

Meet the Editors

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Stephanie Medley-Rath is an associate professor in the Sociology Department at Indiana University Kokomo and the editor for *TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology*. Her areas of expertise include the sociology of autobiography, cognitive sociology, introductory sociology, and the teaching and learning of research methods throughout the undergraduate sociology curriculum. Her research has appeared in *Socius*, *The Qualitative Report*, *Symbolic Interaction*, *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, and *Teaching Sociology* and she has numerous teaching artifacts published in *TRAILS*.

She is the 2019 recipient of the John F. Schnabel Distinguished Contributions to Teaching Award from the North Central Sociological Association. She is past-chair of the American Sociological Association's Section on Teaching and Learning in Sociology. She holds a doctorate and master's degree in sociology from Georgia State University and a bachelor's degree in sociology from Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

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Gregory T. Kordsmeier, PhD, is the director of the Institute for Learning and Teaching Excellence and an associate professor of sociology at Indiana University Southeast, where he teaches the sociology of health and medicine, the self and social interaction, social problems, social theory, and social research methods. He is the recipient of multiple teaching awards, including the Carla B. Howery Award for Developing Teacher-Scholars and the Scholarly Contributions to Teaching and Learning Award from the American Sociological Association, the John F. Schnabel Distinguished Contributions to Teaching Award from the North Central Sociological Association and the Trustees Teaching Award from Indiana University Southeast.

He served as the editor of *TRAILS*, the American Sociological Association's Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology. His research in the scholarship of teaching and learning includes best practices for using podcasts as teaching tools and interventions to better engage the cultural capital of first-generation college students and increase their success and retention. He holds a doctorate and master's degree in sociology from the University of Wisconsin and a bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.





Where Do Good Teaching Ideas Come From?

This module is by Gregory T. Kordsmeier, Indiana University Southeast, and Stephanie Medley-Rath, Indiana University Kokomo

Welcome to the *Teaching Sociology Playbook*, a practical guide to creating and sharing teaching resources. We developed this project to take sociology instructors from the kernel of a great teaching idea, through the development and ultimate sharing of that idea in the hope of creating a robust teaching community. In our experience, most college instructors have many good ideas for improving student learning in a class they teach. Yet transforming that good idea into a full-fledged activity or assignment can prove challenging. For instance, how can you be sure there are sufficient instructions? Or that your students are learning what you want them to learn? This guide is here to help.

We also believe that instructors do not need to create all their teaching materials—many other gifted teachers have developed resources that you can use and adapt to your classrooms. Knowing where to find these resources can serve two purposes. First, it gives you access to a wealth of knowledge that other instructors have developed. Second, it provides a list of places to share your work with a larger audience. We hope that you will contribute to and use these shared repositories so that we can work to further develop a canon of sociological teaching resources and community around outstanding teaching.

In this module, we explain the origins and inspiration for our good ideas for teaching.² Our intent is that if you are having trouble thinking of innovative ideas or need inspiration to improve your existing ideas, our experience will be helpful to you. Good ideas can come from many different places. Sometimes they come with field-tested, evidence-based approaches published in peer-reviewed journals, like *Teaching Sociology*. Other times they are reactions to things in your classroom or institution. And sometimes inspiration comes from life outside of academia. In any case, we thought it would be helpful to catalog just a few places that can inspire you. The first three listed are practical matters whose consideration might lead to your next excellent teaching innovation, while the following four highlight potential sources of inspiration.

²Carla B. Howery came up with the clever slogan of “good ideas for teaching” or GIFTS.





Potential Sources of Inspiration

1. Meeting the Course Learning Objectives

The first place that good ideas for teaching often come from is by looking at the learning objectives you have set for the course. While future modules of the *Teaching Sociology Playbook* will go into the specifics of writing good learning objectives and developing strong syllabi, it is logical to ensure that your activities and assessments reflect the goals you have set for the course. One time to do this is when you set up the course itself. You may see a hole in your syllabus where you have not introduced, planned practice, or established an assessment of a learning objective. You may also find that when you assess your students, they are not achieving the course learning objectives. Greg found that while students could describe individual theorists and their theories well in his Social Theory course, they had difficulty distinguishing larger schools of theoretical thought. As a result, he restructured his class time to add more opportunities for students to review these concepts. For example, at the end of each unit, he spent twenty minutes reviewing the significant tenets of each theoretical school and had students reflect on how well the individual theories they studied fit those tenets.

