

Guide for

Conducting a

Next in Line

Workshop

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That the Future May Learn from the Past

Prepared by Armiger Jagoe, author of *Next in Line, Everyone's Guide for Writing an Autobiography*

(Although the project leader might want to refer to the book *Next in Line* which uses examples from fifty-six famed autobiographies, this is not a prerequisite.)

Introduction

The purpose of this program is to motivate seniors to write their autobiographies. Each has an interesting story which should be recorded. If it is not done, many interesting accounts of this era will be lost. Time is of the essence for those of the Greatest Generation because two thousand die each day. Standing behind them and ready to record their memoirs are the Baby Boomers. They are now approaching their 60s.

Most of these seniors need encouragement and guidance in order to write their personal stories. They accept the fact that they are next in line to document their experiences. Yet, many keep putting it on the back burner, and it can't be done after the stove is turned off.

The *Next in Line* program presents a radically new concept. It will be well received because, with rare exception, these older persons are eager to write about themselves. This project is designed to make it an enjoyable experience. And the sense of camaraderie that develops within a group has a positive effect.

Procedure

A Next in Line Program can best be done with four weekly meetings. Time allowed for each session should not exceed two hours.

The most effective way to conduct the program has proved to be the story telling technique. “You should” might reach the head, but “once upon a time” touches the heart. By sharing their life stories in a small group, participants are both stimulated and encouraged to write about themselves. Also, the openness of recalling personal experiences to strangers develops a sense of fellowship within the group.

Each meeting should focus on three of the twelve components of a successful autobiography. After presenting and discussing the topic, which will be one of the twelve components, have the participants pair off. Then allow five minutes for each to tell the other his or her story relating to this component. One listens while the other talks. Then at the end of five minutes, have them switch roles—the one who listened will now be the speaker.

Before going on to the next component, you might ask for two or three to volunteer and tell the group his or her just-told story.

At the end of the first meeting, recommend that each participant prepare a folder for each of the twelve components which you will be discussing. Suggest that during the following weeks, when they recall memories from the past, they should jot down the thoughts and put them in one of their Next in Line folders.

Components of a Successful Autobiography

1. Purpose

2. In the Beginning

1st meeting

3. Family Album

4. First Home

5. Early Years

2nd meeting

6. Grown Up

7. Adult Life

8. Special People

3rd meeting

9. Humor

10. Important Events and Life Passages

11. Be Kind

4th meeting

12. Reflections

First Meeting

Purpose (first component)

A question frequently asked is “How do I start writing about myself?” The answer is to do it the way that proves the most comfortable. This might be writing in longhand, typing on a computer or dictating into a tape recorder. The most practical means is using the computer, which permits easy editing. If you dictate your memoir, I recommend that the person transcribing the tape use a computer. This will facilitate corrections and additions to your manuscript.

Next in Line is a new and innovative means of writing your life story. This unique concept is based on the fact that there are twelve ingredients or components of a successful autobiography. Each week, our format will be to discuss three of the twelve components.

The first component to cover today is **Purpose**.

At the outset of writing your autobiography, you should have a clear objective in mind. As an example, in 1436, when Margery Kempe dictated the first English autobiography, her purpose was to confirm that she was a saint. Writing in the third person, she stated:

She told her story to release the spiritual force within her.

Jimmy Carter composed his memoir *An Hour before Daylight* as a legacy for his family and friends.

Thomas Jefferson wrote:

At the age of seventy-seven, I begin to make some memoranda of dates and facts concerning myself for my own more ready reference and for the information of my family.

General Colin Powell stated that he wrote *My American Journey* as a tribute to his country.

A hundred years ago, Frederick Douglass wrote his autobiography to throw light on American slavery.

Both Mark Twain and General Ulysses S. Grant were frank in admitting they wrote about themselves to make money.

Now, ask the group to pair off. Instruct them to take five minutes to tell their partner what their purpose is in writing about themselves. At the end of that time, have the listeners and speakers switch roles. When finished, ask if any would like to tell the group his or her reason for writing an autobiography.

