemed to be used randomly, if at all. It became clear that my students needed help.

Telling them to revise wasn’t enough. I needed to teach them how. I didn’t know where to begin. My thinking went something like this: Writers need to arrange their ideas in some logical order that readers can follow. In order to arrange ideas, though, they need to identify how their ideas relate to one another. And in order to identify these relationships, they need to distinguish between main ideas and supporting details. But in order to do that, they need to separate one idea from another, to recognize where a thought begins and ends. And recognizing beginnings and endings of thoughts was difficult for my students. As their punctuation usage and explanations revealed, they understood both a phrase such as “running down the street” and the independent clauses “I was late/the bus broke down” as single complete thoughts. Furthermore, many students identified the main idea of both the phrase, “The barking dog,” and the sentence, “The barking dog ran,” as “The dog was barking.” In other words, in the process of reading, students tended to ignore the structure of a sentence in determining a main idea; instead, they related individual words to one another intuitively as best they could in order to construct meaning. (My experience teaching high school juniors has since shown me that such misconceptions do not diminish on their own over time.) I saw, therefore, that I needed to conduct some concept attainment lessons to help students develop the concept of a sentence. And I needed to start at the beginning to teach them how to sort through all the accessory words in a sentence to pinpoint the ones conveying the main idea. Once they knew how to zoom in with x-ray vision and isolate the core, I would help them see how accessory words related to it so they could recognize where an expanded thought, or sentence, began and ended. From that point, they could work on arranging sentences in some order. Because I wanted to take as little time as possible away from writing, revising, and

literature study, I presented the concept attainment exercise as a “warm-up” activity, one that was completed during the first five to ten minutes of class periods about three days a week. I began in October with the two-word sentence “Babies cry,” adding only one part of speech or language structure at a time, building up sequentially to the compound-complex sentence. To my surprise, it took until June to work up to that construction.

I had students examine all possible permutations of subjects and verbs in stripped subject-verb constructions until I was confident that they recognized the forms a core idea could take. The following list includes some examples:

<i>Babies cry.</i>	<i>Love hurts.</i>
<i>Babies are crying.</i>	<i>Should children vote?</i>
<i>Are babies crying?</i>	<i>Might Lee Harvey Oswald have lied?</i>
<i>Do babies cry?</i>	<i>Live!</i>
<i>Have babies been crying?</i>	<i>I am dancing.</i>
<i>Babies might have been crying.</i>	<i>Queen Elizabeth II had been speaking.</i>
<i>Cry!</i>	<i>Sing!</i>
<i>Who is crying?</i>	<i>Songs were being sung.</i>
<i>Do fish fly?</i>	<i>Is it broken?</i>

Students learned from these and similar examples that recognition of subjects and verbs is not as simple as one might think. In addition to recognizing auxiliary verbs and inverted word order, they needed to understand that components of verb phrases may not occur contiguously, that subjects can be formed of more than one word, that personal and interrogative pronouns can serve as subjects, and that in a command the subject is understood to be “you.”

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Teaching is truly a challenging art. It consists of designing activities that lead students to acquire concepts by thinking through their work and analyzing it. The skillful teacher must know not only how to design such activities, but also how to ensure that students undertake the thinking that leads to comprehension and insight.

The process I have shared with my students since that first year of teaching consists of analyzing sentences through a *process of questioning* that reveals the precise relationship of every part to the whole. And in order to ensure that every student works through the mental steps of the analysis, I have them record their steps on paper in a useful graphic organizer known as the sentence diagram. I use the traditional method of diagramming to *support this process* because, like the popular Venn diagrams teachers are encouraged to use, the sentence diagram provides a visual display of material that reinforces the concepts being acquired. A sentence diagram visually and readily depicts how all parts of a simple or complex sentence relate to its core subject and verb; displays how each unit in the sentence is related to others; shows where slots exist for expanding the sentence; and highlights the links that connect ideas within and between clauses. I have found no other graphic organizer or tool that aids understanding of these aspects of language structure so effectively. To those who suggest that diagramming teaches nothing but how to diagram, I respond that this can be true *if one chooses to teach it that way*. The following instructional dialogue demonstrates this kind of pointless diagramming.

- Q:** Let's look at the sentence, "Yesterday, Rocky climbed onto the roof." What is the verb?
- A:** Climbed.
- Q:** Where does it go on our diagram?
- A:** On a horizontal line to the left of a vertical line that bisects it. (Teacher draws it.)
- Q:** What is the subject?
- A:** Rocky.
- Q:** Where does it go?
- A:** To the left of the vertical line. (Teacher draws it.)
- Q:** What part of speech is "yesterday"?
- A:** Adverb.
- Q:** What does it modify?
- A:** The verb, climbed.
- Q:** Where does it go?

