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DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING: TRUST, CHALLENGE, AND CRITICAL THINKING

ABSTRACT: This article explores the idea that basic writing students, when positioned in a classroom setting where safety and trust are paramount, will be willing to take risks that, when successful, will lead them into a more positive relationship with their own writing abilities. Success in writing leads to a more open-minded approach wherein they are willing to accept the challenges brought on by the struggle to become critical thinkers capable of functioning effectively in the academy.

> In any case—and this is why formal logic always failed in the composition classroom—"thinking skills" must not be taught as a set of abstract exercises (which, of course, they will be if they are not conceived of as being part of writing), but must be intimately connected to composition instruction. Otherwise students hear one more lecture on isolated mental arabesques. (Rose, "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal" 113)

Mike Rose's concept of "mental arabesques" is particularly intriguing. When my two daughters were learning basic ballet positions, they both found the arabesque an extremely difficult position to master. This complex move requires acute balance as well as mental and physical control of the torso, head, and all four limbs. The mind must also control all of the muscles that make all the various body parts move into and hold the position, sometimes for a protracted length of time. Furthermore, the body must execute the various commands sent by the mind. Their dance instructors introduced this position very early—in the basic stages of the learning process—but not before other basic moves and positions were introduced. The arabesque continues to be a difficult move for both, but practice and maturity have made it not as daunting as it once was. The most important aspect of teaching the arabesque was that it was part of an integrated approach including familiarity, practice, and application.

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Like teaching the arabesque to beginning students of ballet, teaching critical thinking skills to developmental writers should begin at the earliest stages of instruction and should continue throughout all phases of writing instruction. But is it necessary to actually address and teach skills as though they were addition facts or events in an historical sequence, or are critical thinking skills and strategies part of the things students do every day? Are they not merely extensions and abstractions of cognitive and metacognitive functions that permeate our lives? If this is the case, then students already know how to think critically. It could be that they are fully capable of employing metacognition when they truly do not even realize it. If so, our task as teachers of developmental writing is more one of making students aware that they have these skills and showing them how to employ them in the study of writing.

In his textbook/workbook *Becoming a Critical Thinker*, Vincent Ruggiero draws an interesting distinction between two methods of thinking: "the production of ideas (creative thinking) [that is] accomplished by *widening* your focus and looking at many possibilities," and "the evaluation of ideas (critical thinking) [that is] accomplished by *narrowing* your focus, sorting out the ideas you've generated, and identifying the almost reasonable ones." He goes on to assert that "both processes are natural activities for human beings" (3). If both of these practices are natural activities, why, then, do so many developmental students find it difficult to think either creatively or critically? I must contend that most of these students are fully capable of thinking at a critical level. However, in many cases, I feel that they are not fully aware of the fact that they are able to think this way; furthermore, they do not understand how they can get from the superficial state in which we most often function to the metacognitive state they must acquire to function in the academy. We tell them all the time that they need to "think critically." What we often fail to do is show them how.

Critical Thinking

The concept of teaching critical thinking through writing across the board to a broad spectrum of the student body, especially those students who find themselves marginalized before they even begin their academic careers, is a daunting, yet essential, task. In "Teaching Critical Thinking in First-Year Composition: Sometimes More is More," Ruth Stewart states that "the teaching of critical thinking in composition needs a paradigm that more accurately reflects the demands of college and career" (170). From placement scores alone, it would appear that many students actually conform to the parameters of the humanistic "Great Cognitive Divide" theory, and early in-class essay

assessments would corroborate this possibility. Many find it difficult to write more than a few simple, unconnected sentences when asked to write an essay that discusses, for instance, their reasons for deciding to attend college. As a rule, their verbal skills are excellent in both spoken English and in the vernacular that best suits their cultural background. This evidence would lead some to believe that these developmental students are functioning primarily on a verbal level, what Patricia Bizzell calls "parataxis" ("Arguing About Literacy" 240). However, a companion assessment that requires students to identify various components and strategies within a written text yields very different results.

