



CAPITAL LETTER

Washington, DC Chapter

Volume 33 / Number 10 / Summer 2002

Congratulations to Chapter Graduates!

by Carolyn Kelley Klinger

Many of us embark on new learning experiences during the year, but it is a select few that go on to receive a certificate or degree in recognition of their efforts. Several chapter members completed their programs of study this year and are free at last! Anyone who has managed to combine school and full-time work understands the liberation graduation brings. On behalf of the entire STC Washington, DC Chapter, I heartily congratulate the following chapter members for their personal and academic achievement.

- Jeanita Danzik, Technical Writing Certificate, Montgomery College
- Stacia Kelly, MA, English (Professional Writing and Editing Track), George Mason University
- Steven Landry, BA, Technical and Scientific Communication, James Madison University
- Burke Lee, MS, Project Management, School of Business and Public Management, George Washington University
- Doreen A. Mannion, MS, Technology Management, University of Maryland University College
- Janet Scharp, MA, English (Professional Writing and Editing Track), George Mason University
- Cynthia Stevens, BA, Communication with a minor in Film and Media Studies, George Mason University
- Anna van der Heijden, MA, Technical and Scientific Communication, Miami University in Ohio ✍

The mind has exactly the same power as the hands; not merely to grasp the world, but to change it.

—Colin Wilson

President's Award Recipients

by Carolyn Kelley Klinger

Between last November and this April, I had the privilege of recognizing four volunteers for their outstanding contributions to the chapter. Their award citations follow.

Quality and Attitude Excellence Award

is presented to

Laurel Rosinger

For her conscientious approach to all chapter tasks, superb care of program attendees, warm and caring personality, and positive attitude that makes working with her a true pleasure.

The Great Communicator Award

is presented to

Janette Walters

For the grace under pressure, cheery personality, and outstanding competency she brings to the planning of STC Washington, DC Chapter programs

Volunteer Extraordinaire Award

is presented to

Daree Allen-Woodard

For her unfailing willingness to take on unfamiliar tasks, enthusiastic support of the STC Washington, DC Chapter, cheerful personality, and commitment to quality in everything she does.

All-Around Mentor Award

is presented to

Betty Montgomery

For her knowledge about and experience with all aspects of Society and chapter activities, conscientious response to chapter needs, and loving dedication to the Austin T. Brown Technical Communication Scholarship Competition and local high school students. ✍



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STC Camaraderie in the Forests of Apeldoorn

by Paul Bernstein, President, Israel Chapter

(An extract from the President's Corner—to be published in i-contact, the STC Israel Chapter's Newsletter.)

In the tranquility of the forests of Apeldoorn, 14 STC members comprising past presidents (two from the Washington, DC Chapter); 4 presidents from Belgium, Denmark, Holland, and Israel, respectively; plus 2 vice presidents and other executive leaders from the France, TransAlpine, and UK chapters—spent a few days brainstorming and exchanging ideas and chapter experiences at a leadership workshop overseen by Chris Benz, our Region 2 Director-Sponsor. Martha McDevitt-Pugh and Jang Graat, our president and webmaster extraordinaire, respectively, of the Holland Chapter, graciously hosted the weekend retreat.

Cecily Spiers, vice President of the France Chapter, moderated our exuberant and often animated discussions, covering such topics as

- Membership issues encompassing volunteerism, membership drives, involving new members in chapter affairs, and grooming interested chapter members to take up executive positions within their chapters.
- Competitions, local and international, and possibilities of cross-judging by sister STC European or joint Region 2 chapters.
- Sharing resources such as speaker banks and utilizing the STC Europe Website for cross-posting chapter seminar and event purposes.
- Conferences (Region 2 and a possible European-specific conference) scheduled for the fall of 2003.

The weekend included intensive late-night discussions over Dutch coffee dealing with potential Finnish and Swedish cellphone company membership, the Society's relationship with INTEKOM, how best to grow smaller chapters, and how to encourage members' participation in initial smaller chapter tasks; and just plain "partying" at a local Mexican restaurant with tantalizing foods and margaritas laced with sugar and colorful miniature umbrellas. The warmth of the camaraderie among colleagues was in stark contradiction to the cold and gusty wind which blew my real-life umbrella inside out while walking to catch a bus later that evening (see Patricia McClelland's pictorial account—slide 24, I think—on <http://www.ofoto.com/l.jsp?m=23667606303&n=1182075192>).