In the Beginning (second component)

When you were born, your mind was a clean slate. Try and recall your first sense of consciousness. What are the first things you took in?

H. L. Mencken wrote:

At the instant I first became aware of the cosmos I was sitting in my mother's lap and blinking at a great burst of lights, some of them red and others green, but most of them only the bright yellow of flaring gas. (It was the fireworks from the Carnival of the Order of Orioles. The year was 1883)

The famed psychiatrist Carl Jung wrote:

One memory comes up which is perhaps the earliest to my life and is indeed only a rather hazy impression. I am lying in a pram, in the shade of a tree. It is a fine warm summer day, the sky blue and golden sunshine darting through green leaves.

Ask the participants to shut their eyes and think back to what was their first remembrance.

What is the earliest thing you can recall?

How old were you?

Where were you at that moment?

Now, as you did after your presentation of the first component (purpose), have the participants begin their five-minute account of their first impressions. When they pair off, have each take a new partner. At the end of the two five-minute periods, ask for volunteers who might like to tell their account of first impressions.

Family Album (third component)

To understand who you are it helps to know who you have been. It is good to know something about the progenitors who contributed to your attributes, physical and otherwise. Future generations, who will appreciate your autobiography, will eventually be your family's ancestors. For that reason, it's practical for you to record what you know about older relatives even if you go back no further than your grandparents.

You may be the only one who knows about these people. For your grandchildren, your grandparents are four generations ago. Recording the memory of those who came first is a means of thanking them for their contribution to the clan.

I suggest that you might start in recalling your fathers' history, then your mothers'.

Margaret Thatcher wrote about her father:

I had grown up in a household that was neither poor nor rich. We had to economize each day in order to enjoy the occasional luxury. My father's background as a grocer is sometimes cited as the basis for my economic philosophy.

My father was both a practical man and a man of theory. He liked to connect the progress of our corner shop with the great complex romance of international trade which recruited people all over the world to ensure that a family in Grantham could

have on its table rice from India, coffee from Kenya, sugar from the West Indies and spices from five continents.

Lance Armstrong had nothing good to say about his father who had abandoned him and his mother when he was a toddler. He wrote:

The main thing you need to know about my childhood is that I never had a real father, but I never sat around wishing for one either.

I never knew my so-called father. He was a non-factor unless you count his absence as a factor. Just because he provided the DNA that made me doesn't make him my father, as far as I'm concerned. There is nothing between us, absolutely no connection.

In her autobiography, Katharine Graham wrote this description of her mother:

On her father's side, my mother came from a long line of Lutheran ministers in Hanover, in North Germany, whose number included, at least in more recent times, not a few black sheep. The Ernst family was handsome, gifted, driven and, unfortunately, riddled with a tendency towards alcohol addiction. My great-grandfather Karl Ernst was clergyman to the last kings of Hanover, but when Hanover was conquered by the Prussians in 1866, he sent his seven sons out of Germany to keep them out of the army. All but one came to America, which is how my maternal grandfather got to New York, where he became a lawyer.

Now have the participants pair off, each with a new partner, to tell one another about their families.

Second Meeting

First Home (fourth component)

What can you remember about your first home?

Mansion or hut, your first home was your whole world within reach. It was the stage for your early formation where you initiated awareness. Throughout your life, it will occasionally reappear in your dreams.

In these surroundings, you coasted through those early days filled with discovery and new associations. As it was an important part of your being, in writing your story you might consider including a description of your first home.

It was a unique place because it changed in size. When you were little, your home seemed enormous. Every room was spacious, and the ceilings were sky-high. Then, when you returned as an adult, you found that everything had shrunk.

When you remember that Helen Keller was a little girl, both deaf and blind, it is interesting to read her description of her childhood home:

It is the custom in the South to build a small house near the homestead as an annex to be used on occasion. Such a house my father built after the Civil War, and when he married my mother they went to live in it. It was completely covered with vines, climbing roses and honeysuckles

The Keller homestead, where the family lived, was a few steps away from our little rose-bower. It was called 'Ivy Green' because the house and the surrounding trees and fences were covered with beautiful English ivy. Its old-fashioned garden was the paradise of my childhood.