2. The Cultural or Institutional Context

We develop good ideas for teaching by considering our strengths and limitations in whatever cultural or institutional context we find ourselves in. There are several details about the setting that matter, as outlined in Table 1.



Table 1. Questions to consider for the instructional context.

Contextual Factors	Questions to Consider
Cultural context	Do you teach at a religious institution? Is your institution in a high-risk environment? Is your location at a greater likelihood of experiencing disruptions related to pandemics, violence, or extreme weather? Do you need to be prepared to quickly pivot instruction from one modality to another?
Curriculum	Where does the course fit in the sociology, general education, or other program curricula? Do you get to select your text, or is there a standard text used across sections?
Demands on instructor time	How many distinct preps do you have? How many students will you teach in total during the term? Do you have any new preps? What are the research and service expectations of your position? Are you also responsible for advising students? What responsibilities do you have outside of your job?
Enrollment	Is the course small (fewer than 20), medium (21–50), large (50–200), or mega (200 or more)? Do you have high school students enrolled in your course, and, if so, what proportion?
Institutional support for instruction	Will you have graders or teaching assistants? Does your institution have a writing center, library assistance, testing center, or tutors? Do you have a center for teaching and learning or access to instructional designers?
Length	How long is the semester or quarter? Is the course in an accelerated format? How long are in-person class meetings?
Level	Is the course an introductory, intermediate, upper-level, graduate, or honors course?
Modality	Is the course in-person, online, or hybrid? Do you typically teach the course in multiple modalities?
Research expectations	Can you connect your research agenda to your teaching responsibilities? How does your institution “count” publications that are in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) or peer-reviewed instructional materials (e.g., TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovation Library for Sociology)?
Student characteristics	Are your students also working or caregivers? Are your students returning students or recent high school graduates? Are your students prepared to ask for clarification on instruction, grades, or extensions?
Student preparedness	Are students overprepared, underprepared, or appropriately prepared? Are your students majors, minors, in related disciplines, or not? How often do you need assigned and graded work?

Note: Download a customizable version of this table at https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/the_teaching_sociology_playbook_questions_to_consider_table.pdf





Sometimes, changes in the cultural context can force a change in teaching. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Greg transformed his face-to-face Social Theory course into an online course. As a part of that transformation, he took the exams he had been using as assessments and converted them into open-book exams and gave students a week to complete them. The positive response from students, who reported much lower anxiety, convinced Greg to keep exams in that format, even when taking the course back to a face-to-face modality.

3. Talking Over a Teaching Challenge With Colleagues

Sometimes the idea of how to teach something comes from trying to solve a teaching problem collaboratively. One technique that Greg developed in graduate school came out of just such a situation: the shirt weenie. As they describe in their note in *Teaching Sociology*, Greg and his coauthor (Shane) found themselves in a situation where they shared a teaching assistant office when Shane was teaching an introductory social psychology class:

During the week when discussion centered on Goffmanian social psychology, both of us collaborated on how to teach the power of face-work and tact in everyday social interaction. We felt it best to develop some sort of demonstration that would cause students to experience the effects of tact on their own behavior, since others have shown the value of experiential learning in teaching . . . Thus, we tried to think of a social faux pas that did not align with the “face” of a college instructor (or most social actors, for that matter). We also needed a faux pas noticeable to all of the students in the class. (Sharp & Kordsmeier, 2008, p. 360)

In other words, Greg and Shane were going back and forth about the best ways to help students understand Goffman when one of them hit on the idea: that it would be funny if they could embarrass themselves in a way that demonstrated the theory to their students. They volleyed ideas back and forth until they





produced the idea of purposely embarrassing themselves by sticking their shirt tail out of the zipper of their pants to see if anyone would call them out. Then, they would start a discussion of embarrassment, face, and tact. Greg still uses this demonstration in his social psychology and theory courses.