*Did you know that...*The STC Israel Chapter (née STWP Israel Branch—Society of Technical Writers and Publications) was the first official chapter in a non-North American country (source: Gunther Marx, Director-Sponsor, 2 May 1967)?

Join the STC Israel Chapter in celebrating our 35th Anniversary. ✍

Where Are You?

If you change your address or phone number, please let STC headquarters know by sending an email message to membership@stc.org. Keeping this information up to date helps keep down our mailing costs. ✍

May Program Review: Web Communicating: Content and Writing for New Media

by Russell Woolard

When readers navigate their way across the web, rarely if ever are they willing to search “from sea to shining sea” to get the information they want. That makes it imperative for content writers and designers of websites to stay a step ahead of their users, understand clearly what they’re looking for, and put that information in a place where it’s easy to find, understandable, and relevant to their needs.

That was the message hammered home by Merry Bruns, an online content strategist, editor, and trainer, during the program “Web Communicating: Content and Writing for New Media,” held at Fig Leaf Software in Washington on 14 May. The STC’s co-sponsorship of the event with the DC Web Women, an organization of women involved or interested in new media, brought out a variety of web professionals looking for ways to focus their messages to users. The key to doing that, according to Bruns, is reaching readers with the right words and formatting the message to accommodate the special traits of the web.

“If you know what your visitors want, that’s what you start with,” Bruns said. “Use that as a starting point for developing content.”

Drawing on her background as a producer and editor of websites for the last 7 years (her clients have included the Social Security Administration and the American Chemical Society), Bruns used examples from several websites to illustrate both the advantages and potential drawbacks of presenting web content. Presenting content well becomes even more important when underscored by the tendency of web users to visit a site just long enough to find specific information they’re seeking—unlike print documents, which are more likely to be read in their entirety.

To lead site visitors directly where they want to go, Bruns suggested a number of tips for developing and packaging content.

- **Closely analyze the users of your site.** Bruns pointed out that there are several gauges designed to paint a picture of users. But many of them don’t tell the whole story. One example is web trend reports that record only numbers of visitors and don’t indicate what users are looking for. Bruns suggested writers and designers could learn much from calls coming into an organization; these calls can provide important clues about the needs and desires of customers. Bruns also urged coordination of the message with the organization’s mission. That way, writers and designers have a better chance of choosing content that reflects the organization’s mission.
- **Learn from the objections of potential users—and address them when possible.** What users don’t want—or have reservations about including—tells as

much of a story as what they want. Bruns pointed out that the launch of Amazon.com in 1995 was preceded by surveys of customers gauging their feelings on whether they’d be willing to buy online, and if so, what goods they’d consider. Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos took potential objections to e-commerce into his business plan. Bruns also displayed the website for Mutual Fund Strategist, which seeks subscribers for its newsletter via email. The site includes a section dealing with measures to protect credit card information submitted by subscribers—thus addressing a major concern of would-be users.

- **Package the most important information in a way that will grab the reader’s attention.** In general, if text is integral to the message, Bruns suggested it be put in the middle of the page. Another technique is to use a scrolling window of moving text, which tends to draw the readers’ attention. Bulleted, boldfaced, or otherwise highlighting text will serve much the same purpose. The key, Bruns said, is to make sure the highlighted text represents the most crucial information for site visitors because it is the part visitors are most likely to read.
- **Use white space.** Text appearing with narrow margins on each side—or what Bruns called the “sea to shining sea” approach—often makes the reader work too hard. Use of white space—especially for longer articles—helps break the monotony of lines upon lines of text.

Important as design is, the content must be well written and aimed at the reader’s level. Bruns suggested writing as if a one-on-one conversation with the reader is taking place and even inventing a person in the targeted audience and imagining him or her when composing the message.

Another key is finding ways to actively engage readers through word choice. To that end, Bruns urged avoiding the passive voice (it creates too much distance between the writer and reader) and using “power pronouns” (i.e., “we,” “our,” etc.) to forge the idea of a writer-reader partnership. She also encouraged writers to use metaphors that relate the message of the website to concepts they can readily understand.

