We all teach our freshmen that coherent writing depends on the use of transitional words and obvious signposts of structure to signal the relationships and sequences of ideas. At the freshman level, we necessarily teach explicitness and transition. Using the literary theory of Wolfgang Iser and the nonfiction of Joan Didion, I want to consider a paradox about coherence that experienced writers soon discover: powerful writing often depends on the deliberate omission of signposts and commentary; meaning sometimes carries across the gaps or silences in a discourse with greater power than words themselves can bear. This is not a new idea, either in rhetorical theory or in pedagogy. My purpose, however, is both to propose a somewhat different theoretical approach to the concept of implicitness and to make some practical suggestions for teaching implicitness to our students. I will begin with a quick sketch of Iser’s theory, apply the theory to Didion’s strikingly stark style, and then discuss how to apply this theory in the advanced composition class.

My focus throughout will be restricted to what Ronald Weber has called "literary nonfiction": informative and reflective writing, primarily narrative and dramatic in mode, in which the language has an intrinsic literary interest. Iser’s notion of implicitness, I will argue, is one way of explaining this "literary" quality. Furthermore, my recommendations for teaching will be limited to advanced composition. In my view, the rhetoric of gaps should be taught only after conventional instruction in cohesion and only as a means of supplementing traditional notions of how sentences and paragraphs fit together. The rhetoric of gaps gives us a vocabulary for teaching the kind of creative, exploratory, open-ended nonfiction that we want our students to try once they have mastered the basics of form, structure, and coherence.

Iser’s Theory

At the heart of Wolfgang Iser’s complex and challenging system is a rather simple idea. The reading experience, he says, depends on the "gaps" or "blanks" in a text, the gaps arising from dialogue, for example, or from unexplained events, delayed revelations, and uninterpreted concrete images. At these junctures, "what is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements themselves that give shape and weight to the meaning" (The Act of Reading 168). In the
space left by the reticence of the author, meaning takes place. Information withheld, interpretation withdrawn, the reader is left to make inferences and connections.

In other words, for Iser the reader must actively "assemble" the various parts of any literary text. Language can only specify the operations the reader must perform. Gaps are the most fundamental of these linguistic instructions, the basic spur to the reader's synthetic and totalizing activity. It is in the absence of explicit commentary that we are made to assemble the text. As Iser puts it, a text's unwritten aspects "not only draw the reader into the action but also lead him to shade in the many outlines suggested by a given situation, so that they take on a reality of their own" (The Act of Reading 168). The rhetorical effect of gaps, then, is to draw us as readers into the text. They involve us, stimulate us.

My purpose here is not to give a comprehensive summary of Iser's system, which in its particulars is wide-ranging and philosophically sophisticated, grounded in the phenomenology of Husserl and the controversies of recent literary theory. My interest is in the applicability of this basic notion of gaps to the teaching of writing and the study of nonfiction discourse. Iser himself limits the rhetoric of gaps to fiction, arguing that in an "expository" text, a text which "unfolds an argument or conveys information," the goal is to narrow down the "multiplicity of possible meanings" by "observing the connectability of textual segments" (The Act of Reading 184). Apparently, Iser would agree with the conclusions of Stephen Witte and Lester Faigley's recent study of "cohesive ties" in student writing, based on the linguistic research of M. A. K. Halliday and Ruquaiya Hasan. Witte and Faigley report that in the essays judged to be good in their study, 31.7% of all words helped to establish explicit semantic relationships among statements, while only 20.4% of the words in the low-rated essays contributed to coherence. The implication: expository texts should employ frequent cohesive ties (196).

Nevertheless, Iser defines expository writing too narrowly, restricting that term to analytical exposition in its most basic sense and thus to the communication of facts, ideas, and procedures in linear order. Conventional analytical exposition obviously requires explicitness and connectedness. What Iser fails to consider is an important body of nonfiction, existing somewhere on the continuum between strict exposition and literature, which employs the narrative and dramatic techniques of fiction: literary nonfiction. A definition of literary nonfiction should also include the reflective/exploratory and familiar essay, which relies on techniques of narration and symbolism adapted from fiction and poetry to recreate and reflect on personal experience. Literary nonfiction, in other words, uses the modes of fiction for nonfictive aims, either the communication of information or the dramatization of a point of view.
Contemporary Literary Nonfiction

This hybrid form of writing includes some of our most celebrated examples of nonfiction. Many of the prose models we ask students to imitate are, in fact, familiar essays or, less often, examples of literary nonfiction narrative. In my own advanced composition class, for example, I frequently teach Joan Didion's "On Going Home" as a model of power and dramatic force. Iser's theory helps me explain this power. The essay is one of the most anthologized in the composition canon, and it depends at almost every point on what Didion doesn't say.

