

The ‘Write’ Skills and More: A Thesis Writing Group for Doctoral Students

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ABSTRACT *Writing groups facilitate the development of research students’ written communication skills, which are critical for the competent preparation of theses and publications. This paper describes a Thesis Writing Group for social science doctoral students. Participants indicated that the group not only served a practical role, providing an impetus for the consideration and production of different components of their theses, but also served psychological purposes, fostering positive attitudinal changes such as enhanced motivation, increased confidence and a more positive outlook on the writing process.*

KEY WORDS: Thesis, writing group, doctoral students

Introduction

Utilized to a great extent in teaching, research and administrative tasks, writing has a focal role within academia (Eyres *et al.*, 2001; Rose & McClafferty, 2001; Lee & Boud, 2003; Antoniou & Moriarty, 2008). Academics are not only consistently engaged in writing, but a career marked by longevity and success is often characterized by written outputs, particularly high-quality peer-reviewed publications (Lee & Boud, 2003; McGrail *et al.*, 2006; Antoniou & Moriarty, 2008). Consequently, various means of encouraging and supporting writing productivity among early-career and established academic staff/faculty members in numerous disciplines, as well as professionals undertaking academic work, are increasingly being mounted (McGrail *et al.*, 2006). These include writing retreats, formal writing courses, writing support groups, writing coaches, peer mentoring and initiatives embedded within staff development programmes (e.g. Grant & Knowles, 2000; Kinnucan-Welsch *et al.*, 2000; Morss & Murray, 2001; Murray, 2001; Baldwin & Chandler, 2002; McVeigh *et al.*, 2002; Grzybowski *et al.*, 2003; Lee & Boud, 2003; Moore, 2003; Pololi *et al.*, 2004; Solem & Foote, 2004; Cumbie *et al.*, 2005; Tysick & Babb, 2006; Murray & Newton, 2008).

Competent written expression is also essential for higher education students, especially for doctoral research candidates whose primary basis of assessment is a written thesis. Hence, writing has a central role in their research programme (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992;

Eyres *et al.*, 2001; Kamler & Thomson, 2006). Indeed, recent trends in higher education have heightened the significance of providing writing support for research students. The current emphasis on transferable or generic skills applicable to university and other professional settings is evident within higher education institutions internationally (Cargill, 2004; Demeritt, 2004; Gilbert *et al.*, 2004; Craswell, 2007). Thus, writing skills become even more important after the successful completion of a doctoral programme, not only for those who remain in university settings but also for those who pursue professional occupations outside academe.

Despite the centrality of writing, some posit that explicit instruction in areas such as 'thesis writing' and 'writing for publication' does not seem to be normal practice in higher education (Mullen, 2001; DeLyser, 2003; Cuthbert & Spark, 2008). Cuthbert & Spark (2008) acknowledge that it may be that examples of this type of provision for graduate research students are under-documented in the literature.

This paper focuses on a Thesis Writing Group (TWG) for social science doctoral students at the University of Sheffield. It begins with an overview of the benefits of providing writing support for students. The development, format and focus of the TWG are then outlined, followed by an exploration of some of the outcomes for participants. It concludes with a discussion of some of the lessons learned and recommendations for those interested in designing similar groups for research students.

Of course, writing support is important for all disciplines within higher education. Indeed, the scheme described here was shared with students from all social science fields. However, it is especially relevant to geography because of its multi-disciplinary make-up. Johnston (2003) argues that human geographers "have wider audiences (in several senses of that word) than is the norm elsewhere in UK social science" (p. 139). Shaw & Matthews (1998) suggest that academic geographers fail to disseminate their work to wider audiences effectively, perhaps accounting for the dichotomy between academic and 'popular' views of the field, while Madsen (2002) offers guidance for geographers trying to communicate with the public. In this context, the make-up of the TWG helps address the need to be able to communicate with diverse audiences both outside and within academe. These thoughts are especially important for those with active roles in researcher development who might find this an additional impetus to organizing groups like the TWG.