Several other devices, Bruns said, can make web content more user-friendly. Among them:

- **Write concisely.** Because people read more slowly online, giving them fewer words to wade through will drive home the point more effectively. However, avoid editing too much information from the document; otherwise, the reader may be left guessing as to the meaning of the text that remains.
- **Use short paragraphs,** with information broken into bite-sized bits.
- **Use keywords** to help the user find the information most relevant to his or her needs.
- **Format** the document so it will be scannable.

These strategies work equally well when designing information for print distribution. Bruns showed us that they are even more important when we are writing for the web. ✍

April Program Review: We Are What We Measure

Developing Productivity and Effectiveness Metrics for Technical Communication

by Leda Farbstein

The STC Washington, DC Chapter was graced with the presence of Dr. Saul Carliner as its featured monthly speaker on 17 April 2002 at Hughes Network Systems' facility in Gaithersburg, MD. A Fellow and past president of the Society, Dr. Carliner is currently an international consultant in areas such as e-learning, information design, technical communication, and training. His clients have included Berlitz, IBM, and Microsoft. He has taught at the university level, authored several books, and received a number of highly distinguished awards, in addition to grants to research design and management practice. He holds a Ph.D. in instructional technology.

The 45 attendees braved the record-high heat (95 degrees) and unprecedented pollen count (2,587 versus a normal 90) to hear Saul, with his trademark wit and dynamic delivery, discuss the issues surrounding how to measure what we as technical communicators produce.

There Is No Formula

Assessing whether our work is productive and effective is difficult because there is no single proven formula for reliably measuring these qualities. There are, however, a variety of measures to assess the work of software developers and communicators working in other disciplines. These measures can be adapted to what we produce, but there are unique challenges to collecting credible productivity and effectiveness data, and, in turn, to communicating this information to management in an effort to prove our value.

Before we can measure the value of our efforts, we need to define what we mean by "productivity," "effectiveness," "metrics," and several other related terms:

- Productivity: how much one produces in a particular time period
- Effectiveness: whether the work is considered 'good.'
- Metrics: measures that one can track over time that give productivity, effectiveness, or both
- Assessment: the answer to the question, "Is it good enough, and why?"
- Evaluation: deciding whether you are doing the best you can do
- Proof: something that does not exist

Twelve Best Lessons

Saul, along with several others, began studying metrics by first considering software engineering studies. He hoped to identify metrics used by related professions and then to assess their transferability to technical communications. Data was collected from large technical communications operations regarding projects, individuals, and business management practices. Although

results were not generally quantifiable, many of the findings were definitive, and from these findings Saul formulated 12 main insights.

- 1. It's about evaluation.** Measuring our work is a lot less about strict measurements, such as the number of pages we produce, and a lot more about evaluation of our work.
- 2. Metrics involve several measures.** No one measure works for everything. No two products, projects, departments, individuals, etc., are the same and, therefore, measurements to assess them should, appropriately, account for these differences.
- 3. Simple measures do not work.** There are no standard industry-wide practices. A simple standard, such as the number of topics for a Help system, may work for one type of project but be entirely inadequate for another. And more often than not, producing better documentation means producing less.
- 4. You cannot wait until completion to begin.** Showing a change in performance usually requires a before-and-after comparison so that you can measure the effectiveness of a document's communication and the productivity of the development effort. In addition, credibility depends on applying measurements during the documentation development process, not after the document is finished. Because evaluation is not a standard business practice, you must do it on a regular basis over time.
- 5. Metrics assume you follow a documented process.** Current metrics for nontechnical communication fields are based on the assumption that a documented industry-standard process is being followed, such as that outlined in a software capability maturity model, an instructional systems design process, or an analysis-design-placement approach. As technical communicators, we exist to generate revenue, contain expenses (such as those associated with technical support), and comply with regulations. To develop metrics that apply to technical communication, we need standard processes—but processes that are focused on project management as opposed to design and development issues.
- 6. To assess effectiveness, you must begin with clear goals.** To be able to judge how effective documentation is, we need to establish clear goals, in observable, measurable terms that ensure satisfaction of intended business results and content requirements.
- 7. To assess productivity, you must benchmark against the industry.** Industry surveys, such as those in the training, financial, and mass marketing industries, provide productivity standards against which to measure. Our industry has no such comparable survey.
- 8. Industry-standard models build acceptance.** A strong argument for using a standard model is that standards promote acceptance within an industry. They also improve methods. The most common method of assessing effectiveness is technical reviews. Another effective method, though underutilized, is reader comment forms.
- 9. Measurements of technique are not persuasive.** Measurements that assess technique—number of typographical errors, number of index entries per page, number of graphics per page, or choice of font—assess neither effectiveness nor productivity. Even though research may indicate which characteristics correlate with effectiveness, they do not guarantee it. Whenever

possible, it is best to use financially based measures, such as sales generated or number of product registrations.

