

EXPLORING THE USE OF WRITING FRAMES TO TEACH AND ASSESS WRITING IN ENGLISH ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The learning of writing is complex because it requires the development of cognitive and linguistic abilities. Effective teaching and learning of writing demand guided practice. The South African National Curriculum Statement for Grades R–12 includes the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for First Additional Language (FAL) teaching and learning. Writing frames, such as the I prompt question writing frame, are introduced to learn writing in Grade 4. In the second part of the Grade 5 year, process writing is introduced as a writing frame that should be used when needed. From Grade 7 to Grade 12, process writing is implemented as part of the writing lessons. The education department adopted assessment for learning as a teaching and learning approach where feedback provides scaffolded learning. This theoretical paper argues that the writing frames used in the South African curriculum are inadequate to scaffold the learning of writing; furthermore, the assessment of the writing skills of learners tends to focus on closed skills. The implementation of assessment for learning as an approach to teaching and learning is yet to develop fully to ensure successful scaffolded learning. Additionally, the writing frames introduced in the curriculum limit the teaching of a variety of writing genres, restricting the teaching of writing to Western narratives and writing styles. This paper considers the use of targeted frames appropriate for the writing task as a way to improve the development of writing abilities.

KEYWORDS: writing frames, English First Additional Language, process writing, assessment for learning.

INTRODUCTION

Humans have been able to write for approximately 5 500 years, yet writing remains a complex skill (Graham, 2019; Bazerman *et al.*, 2017) that requires both cognitive and linguistic abilities in the teaching and learning of both the home language and the first additional language (Graham & Perin, 2007). The South African language teaching curriculum, as stipulated per phase in the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2011 a, b, c) aims to develop good writing skills since such skills are critical since the academic assessment achievement of learners relies on writing proficiency. This theoretically-based paper aims to explore the use of writing frames to teach and assess writing in language learning in schools.

The CAPS language curriculum includes the use of selected writing frames. In the intermediate phase (IP), learning to write is a cumulative process through which learners progress from

formulating sentences to formulating paragraphs and eventually, writing essays independently. The first writing frame in the form of question prompts commences in Grade 4. In the third term of Grade 5, process writing is introduced as a frame. That is sustained up to Grade 12, the final school year. However, while there is reference to the use of frames or structures in writing, the frames do not provide for scaffolded learning.

As illustrated in this paper, writing frames should serve as a scaffold assisting learners in not only applying their language skills but also their cognitive skills to organise and write down their thoughts and ideas (Campbell & Parke, 2018). Torrance (2021) asserts that Vygotsky's zone of proximal development describes the scaffolding process as one through which learners move from 'cannot do it' to 'can do it with help' and finally, to 'can do it on my own'.

The question prompts included in the curriculum are limited to the formulation of sentences, although there is a variety of writing frames that could be used to develop more specific writing skills. Furthermore, process writing focuses on planning, drafting and writing a final essay without any significant scaffolding. The general assumption is that learners will develop their writing from initially using frames to eventually writing independently. This paper argues that the limited range of frames prescribed in the curriculum does not scaffold learners effectively to move towards writing independently and with the necessary proficiency.

Assessment for learning (AFL), which has been adopted as the informal assessment approach (DBE, 2011a, p. 77, DBE, 2011b, p. 94, DBE, 2011c, p. 119), is used to identify and address the gaps in learning to move the learning forward (Black, 2015). Feedback is an integral part of the AFL approach and is instrumental in the scaffolding process. It provides information about any gaps in the learning and how they could be addressed, which scaffolds the learning (Hattie, 2011).

Learning to write should allow learners to construct and communicate thoughts and ideas coherently and the curriculum's rationale for teaching writing is admirable. It aims to produce competent, versatile writers who use their skills to develop and present written, visual and multimedia texts for a variety of purposes (DBE, 2011b, p. 11). However, limiting writing learning to the predominant use of two writing frames is inadequate and does not contribute to the curriculum's aim. The question is, how should frames be used to improve writing proficiency? This paper sets out to explore more effective ways in which frames could be used in the teaching, learning and assessment of writing.