First, there are gaps between sentences and paragraphs, a deliberate omission of transitional words and phrases. For example, after discussing the apparent irrelevance of home for the postwar generation, Didion immediately moves, within the same paragraph, without explicit transition, to a description of a topless dancer contest: "A few weeks ago in a San Francisco bar I saw a pretty young girl on crystal take off her clothes and dance for the cash prize in an 'amateur-topless' contest." The juxtaposition is abrupt and dislocating. It is only after a momentary regrouping, a brief comparing of what comes before and after the break, that we realize how the topless dancer is meant to illustrate Didion's comment about the irrelevancy of home. The gap requires our active comparison of the general and the particular. "The participation of the reader," Iser says, "could not be stimulated if everything were laid out in front of him" (The Implied Reader 31).

Similar gaps take place between paragraphs. "We get along very well," Didion says at the end of paragraph three, "veterans of a guerrilla war we never understood." A paragraph break follows, and then two sentences: "Days pass. I see no one." There is structural coherence here. The paragraphs follow one another chronologically, recording separate vignettes of experience in their order of occurrence. But because Didion omits the connections, we are required to engage in an additional split-second of interpretation; we must perceive the structural relations ourselves, "assembling" the "totality" of the text.

In this way, "On Going Home" recalls the essay "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," in which Didion uses more obvious sections of blank space to separate deliberately fragmentary and unrelated scenes, portraits, dialogues, and stories, creating a verbal collage. "On Going Home" is an implicit collage. Even sentence rhythms suggest fragmentariness, as in the asyndeton of "Days pass. I see no one." Didion's sentences are unadorned and straightforward, connected by blank space rather than conjunctions. Parallel structures indicate parallel relationships, but for the most part there is no hierarchy or subordination in these series of sentences.

Secondly, there are gaps following Didion's short interpretative statements. The difference between Didion's "home" in Los Angeles and her original "home" in Sacramento is "a vital although troublesome distinction." Why? Didion doesn't elaborate. Instead
she immediately lists concrete details, and, as a consequence, our activity as readers is stimulated. As Iser explains, "gaps heighten awareness, and their effectiveness lies in the fact that they conceal something of vital importance" (The Implied Reader 33). When Didion says that she and her mother "get along very well, veterans of a guerrilla war we never understood," she does not elaborate. We can gather the meaning, and do. It is clear from the context of details that precede the statement. But Didion does not explicate the statement. It is commentary, it is interpretation, but it demands interpretation itself.

The concreteness of Didion's prose is the third, and certainly the most important, kind of gap in the essay. Select details and isolated scenes are made to carry the weight of meaning. Rather than explain her feelings about the disjointedness of her own past, Didion describes the contents of a drawer: "A bathing suit I wore the summer I was seventeen. A letter of rejection from The Nation, an aerial photograph of the site for a shopping center my father did not build in 1954." Why didn't her father build the shopping center? And what does this fact mean? Why include it? Didion doesn't say. She lets the fact resonate. Rather than tell us that her family is un­communicative and out of touch, she provides a one-sentence dramatization: "We miss each other's points, have another drink, and regard the fire." The essay is a list of details, a juxtaposing of scenes. Each scene is preceded or followed by interpretative statements, but because these interpretative statements are short and suggestive rather than elaborated, the scenes bear most of the burden of significance. We must "read" them: that is, we must not only understand their superficial, denotative meanings; we must look beyond the surface to understand the connotations of the particulars.