Writing Support in Higher Education

While training in the skills needed to conduct research is fairly well established within institutions of higher learning, explicit tutelage in the written communication skills needed for the preparation of theses and publications is not necessarily as institutionalized (Mullen, 2001; DeLyser, 2003). Consequently, while students are "meticulously prepared for undertaking their research", they are "*under-prepared* in the skills and techniques that will enable them to present their findings and communicate the insights of their research. No one has taught them how to write" (DeLyser, 2003, p. 169). Aitchison and Lee (2006, p. 267) add that in the current research culture of higher education, writing is "subordinate" to "thinking and knowledge production". Due to its fundamental role in research, however, Mullen (2001) argues that not only should writing be taught at the postgraduate level, but that it is the responsibility of research programmes to ensure that it is taught.

There are numerous texts that focus on the thesis writing process (e.g. Murray, 2002; Dunleavy, 2003), which serve as extremely useful resources. Programmes that emphasize

face-to-face interaction with peers, though, such as writing seminars, courses and support groups, provide a physical environment where writing can be discussed and developed. Regardless of the purpose, structure, duration, level of (in)formality, group size or format (e.g. seminar, course, group), the practical and psychological value of this type of writing support for both students (undergraduate and postgraduate) and academic staff across a variety of disciplines is documented in the literature (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Kinnucan-Welsch *et al.*, 2000; Morss & Murray, 2001; Rose & McClafferty, 2001; DeLyser, 2003; Lee & Boud, 2003; Cumbie *et al.*, 2005; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Tysick & Babb, 2006; Larcombe *et al.*, 2007).

Communication Skills

Unsurprisingly, the principal benefits of writing groups and courses are derived from the practical opportunities to improve written communication skills. First, writing courses can help deconstruct many of the myths (e.g. writing is: an 'innate' talent, a result of 'inspiration') that obfuscate the writing process and that present significant obstacles to persons seeking support for their writing. In other words, the writing process can be 'demystified', brought into greater clarity and made more manageable (Rose & McClafferty, 2001; Lee & Boud, 2003). The groups also help individuals learn about writing 'conventions' (Moore, 2003). Additionally, goal- and deadline-setting and accountability mechanisms help learners make time to write and write more regularly (Morss & Murray, 2001; Pololi *et al.*, 2004). The mutual processes of reading and critiquing the writing of peers also hone critical reading and writing skills (Hay & Delaney, 1994; Lee & Boud, 2003). Finally, these processes expand the limited readership for a thesis (e.g. 'only' supervisors and examiners) to a wider audience (Kennedy-Kalafatis & Carleton, 1996), thereby allowing more feedback.

Psychological Benefits

In addition to improved communication skills, writing groups can also help address psychological factors which influence writing practices. Individuals can be inhibited from writing by a range of emotions, including insecurity, self-doubt, fear, anxiety and a lack of motivation. Programmes that provide an enabling environment can help alleviate these emotions by encouraging individuals in their writing. This can result in: increased motivation to write (Hay & Delaney, 1994; Morss & Murray, 2001); enhanced confidence to write (Hay & Delaney, 1994; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000); and emotional support to counterbalance what could otherwise be a lonely, isolating process (Torrance *et al.*, 1992; Moore, 2003; Boud & Lee, 2005; Larcombe *et al.*, 2007).

The Thesis Writing Group

The University of Sheffield offers several opportunities to support the development of writing skills among research students, including a thesis writing module offered as part of the Research Training Programme; academic writing courses offered through the English Language Teaching Centre; a stand-alone thesis-writing resource available via the online learning environment; and periodic seminars run by the Graduate Research Centre

on writing-related themes. This paper describes a Thesis Writing Group for social science research students.

Genesis and Evolution

The idea for the TWG emerged in response to feedback from a series of introductory thesis-writing workshops, piloted in the fall semester of the 2005–2006 academic year. This ‘Introduction to Thesis Writing’ series was run with three different groups of students from the Departments of Geography, Politics, Sociological Studies, and Town and Regional Planning (12 students in total), each group meeting voluntarily for three consecutive weekly two-hour sessions. The first session introduced students to the writing process, the second focused on criticism and reflexivity, and the third culminated with a discussion on structure and style. At the end, students completed evaluation forms, indicating the elements they liked most and least and offering suggestions for changes to the format and content of the sessions.