Fidel Castro goes to such detail in describing where he grew up that you can practically hear the chickens cackling under the house. This is his account:

There was the family home and an annex containing a few small offices that had been built on one corner. Its architecture could be described as Spanish. It was because my father was a Spaniard from Galicia. In the villages there they had the custom of working a plot of land and keeping the animals under the house during the winter or throughout the year. They raised pigs and kept some cows there.

That's why I said my house was based on Galician architecture, because it was built on stilts. Between the dining room and the kitchen there was a flight of stairs leading down to the ground.

Now, have the group pair off and each tell his or her partner the memories of their first homes. After this session is over, ask for volunteers to tell their stories.

Early Years (fifth component)

After infancy, your next fifteen years was an interesting period. It was the span when your childhood blended into adolescence, then stumbled ahead to the beginning of your adult life. During this time, you began to recognize your uniqueness.

In recording this era, you have to try and see it through the eyes of the kid you once were. In doing this, you want neither to denounce reality nor to be bound by it. There's a happy middle ground between the literal and the absurd — between the absolute and the fanciful.

In *An Hour before Daylight*, Jimmy Carter wrote:

My most persistent impression as a farm boy was of the earth. There was closeness, almost an immersion, in the sand, loam and red clay that seemed natural, and constant.

The soil caressed my bare feet, and the dust was always boiling up from the dirt road that passed fifty feet from our front door; so that inside our clapboard house, the red clay particles, ranging in size from face powder to grits, were ever present, particularly in the summertime, when the wooden doors were kept open, and the screens just stopped the trash and some of the less adventurous flies.

In his memoir *Colored People*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., clearly recalled the discrimination he and his family endured in West Virginia during the 1960s:

For most of my childhood, we couldn't eat in restaurants or sleep in hotels, we couldn't use certain bathrooms or try on clothes in stores. Mama insisted that we dress up when we went to shop. She was a fashion plate when she went to clothing stores, and wore white pads called shields under her arms so her dress or blouse would show no sweat.

"We'd like to try this one," she'd say carefully, articulating her words precisely and properly. "We don't buy clothes we can't try on," she'd say when they declined, as we'd walk, — in Mama's dignified manner — out of the store.

Now, have the group pair off, with new partners, and tell about their early years.

Grown Up (sixth component)

When concerned adults would recommend a change in your youthful behavior, they would begin with, "Now that you're grown up." Then you knew what to expect. Being "grown up" implied many things, such as:

"You're not a kid any more, so cut out the kid stuff."

"You've got to take on more responsibility."

"For heaven's sake, act your age."

You might have found that teenage could be a mean age. It was the time when you had no choice; you had to grow up. It was also an experience filled with memories worth recording.

If you have college days to recall, it was probably an exciting period. That's especially true about the freshman year.

In his autobiography, General Ulysses S. Grant and told about his preparation for going to West Point.

In the winter of 1838-9, I was attending school at Ripley, only ten miles distant from Georgetown, but spent the Christmas holidays at home.

During this vacation my father received a letter from the Honorable Thomas Morris, then United States Senator from Ohio. When he read it he said to me, "Ulysses, I believe you are going to receive the appointment."

"What appointment?" I inquired.

"To West Point, I have applied for it."

"But I won't go," I said. He said he thought I would, and I thought so too, if he did.

Billy Graham gives this amusing account of his days at Wheaton College near Chicago:

When I talked at my customary rapid clip, people looked at me curiously, as if my heavily accented drawl were a foreign language. At six-foot-two, I was too tall to fade into the background.

At twenty-one years of age, I was older than most of my classmates, which did not help my self-image. I was sure they were staring at my Li'l Abner appearance, what with out-of-style clothes and brogan shoes. I decided to do something about it.