10. Intangibles matter to executives. Factors such as perceptions, feelings, and levels of frustration that cannot be measured matter to those in positions of power, illustrating that there is value in intangible parameters. Gathering data about these types of factors gives an indication of impact, while numerical data indicates extent.

11. Collect data on an ongoing basis. One-time studies do not prove anything—they are more “metrics for tyranny” than tools for improvement. Data must be gathered on an ongoing basis over a period of time so that sets of data can be compared to each other. To be effective, you should devote between two and five percent of a project’s budget to evaluation.

12. On their own, metrics prove nothing. Metrics by themselves do not tell us anything. They build perceptions. Data supports those perceptions and promotes informed decision-making. So, in essence, metrics are a value system—we choose to measure the things we believe are important or valuable. Successful metrics programs track measurements that are important to us as technical communicators and meaningful to our managers.

Applying the Lessons

Processes need to be tailored to your particular documentation projects’ goals. Incorporate the following suggestions to help you formulate your own metrics.

Leverage your documentation process. Do this by documenting your process, communicating to others about it, and tracking it.

Have observable, measurable objectives when you begin projects. To measure content, know what users should be able to do after using the communication product. To measure business goals, know how the product should generate revenue, contain expenses, or comply with regulations.

Adapt the four-level method for training effectiveness. Saul’s adapted version involves a trainer’s four-level process of getting client reaction to a course (client satisfaction), assessing how much clients learned (user performance), assessing how much retained information was applied to client documentation (client performance), and assessing financial impact of applied information (client satisfaction).

Leverage reader comment forms and usability tests. Adapt comment forms and usability questionnaires as products change to assess and reassess user satisfaction. Communicate results quarterly, or on a schedule that allows for enough data to be gathered to create a statistically valid sample. (A sample comment form can be found on

<http://web.bentley.edu/empl/c/scarliner/idbusiness/eadercommentform.htm>.)

Learn evaluation methodologies. Absorb as much as possible about existing evaluation methodologies. (See references in the “Additional Resources” section at the end of this article.)

Make a commitment. Commit to evaluating your processes on an ongoing basis to ensure validity of your data.

Additional Resources

The entire February 1995 edition of *Technical Communication* is devoted to measuring the value technical communicators add. It features a comprehensive article by Janice Redish titled, “Adding Value as a Professional Technical Communicator.” The issue can be downloaded from <http://www.techcomm-online.org>.

References involving evaluation methodologies include:

- Kirkpatrick, D. L. (1998). *Evaluation Training Programs: The Four Levels*, 2nd edition. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Mager, Robert. (1997). *Measuring Instructional Results*. Atlanta, GA: Center for Effective Performance.
- Phillips, Jack. (1999). Return-on-investment in training. Lockwood Conferences. Phoenix, AZ: Training Director’s Forum. June 7, 1999.
- Dumas, Joseph S. and Redish, Janice C. (1999). *A Practical Guide to Usability Testing*. Intellect.

Additional references are:

- Edvisson, L. and Malone, M. *Intellectual Capital: Realizing Your Company’s True Value by Finding Its Hidden Brainpower*. 1997. New York: HarperBusiness.
- Hackos, J. T. (1994). *Measuring Your Documentation Projects*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Mead, Jay. Measuring the value added by technical documentation: a review of research and practice. *Technical Communication*: 45(3) p.353-379.