INSTRUCTIONAL SCAFFOLDING TO TEACH WRITING

Writing makes use of cognitive, linguistic, social and cultural capacities and conventions that evolved independently from it (Bazerman *et al.*, 2017, p. 355). Bazerman *et al.* (2017, pp. 355–356) explain that Berninger reviewed the research on five established developmental domains in child psychology that interact with writing development throughout schooling. These are sensorimotor, language, cognitive, social/emotional and attention/executive functions. These developmental domains are not isolated from cultural and sociolinguistic influences. Writing is thus unique to each learner as they strive to achieve the purposes of the writing task at hand (Bazerman *et al.*, 2017, p. 354). Hence, it is argued that since writing skills development is ongoing and guided by teaching and learning activities, it is enhanced with structured, explicit teaching and learning.

Rosenshine's explicit instruction steps include reducing the difficulty, providing scaffolds and support, providing supportive feedback and extensive, independent practise (Rosenshine, 2008, p. 45). Martin and Evans (2018, p. 203) contend that both discovery- and enquiry-based learning and explicit teaching can be used to make learning accessible so that learners can use newly-acquired skills in creative ways. Their load reduction instruction (LRI) approach has similar steps to Rosenshine's. The structure provided by such explicit instruction makes learning accessible.

Writing frames are appropriate for explicit teaching because they allow teachers to show learners what to do and how to do it. Teacher, self and peer feedback are furthermore included as part of the scaffold. Writing frames should support the learning of writing in various genres and as learners acquire the appropriate writing skills, they will internalise the frames and develop as independent writers. Campbell and Parke (2018) add that scaffolded writing learning helps learners to start making decisions about their writing learning as they move towards independent writing.

Learning is not confined to the classroom and can be explicit or implicit. However, classroom learning is often prioritised and shaped by the assessment-driven curriculum. If the curriculum-prescribed format and contents of culturally sensitive genres such as an obituary or a story are, for example, based on a Western format and style and assessed as such, teachers may choose to exclude such genres from their teaching rather than adapt them to be culture-specific (conversation with Xhosa teacher, 27 July 2022). Writing frames should make writing learning accessible and thus, be adaptable to various writing tasks and fit the writing needs of learners.

How do writing frames work?

Lewis and Wray (2002) have made a substantial contribution to the literature on writing frames over the past three decades. While their focus is on non-fiction writing, the principle of writing frames applies to all writing learning. They use the EXEL teaching model that evolved from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory that children learn in collaboration with experts. The EXEL model involves teacher modelling or demonstration, followed by a joint activity, then scaffolded activity and lastly, independent activity. The scaffolded activity is where writing frames are used in writing learning. Both the learners and teacher must understand that a frame should be the learners' tool that allows for a somewhat messy planning, drafting and editing process that is open to interrogation and discussion by the learners and the teacher alike.

According to Campbell and Parke (2018, p. 48), there is little evidence that current literature deals with writing teaching that scaffolds writing learning purposefully. They explore the use of paragraph frames as good examples of structured writing, suitable for the introduction of new writing genres. Paragraph frames typically have an outline comprising the main idea and the connecting words so that learners can construct their own cohesive and coherent paragraphs (Campbell & Parke, 2018, p. 51).

As explained by Lewis and Wray (2002) and Campbell and Parke (2018), frames are instrumental in scaffolded writing learning because they provide structure to the progress learners make toward independent writing. There is a variety of writing frame examples that each serves a specific purpose, such as frames for non-fiction writing and creative writing (Lewis & Wray, 2002). The availability of so many writing frames further underscores the challenges relevant to the limited use of writing frames in the current South African curriculum.

The CAPS refers to structures or frames to use for writing with the expectation that learners would move to independent writing. In the IP, frames are used when needed; for example, when writing a simple story, the story structure (introduction, body and conclusion) is used as a frame, but it does not scaffold the writing. There is no explicit guidance on how to write an introduction, a body or a conclusion. The focus is on process writing, namely planning the essay, writing a draft and self and peer editing. No provision is made for sufficient scaffolding, with the frame rather used as a writing strategy. However, it should be possible to use the writing learning intentions to create writing frames that would scaffold independent learning effectively.