- A:** On a diagonal line underneath the verb. (Teacher draws it.)
- Q:** What is "onto the slate roof"?
- A:** A prepositional phrase.
- Q:** What does it modify?
- A:** The verb, climbed.
- Q:** Where does it go?
- A:** On an angled line under the verb.

It is evident that in this approach, students must already know the answers to the questions they are asked in order to diagram. The means by which they determine that "yesterday" is an adverb and "onto the slate roof" is a prepositional phrase is unclear, and they may be simply recalling the fact that adverbs frequently modify verbs in order to determine that "yesterday" modifies "climbed." The critics are correct: with this method, students are not learning anything except the process of diagramming. However, diagramming can be used effectively to support sentence analysis. It can help students see the steps undertaken in the analytical process and give concrete form to the insights derived from it. Diagramming helps students develop the way of "seeing" structure that is so crucial for comprehension in reading and proficiency in writing.

As mentioned earlier, I approach sentence analysis as a process of questioning. Because language is a system of relationships, in any given sentence every word answers a question about another word, and every structure (group of words) answers a question about another word or structure. Answering the first question is the most difficult because it requires that students recognize and isolate main action and linking verbs and their auxiliaries. That is why the first step is to introduce simple sentences composed solely of subjects and verbs so that students become familiar with the forms they are looking for. Once they identify the main verb phrase in a sentence, everything else falls into place. The questioning process is self-correcting, too. Should students get off on a false start, they eventually come to a dead end, which necessitates starting over again with a new verb. I realize that to many, this explanation must appear pedestrian and familiar—even antiquated. Yet to others—and most importantly, to students—it is new and critically important. The process does, in fact, lead to increased proficiency in adapting meaning to structure and structure to meaning.

Although in the classroom I introduce the analytical process with sentence cores, I describe it here with the sentence used to introduce adjectives: “Those two big babies are crying.”

- Q:** What is the main action or state of being expressed in this sentence?
- A:** Crying.
- Q:** Are there any auxiliary verbs?
- A:** Are.
- Q:** (Teacher writes “are crying” to the right of a bisected horizontal line.) Who or what are crying?
- A:** Babies.
- Q:** (Teacher writes “Babies” to the left of the bisected horizontal line.) What question does “Those” answer?
- A:** Which.
- Q:** About what word?
- A:** Babies.
- Q:** Good. I am going to indicate that relationship by writing it on a diagonal line that connects to “babies.” What question does “two” answer about what word?
- A:** How many babies.
- Q:** Good. I’ll write it on a diagonal line connecting to “babies” as well to indicate that relationship. What question does “big” answer about what word?
- A:** What kind of babies. And we show that by drawing it on a line connected to “babies.”

Students pick up the logic of the diagram quickly so the intrusive explanations about the diagram are quickly dropped from the questioning process. In this manner, students work through a series of simple sentences with a variety of adjectives until they are able to draw the conclusions that adjectives relate to the subject by answering which, what kind of, and how many/how much; that they do not relate to the verb; that a word can function as a subject or an adjective depending upon its relationship to other words in the sentence; that an unlimited number of adjectives may relate to one word; and that they come in many forms, some of which look like verbs. At this point, they do not need to distinguish gerunds and participles from simple adjectives; they need only to recognize the function of the word in the sentence. Some sample sentences are listed below.

*Three beefy disgruntled police sergeants appeared.*

*Many barking dogs ran.*

*These two are staying.*

*Will my four new students be participating?*

*Which ones are broken?*

*Which are broken?*

*Are your new fish dying?*

*The silver jetliner is landing.*

*A wolf approached.*

*The breathless, frightened runner spoke.*

*What is burning?*

*That tiny metal robot talks.*

After students develop confidence in recognizing simple subject-verb constructions with adjectives, I add adverbs, working through a number of examples until students are able to draw conclusions about the concept and functioning of adverbs. The question asked about each word after the main verb and subject have been found is, “What question does it answer about what word?” Once again, a list of sample sentences reveals some of the conclusions that can be drawn.