Further food for thought can be found on Saul’s web site:

- A literature review on metrics at <http://saulcarliner.home.att.net/idbusiness/litreview.htm>.
- A preliminary report on the management portfolios of larger technical communication departments at <http://saulcarliner.home.att.net/idbusiness/preliminaryreport.htm>.
- Business models for technical communication departments at <http://saulcarliner.home.att.net/idbusiness/bizmodels.htm>. ↵

Membership News

New members:

John A. Cavin
Jeff Chu
Gary A. Deininger
Michael P. Fruitman
Dorothy Goldsmith
Ira H. Haber
Pam Harley
Jennifer C. Howard
Beth Pavlik
Penny Pickett
Jake C. Posey
Janet B. Reise
Annette Warder

The grade of senior member is conferred upon those who have been members of STC for 5 years.

New senior members:

Lauren Anthone
Anne M. Emmerth
Shayna Heller
Carolyn O’Connor
Jan D.H. Stanley
Suzanne Snell Tesh
Thomas A. Witherspoon

Reinstated members:

Marcus D. Andrews
Arlene R. Shykind
Mildred B. Wyman

Members transferring in:

Lorna M. Hawkins
Julia W. Neunreiter

Current chapter membership: 637.

Total STC membership: 19,052. ↵

The Capital Letter Wins an Award of Excellence!

by Carolyn Kelley Klinger

Once again, the *Capital Letter* has won a national award—this time, an Award of Excellence! Details will follow in the next issue.

We would like to thank the following writers for contributing articles to the *Capital Letter* this year.

Alice Babazadeh
Melissa Brown
Leda Farbstein
Lynn Gandy
Carolyn Kelley Klinger
Ranee Markowitz
Ann Ray
Terry Reece
Laurel Rosinger
Allen Rotz
Paul Stregevsky
Frank Tam
Athena Thomas
Russell Woolard ✍

Austin T. Brown Technical Communication Scholarship Competition Winners

The STC Washington, DC Chapter is proud to announce the winners of the Austin T. Brown Technical Communication Scholarship Competition. The chapter sponsors this competition to encourage the development of technical writing skills among students in grades 10, 11, and 12.

The scholarship fund was started in 1962 and has been funded by the chapter since 1964. The competition, formerly called the High School Science Writing Contest, was renamed to honor Austin T. Brown. Austin joined STC in 1967 and was an active leader, mentor, and supporter of the Washington, DC Chapter for many years until he followed the sun to Hawaii in the early 1990s. One of his special interests was this competition. He is a past president of the chapter and of STC (1988-1989). In 1993, he was elected a Fellow, the highest rank the Society can confer on a member.

Betty Montgomery, former manager of the chapter's Education Committee, has been managing the scholarship competition for many years. The chapter provides four

levels of awards, each with a monetary prize. The highest award is Distinguished, with an award of \$1,000, followed by Excellence with an award of \$500, Merit with an award of \$300, and Honorable Mention with an award of \$50. Winners of the Distinguished award at the local level go on to compete at the international level against winners from other chapter competitions.

Betty's competition subcommittee of volunteer screeners and judges is proud to announce the following winners.

Distinguished: Daniel Kim, Montgomery Blair High School, Montgomery County, MD.

Investigating the Electrochemical Properties of Lithium/Carbon Monofluoride Batteries.

Teacher, Jonetta Russell.

Excellence: Elyssa Gelmann, Montgomery Blair High School, Montgomery County, MD.

*Net-spinning Caddisflies as Ecosystem Engineers: The Effects of *Hydropsyche Eepravata* on Stream Substrate Stability During Floods.*

Teacher, Jonetta Russell.

Merit: Alexey Rostapshov, Montgomery Blair High School, Montgomery County, MD.

Determining 3-D Structures of Macromolecular Complexes Using Electron Microscopy and Protein Docking: Development, Refinement, and Parallelization of the DCORR Method.

Teacher, Jonetta Russell.

Honorable Mention: Ruben Galbraith, Montgomery Blair High School, Montgomery County, MD.

Effects of Range, Cross Range, Image Shifting, Pixel Error, and Occlusion on Accuracy of Internal and Silhouette Automatic Target Recognition Algorithms.

Teacher, Jonetta Russell.

Honorable Mention: Matthew Carson, Montgomery Blair High School, Montgomery County, MD.

Determining an Algorithm for Autonomous Robot Docking using Robot Mobility and Agent Collaboration.

Teacher, Jonetta Russell.

Honorable Mention: Arielle Kuiper, W. T. Woodson High School, Fairfax, VA.