Independent learning means that learners will employ frames when they see the need for them. With this aim in mind, learners should be exposed to genre-specific writing frames and teachers should create a frame suitable for the writing task to facilitate learning. Feedback is an effective scaffold for learning and a central feature of assessment for learning. This research showed that writing frames could be used with assessment for learning to scaffold writing learning. It is thus conceivable that if learners were taught how to use writing frames to scaffold their writing, they would learn to use writing frames for various writing purposes well into adulthood.

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING IN WRITING

AFL is the assessment approach included in the CAPS (DBE, 2011a, b, c). AFL and formative assessment are often used interchangeably because both focus on what can be learnt through the assessment process. “Assessment is a continuously planned process of identifying, gathering, and interpreting information about the performance of learners, using various forms of assessment. It involves four steps: generating and collecting evidence of achievement; evaluating this evidence; recording the findings and using this information to understand and thereby assist the learner’s development to improve the process of learning and teaching.” (DBE, 2011a, p. 35, DBE, 2011b, p. 93, DBE, 2011c, p.118).

According to the CAPS, informal assessment is a daily assessment and serves as AFL. Teachers use informal assessments to identify and address gaps in learning. It gives them the opportunity to provide feedback to the learners and to use the assessment results to plan the next teaching phase. It is stressed that such assessments should not be seen as separate from learning.

AFL has been well-researched following the reviews by Black and Wiliam (1998a, 1998b). It is implemented as a process: 1. clear learning intentions, 2. an activity to demonstrate learning, 3. feedback to move learning forward, 4. learners actively involved in the learning process and 5. assessment results used to move learning forward (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Black, 2015). Feedback is regarded as the driver because it initiates discussion between a learner and peer or teacher, which acts as scaffolded support. Feedback is instrumental in moving learning from ‘cannot do’ to ‘can do with help’ and finally, to ‘can do independently’, which leads to the zone of proximal development (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014, p. 158).

Writing tasks are typically assessed using a set of criteria such as analytic or holistic rubrics. In AFL, the expectations are made clear and explicitly linked to the learning intentions. As such, learners know what the success criteria are. Thus, writing frames could be adapted to incorporate the success criteria to allow for formative assessment and feedback to scaffold the writing.

There is synergy between the AFL process, Roshenshine’s (2008) common teaching elements and the LRI of Martin and Evans (2018). The clear task goals or intentions connect with prior knowledge and make new learning accessible by reducing difficulty if it is followed by scaffolded support, feedback and autonomous practise. It is, therefore, possible for the current writing frames to be adapted to include these elements to guide and scaffold writing learning to enable ongoing learning towards independent writing practice.

CURRENT APPLICATION OF WRITING FRAMES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

The CAPS (DBE, 2011b, pp. 11–12, DBE, 2011c, p. 35) explains that writing should be scaffolded and that learners should learn to write a variety of texts; furthermore, writing tasks should not be limited to language learning but should reach across subjects to empower learners to communicate functionally and creatively for various purposes.

Learners embark on the process of learning writing with the use of writing frames. Writing frames assist learners in mastering the foundational skills of writing before progressing to independent writing because they facilitate “well-organised and grammatically correct writing texts” (DBE, 2011b, p. 11). In the IP curriculum, language learning centres around themes (DBE, 2011b, p. 31). This allows for systematic vocabulary learning and reduces the cognitive load as new learning relates to what is already known. A writing topic is identified and question prompts are developed to frame the writing. The question prompts are arranged to teach learners when to start a new paragraph. In Grade 4, learners are required to respond to the questions in one sentence. Towards the end of the third term in Grade 5 in the IP, process writing is introduced and flow charts or mind maps are used to guide their writing (DBE, 2011b, p. 64).