One day, tagging along with some other students, I went to Chicago's Maxwell Street, a kind of open-air flea market. On Monday morning, if you were the first there and a sharp bargainer, you could talk the merchant down to about a third of the asking price. For \$4.95 I bought a beautiful turquoise tweed suit and wore it proudly to a football game in October.

Then it started to rain. The pants legs shrank up my ankles and the seat of the pants became so tight that I burst the seam. I couldn't get home fast enough!

You can now ask the group to pair off and talk about their “grown up” days.

At the end of the meeting, again recommend that they make good use of the files they have prepared for the twelve components. During the time before the next meeting, when they recall things they want to remember, they should put notes in their files.

3rd Meeting

Adult Life (seventh component)

Your early adult experiences affected the rest of your life. In remembering those days, you have such a large volume of information that it's difficult to select what to tell about. From the following examples, you'll find that others have chosen from a wide variety of happenings.

Jane Goodall wrote about her first trip to Africa, which determined her future:

On Wednesday morning, December 18, 1956, I received a letter from Marie Claude Mange. Clo, as she was known, had been

my best friend at school. I hadn't heard from her for a while and was surprised when I saw that her letter was from Africa.

I still remember the Kenyan stamps-there was an elephant on one and two giraffes on the other. Her parents, she wrote, had just bought a farm in Kenya. Would I like to join them for a visit? Would I ever!

While visiting her friends in Kenya, she had this opportunity:

It began after a dinner party when I was being given a lift back to my quarters. "If you are interested in animals," someone said, "you should meet Louis Leakey."

So I made an appointment and went to see the famous paleontologist and anthropologist at the Caryndon Museum of Natural History.

After his interview, Dr. Leakey immediately hired Jane as his personal secretary.

As a young ambitious architect, Frank Lloyd Wright told about getting a job with the prominent firm of Adler and Sullivan:

Thus began an association lasting nearly seven years. Mr. Sullivan had been interested and interesting. His drawings a delight to work upon and work out. His manner toward me markedly different from his manner toward the other men. Mark me it might, and mark me it did. I soon found my place in the office had to be fought for.

The work was going well. I could do it. The master was pleased. This evident favoritism of the master together with my own natural tendency to mind my own business, coupled with distaste for most of the Adler and Sullivan men, had, in the course of a few weeks, set them against me.

I was unpopular from the first day. And I was baited in various ways. My hair of course. My dress a bit too individual, I suppose. There would be casual conversation behind me with

unmistakable reference to me. Studied interference with my work. The gang had evidently combined to “get me.”

Now after getting the group to pair off, ask them to select parts of their adult life they would like to include in their autobiographies. Following the two five-minute periods, ask for volunteers to tell their stories.

Special People (eighth component)

The things you do, think and say have echoes from those who have nudged you along the way. Even if these submerged directives are faint, they are real. It’s good to acknowledge their source. By including these special men and women in your autobiography, you perpetuate their memory.

These influential persons might have been your parents, relatives, neighbors, teachers, associates, mentors or friends. Each has made a valuable contribution. The more important of these merit being included in the story.

In his autobiography, Cardinal Newman wrote this about a special teacher:

And now as to Dr. Whately, I owe him a great deal. He was a man of generous and warm heart. He was particularly loyal to his friends, and to use the common phrase, “all his geese were swans.” While I was still awkward and timid in 1822, he took me by the hand, and acted the part to me of a gentle and encouraging instructor. He emphatically opened my mind and taught me to think and to use my reason. ...

He had done his work towards me, or nearly so, when he had taught me to see with my own eyes and to walk with my own feet.

In telling the story of his life, the modern author Stephen King expressed his appreciation for a very special member of his family. He wrote:

My wife made a crucial difference during those two years I spent teaching at Hampden (and washing sheets at New

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Franklin Laundry during the summer vacation). If she had suggested that the time I spent writing stories on the front porch of our rented house on Pond Street or in the laundry room of the rented trailer on Klatt Road in Hermond was wasted time, I think a lot of the heart would have gone out of me.