For Iser, "the image . . . is basic to ideation," one essential part of the process of formulating interpretations of texts. In the act of inferring the implied meaning of an image, "the reader is absorbed into what he himself has been made to produce through the image" (The Act of Reading 137, 140). Sometimes in Didion, the details are metonymic rather than synecdochical: they are what Tom Wolfe calls "status details" which trigger associations in the reader's mind that lead to a fuller impression of the scene (32). On this level, they involve a gap or silence, since one phrase or image on the page carries with it a larger unspoken context, a context we recreate from the written clue. In other cases, the images are synecdochical, symbols of some larger meaning. Didion's mention of snakes in the graveyard and the broken monuments over the family graves clearly evokes a sense of decay and fragmentation, the loss of a heritage. Here, too, Didion means more than she says. What she says is the scene itself; what she means is what the scene points to, signifies.

On all these levels, the language develops theme. From the beginning, Didion has alluded to the "obliqueness" of her family's way of talking, their "deliberately inarticulate" ways, their method of talking in "code" about underlying desire. Didion, too, talks in code,
using suggestion and image to signal desire. More than that, Didion's task in this essay is to express a "nameless anxiety," an experience and a feeling that is ultimately inexpressible. "There is no final solution," she says, to the fragmentariness of her life, or to the fragmentariness of postmodern experience. Didion's obliqueness reflects her inability to word the wordless, to order what resists order.

Yet, the essay is not obscure or hard to read. W. Ross Winterowd might call it an example of "dramatism" in "themes," powerful because it is dramatic (see his recent article in College English, 581-88). Showing, as we all repeat to our students, is usually more effective than telling. Iser's rhetoric of gaps helps explain why this is true. A dramatization is more vivid and real to us because, in the act of completing the gaps it creates, we actually have the experience it points to. In order to infer what an image or a suggestion does not say, we have to put ourselves in the text—that is, we have to recreate the text mentally. The text invites our participation because it demands our interpretation.

Theoretical Objections

It might be objected that the qualities I've described in Didion's prose are too literary and sophisticated to be of any real use to our students. I would agree that the rhetoric of gaps is applicable primarily to literary nonfiction, and particularly to narrative, dramatic, concrete, and autobiographical writing. One of my aims has been to show that literary nonfiction is literary precisely because it shares the implicitness of fiction and poetry. But I would not agree that the "creative" qualities of the prose in this sense are irrelevant to the expository writing classroom or inaccessible to our students in advanced composition.

We do teach "On Going Home" and many essays like it—E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake," George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," Lewis Thomas's "Tucson Zoo," "On Going Home" is only one example of the reflective or familiar essays that populate our essay anthologies. And we teach these essays for a reason: because they exemplify mature style and we value style, both as end in itself and as a means to better communication; because we realize that the best writing is grounded in experience and that our students learn to write better when they begin by reflecting on their own experience; because we find in the reflective or familiar essay a model for bridging the gap between experience and abstraction, the personal and the public voice. In "On the Neglect of Twentieth Century Nonfiction," Dennis Rygiel has recently argued that we need to study the literary styles of writers like Joan Didion, John McPhee, Tom Wolfe, and others as a way of justifying our claims about what makes writing good. His assumption is that our standards of form and style should be based on the practice of established, successful writers of prose rather than invented inductively for the purposes of teachability. Rygiel goes on to
suggest that literary nonfiction can help us impart humanistic values to our students and—more importantly—that without a sense of such values, students will not be motivated to learn.

We have an obligation, of course, to teach analytical exposition and other kinds of nonfiction which depend on explicitness and connectedness. But we have an obligation as well to teach what James Moffett has called the whole "universe of discourse," including the kind of creative nonfiction which the rhetoric of gaps helps us describe. More than that, as Rygiel implies, literary nonfiction has a special claim to our attention as writing teachers, since it embodies attitudes about language and culture central to our literary and rhetorical tradition.