*Those two big babies cried loudly here yesterday.*

*The red train stopped there unexpectedly Sunday.*

*Tomorrow a three-ring circus will finally arrive here.*

*Some have come here.*

*Others have not arrived yet.*

*When will Sue understand?*

*Who is there?*

*Eventually she will follow.*

By analyzing these and other examples, students become aware that adverbs answer how, when, where, in what manner, and to what extent; that they relate to the verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs but not subjects; that they can occur anywhere in the sentence; and that a word that looks like a noun (Sunday) might function as an adverb depending upon its relationship to other words in the sentence.

Adding one part of speech or language unit at a time, I build up to compound-complex sentences by the end of the year. I modify the basic process only slightly by adding a couple of questions as students are introduced to new sentence patterns that include

complements and objects and by teaching them to heed words (prepositions, conjunctions, relative pronouns) that head units working together to answer questions. The following sequence is limited to basics and to what can be realistically accomplished over the course of a school year: direct objects, indirect objects, complements, adjectival prepositional phrases, adverbial prepositional phrases, passive constructions, compound parts of speech (subjects, verbs, phrases, objects, complements), compound sentences, adjective clauses, adverb clauses, compound-complex sentences.

Below is a dialog between two practiced students engaged in analyzing the complex sentence, “The automobile mechanic gave me an estimate before he started.”

- Q:** What is the main action or state of being expressed in this sentence?
- A:** I see two separate actions, each performed by a specified subject.
- Q:** What is the first one?
- A:** Gave.
- Q:** Are there any auxiliary verbs?
- A:** No.
- Q:** Who or what gave?
- A:** Mechanic.
- Q:** Mechanic gave what?
- A:** Estimate.
- Q:** Gave estimate to what or to whom?
- A:** To me.
- Q:** What question does “The” answer about what word?
- A:** Which mechanic.
- Q:** What question does “automobile” answer about what word?
- A:** What kind of mechanic.
- Q:** What question does “an” answer about what word?
- A:** Which estimate.
- Q:** What question does “before” answer about what word?
- A:** I recognize “before” as a conjunction. That means it links a group of words to another part of the sentence. In this case, it links “he started,” to “gave,” answering the question when the mechanic did the giving.
- Q:** What is the main action in the clause “he started”?

**A:** Started.

**Q:** Who or what started?

**A:** He.

Though cumbersome to explain, this process is actually charmingly simple, and students find it appealing. I have used it with basic, regular, and gifted students with remarkable effect. It is the kind of language play that students naturally enjoy, and as they begin to understand how it impacts their reading comprehension and writing, they become even more enamored of it. An added feature of this approach is that there is no need to test students’ comprehension. As long as students are working through the analyses regularly, they are enhancing their understanding and sharpening their analytical ability. Teachers who would dismiss the process as too involved or too difficult for their students may be too hasty in their judgment. First, students do not find it difficult as long as concepts are introduced slowly and sequentially and time is allowed for full understanding at each step. In fact, students at all levels take pleasure in asserting from time to time that the process is too easy. Second, it is important to consider the difficulty and complexity of the assignments students are being asked to complete without any help or guidance whatsoever. Currently, they are expected to analyze as they read, write, and revise without the benefit of any instruction in analytical technique or conscious understanding of the way language works.

By the time students have worked through the sequence of sentence types above, they have not only developed a deep understanding and conscious awareness of sentence patterns, but they are able to “see” groups of words as moveable and replaceable parts, and they understand the changes in meaning and emphasis that occur by adding, deleting, rearranging, and reforming the parts. Thorough analysis accomplishes in depth what sentence combining only touches upon, for sentence combining succeeds in drawing attention to some structures that can be used for expanding a sentence, but it provides neither method nor rationale for choosing one structure over others. Nor does it instill an understanding of the language system as a whole that gives students the control over structures they need.

The following sets of sentences illustrate some of the insights that can be acquired through analysis. (Unfortunately, space limitations prevent diagramming.)

1. a. The group climbed.  
 b. In one long hazy afternoon, the ragged group of scouts climbed to the top of the bald mountain.  
 (The most basic sentence may be composed of many words.)
2. a. The feverish dog lay on the sidewalk.  
 b. The dog with the fever lay on the sidewalk.  
 c. The dog, which had a bandaged leg, a sore tooth, and a fever, lay on the sidewalk.  
 (Simple adjectives, adjectival phrases, and adjective clauses answer the same question about the word they modify.)
3. a. The monster ate four sandwiches and his dog in one gulp.  
 b. The monster ate four sandwiches, and his dog, in one gulp, swallowed a ham.  
 (Conjunctions can connect words or clauses.)
4. That walking thirty minutes a day is beneficial to one's health is not news.  
 (An entire clause can serve as a subject.)
5. a. Addressing the high cost of prescription drugs, the vice president presented a document hoping to secure the senior citizen vote.  
 b. Hoping to secure the senior citizen vote, the vice president presented a document addressing the high cost of prescription drugs.  
 (Precision in thinking is required to spot the dangling modifier in this sentence. The clause beginning with "Hoping" tells why the vice president presented the document, not what kind of document he presented. The clause beginning with "Addressing" tells what kind of document it was.)