4. TRAILS! *Teaching Sociology!* Social Media!

Sociology has a long history of supporting the sharing of good teaching ideas. *Teaching Sociology* and TRAILS are two great resources. Unfortunately, both are behind a paywall, which means you must be a member of the American Sociological Association or pay for access to these resources. Your institution's library should have access to *Teaching Sociology*. You can also contact the author of a resource for a copy. Most authors are happy to share their resources if you do not otherwise have access. Further, social media can be a place to find new ideas from leaders in teaching. For instance, Greg adopted an idea shared by Alanna Gillis (@alannagillis3 on Twitter) about a way to automate extensions for late work to make them more equitable (see Figure 1). Keep in mind, however, that contextual factors that matter rarely make it into social media posts. In the Making Your Teaching Public module, Stephanie discusses these and other venues for sharing and publishing your ideas.





Figure 1. Example of a tweet thread that Greg used as a model for managing extensions.

Alanna Gillis, PhD @alannagillis3 · Mar 24 ...
Problem summary: students could benefit from extensions, need flexibility, need structure, profs are burned out, and we have to worry about inequality? Sounds insurmountable. In some ways, yes, it's a structural problem that needs a structural solution.

1 ↻ 19 ↗

Alanna Gillis, PhD @alannagillis3 · Mar 24 ...
However, I've created a system in my courses called structured flexibility that helps. Give students flexibility in a highly structured, consistent, easy to access, and easy to implement way. What do I do?

1 ↻ 8 ↗

Alanna Gillis, PhD @alannagillis3 · Mar 24 ...
My system:
1. Simple Google form asking name, course, assignment title, and new due date
2. Rule= new due date within one week of original deadline
3. Put form link everywhere: syllabus, assignment guidelines, course website
4. Submitted form = confirmed extension. No emails!!

4 ↻ 15 106 ↗

Alanna Gillis, PhD @alannagillis3 · Mar 24 ...
5. I grade all papers in by original deadline as one group and return. Then all extension papers as one group.

My results: more than 95% of papers are "on time", students can plan for their new date but not put off forever, and I love having smaller chunks to grade together.

1 ↻ 1 40 ↗

Source: Gillis, A. [@alannagillis3]. (2022, March 24). *Problem summary: students could benefit from extensions, need flexibility, need structure, profs are burned out, and we have to worry* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/alannagillis3/status/1507120900822417410>





5. K-12 Instruction

Stephanie gets ideas from her K-12 daughter's schooling. Her daughter is in high school, but her daughter's school has used iPads and Google products since she was in first grade. This broad access to technology in K-12 means that college faculty are close to having students who have used iPads or laptops for most or all of their education. Therefore, we should learn how K-12 settings use iPads, Google products, or whatever technology schools that feed into your college rely on. For example, Stephanie's daughter has done several group projects using Google products, and now Stephanie has students work collaboratively using Google products.

The experience of being a parent of a school-aged child has also helped Stephanie understand what not to do. For example, she better realizes how important it is for students to have clear written instructions, organized materials, and rubrics that reflect written instruction. She now uses Google Docs for assignment instructions, which allows her to add comments in response to student questions about the instructions as they occur. Instead of only providing that clarification orally or in a single email conversation with one student, she records it in the instructions. This practice of social annotation also makes it easy to edit the instructions the next time you use an assignment.

Stephanie also created an activity based on her work as a Girl Scout troop leader. She created an out-of-class assignment for Introduction to Sociology following the format used for Girl Scout badges (i.e., five steps that become progressively more advanced about a topic or issue). The assignment tasked students with creating a badge program about something covered in the course. Many students picked topics related to health inequality, such as physical fitness or nutrition. Unfortunately, many students then created a badge focused on individual solutions without considering the role of inequality. These topic choices were also partially a result of student backgrounds in her courses (i.e., many nursing and health care students). Stephanie wanted students to focus more on the significant concerns of sociology, such as inequality. Due to COVID-19, Stephanie dropped the assignment





altogether because it needed improvement and she wanted to lessen the load on students during the pandemic. The Girl Scout badge assignment has potential but just needs more work.