Living in the Clone Age.

Teacher, George Crump.

You might notice that five of our six winners shared the same teacher, Jonetta Russell. After more than 44 years of teaching science and mentoring scores of students with prize-winning papers (at STC, Intel, and other competitions), Mrs. Russell retired this year. The STC Washington, DC Chapter recognized her for her tremendous support to local students at the June 8 luncheon at Normandie Farms restaurant (see http://www.stcfdc.org/prgm_jun02.shtml for more information about this event).

Congratulations to all the winners and the fine teachers who mentored them! ✍

From the President

Why We Are a Chapter of Excellence

by Carolyn Kelley Klinger

Why not brag? The STC Washington, DC Chapter has got what it takes. It is my pleasure to announce that for the second year in a row, we have earned the title of Chapter of Excellence by meeting the Chapter Achievement Award guidelines for the Excellence level. We were considered for Chapter of Distinction, but that award for chapters our size (600+ members) went to the impressive Boston Chapter. We also won two other Excellence awards in the Chapter Public Relations Competition and the Chapter Newsletter Competition. In gambling parlance, that's a trifecta of Excellence awards!

Our chapter membership also soared this year. Starting at 655 members last June 2001, we reached a peak of 800 members by mid-March 2002. That 22 percent growth in real numbers exceeded all other chapters around the world! More than any other indicator, this membership growth tells me that your chapter leadership has succeeded in the strategic goals we set out for ourselves last summer, in particular, our goal to increase the value of membership. In addition to our programs, competitions, and website services, we also initiated the following activities this year.

- Delivered our first technical communication seminar series.
- Had our first chapter representation at high school and middle school career days.
- Submitted three nominations for Associate Fellow and one for the J.R. Gould award that were accepted.
- Started a member-to-member chat mailing list.
- Selected our first college student in ten years to receive a Shirley G. Carter Memorial Scholarship.
- Redesigned all chapter publications to incorporate new Society and chapter brands.
- Established a "President's Award" recognition program for Administrative Council members.

By any measure, we have been successful. What makes me proudest is the way we have been able to involve more of you in our activities. Appreciation and recognition go out to all of our volunteers this year, particularly my hard-working executive committee of **Annette Reilly**, **Harold Hofstad**, and **Cynthia Lockley**. Many others donated their time and talent to the chapter. **Daree Allen-Woodard**, **Laurel Rosinger**, and **Jan Walters** deserve kudos for pulling together eleven programs and two full-day seminars. **Melissa Brown** and her committee managed three professional competitions and an elegant awards banquet. **Betty Montgomery** and her committee of screeners and judges managed our Austin T. Brown High School Technical Communication Scholarship Competition. **Allen Rotz** took over the reins of our Usability SIG and revitalized it with two meetings so far in 2002. **Doreen A. Mannion**, one of our new Associate Fellows, **Lee Blue**, and I put together ten issues of the award-winning newsletter you are now reading. **Cynthia Lockley**, another new Associate Fellow and long-time chapter mentor, continued to work her magic as our exalted Web Diva while also finding the time to develop a new chapter logo and work it into a number of new publications, including sticky notes. **Harold Hofstad** took Cynthia's design and produced two beautiful new chapter signs. **Rosemary Moyer**, **Stacia Kelly**, and **Hilary Silvert Newell** each helped with nominations and elections. **Alyssa Slotkin** and **Lynn Gandy** both saved the day by ignoring the traditional turnover time and taking over the education and membership committees, respectively, mid-year. **Janet Scharp**, Distinguished Chapter Service Award winner for this year, forwarded volunteer applications and also coordinated the update of our chapter's strategic plan with me, **Annette Reilly**, and **Mary Wise** (through her facilitation of Vision Day 2001). Mary is also a new Associate Fellow. **Ann Ray** responded to member requests about the challenging employment situation we have all faced this year. **Randee Markowitz** helped get us ready for STC's fiftieth anniversary with her stewardship of the history committee.

Over the summer many of the individuals mentioned above and many new volunteers, including our new newsletter editor **Pam Muskat**, will start planning our next year of activities. You are welcome to join us at any of our planning sessions that I will announce in our email announcement list. I am pleased to continue as your president for one more year and look forward to the year ahead! ✍



CAPITAL LETTER

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