It is evident how understanding the structures and relationships listed above contributes to an increased awareness of options in writing, of opportunities for combining, embedding, controlling emphasis, and enhancing clarity. It is clear how the ability to "see" words operating as language units assists in punctuating and maintaining subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement and how this ability to "see" aids reading comprehension as well. But it is the increased ability to "see" links between ideas, what Jeanne Fahnestock in "Semantic and Lexical Cohesion" calls "synapses" (401) and Mina

Shaughnessy in *Errors and Expectations* calls "seams and joints" (79) that impacts cohesion, arrangement, and invention. It is within these links that grammar and writing finally meld, where expanding and developing structure fuses with finding and creating meaning. Numerous scholars since Aristotle have written about the importance of links to coherence and reasoning, and others, like David Blakesly in "Reconceptualizing Grammar as an Aspect of Rhetorical Invention," have discussed their relationship to rhetorical invention. It is by identifying the links between ideas, by analyzing the manner in which ideas are related—that is, by identifying precisely what question a particular idea answers about what particular aspect of another idea—that writers and thinkers determine and/or precisely express the relationship between them. The precise relationship is expressed explicitly within sentences by a coordinating conjunction (so, or, nor, yet, for, and, but) or subordinating conjunction (because, although, when, if, since, etc.), and across sentences by transition words (therefore, however, on the other hand, on the contrary, nonetheless, etc.). Fahnestock categorizes the various types of semantic relationships expressed in transition words and explains how writers don't necessarily express them explicitly. She demonstrates how instead they may juxtapose ideas so that the relationship between them is implied, leaving it up to readers to make the connection (402). However, whether they choose to express the connection implicitly or explicitly, authors need to identify relationships between ideas, and they seek them out as they work to arrange ideas coherently. A sentence adapted from Honoré de Balzac's *Louis Lambert* illustrates this point.

Imagine a scenario in which Balzac writes the following sentence and reads it back to himself: "Louis explained facts to himself and searched out their causes and effects with the perspicacity of a savage." Desiring to clarify it, he identifies the weak link, the first "and." His thoughts may then proceed as follows. "Linking the two actions with the word 'and' suggests that Louis explained and searched at the same time or that he explained first and then searched, which makes no sense. Actually, he searched first and then explained. The explaining came last; it came not *as* he was searching but *after* it." Our imaginary Balzac thus writes the improved sentence, "Louis explained the facts to himself after he searched out their cause and their effect with the perspicacity of a savage" (53).

The thought process just described is not a simple matter of word choice, of finding the precise word. The writer had to be able to see the units that were being joined, identify how they were joined, identify the precise relationship between them, be aware of the variety of options that exist for expressing that relationship, and choose the one that best fit his meaning. Students who are taught that words, phrases, and sentences bear specific relationships to one another and who are taught to carefully analyze these relationships develop an enhanced ability to recognize weak links in their own and others' writings. Often, clarifying that weak link involves adding more than a conjunction or a transition word; it may involve adding sentences that expand, clarify, or develop an unstated premise or concept. Furthermore, the skill used to analyze relationships between words, phrases, and clauses within sentences applies to the analysis of relationships between and among sentences in a paragraph. That's why writers sometimes develop insights by distancing themselves from a project they are working on. The distance allows for a view of the big picture, a consideration of how large sections relate to one another and the whole, which can lead to a previously unrecognized connection between two distant parts. Language and writing are about analyzing, finding, controlling, and expressing relationships between ideas on many levels.

In "Language Studies and Composing Processes," Richard Larson discusses how, in his work on tagmemic theory, Kenneth Pike describes three levels of relationships he found to exist in over 260 languages. Pike writes, "Language units can be viewed as particles, or as waves, or as points in a linguistic field . . ." (qtd. in Larson 222). As Larson explains, this means that a language unit—a word, phrase, clause, sentence, or paragraph—can be examined in one of three ways: (1) in isolation from other units, as an entity in and of itself (a particle); (2) in terms of its relationship to a unit with which it blends (a wave); (3) in terms of its relationship to other units of the larger ordered system of which it is a part (the sea, or dropping the metaphor, the linguistic field) (222).