It might also be objected that Didion's prose is not representative of contemporary prose style in general. Certainly, her style is tauter and more restrained than Orwell's or White's. But Didion's natural understatedness should not obscure the fact that implicitness, in Iser's terms, is structural, built into the form of certain kinds of discourse whatever the apparent degree of wordiness or verboseness or flamboyance of the particular author in question. Like Didion, Truman Capote prides himself in his nonfiction on his ability to "reveal character and sustain mood unaided by a narrative line" (Dogs Bark vii). He shares not only Didion's taste for a sentence style "simple, clear as a country creek," but also her commitment to "literalness and surfaces," to "implication without comment" (Music xviii; Cowley 291). Similarly, Norman Mailer abandons the verboseness and self-consciousness of his earlier nonfiction, particularly Armies of the Night, for the spare, restrained, and detached narrative style of The Executioner's Song, but it is not the spareness of the style that matters for our purposes. Mailer employs gaps by recreating the experience almost entirely through the words and perceptions of the characters themselves, without directly intervening as narrator. He shows rather than tells. He also comes to rely on the technique of the collage, assembling bits and pieces of observation and description connected only by blank space. Even Tom Wolfe, whose style is entirely uninhibited on the sentence level, characterized by exuberant and apparently uncontrolled figurative repetitions, attempts to present experience by means of what he calls "scene-by-scene reconstruction" with as little "historical narrative" as possible (31). Structurally, he holds back, not commenting directly. He dramatizes the experience, describes it in the "eye sockets" of the people involved, allows details to resonate, and thus insists on the reader drawing his or her own conclusions (18). Often his long, accumulating sentences are riddled with dashes, ellipses, incomplete sentences; chunks of discourse are separated with blank space.

The rhetoric of gaps also applies to more traditional nonfiction. The essays of Lewis Thomas, for example, are balanced, elegant, deliberately structured, clearly in the mainstream of the essay tradition. Yet Thomas, too, relies on implication without comment
and the gaps inherent in concreteness. "The Lives of a Cell" juxtaposes three discrete observations about biological science, using only the word item to indicate the breaks. Characteristically, the essay ends with a question ("What is the earth most like?") followed by a single, unelaborated assertion: "it came to me: it is most like a single cell." This final statement is left to resonate, and we are left to go back and see on a second reading how it issues from the itemized observations that precede it (Lives 3-5). Thomas's much reprinted essay, "Tucson Zoo," a reflection on the interconnectedness of living things, breaks at paragraph six without warning or transition. Thomas has just finished describing his thought upon seeing beavers and otters playing in an aquarium tank ("Left to ourselves, mechanistic and autonomic, we hanker for friends"); then he paragraphs, beginning a surprising new chain of thought which continues for the rest of the essay: "Everyone says, stay away from ants." And here, too, the essay ends with a deliberately uninterpreted, isolated question: "When those ants have made the Hill, and are all there, touching and exchanging, and the whole mass begins to behave like a single huge creature, and thinks, what on earth is that thought?" ("Tucson" 9). There are fewer gaps within paragraphs in Thomas's prose; on the sentence level he explains more than Didion, guides us more in moving from one statement to the next. But the leaps he makes between paragraphs, and the unanswered questions he habitually leaves at the end of his reflections, constitute gaps that just as powerfully draw us into the making of meaning.

**Applications**

On a more practical level, it might be objected that the notion of implicitness flies in the face of what students need to learn about the use of explicit transitions. If we teach our students to leave gaps in their prose, how do we avoid the deterioration of cohesion? Aren't structural gaps precisely the problem we want to eliminate in our students' writing? My answer to these questions is that the rhetoric of gaps is at best what Winston Weathers has called an "alternate style," not a substitute for conventional structure, and that it presupposes previous instruction in coherence and cohesion. Implicitness is a strategy for advanced composition students already competent in constructing coherent paragraphs and arranging them in larger blocks of discourse. Gaps can guide students at this level in the act of revising, freeing them from the unnecessary transitions and explanatory language that often make their prose lifeless and flat. Indeed, at the advanced level, the notion of implicitness is not at all hard to teach or to learn, and its effect is not to undermine coherence but rather to make available to students a different kind of coherence.