Most students easily identify introduction, body, conclusion, thesis statement and a host of other components. They are also able to pick out rhetorical strategies buried within the text and can find the resolution to the problem posed by the thesis. This presents an interesting dilemma: Why are they familiar with all the parts of an essay yet unable to write one? Why are they able to make connections regarding abstract concepts with someone else's text, yet unable to create their own text, even with a model right before their eyes? (The essay they must dissect for parts is entitled "The Essay" – a short piece that explains the necessity of knowing how to write essays for college classes.) In this respect, they do appear to embrace what Bizzell refers to as "hypotaxis, the subordination of one idea to another in a logical hierarchy" and "generalizations that appeal to reason and text-assisted memory for validation" (241). The third criterion Bizzell notes, "a dialectical relation to authority, encouraging the ongoing, disinterested criticism of ideas" (241), is addressed indirectly through the writing sample with which so many students have problems. They do not appear to be able to synthesize, to put "together the parts ... analyzed with other information to create something original" (Reichenbach 25). In the case of developmental writing students, the "other information" Reichenbach refers to would most often be personal experience. I have found that developmental writing students, in general, often question the validity of their personal experience and find it difficult to accept that it *is* as valid as anyone else's first-hand experience – in short, they do not trust the knowledge they already possess. This phenomenon leads me to conclude that many developmental students are orally and alphabetically literate (and in the case of the latter, literate in both the vernacular and in Standard English); however, they lack the skills needed to synthesize the information they readily have at hand into new information. If they can not synthesize the information, they are left with scattered bits of data and concepts they have gleaned from their reading and nothing to which they can relate any of it.

What does it mean, then, to be a critically thinking human being? Lauren B. Resnick of the National Research Council outlines higher

order thinking and states that "we can recognize [it] when it occurs" (3). Critical thinking

> (1) is *nonalgorithmic.* That is the path of action is not fully specified in advance.
>
> (2) tends to be *complex.* The total path is not "visible" (mentally speaking) from any single vantage point.
>
> (3) often yields *multiple solutions*...rather than unique solutions.
>
> (4) involves *nuanced judgement* and interpretation.
>
> (5) involves the application of *multiple criteria,* which sometimes conflict with one another.
>
> (6) often involves *uncertainty.* Not everything that bears on the task at hand is known.
>
> (7) involves *self-regulation* of the thinking process. We do not recognize higher order thinking in an individual when someone else "calls the plays" at every step.
>
> (8) involves *imposing meaning,* finding structure in apparent disorder.
>
> (9) is *effortful.* There is considerable mental work involved in the kind of elaborations and judgements required. (3)

For academics, these criteria make complete sense and are easily applied to almost any field of study. But to a developmental student, they mean little more than a wild goose chase combined with a snipe hunt followed by a fishing expedition in uncharted waters. Students need guidance and in-depth explanation of these processes as much as they need guidance with rhetorical strategies. But perhaps what they need more is the assurance that they will not develop any new, or reopen any existing "writing scars." I have found and will discuss throughout this paper a number of very practical ways to engage students in the critical thinking process.

One of the best practical definitions of critical thinking, addressed directly to students, comes from *The Little, Brown Handbook:*

> Throughout college and beyond, you will be expected to think, read, and write critically. **Critical** here means "skeptical," "exacting," "creative." When you operate critically, you ques-

> tion, test, and build on what others say and what you yourself think. The word *critical* does not mean "negative" in this context. It comes from Greek words meaning "to separate" and "to discern"[...]. (118)

Students become intimately involved with this definition because it is introduced during the first week of the course and referenced repeatedly throughout the semester. For practical application and understanding of the term "criticism," early in the semester, we look at film, book, and restaurant reviews to show that being "critical" has positive, negative, and ambivalent aspects that are all based in personal reaction to external stimuli.