The process writing approach allows learners to design and write texts using the following stages:

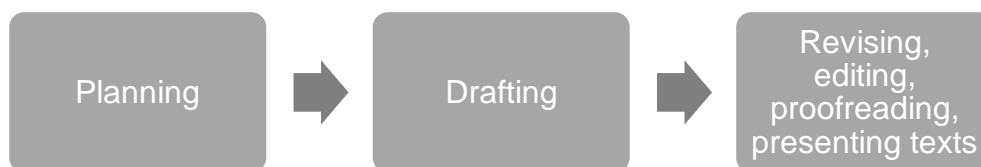


Figure 1: The writing process

While the writing process is described in the curriculum (DBE, 2011b, pp. 11–12), the implementation process is not always conducive to scaffolded learning (Burger, 2018). Planning and drafting are often perfunctory exercises and are implemented for the sake of compliance (Burger, 2018).

As demonstrated in Figure 2, the CAPS (DBE, 2011a, p. 35, DBE, 2011b, pp. 11–12, DBE, 2011c, p. 36) provides teaching plans that prescribe writing task types with the use of unspecified writing frames.

WRITING AND PRESENTING
Writes a personal recount using a frame, (e.g., yesterday I ... then I ...)

From the textbook or teacher's resource file:

- Uses the frame.
- Selects from own experience.
- Selects appropriate topic.
- Stays on topic.
- Tells event in sequence.
- Uses varied vocabulary.

Figure 2: CAPS teaching plan

According to Zimmerman's (2013) curriculum levels, the ideal curriculum envisages that both frames will be used to develop writing. However, at the curriculum implementation level, teachers apply the frames in line with their own contexts, which involve subjective possibilities and limitations. Primary school teachers, for example, implement the curriculum using the prescribed books and a variety of support material. However, the material used does not deviate from the curriculum and sustains the use of the given writing frames. Teachers, thus, have limited motivation to explore other, more effective frames.

THE RATIONALE FOR EXPLORING THE USE OF WRITING FRAMES TO TEACH AND ASSESS WRITING

Writing frames, when used appropriately, will scaffold writing learning and help learners to develop the necessary writing skills specific to a writing task. While the focus is on two frames namely question prompts and process writing, there are a variety of writing frames that could be used. The limited use of writing frames could compromise learner writing proficiency and is worth exploring. Furthermore, successful AFL relies on the clarification of task goals because the role of feedback is to address the gap between what the learners have learnt and what they were supposed to have learnt. In other words, feedback acts as a scaffold between what learners can do and what they are expected to do.

Skills can further be divided into open (tools) and closed (rules) skills (Clarke, 2020). Closed skills such as grammar and punctuation have compulsory criteria and lead to mastery; once a skill has been attained there are no further steps. Open skills such as writing are the skills learners learn to improve for the rest of their lives (Clarke, 2020). Teachers and learners should create success criteria by analysing the skills needed for a specific writing task and formulating learning intentions to guide the writing (Burger, 2018).

Devising clear learning intentions can be challenging and consequently, success criteria are often not clearly defined. The absence of clearly defined and agreed upon success criteria has a negative influence on how writing is assessed. Success criteria focus on both the writing and the assessment. Without them, the assessment is often of closed skills, such as spelling and punctuation and not of open skills, such as writing (Burger, 2018). The curriculum prescribes transactional writing genres as well as essay writing genres and learners should, ideally, make use of writing frames, which would allow them to reach the specified success criteria that include both closed and open skills.

Lewis and Wray (2002) have illustrated that more than one frame can be used for recount writing—not all recount writing has to follow a chronological structure. An alternative frame,

such as the prior knowledge and reaction frame, could, for example, guide learners to write about what they have learnt instead of only telling what they did (Lewis & Wray, 2002). On the other hand, the prior knowledge and revision frame could help learners to think about the new information they have learnt that conflicts with their existing knowledge. The learners then write about the conflict or add to what they already know (Lewis & Wray, 2002, p. 6). The frames stimulate thinking and teach learners how to express their thoughts in writing; thus, the development of open skills is addressed.

The limited use of writing frames and closed skills success criteria is hampering learning. Furthermore, it prevents the learning of indigenous narratives and practices. The narrowly-focused writing frames do not allow for the writing of non-western narratives. Additionally, transactional writing pieces such as dialogues, invitations or obituaries do not accommodate cultural practices. A closer look at the obituary as a text type illustrates this.