Larson also explains that in later work with Richard Young and Alton Becker, Pike went on to suggest that these relationships define a heuristic that could be used as an aid to invention in writing. And indeed it could be argued that helping students to analyze concepts on these three levels is one of

the overall goals of the writing class. For we teach not to give students answers, facts, rules, and ideologies, but to provide them with tools that will empower them to query, investigate, and write about knowledge independently.

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Therefore it is important to emphasize again the point made at the beginning of this article about the grammar-in-context approach.

It is fundamentally flawed.

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For some time now, however, teachers have not been encouraged to teach language and writing analytically. In truth, our present approach to writing is so haphazard that students often arrive in September with experience in writing little else but journal style compositions, getting credit for simply completing assignments—for putting writing on the page—rather than for crafting coherent sentences and paragraphs. Teachers who want to make a difference must try in the space of a year or semester to teach all aspects of writing at once (in addition to literature) to five classrooms of twenty-five to thirty students each. Overwhelmed, teachers may feel they have no option other than to have students write and to teach grammar in context in response to errors that occur in writing.

Therefore it is important to emphasize again the point made at the beginning of this article about the grammar-in-context approach. It is fundamentally flawed. It treats grammar as an isolated set of rules, thereby considering the written product under review as the only relevant context for grammar instruction. It completely ignores the context from which the rules derive, the language system itself. Quite simply, students have no background knowledge about grammar, no vocabulary, no concepts, no context, no means for understanding teachers' explanations of rules or their application. Thus, someone who attempts to teach grammar in context, is, in effect, attempting to teach grammar in a vacuum.

The debate between direct and in-context grammar instruction in composition clearly parallels the debate that raged for some time between phonics and whole language instruction in reading. It is relevant to recall how people wedded to the whole language approach eschewed phonics, insisting that children learned to read by reading and that phonics instruction was mindless drudgery because it was an activity separated from the understanding of a particular story. They were unable to see that the context for phonics was the process of reading itself. It provided a methodology, a decoding system to which students could turn in order to sound out an unfamiliar word that they met in their reading. After much needless dichotomizing, there is now general agreement that the approaches complement one another, that they work hand in hand to promote fluency in reading. It seems likely that a similar *rapprochement* between approaches to grammar instruction will develop in composition. There is a widening circle of people who suggest that direct and in-context instruction complement one another and that direct grammar instruction equips students with the set of tools and insights they need in order to control their expression. With grammar in context, students practice applying the tools and insights to their own writing. Without an understanding of these tools that direct instruction provides, as Shaughnessy explains, students must make random guesses about how to improve their work in the same way that people who know nothing about engines poke at random motor parts when their car breaks down (137).

What needs to be done to teach students to write is clear. We need to align our instruction more closely with the tasks students face when composing and reading, by including practice in analyzing relationships between words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, sections, and the work as a whole. We need to reinforce their understanding of these relationships through extensive reading, writing, and informed revising. We need to recognize that writing proficiency develops over a period of twelve years or more, and instead of having every teacher try to address all aspects of writing every year in haphazard and band-aid fashion, we need to implement a sequenced approach to grammar instruction that is designed to build students' compe-

tence gradually. The following sequence is one ambitious, but possible, approach:

Sixth grade—parts of speech (There are a number of playful ways to approach this: concept attainment, games, writing poems that feature or consist entirely of one part of speech.)

Seventh grade—simple two-word sentences through compound-complex sentences (the sequence outlined in this article)

Eighth grade—infinitive, noun, gerund, participial, appositive, and absolute phrases, and more practice with compound-complex sentences

Ninth grade—practice/review/reinforcement

Tenth grade—cohesion and arrangement (Jeanne Fahnestock's "Semantic and Lexical Coherence" outlines the concepts to be taught here.)

Eleventh grade—style (In "Teaching Style," Edward Corbett lists four categories: diction, sentence patterns [length, grammatical types, rhetorical types, functional types, sentence openers, methods of expansion, amount of embedding], figures of speech, and paragraphing [25–27].)

Twelfth grade—practice/review/reinforcement

First year of college—argument/style

Finally, we need to free ourselves from the tendency to value research over the experience of the expert teacher. Methods that have been proven to work over time by teachers who know how to use them should not be summarily dismissed. Most importantly, care should be taken to align instructional methods with the nature of subject matter. In composition instruction, this leads to a classroom where grammar and writing are virtually inseparable.

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