6. Inspiring Media

An idea may come as a result of consuming a piece of media that sparks a connection to something you teach, and you want to expose your students to that media. Greg enjoyed the podcast *Sawbones* for its informative and irreverent take on medical history. He was often struck by the sociological content of the show, even when the authors did not identify it explicitly as sociological. Still, the show's host did an excellent job of helping to draw out how class shaped the use of lobotomy or how gender norms shaped the disease of hysteria. Greg incorporated the podcast into a short application paper for his Sociology of Health and Medicine class. Students had to use the episode to explain the social construction of health and illness. Other media, from television show clips to documentaries, from newspaper op-eds to webcomics, can spark a connection and be used to illustrate points, spur discussions, or build assignments. There is a wealth of resources inspired by media in both TRAILS and *Teaching Sociology*. For instance, there are activities based on *The Hunger Games* (Oslawski-Lopez, 2022), *Reservation Dogs* (Sauptura, 2022), and the game Werewolf (Baxter & Connor, 2021).

7. Discouraging Academic Dishonesty

You might develop an activity or assignment to discourage plagiarism. Students often report that the pressure from high-stakes assessments drives them to plagiarize materials or otherwise engage in academic dishonesty (Golman et al., 2022). One reason to develop new ways of assessing students may be to decrease the impact of a single form of assessment, which can reduce the pressure to cheat. Greg has made changes to a couple of his courses and has felt it successfully discouraged academic dishonesty as a result.





For instance, when designing his Medical Sociology course, Greg created a series of shorter papers that had students apply concepts from the course to a new context rather than having them complete a single term paper for the course. Shorter papers got students writing while lessening the chance that any single writing assignment would make or break a student's grade.

Greg's final paper for Social Theory has students apply two theorists' perspectives to a contemporary social issue and then compare those explanations of the case in question (see Kordsmeier & Macdonald, 2015). By changing the social issue every time he teaches the course, students have neither a library of previous papers they can share nor a set of publicly available examples of essays that they can buy or otherwise appropriate. This assignment was inspired by Macdonald's description of her final paper and was initially adapted because Greg wanted a cumulative project. It was only later that he discovered that it promoted academic honesty as well.

Reflective Cases

Now that you have a good grasp of many potential sources of good ideas for teaching, we will describe in-depth reflections on our process of identifying and refining these ideas.

Out-of-Class Assignment

Seeing Sociology

Stephanie developed the Seeing Sociology assignment to address several practical problems related to **contextual factors**.

First, the assignment dealt with limited instructional support. For example, Stephanie did not have graders or teaching assistants, so everything that she assigned, she graded. A visual-based





assignment promised to take less time to grade than a text-heavy assignment. Stephanie also had to consider the other *demands on instructor time*. She developed the assignment at a community college where she taught five courses every semester: two online and three in-person.

Further, she usually had three unique preps each semester (in addition to in-person and online sections of Introduction to Sociology). Her courses usually *enrolled* about 30 students. Each semester, she was responsible for the instruction of approximately 150 students, and she also advised 30–40 students. She had no research expectations, and service requirements were low (e.g., being a member of one campus committee).

When Greg and Stephanie first met, they talked about their teaching challenges. Greg shared that he was overwhelmed by the amount of grading he had to do after changing institutions. Greg went from one section of Introductory Sociology a semester (with approximately 25 students) to two sections a semester (with 40 students each). This increased enrollment made it challenging to keep up with grading and provide effective feedback on the four-page papers he typically assigned at multiple points throughout the semester. Stephanie shared the assignment with Greg because she had developed it to address this very challenge.

Second, *Seeing Sociology* addressed the unique context of online learning (i.e., *modality*). In online courses, students often do more graded written work through the discussion forum (in contrast, discussion question responses are more likely to be ungraded for in-person courses). If students were already doing some graded writing, more writing seemed unnecessary. Therefore, *Seeing Sociology* took the place of nondiscussion-based writing assignments but still challenged students to activate and use their sociological imagination by connecting course material and the real world, thus **meeting the course's learning objectives**.