Safety, Trust, and Application

The relationship that beginning students of dance have with their instructors is one of implied trust, a trust that allows them to take risks and attempt difficult moves such as the arabesque. Similarly, the "mental arabesques" writing teachers ask developmental writers to perform can not be accomplished if students do not trust themselves or their instructors. Developmental writing students are a diverse lot, but one thing they all have in common is that they are told they *must* enroll in developmental writing because their placement scores indicate that they are writing below college level. Many have failed past English courses; many blatantly state that they "can't write." Overall, they feel frustration based on previous negative experiences with writing. Stewart's experience shows her that it is important that students "know their frustration is a shared experience" (167). A few are confident, even cocky, but this demeanor almost always proves to be merely false bravado. Most are afraid. Some are terrified. Some make no sounds or movements until mid-term. Most will not trust me until then, but building trust and retaining it is crucial to their success: they can not progress until they feel safe enough to take risks. And they will not take risks until they feel assured that I will not hurt them. Citing the work of Maxine Hairston (1997), Anmarie Eves-Bowden creates a "low-risk, student-centered classroom where the emphasis is on communicating in writing" (74). In an effort to establish trust and foster risk-taking, the in-class assessment my students take the first week of class receives no grade; it merely tells me where I need to start. Early semester writing assignments receive little weight, if any, toward the final grade. In short, they soon know that in their developmental writing class, recursive process is more important than initial product, and not only will they learn how to write an essay, they will also learn to think critically about what they are writing and what they are trying to say.

Developing an environment of trust within the confines of the writing classroom is pivotal when dealing with developmental students. Many have been "burned" in the past; all can relate stories that indicate failure leading to alienation from, or abject fear of, "putting pencil to paper." Indeed, some have such an aversion to writing that they initially refuse to take even the most elemental notes. The semester begins with an introduction to the course followed by an ungraded assessment that the students never see again. The next two assignments, a short narrative piece and a short descriptive piece, are intended not only to allay student fears about writing but also to help me continue to assess the overall tenor of the class' strengths and weaknesses. Marilyn B. DeMario states that she is "markedly inattentive to errors in student papers in the first part of the term" ("Teaching the Course" 97). David Bartholomae agrees with DeMario when he states that "cover[ing] their papers with red circles would be a betrayal of this trust, and yet it would be irresponsible to act as though error didn't matter" ("Teaching Basic Writing"). I, too, feel that too much attention paid to grammatical structures found in early student writings is counterproductive to the process. Certainly, many of these papers are rife with error, but drafts that are covered in editing marks merely reinforce the cycle of failure that many developmental students have faced for years. It is my opinion, then, that students need to feel a modicum of success in one area before they can begin to address additional problems. First drafts and early revisions receive only comments, no grades. Comments are limited to critical questions intended to make students reflect on what they have written and what they could do to make their meaning more clear. Little attention is paid to grammatical structures during this procedure other than general comments that indicate to students that grammatical errors exist that will need attention in the future. The class knows they will have the entire semester to work on revising these pieces. It is not until the revisions begin to show significant improvement that grades are assigned.

To some, this is an entirely new concept. Students begin to ask questions about the comments they receive, essentially asking for clarification, a basic step toward philosophical inquiry and a first tentative step in critically thinking about what they have written and what they are trying to say. This questioning leads to additional revisions through which students typically become more analytical toward content and style. They begin to question their own motivations and the conclusions they are attempting to draw.

Developmental students are *not* stupid; however, they may carry around this perception from years of failure. It is imperative to dispel this myth in the earliest stages of the semester. In a lengthy discussion regarding the "inherent knowledge" that students bring to the classroom, Gregory Shafer, president of the Michigan Council of Teachers

of English, cites numerous sources that substantiate "the amazing skill that students bring to class. Rather than being the deficient, developmental students that seem forever to be missing basic skills, writers [...] are competent and linguistically sophisticated when they enter our classrooms" (8-9). The problem then becomes one of convincing students that they are capable of success regardless of past failures. During a class discussion over the characteristics of description, the concepts of denotation and connotation always arise. We select almost any noun, for instance, "dog," and it is written on the board. We define it using a dictionary and determine that this is the denotative quality of the noun. I then ask students to tell me what the noun makes them think about and their responses comprise a lengthy list of words and phrases under the heading connotation. We discuss the practical uses of connotation and denotation as they would apply to students' writing and orally construct some highly descriptive, and often very humorous, sentences using the words and phrases on the board, comparing them to a strictly denotative sentence about the chosen noun. (The exercise can also be a wonderful springboard to a discussion of generality and specificity.)