The curriculum explains the purpose, text structure and language features of an obituary as follows (DBE, 2011a, p. 41): The purpose of the obituary is to commemorate the deceased and inform others of the death. The following information is provided: personal information, the date of death, where the person was living at the time of death, date of birth and birthplace, the names of those left behind and the date of the funeral. Cause of death and memorial tribute information may also be included. The style is formal, euphemisms may be used, it is concise and language conventions such as *In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to...* are employed.

It is a long, transactional task which requires skilled writing that conveys information while showing sensitivity to the loss of life. However, the curriculum seemingly does not accommodate how cultures may differ profoundly on how an obituary is written. In the Xhosa culture, for example, the first part of the obituary where personal information is shared is written in the first person from the point of view of the deceased (conversation with Xhosa teacher, 27 July 2022). Therefore, when Xhosa learners are expected to write an obituary in a prescribed way, it removes the learning from their culture and further impedes the development of expressing themselves and their culture proficiently in writing. The aim of writing frames should ideally combine the foundational skills of good language use, that is, closed skills, but also allow for open skills to be developed and assessed. Importantly, writing frames should enable learners to develop and write their own stories.

ILLUSTRATING THE USE OF FRAMES TO TEACH AND ASSESS WRITING

The frames currently in use do not encourage the clarification of learning intentions and the assessment of a clear, predetermined set of success criteria, which means that the use of feedback as scaffolding in relation to the success criteria is limited. The frames do not fully exploit opportunities to teach writing as a skill, leaving learners and teachers to focus on closed skills such as grammar. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how writing frames could be used to teach and assess writing skills in a variety of writing genres.

According to Campbell and Parke (2018), the paragraph frame can be an effective frame with which to introduce writing because it is structured. Paragraph frames are short and accessible and can include a variety of closed and open skills. Grade 4 would be an appropriate level for the introduction of writing frames to young learners who are learning to write.

The current prompt question frame could be presented as follows:

<p>Question prompts</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When did this happen? 2. Where were you? 3. What happened first? 4. What happened second? 5. What else happened that was important? 6. How did it end? 7. How do you feel? 8. What did you learn? 	<p>Paragraph 1 sets the scene:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. <p>Paragraph 2 tells us what happened and how it ended:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. 5. 6. <p>Paragraph 3 tells us how you felt and what you learnt:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. 8.
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While many teachers are not generally resistant to meaningful change, any suggested development is best made if it dovetails with current practice. Hence, the following is the author’s adaptation of the prompt question frame to teach a recount in paragraphs.

The recount paragraph writing frame

The recount writing frame could be adapted as follows: The closed and open skills could be taught leading up to the writing task. The success criteria should be explained clearly to the learners. The teachers and learners should assess the three paragraphs included in the table above according to the success criteria. Therefore, the learners should be able to self-assess their writing. Concerning assessment of the closed skills, learners could be taught to underline the verbs and circle connecting words to see if the words were used correctly. The open skills should focus on how to describe what happened and learners could be taught how to use words to make their stories interesting. Learners could be taught what feelings and emotions are and how to describe them in different ways. They could assess their writing by analysing their descriptions per the success criteria.

<p>RECOUNT WRITING FRAME: A time I made someone laugh</p>	<p>Success criteria</p> <p><i>Closed skills:</i></p> <p>Use connecting words. Use past tense verbs.</p> <p><i>Open skills:</i></p> <p>Use descriptive details and sentences to make the story interesting.</p>
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<p>Paragraph 1 One topic sentence on where you were and what you were doing. <hr/> One sentence with descriptive detail about how your sister was feeling. <hr/> Concluding sentence explaining why your sister’s feelings were so upsetting to you. <hr/></p>	<p>Sentence creates the context. Sentence describes more than one emotion. Sentence describes the reason for the emotions. Use connecting words.</p>
<p>Paragraph 2 One topic sentence explaining what your upset sister does. <hr/> One sentence saying why you came up with your plan. <hr/> A concluding sentence describing your sister’s reaction. <hr/></p>	<p>Explanation is clear. Plan is described. Create clear picture of your sister’s reaction. Use connecting words.</p>
<p>Paragraph 3 One topic sentence describing how you felt. <hr/> One sentence explaining what you have learnt. <hr/> One concluding sentence about helping people who feel sad. <hr/></p>	<p>Use descriptive words. Use connecting words. Sentence describes emotions. The concluding sentence explains why the moment was important or what the writer learnt from the experience. Sentence reflects on learning. A sentence that closes the paragraph and story.</p>