Third, *Seeing Sociology* addressed issues related to *student preparedness* and other *student characteristics*. Stephanie created the assignment around 2011 and was responsive to the shifts that were taking place in the broader culture around visual-based





forms of communication and access to smartphone technology. When Stephanie began using the assignment, visual-based social media was still new. For example, Instagram and Pinterest started in 2010, and Snapchat came out in 2011. In 2012, 45 percent of Americans owned a smartphone, which increased to 56 percent in 2013 (Fox & Rainie, 2014). In other words, more students were getting smartphones or knew someone who had a smartphone. The smartphone was essential because cameras were now more accessible to students. She also knew that many of her students were part of the have-nots in the digital divide (see Gonzales et al., 2020). Therefore, she had a couple of spare digital cameras to lend out but never needed to lend them to students. Today, most students are very familiar with visual-based social media, and nearly all students have a smartphone. Therefore, students are technologically prepared for the assignment. Still, because most have grown up using social media, they are now challenged to use the conventions of social media and visuals in a new way.

Fourth, Seeing Sociology fit in the sociology *curriculum* because it had the potential to help students with their observational skills and could be used to introduce students to the subfield of visual sociology. Stephanie has only used the assignment in Introduction to Sociology. Still, it could be adapted to intermediate or upper-level courses and, more explicitly, target the development of observational data collection and analysis.

Over the years, the assignment underwent significant revisions. Stephanie published the initial instructions for this activity on TRAILS in 2013 and an updated version in 2017 (Medley-Rath, 2013; 2017; see also Medley-Rath, 2019). The 2017 version changed the assignment to a group assignment and included a method for sharing students' work with the whole class. Stephanie shifted from an individual to a group assignment due to varying levels of *student preparedness*. Students in groups could correct students who misunderstood the assignment early.

Greg began using the assignment with the instructions Stephanie had published on TRAILS. He has since adapted the assignment to better fit his context. For instance, he found that sharing student work from previous classes is useful for students to get an idea





of how the project works. Stephanie designed the assignment as a term-long project. Greg experimented with doing it only for the second two units of his class, with mixed results. Students seem to benefit from repetition and starting earlier in the semester. He also ran into the problem every semester of the “poetic caption.” While Greg wants students to be creative in how they express themselves, too often it became a trite expression like “The nature of life is change” over an image of graduation or “Under the skin, we are all the same” over a picture of arms of different skin tones. He revised the assignment to avoid these kinds of submissions in the future. He finds that having students use the list of sociological terms they get on their exam study guides helps reduce (but not eliminate) these types of submissions by pushing students back into active sociological thinking.

In-Class Activity

Objects From Everyday Life: A Can of Coca-Cola

Stephanie started using Objects From Everyday Life: A Can of Coca-Cola (Medley-Rath, 2015) as an in-class activity in Introduction to Sociology early in her career. The framework for the activity was not her original idea. The original idea came from Peter Kaufman, who published this activity in *Teaching Sociology* in 1997. Stephanie learned about the activity from a classmate during her Teaching Sociology Seminar as a graduate student.

Stephanie has used this activity in Introduction to Sociology classes with *enrollments* ranging from about 15 to upward of 90 students. However, the activity could be successfully used in larger sections too. She has also used a condensed version of the activity with eighth-grade and high school students on campus visit days.

Kaufman’s (1997) activity centered on a pair of Air Jordans as a cultural artifact. Stephanie was familiar with the shoes but never owned a pair or had much interest in them. She was not sure





of her students' familiarity, but suspected it was mixed: Most students were likely familiar with the shoes, but few were likely to be extensively familiar with them. The assignment needed a cultural artifact that had more widespread appeal and was inescapable. At the time, she was living in Atlanta, Georgia, where Coca-Cola is headquartered, and thought more students would have a greater familiarity with Coca-Cola. Using Coca-Cola also had the convenience factor, reducing *demands on instructor time*. Stephanie could easily purchase a can of Coke for the activity or keep a can in her office at the ready.

Kaufman's (1997) version included several questions to pose for students. Over the years, Stephanie looked up and answered those questions so that she could provide more in-depth content to her students. She created follow-up questions so that she could more fully answer the questions about Coca-Cola (especially when students were unable or unwilling to share). She also made a PowerPoint with images to illustrate ideas based on the questions.