These tasks accomplished, we move into a slightly different realm, still using the materials on the board. The denotative definition becomes the "form." The connotations are the individual perceptions and variations created by the form. Students are surprised to realize that they have the inherent ability to think like Plato—what effect this type of revelation might have on a student's overall academic performance may indeed be negligible, but in class, the resultant boost in self esteem is palpable.[1] To know that they are able to think like one of the world's greatest thinkers empowers them to progress despite past failures. In short, it may be possible that no one has ever patted them on the back or given them an "attaboy." Developing an environment where students feel confident in their abilities leads to a sense of trust that allows them to take those risks they have been hesitant to take in the past.

Challenge and Application

Even if developmental writing students are unsure of themselves, keeping them too "safe" can also be counterproductive, just as teaching only the safest ballet positions would be counterproductive to an aspiring dancer. Stewart states that "[...] research in educational psychology suggests that struggle is integral to higher-level learning" (167). In describing his Basic Reading and Writing course, David Bartholomae states the importance of introducing longer, more involved texts into the curriculum: "[We] felt in designing the course, that our concern

should be with acts of comprehension beyond the sentence or the paragraph, and our bias towards larger units of discourse was justified by later findings from the research we did on the course" (97). Stewart agrees: "Much can be gained by challenging students with material assumed to be 'too difficult' for them. ...And as a result, they develop analytical skills at a level that comes from *doing* academic work as opposed to being *prepared* to do academic work" (162). Shafer concurs in his outline of curriculum revision: "[...] it seems more natural to pose problems, which induce critical thinking and original approaches to composition" (14).

My students are challenged from the outset with a difficult text that we work through over the course of the semester—one that lends itself to a multitude of activities that enhance their ability to critically assess this and other texts they will encounter. Early in the semester, students read chapter three of Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life.* Dealing with the problems even the professional writer encounters in developing a text, this selection is far from academic in structure; however, its surface meaning is clear: writing, in any form, is extremely difficult and the demands placed on the writer can often be very disconcerting. But acknowledging as much can help to relieve some of the pressure. Bartholomae notes that "it is liberating to hear others [...]talk about how sloppy the process is, or about ways others have dealt with the anxiety and chaos that so often accompany writing" (88). Students must keep notes while reading this piece and must write at least a paragraph about what they understand the purpose of the chapter to be. Over the course of the semester, the class often returns to relevant sections of the chapter (narrative, descriptive, comparative, causal, and argumentative) to delve more deeply into the writer's motivations and results. Students try to determine why Dillard uses some of the tactics she does and what effects these tactics have on the conclusions she draws. Students locate and identify the strategies she uses to develop her ideas. Through this inquiry, it becomes obvious that Dillard spends much more of her time thinking about development of ideas, purpose, audience, organization, style, and revision than she spends actually writing. Not only does this show students the importance of process, it also forces them to be more aware, and more critical, of their own writing processes. A simple exercise in analyzing process becomes a catalyst for understanding objectivity.

One feature of our developmental writing requirement is that students must fulfill a weekly lab requirement; fortunately, the form these labs must take is left to the discretion of the instructor. I have chosen to structure my labs around the Dillard selection and other writings that I vary from time to time.[2] Labs involve topics as varied as vocabulary development, identification and decoding of simile and metaphor, interpreting implicit meaning, and finding the connections

between the extended metaphors. Students are also asked to develop a profile of the writer after reading the text and a short biographical sketch—conjecture is welcomed, always with varied and often humorous results. Students come to understand that often there are no right or wrong answers and that contradiction and paradox are integral parts of academics, an observation made by Bartholomae: "Ambiguity, contradiction, uncertainty—those qualities that are most attractive to academics—are simply 'wrong' in the minds of students whose primary goal is to produce controlled and safe essays" (92).

Finding ways to make sense of what does not initially appear to make sense is crucial to understanding an author's intent, but it requires effortful, complex thought that often leads to further uncertainty and multiple solutions. It requires creating new meaning from disorder. Students need to know that from the ambiguities and uncertainties come the most fertile ground for expressing their opinions through academic argument. I write the word "WHY?" in huge letters on the board every day. It sometimes takes two weeks for someone to ask what it means, but when someone does, the real work soon starts. It becomes the operative word—the word that will lead them past the literal and into the realm of academia as critical thinkers.

In an effort to show students the importance of implicit meaning in their writing, they are required to critically analyze their own early writings. The non-confrontational narrative and descriptive essays, initially intended as safe, trust-building activities, become the catalyst for reflection and initial steps into the realm of critical thought. From these two "safe" essays, a comparative analysis of both writings soon evolves. To most developmental students, this concept is completely foreign (certainly a mental arabesque) and many are openly mystified; therefore, most of the early part of this process is completed in class.