The writing feedback tool

There is a synergy between AFL as an assessment that is specifically intended to provide feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning (Sadler, 1998) and process writing. Using the feedback model of Hattie and Timperley (2007), process writing and AFL as a conceptual framework, the steps were merged to form the following process: Step 1 – clarify the task outcome; Step 2 – establish learning goals and success criteria; Step 3 – draft the writing task; Step 4 – analyse feedback and produce the final product; Step 5 – reflect and evaluate (Burger, 2018). In so doing, the writing feedback tool (WFT) was created (Burger, 2018).

The WFT (Figure 3) comprises three steps or sections. The *Where am I going?* step (column 1) allows teachers and learners to use the success criteria (from the rubric or the marking tool) to create learning intentions for the writing task. The learning intentions can include closed and open skills and in the case of dialogues, invitations or obituaries, culturally specific criteria can be included. The learners can formulate their own goals, which means they direct the learning of the closed and open skills guided by the feedback they receive. The *How am I going?* step comprises two subsections. The first subsection entails written feedback which can be self, peer or teacher feedback on the achievement or non-achievement of the learning intentions. The

gaps in learning are also identified. The *Strategies to reach success criteria* subsection requires learners to reflect on the feedback and to devise or ask for strategies to address the gaps before the task is edited. The *Where to next?* step compels learners to respond to the assessment and feedback from the teacher and to analyse their progress in comparison to the learning intentions. In step three, the first and second subsections, *Which learning intentions have I achieved?* and *What did I do to achieve them?* guide learners to determine what they can do on their own. Of further importance is that these subsections stimulate learners to think about how they were able to achieve the learning intentions, which should confirm that the strategies they used had indeed worked. Subsection three, *Areas to develop to improve my writing* allows learners to consider what they think they would be able to do with some help. Here, the teacher may write further scaffolded feedback. The last subsection, *I need more feedback about / help with* highlights what the learners think they cannot do. The learners and teacher have an opportunity to reflect on the learning and determine which gaps must be addressed. The teacher can use the information from the WFT to inform the next teaching phase.

These two writing frames are examples of how the current frames could be adapted to include the teaching of both closed and open skills, as well as the assessment of the skills. The frames direct the writing and scaffold the learning of closed and open skills in any writing task. The examples further show how the frames could include the clarification of learning intentions, scaffold the learning and provide an opportunity for feedback and assessment. The WFT would allow for learners to engage with feedback and reflect on their learning. That would, in turn, encourage autonomous learning.

CONCLUSION

This theoretical paper argues that the writing frames used in South African schools are limiting the learning and assessment of writing. According to the literature reviewed, appropriate writing frames could be successfully applied for scaffolded writing at any learning level and in a variety of genres. The current use of writing frames in the first additional language learning classes from Grade 4 to Grade 12 is not effective in scaffolding learning and does not support the achievement of the learning intentions. In addition, the frames are limiting the exploration of indigenous and localised knowledge and expression in writing.

There are a variety of writing frames available for writing literature, which could be used to teach both closed and open skills. Two frames were used to illustrate how current frames could be adapted to scaffold writing and assess learning intentions. The prompt question writing frame was adapted to include the paragraph writing frame, while the WFT was used to illustrate how AFL and process writing steps could be combined to create a structured frame which includes scaffolding feedback. The adapted writing frames could encourage explicit teaching and lead learners towards independent writing learning.

This paper recommends that studies should be conducted to first, develop writing frames that would allow for the structured teaching of open and closed writing skills and learning intentions that provide for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge. Furthermore, research is needed on how frames could be used to assess writing. The practical implementation of writing frames for different writing tasks should also be studied to determine their effect on writing learning. These recommendations substantiate the argument that the use of two writing frames limits the learning of writing, which could be remedied by the implementation of various and appropriate writing frames.

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