Students find the activity memorable (it shows up on her student evaluations of teaching). However, over the past couple of years, students have been less able to answer the questions because they are less familiar with the product. She no longer lives in the land of Coca-Cola, but today, all students drink less soda because they are drinking more bottled water, flavored coffee beverages, and energy drinks. Soda machines are no longer a staple of their K-12 schooling as they were for Stephanie (when it was possible to purchase a soda two to three times during the school day!). Stephanie recognizes that the assignment is due for another significant overhaul using a different cultural artifact because students are *less prepared* to engage with this item. Possible cultural artifacts include smartphones, cars, social media (i.e., how to share information), Amazon.com (i.e., how to shop for things), or Google.com (i.e., how to search for information). Ideal objects have been around long enough to change over time, are used globally, and are part of our everyday lives. The problem with using social media, Amazon.com, or Google.com, is that they are not objects as envisioned by the original assignment. Objects



From Everyday Life is a good activity but needs a new cultural object and discussion questions to handle digital objects.

Additionally, the activity was developed entirely for in-person instruction and needs to be adapted for online modalities. The activity could likely be adjusted using polling or social annotation software, online discussion forums, or other programs like VoiceThread. Stephanie has access to many software solutions through her *institution*, which makes an adaptation possible. Still, *demands* on her time have made creating an interactive online version of the activity difficult.

Overview of Coming Modules

Over the next few months, we will have several modules by leaders in teaching and learning in sociology that will walk you through multiple considerations as you develop your germ of an idea into a published resource. Subsequent modules will help you with considerations from various points of the process. Andrea Hunt writes on the special considerations when developing in-class assignments. Stephanie Medley-Rath offers her insights on how to get your resources in front of other people, from the nitty-gritty of dealing with copyright and Institutional Review Boards to finding the right venue for sharing your work. Diane Pike and Alana Gillis provide details on how to present your teaching accomplishments in job applications and promotion and award dossiers. Kathleen Lowney describes scholarly teaching.

Be sure to join us as we help you go from great ideas to polished resources and take the next steps to share those resources and foster a teaching-based community.





Next Steps

Where are you stuck? What resources do you have to get unstuck? For example, if you have access to TRAILS, then you could search for innovative ideas to get you started. If you want to incorporate media but are overwhelmed by the possibilities, then browse the film and podcast reviews in *Teaching Sociology*. If your challenge is specific to your institutional context, then identify a colleague to discuss the issue. Do not limit yourself to colleagues within your discipline.

Resources

Meeting the Course Learning Objectives

- Cabrera, S. A., & Sweet, S. (Eds.). (in press). *Handbook on teaching and learning in sociology*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Greenwood, N. A., & Howard, J. R. (2011). *First contact: Teaching and learning in introductory sociology*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Middendorf, J., & Shopkow, L. (2018). *Overcoming student learning bottlenecks: Decode the critical thinking of your discipline*. Stylus.

The Cultural or Institutional Context

- Gabriel, K. F. (2008). *Teaching unprepared students: Strategies for promoting success and retention in higher education*. Stylus.

Talking Over a Teaching Challenge With Colleagues

- Teaching With a Sociological Lens Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachingsoc/>
- American Sociological Association's Section on Teaching and Learning in Sociology: <https://teachingandlearningsociology.wordpress.com>

TRAILS! *Teaching Sociology!* Social Media!

- TRAILS: <https://trails.asanet.org>
- *Teaching Sociology*: <https://www.asanet.org/publications/journals/teaching-sociology/>

K-12 Instruction

- Cult of Pedagogy: <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/>





Inspiring Media

- *Teaching Sociology* film and podcast reviews
- *Teaching Sociology* podcast webinar: https://elizabethtown-my.sharepoint.com/:v/g/personal/kozimor-kim_etown_edu/ES3Es5oGkw9GpMSx9Yhjzy0Bt9-FVyo17_c1LfavuLONuw?e=uYRLft

Discouraging Academic Dishonesty

- Goldman, J. A., Carson, M. L., & Simonds, J. (2022). It's in the pedagogy: Evidence-based practices to promote academic integrity. In D. A. Rettinger & T. Bertram Gallant (Eds.), *Cheating academic integrity: Lessons from 30 years of research* (pp. 131-168). Wiley.

Other

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