Students liked the informal, small-group atmosphere, opportunity for discussions, interaction with peers and writing exercises. Dislikes included the setting of the workshops and lack of examples. Suggested adjustments to the format included: extending the time of each session (or extending the number of sessions), having longer times for peer review, and emphasizing that assignments are voluntary. Recommended changes to content included the inclusion of more writing exercises and examples.

These workshops evolved into the TWG based on the recommendations for more sessions over a longer timeframe, more exercises, additional examples, and more time for writing practice and peer critiques. The first TWG met in the spring semester of the 2005–2006 academic year. Thereafter, the TWG was offered each semester over a $2\frac{1}{2}$ year period to students from all fields within the Faculty of Social Sciences, in any year of study, and without restriction with respect to disability or English-language fluency. Each TWG is capped at a maximum of 10 persons to enable the group cohesion necessary to allow students to feel comfortable sharing their writing with their peers. Group sizes thus far have ranged from three to six students, with individuals meeting in a voluntary capacity for a two-hour session every two weeks, for a total of five sessions. Over the past $2\frac{1}{2}$ years, 25 individuals from all years of study and a range of disciplines have participated.

Objectives and Overview

The objectives of the TWG include:

- the creation of a ‘safe and supportive space’ in which to share the challenges encountered in writing the thesis, as well as strategies for dealing with these;
- the provision of opportunities to discuss, practise and develop written communication skills;
- the development of critical reading and writing skills, particularly through the use of peer-critiquing activities; and
- the build-up of confidence as scholarly writers.

Each of the five sessions has a particular thematic focus, specifically: the writing process, criticism, reflexivity, structure, and style. Each theme is dealt with through group discussions and supplemented by recommended readings and in-class and at-home writing

activities. Core readings include chapters from Murray (2002), Dunleavy (2003), and Wallace & Wray (2006). A reading list outlines other useful resources, including journal articles on topics such as examiners' expectations of a thesis, reflexivity, research journals, and authorial presence in writing. In addition to in-class and at-home writing assignments, students also engage in a peer-critique exercise. The peer critique involves individuals distributing current writing to their peers, which is then taken home and read. Written feedback for the student is compiled by colleagues and me, and discussed within the wider group at the next session.

Evaluation

At the final sessions, students are asked to complete evaluation forms, indicating the elements they like most and least about the sessions, whether they would recommend participation in the TWG to their peers, and suggestions for changes to the format and content of the group sessions. They are also asked to use a five-point Likert scale (1 = no use at all, 5 = very useful) to assess the overall usefulness of the group, as well as the helpfulness of particular aspects, such as the readings, discussions, peer review, and in-class and at-home writing activities. In addition, email comments were also solicited from students asking how the writing support offered within the group differed from that received from their supervisor.

Twenty of the 25 students returned evaluation forms. The overall mean ratings for all aspects were '4' or more. Further, all 20 students stated that they would recommend the group to their peers. The other comments shared by the students will be discussed in the following section, alongside the existing literature on writing support.

Benefits of the TWG

Writing Skills

Students appreciated the TWG as a forum to practise and develop their writing skills, using the group as an impetus to compose and/or revise drafts (e.g. of chapters, conference papers, articles), compile chapter outlines or the contents pages of theses, and experiment with aspects such as journal writing and authorial voice. The following comment illustrates this:

Perhaps the best thing was the opportunity (and, yes, coercion!) to put readings/class discussions into practice in exercises. The recommended readings were great, but I probably wouldn't have put them into practice without this group. The peer critiques (doing and receiving) were invaluable. I found everything we did, especially the exercises, applied to my PhD work and it has made a huge difference to the way I approach my writing.

Another student indicated that what she/he liked most about the TWG was: "the assignments and the exercises as this has given me a chance to practise a number of things including writing".

In particular, students enjoyed the opportunity to enhance their critical reading and writing skills through the peer-critique exercise. This activity highlights the 'audience' aspect of writing, that is, that writing is a social activity involving not only the writer,

but readers as well (Hay & Delaney, 1994; Antoniou & Moriarty, 2008; Cuthbert & Spark, 2008). Additionally, it enables students to hone self-critical writing skills to better address the needs of their audience. Hay and Delaney (1994, p. 318) point out, “By receiving and responding – by way of revision – to audience reactions to a piece of writing, an author’s writing skills may be cultivated”. Consequently, obtaining feedback can improve the writing product as the ability to construct and substantiate arguments is enhanced. When asked what they liked most about the TWG sessions, students highlighted:

[the] peer review which gave many good insights for my own writing and thinking
the constructive criticism in peer review sessions

Furthermore, the act of seeking readership and soliciting feedback precisely mirrors what happens in academic contexts, where writing “enters into [an] explicit network of social, institutional and peer relations”, including reviewers, editors and publishers (Lee & Boud, 2003; Aitchison & Lee, 2006, p. 271). One TWG participant said that one of the aspects that they found most valuable was:

... the opportunity for peer group interaction and discussion of practical exercises where we were asked to comment on each other’s work: apart from a supportive element to this activity, it provided practice for what could be a useful skill to have in the future (when teaching for instance, or publishing).

This said, two students cited aspects of the peer critique exercise as being what they liked least about the TWG sessions. One voiced dislike of the overall exercise saying: “I did not find it very useful apart from making me finish my writing within a time [period]”, while another had problems with the exercise within the context of a multi-disciplinary group saying that they least liked, “reading others’ writing when it’s difficult to understand the content”.

In general, however, peer groups such as the TWG can help learners to “handle the feelings of vulnerability and insecurity that arise when receiving editorial comments” (Engstrom, 1999, pp. 274–275). This is significant because writing can be highly personal with individuals’ sense of self-worth tied into it (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). Distancing the feedback received on one’s writing from one’s sense of self is important, particularly as the ‘peer review’ is an important practice in academic life. Learning how to do this as early as possible is therefore an integral lesson that can be gained in groups such as the TWG.

Peer Interaction

The interaction with peers is another valued aspect of the TWG. Students welcomed the opportunity to discuss writing practices and ideas and to interact with peers in an informal, small-group environment. Students shared that they liked the:

... relaxed, informal discussions and advice ...
... exchange of ideas, it was very useful and motivating ...
... active discussions, which were highly relevant and challenging ...
peer critique and mutual support, which extended beyond class

The benefits of working with peers have already been highlighted, for instance, through the enhancement of critical thinking skills, through an accountability framework for writing (Morss & Murray, 2001; Pololi *et al.*, 2004), through increased confidence and motivation to write (Larcombe *et al.*, 2007), and through the emotional encouragement that can be offered. All of this contributes to efficiency; in his survey of 13 productive authors within the field of educational psychology, Mayrath (2008) found that collaboration with colleagues was the most frequent factor cited by authors as contributing to their productivity. In addition to these benefits, working with peer groups prepares students for a key relationship which marks academe, the peer relationship (Boud & Lee, 2005), signalled in practices such as the 'peer review' process.

Further to this, within universities, the doctoral research process and its associated writing is still undertaken, for the most part, within the boundaries of the supervisor–student relationship (Boud & Lee, 2005; Aitchison & Lee, 2006). This limits not only the potential readership of early writing drafts, but also the development of students' writing skills as supervisors can feel that explicit writing instruction does not fall within their remit (Larcombe *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, a couple of participants in the TWG related that: "[writing] is not something that I have covered at all with my supervisor and didn't expect to" and that "these things didn't come up in my supervisory meetings where we mostly discuss the actual PhD project but so far haven't paid attention at all to the procedures, like writing, presentations, etc."

Moreover, the supervisor–student relationship is often vertically based, supporting "a power relationship in which one is the master and the other the learner" (Kumar & Stracke, 2007, p. 462), perhaps adding to the isolation of the research undertaking. In comparison, peer writing groups, whether for students or staff, can support 'horizontal' relationships among peers (Boud & Lee, 2005). "Peer relationships provide many of the same benefits as senior mentoring but they also provide unique advantages" (Tysick & Babb, 2006, p. 96), including: support, collaboration and networking, and the development of a variety of communication skills (Engstrom, 1999; Tysick & Babb, 2006). As one participant in the TWG stated, "you are developing skills working with your peers". Another student compared the peer–peer and supervisor–student relationships thus: "[the] supervision relationship is kind of crucial and is delicately balanced because [the] student is concerned with how/to what extent [the] supervisor feels [the] student is competent or not ... [the] thesis writing group is [a] great idea and would meet students' needs for 'warmer' support than can be offered by supervisors and also another perspective". In a group such as the TWG, students can learn alongside one another, fostering a peer–peer relationship.