We begin by covering the theoretical material and examples in the textbook and reading ancillaries such as Mark Twain's "Two Views of the Mississippi." I point out the relative futility in comparing two things simply to compare them, and draw their attention especially to the numerous conclusions we can draw from an analysis of Twain's writing. Comparing for the sake of comparison becomes another exercise in descriptive strategy, something we have already done. The purpose here is to elicit a critical, third-person response to earlier texts, much like the analyses they will have to perform in freshman composition. But in this scenario, there is safety as well as challenge. Since they are intimately involved with the writer, there is safety in that everything they need to know about the writer they already know—biography, preferences, cultural background, socio-economic background—making research into the author unnecessary to understand the writer's motivation. The challenge is to analyze the material and draw conclusions about a singular aspect of the writing—to create new

meaning from the two texts. Bringing these two concepts together in order to draw relevant conclusions about the writing itself carries with it the potential to open pathways of thought that for some, have never been traveled.

In class, students first write synopses of both papers. (This forces some students to scramble and quickly write one or both of the required essays.) From the synopses, they look for commonality, contradiction, paradox, similarities in point of view, subject matter, voice, or any of a host of other possibilities. They assume the role of an objective, third-person critic whose task it is to formulate an opinion about the writings. During this entire process, I circulate, working individually with students, answering questions and generally guiding the composition. They are encouraged to work in pairs or small groups to get feedback from their peers. Perhaps more importantly, I ask probing, open-ended questions intended to make students consider all aspects of what they have previously written. It is from these probing questions that opinions begin to develop, opinions that become pointed arguments developed out of the materials students have at hand. Whether the opinion is that the grammar needs revision in both papers, or that the writer used similar tactics in both papers, or that the writer treasures family values, the important point is that the student has thoroughly analyzed two pieces of writing and through a process including reflection, inference, and synthesis, has successfully formed an opinion that has led to an arguable conclusion about the two pieces of writing in question.

Many students have expressed surprise and elation at what they have been able to accomplish. It has required guidance, patience, and in-depth thought. As they go through this process, they become aware of the concept that they are thinking about what they have already written as they would any given text, taking into consideration all the known facts and forming opinions regarding what they know and what they have deduced. Many feel that, for the first time, they have been able to accomplish something through writing. This further success provides them with the assurance that they *can* take risks and that they *can* be successful.

Another successful strategy is to have students write a journal entry for each class day. A portion of the entry must reflect class procedure for that day; a portion must attempt to assess the impact the class session had on the student's understanding of academic writing; and a portion may voice opinions or questions raised during reflection. Sometimes there are no questions, but more often, students who diligently follow this process openly or privately seek clarification, actively opening a dialogue that helps to further clarify a concept or strategy. These class discussions sometimes wreak havoc on class schedules, so it is imperative to be flexible. The most important aspect of this process is reflection leading to dialogue.

Students are often unaware that they already think critically in most situations, but that often the thinking happens so fast that they do not even realize it. I ask if they have ever been in a situation that required an immediate defensive driving maneuver and ask what their reaction was. The immediate answer is that they swore, swerved, and/or applied the brakes heavily. I point out that this type of thinking, however immediate, is a process of recognizing a problem, determining a logical course of action, and employing a strategy that suits the situation, hopefully arriving at a solution that avoids serious damage, and without certainty that the solution will work. Expressed in this manner, such everyday problem-solving helps students start to see the metacognitive possibilities they already possess; the task then becomes harnessing and slowing down the thought process so students are aware of it. On a similar note, we discuss commercials, coming to the same conclusion: we employ our critical thinking skills at all times, even if we do not realize we are doing so.