Recently, for example, after teaching Didion's "On Going Home" and the rudiments of Iser's theory, I asked my advanced composition students to revise an earlier in-class essay about a significant decision in their lives. The topic had asked for both narration and
The excerpt from Paula's response to the assignment is representative of responses from the class as a whole (Paula is a former teacher taking the course for graduate credit):

Original:
Which brings me to the problem that drove me from teaching. The shock that my little world within the classroom could be invaded multiplied when I experienced the rudeness and arbitrary manner with which the invasions were made. The principal I worked with, or rather under, is probably a direct descendant of Adolph Hitler or Mussolini. Undermining the teachers' authority in the presence of the students was one of her favorite pastimes. She always got right up in your face, so maybe she's a bit Arabian. There, in the middle eastern countries, close proximity in conversation is acceptable and desirable. Americans don't want their personal space entered. She, this principal, invaded everybody's space for the purpose of displaying her position of authority. She would fuss at teachers in the middle of a full office, talking to them as if they themselves were students, shaming them with her wagging finger and haranguing them with her goose-like voice. Most often, she'd say what she had to say and then run off, cutting off any chance for reply (which she thought of as backtalk). More than once this hit-and-run artist would open my classroom door (even closing it was ineffective in discouraging her) and toss out a harsh criticism or order and then close the door back without waiting for an answer or acknowledgement from me. She didn't need or want an answer. Her word was chiseled in granite. My words and thoughts were nothing; they didn't matter. She didn't give a damn how I felt. If I did muster the guts to venture a reply, I'd usually have to run across the room to the door, fling it open, and chase her down the hall. That entailed leaving my class unattended: a perfect opening for another bitch session. Finally I learned to restrain myself from running after her in the heat of the moment. (It was amazing the way that boxy body of hers could move so quickly.) Sometimes I'd lie awake in bed at night, formulating answers to all her objections and looking for ways to voice my own objections without getting fired or fussed at.

Revised:
Which brings me to the problem that drove me from teaching. The principal I worked with, or rather under, is probably a direct descendant of Hitler or Mussolini. She would fuss at teachers in the middle of a full
office, talking to them as if they themselves were students, shaming them with her wagging finger and haranguing them with her goose-like voice. Most often, she'd say what she had to say and then run off, cutting out any chance for "backtalk." More than once this hit-and-run artist would open my classroom door and toss out a harsh criticism or order and then close the door back without waiting for an answer or acknowledgement from me. My words and thoughts were nothing. If I did muster the guts to venture a reply, I'd usually have to run across the room to the door, fling it open, and chase her down the hall. It was amazing the way that boxy body of hers could move so quickly. Sometimes I'd lie awake in bed at night, formulating answers to all her objections and looking for ways to voice my own objections without getting fired or fussed at.

Notice that the original is marred by unnecessary analysis and explanation, a tendency to fill all the gaps (for example, "Undermining the teachers' authority in the presence of the students was one of her favorite pastimes"). Freed from deadening commentary, the fine details embedded in the narration have much greater force: doors are flung open, fingers wag, boxy bodies move down the hall. There is more at stake here than wordiness. Eliminating wordiness is a matter of cutting unnecessary words and phrases, but creating gaps means substantially cutting new ideas and descriptions, additions not redundancies (for example, Paula's unfortunate Arabian analogy). As Paula observed in her feedback on this assignment, "Most people are uncomfortable with silence in certain situations, and I think that's the characteristic my writing showed before I revised. I see now that I was spoonfeeding the reader and that gaps provide places for the reader's own imagination."

In her response to the same assignment, Debra has gone even further than Paula, not simply eliminating explanation but conceptually re-seeing her subject:

**Original:**

After all the encouragement and support from my husband, I began to realize that I was really and truly going back to school. I was nervous and excited. I had the normal worries about whether or not I would fit in and be accepted among students a few years younger than me. I was also very excited and even took great joy in paying $34.95 for my first textbook.

I am now working on my second semester since coming back to school. I feel very challenged and a lot more satisfied with my life and with the direction it is going. My brain is finally getting the workout it needed for me to feel good about myself. My decision to come back to school was not an easy one and it has required myself and my husband to make a few personal sacrifices, but for what school has already given me in the way I feel about myself it is worth all the sacrifices we've made.

**Revised:**

I walked into the UNC-G bookstore trying to look like any other college girl. I tried to mask my excitement but felt great joy paying $34.95 for my first textbook. My next stop was the library. I proudly handed the man behind the front desk my I.D. card and in return I carried Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience home with me.