Multiple Areas of Study

The TWG is open to students from all areas of study within the social sciences. The opportunity to receive feedback from individuals with different backgrounds can strengthen writing, as a number of case studies highlight (e.g. Rose & McClafferty, 2001; Cumbie *et al.*, 2005). While one student in the TWGs cited a difficulty with understanding the substantive content of peers 'writing from different backgrounds', other participants have lauded the benefits, citing the more varied feedback that helps them to clarify and strengthen material for a more diversified readership. When asked what they enjoyed most about the TWGs, one person simply said the "mixture of people" from different backgrounds. Others elaborated thus:

I think the benefit of the thesis writing group ... [was] talking to people who were more detached from your work and area and so came at things from fresh perspectives.

It was challenging to have to think about politics in my case, for example, as I am from Sociological Studies. This was 'stretching' and will help to make me more confident when having discussions or collaborating with people from different fields in the future.

The reality is that while students' research may be positioned within a particular field, their readership may transcend this area of study and, indeed, may go beyond the academic community. Rose & McClafferty (2001) point out that the notion of writing for an 'academic community' is not a straightforward one as this 'community' can actually be quite diverse in terms of its backgrounds, interests and approaches. They further state that students may want to write about their work for audiences such as policy-makers or the wider public. This is relevant not only for the dissemination of the doctoral research; it is also pertinent for academic life 'beyond', as the ability to collaborate with persons from different fields of study is increasingly a necessity. More multi- and inter-disciplinary endeavours are being undertaken by researchers, for instance, in partnerships between areas such as medicine and geography or environmental studies and education.

Mental and Emotional Rewards

In addition to issues such as heavy workloads and time constraints, psychosocial reasons are among the reasons why many academics refrain from writing or are under-productive. Both early-career and established academic staff can be affected by factors such as self-doubt, insecurity, lack of confidence, fear of writing and submitting for publication, and fear of criticism or rejection (Boice & Jones, 1984; Engstrom, 1999; Morss & Murray, 2001; Moore, 2003; Pololi *et al.*, 2004; Cumbie *et al.*, 2005; Tysick & Babb, 2006; Gould *et al.*, 2007). When sharing their phobias about writing during the first TWG session, some disclosed issues of lack of confidence and motivation. Interestingly, though, students commented on shifts in their attitudes after participation in the group. One student shared that what he/she liked most about the group was that it assisted in "making it easier and simpler to write" and helped him/her to realize that the process "is not very scary". Another student echoed this, saying the sessions: "helped me to examine issues about my own writing, and made the thought of a thesis less scary". Students also shared having enhanced confidence. One student said: "the knowledge I gained in attending the group has increased my skills as a writer and helped me to view the writing of my thesis in a much more practical and confident manner" and this was voiced by another who said that the group helped her/him to see that there were others with similar fears and struggles, admitting that this realization was: "a relief ... it gives you some confidence". The next two comments seem to sum up the changes in individuals' outlooks:

I have really enjoyed this course and found it very beneficial, to the point where I actually feel positive about the challenge of writing up!

The thesis writing really supported our learning and thinking ... also the opportunity to share views with the other students makes some issues clear and

knowing that we are not alone in this made a difference. The pressure on PhD students to write a lot makes such sessions very important to support students and provide help and guidance

Thus, the TWG played a positive role in the mental and emotional mind-sets students brought to the thesis-writing process.

Discussion

Outcomes

Participation in the TWG had positive results for persons, both practically and psychologically. On a concrete level, students were enabled and supported in considering aspects of their theses; engaging in different stages of writing, such as brainstorming, structuring, composing and revising; producing text; and experimenting with issues such as authorial voice. On a psychological level, individuals experienced attitudinal shifts, emerging with enhanced confidence and motivation to approach the thesis-writing process. Additionally, two students from one TWG and three students from another have formed collaborative teams to write papers on 'writing'. Both groups have already held brainstorming meetings to discuss ideas for their pieces.

'Best' Practices, Possible 'Pitfalls', and Other Guidance

Based on individual feedback, as well as personal observation and reflection, the features of the TWGs that worked well included the following.