In an effort to heighten awareness of external stimuli, to discern meaning and to learn descriptive strategy, students watch a short video entitled "It's in Every One of Us." This video is a series of still photographs with musical accompaniment. There is no action nor is there dialogue, but the multi-faceted argument is very evident. Musically and visually, the video follows a fugue pattern, regularly adding instrumentation to the sound track and adding different people and groups as it progresses. The faces portrayed are multi-cultural and the settings are obviously shot at various locations around the world. After watching the video one time, I ask students to give me their impressions. Initial responses are "people, faces, groups, smiles, frowns" and the like—only the superficial visual aspects. They then watch it a second time after I have asked them to use all their senses, hinting that there are patterns that evolve in both the visual and audio portions. Reactions become more concise. They notice more nuance, such as emotions and background settings, but the patterns still elude them. It is not until the third viewing that students begin to notice the patterns: one voice, one instrument, one person; two voices, two instruments, two people; several voices, several instruments, groups of people. They quickly come to understand that watching the video more than once is analogous to reading a text more than once. When asked what the video means, most will agree on an overall meaning, but as we discuss and brainstorm further, even deeper meaning becomes evident. The result is that students realize that the deeper they probe into a text, the more meaning they will be able to create from it.

Conclusions

Performing the arabesque, a complex, mentally and physically challenging maneuver, can become simple with practice—so simple that, perhaps, it is no longer an acquired skill. It becomes second nature, something one performs without hesitation. Like the arabesque, critical thinking can become second nature, as Rose has stated, a mental arabesque. Ruggerio says that it is a "natural activity" achieved by narrowing the focus. But many, perhaps most, developmental writers have been "under-exposed" to ways of thinking beyond the literal, surface level meaning of a text. I "over-expose" students in the sense that instruction in writing and instruction in critical thinking can not be separated in most instances. Certainly, they learn how, when, and where to apply any of the various rhetorical strategies we study, but this is not enough. They learn to habitually ask and attempt to answer the question "why?" regarding all aspects of writing. I do not expect that they will all exit the program as philosophers, but they will be much better equipped to face their impending challenges than they were when they arrived. In "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College," Bizzell states that there are three approaches to understanding basic writers in college: recognizing "differences in dialects, discourse conventions, and ways of thinking" (167). I fully agree that the dialects and discourse conventions normally attributed to developmental writers differ radically from those found in academia. However, different ways of thinking, especially ways of thinking about thinking, are more a result of under-exposure in earlier grades rather than of "cognitive dysfunctions" or of an inattention to "the cultural bases of differences in thinking" (Bizzell 167). Although developmental writers initially struggle to master critical thinking, once they are aware of its possibilities, they are, with practice and guidance, willing to accept new and different ways of thinking and are fully capable of functioning at or near (and in some cases, above) a level that will allow them to compete with their academic peers. I have found that over-exposing students to situations that force them to think critically about their own texts, and those of others, tends to make critical thinking a more natural process, one that can be accessed at any time.

What, then, do safety and challenge have to do with becoming more adept at thinking critically? Feeling secure in an unfamiliar environment is a notion everyone would prefer in all situations. Being challenged is what often forces us to progress. But the challenge is easier faced knowing that there is a safety net in place, one that will cushion the fall. Moving into the realm of critical thinking is a risk that many developmental students would prefer to avoid. Previous situations have often allowed them to fall into the safety net of "touchy-feely" writing that will not support them in the academy. Mike Rose

has said that "error marks the place where education begins" (Rose, *Lives on the Boundary* 189), and developmental students are going to make numerous errors, despite the best intentions of their instructors. They must believe that the errors they make are not going to elicit the types of failures they have previously encountered. Learning to become a critical thinker is a challenge that will beget error, but avoiding the pain usually associated with error is paramount.

There are numerous tactical devices that can elicit critical thought in developmental writers. Exposure, perhaps over-exposure, is the key. Experience has taught me that merely *telling* developmental students to think critically about what they read and write is a waste of time. *Showing* them that they already have the inherent ability to think critically and explaining how the process can work for them may be time-consuming, but it can be combined with regular classroom instruction in academic writing to give them that critical edge they need to succeed in their future endeavors. We can, indeed, teach them to perform those "mental arabesques" that have been too risky to try in the past.

Notes

1. Plato and dialectic are discussed at various times during the semester. We also discuss a simplified version of Hegelian dialectic, and Descarte's *cogito* is discussed when we look at proper application and punctuation of the conjunctive adverb.

2. Other selections have included the introduction to Tom Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation*, and a comparison of the text and film versions of Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." I am currently developing additional selections to use in the future.

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