Four papers and three tests are on my agenda for the next week. I've got to remember why the moon has a dark side. I need to read Elbow's section on "voice" again. I need to study the imperative forms of French
"This idea of gaps is very exciting to me as a writer," Debra wrote in her feedback on this assignment. "After you explained gaps in class, I felt as if you had diagnosed a problem I have always had—I have always felt a need to give the reader a reason for everything I say." The revision suggests how the rhetoric of gaps has helped Debra re-imagine her subject dramatically and concretely. Her joy in buying a $35 book or checking out Blake from the library evokes her experience as a returning student far more powerfully than all the generalities of the original.

I also teach gaps by having students follow Peter Elbow's method for writing the collage essay (59-77, 146-66). I assign a general topic and then ask students to approach the theme indirectly and from a number of different perspectives in a series of short scenes, dialogues, portraits, stories, summaries, and analyses. Students begin writing without knowing their central point, generate a large and diverse amount of material, and only in the end try to assemble what they've written into some kind of order. In the finished product, the pieces are juxtaposed rather than blended together, large sections of blank space signaling transition.

The collage helps students experience the value of gaps in two ways: first, because the individual pieces are often experiential and concrete, and because the relationship of the pieces only emerges after the first draft, students are forced to show rather than tell; second, because the chunks of experiential and interpretative writing are connected with blank space rather than transitions, students are forced to consider what kinds of gaps are most effective and what clues in the writing before and after a blank space signal the relationship of the parts. Readers of the collage have to participate in the meaning of the text, interpreting the significance of representative scenes and images and intuiting structural relationships.

If anything, teaching gaps through the collage assignment or the revision exercise helps reinforce what students already know about transitions and coherence. The pieces of a collage are not thrown together at random. Students must ask themselves why a certain piece goes here rather than there: to repeat a pattern of images, to balance a previous section of analysis, to create variety. In the revision assignment, students are forced to examine how sentences actually relate to one another. The use of transitions in itself, after all, does not ensure order. Order is determined by the structural relationship of the sentences themselves. Paula's statement about the principal fussing at the teachers naturally follows the previous claim about the principal's need to display her authority: it is a specific illustration of the general assertion. The wagging of the principal's finger and her haranguing in a "goose-like voice" concretize without explicit explanation the five awkward sentences which
precede these details in the original. The alternative to a stiff and formulaic structure, as Keith Fort says in his important article, "Form, Authority, and the Critical Essay," is not the absence of form (182).

A Final Note

I am not recommending deliberate obscurity and vagueness. Many problems in student writing come from the writer's failure to make certain concepts fully explicit, and we need to continue teaching transition and coherence to solve these problems. We should teach strategies of implicitness only after students have mastered the use of explicit transitions, introducing silence as another dimension of effectiveness in writing beyond the level of basic coherence. The rhetoric of gaps is a refinement, a further step in relating ideas and sentences in dramatic, narrative, concrete nonfiction.

What I'm proposing is that we use Iser's theory and Didion's example to help our advanced students gain access to the vast other half of language. In A Rhetoric of Motives, Kenneth Burke says that words "glow" (219). They mean more than they say. Their significance resonates in the blank spaces between and around and under the printed signs themselves. Iser's notion of gaps is one conceptual approach to this realm of connotation and resonance and association—to the realm of the reader's mind, in effect, since the blank spaces on the page represent the silent activity of the reader sorting and pondering, reading between the lines. "Communication," Iser says, "is a process set in motion and regulated not by a given code but a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment" (The Act of Reading 169). If this is true—if the power and authority of the explicit finally depend on the implicit—we need to teach more than explicitness and transition in the writing classroom. We need to teach more than coherence in its most basic sense. We need, at some point, to teach our students what not to say. If, as Iser says, "what is concealed spurs the reader into action," our students need to master the rhetoric of gaps in order to become more accomplished writers.

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Notes

1This article is based on part of the author's book, Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction, forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press.
It may be that on some deeper level gaps are at work in even the most linear and syllogistic patterns of development. In a wise and suggestive conclusion to their study of cohesion, Witte and Faigley point out that even in informative and functional prose the coherence of the text depends on "factors which lie beyond the scope of cohesion analyses." Often "lexical collocations within a text are understood through cues which the writer provides and through the reader's knowledge of general discourse characteristics and of the world to which the discourse refers" (199-200). An interesting study could be done of exactly how experienced writers of analytical exposition choose material to delete and then how the reader perceives and reacts to the gaps in the finished product.

Works Cited


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