Voluntary Participation. This meant that those who attended were committed, diligent and enthusiastic. In one group, attendance was sporadic but, in general, students attended sessions consistently, missing meetings only in instances of overseas travel, sickness/hospitalization or fieldwork engagement that could not be rescheduled. As a voluntary endeavour which hinges on regular attendance to facilitate group cohesion and smooth transitions between sessions, outlining the expectations and requirements during the first meeting is imperative. This enables persons to make a firm decision from the outset as to whether they can realistically commit to the group.

There is a potential danger that, as no formal credits are attached to the undertaking, students could attend sessions without completing readings or exercises. Ensuring that all activities and materials are directly relevant to the writing of their theses minimizes this danger, providing the incentive for students to actively prepare work.

Small Group Size. Working with a small group of students was, first, easier to manage. Second, it facilitated the development of rapport and trust between peers, which is critical for exposing one's writing to critique. Indeed, in one group, one student initially expressed a clear reluctance to share writing with the group, voicing a desire to refrain from this aspect of the peer critique exercise. This was understood and accepted by the group. Towards the end of the sessions, however, the student had a change in attitude and willingly brought in a draft for peers to read and discuss. Finally, the small group size allowed time for adequate discussion during peer critique sessions.

Multiple Disciplines. Having students from multiple disciplines participate was a clear benefit, as this enabled more varied feedback during the peer critiques and ‘forced’ students to write more effectively to convey their ideas to those from dissimilar disciplines.

All Levels of Study. Encouraging students from all stages of study to participate in the TWGs was also valuable, as those beginning the research process (first-year students) often received useful advice from those towards the end stages of the research process (third-year students). Additionally, in the session on the writing process, those in the first year of study were introduced to the notion of writing as a “knowledge-creating” process as opposed to simply a “knowledge-recording” process (Rose & McClafferty, 2001; Moore, 2003; Richardson, 2003; Aitchison & Lee, 2006, p. 270). In other words, the idea that writing is something that can be engaged in from the very inception of the research, as opposed to something undertaken at the end (Kamler & Thomson, 2004), can be highlighted and encouraged.

Based on suggestions from the participants, there are additional points that must be kept in mind, including those listed below.

Scheduling. Students had different viewpoints on scheduling issues, with some, for instance, recommending fewer sessions, others suggesting more sessions which met on a weekly basis, and others proposing that individual sessions should be shorter (i.e. 1½ hours). Obviously, it will be difficult to please all individuals in all instances. Where possible, though, it might be wise to take a flexible approach to the timing of the sessions, letting a group consensus determine this.

Writing Activities. Several students suggested incorporating more in-class writing activities. In retrospect, a number of the in-class ‘writing’ activities focused on examining extracts and examples, as opposed to using class time to produce students’ own text. While reading others’ writing has been useful, given the multiple demands on their time that individuals face, incorporating more ‘hands-on’ writing activities within class time is essential.

Additionally, one student proposed that activities could vary depending on one’s stage in the doctoral process. Students were given an ‘either/or’ option for some activities, such as either compiling a Table of Contents for their entire thesis or an outline for a single chapter on which they would like to begin work, depending on their stage in the doctoral process. More ‘either/or’ options, however, could be provided across all of the sessions to ensure more balance.

Peer Critique. Overall, most students found the peer critique exercises helpful. Two individuals offered suggestions for these, one proposing doing more critiques and another advising that the length of the piece submitted for peer critique should be curtailed. Both of these suggestions could be merged so that instead of students doing one long peer critique exercise they undertake two or three critiques on shorter pieces of writing.

Conclusion

Proficiency in writing is crucial to the successful completion of a doctoral programme, as well as for the subsequent professional pathways that are chosen. For those who pursue a career in academe, writing is an activity in which one is habitually engaged, comprising

a significant component of teaching, research and administrative responsibilities. Moreover, writing establishes one's academic identity, with high-quality peer-reviewed publications deemed significant indicators of worth (Rose & McClafferty, 2001; Lee & Boud, 2003; Kamler & Thomson, 2006). For those who opt for professional careers outside higher learning institutions, effective written communication skills are also essential attributes sought by employers. There is, therefore, a vital need to support research students' development as writers. Writing groups can provide an environment conducive to cultivating writing skills and enhancing writing productivity, thereby providing the requisite practical and psychological support.

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