Tabby never voiced a single doubt, however. Her support was a constant, one of the few good things I could take as a given. Whenever I see a first novel dedicated to a wife (or husband), I smile and think, There's someone who knows. Writing is a lonely job. Having someone who believes in you makes a lot of difference. They don't have to make speeches. Just believing is usually enough.

When the group pairs off for the listener-speaker exercise, ask that they do not have the same partner they had for the last component. Now, have the pairs take turns talking about special people in their lives.

At the end, it will be interesting to ask several in the group to explain why they chose certain persons to include in their autobiographies.

Humor (ninth component)

Since life is a long lesson in humility, sometimes it's healthy to poke fun at yourself. With rare exceptions, humor is missing in most autobiographies. This implies that we take ourselves too seriously.

It makes good reading to occasionally laugh at yourself. .

Katharine Hepburn laughed at herself in recalling a theater experience when she was a student at Bryn Mawr. This is her account:

I played the lead man in one play—The Truth about Blayds, by A. A. Milne. I played the juvenile. I had to wear a wig, covering my long hair. And a pair of pants, a bit tight in the seat.

It was a modern play. I remember one frightful moment when we were giving a performance of it at the Colony Club in New

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York. Somehow or other I managed to put my hand in my pants pocket and then to sit down. After a bit I tried to get my hand out of the pocket. Impossible. I tried several times. I got a bit confused and kept yanking. This turned out to be a splendid laugh.

In his autobiography *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, the noted pianist and entertainer Oscar Levant told of his first visit to the White House:

In 1947 President Truman took a fancy to me, and I was invited to a state dinner for the Supreme Court-the first one given since before the war. June and I had been warned not to be late as White House etiquette demanded punctuality; consequently we arrived a half-hour early. A naval aide greeted us, escorted us to the cloakroom, then through the long portrait-lined corridors to the entrance of the East Room, drew himself erect and announced, "Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Levant." We walked into an empty room. We walked around wondering to whom we had been announced. Not for twenty minutes did the next guests arrive,

After dinner I was escorted to the piano by a naval aide who stood at arm's length with a gun. I thought if I make a mistake, I'll be shot.

Now, ask the pairs to recall amusing or funny things in their lives that they might record. After this period, the stories that some will want to share with the group should give some good laughs

Again, remind everyone to start filling their twelve files with notes they have for each of the components.

Fourth Meeting

Important Events and Life Passages (tenth component)

This might be difficult. In reviewing the past, you will have to sift through a multitude of experiences. Don't overlook the fact that a lot of living comes in and goes out by the back door. You want to select those experiences that are the most important and should be recorded. For example, in reviewing the highlights of his career, horse trainer Monty Roberts wrote this about his initial association with royalty:

One December evening in 1988, when I was fifty-three years old, my longtime friend and neighbor, John Bowles, called me. "Monty," he said, "guess what? The Queen of England wants to meet you." Her Majesty, he said, was intrigued by my claims of being able to communicate with horses.

Some weeks later, I received a formal letter of invitation from Buckingham Palace: in April 1989 I was to spend a week at Windsor Castle.

For some days I had pondered the proper salutation to use should I meet the Queen of England. And should I bow, or was a handshake the order of the day? Far from home, the guest of a foreign nation, I wanted to do the right thing. But the Queen made it easy for me by offering her hand.

I shook it and said, "Your Majesty," and let it go at that. She was quick to put me at ease. "Come, Mr. Roberts," she said, "and show me this lions' cage in the center of the riding hall. I want you to tell me about it."

We shared a genuine fascination with horses and it was a great pleasure to talk with her about them. As her support continued, my respect and feeling of warmth for her grew steadily.

As dean of American journalism, Walter Trohan described this event when he was a young reporter:

It was St. Valentine's Day, February 14, 1929. John Pastor, a young lad who had been collecting marriage licenses, births and similar vital statistics, was being given a trial as police reporter.

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Johnny was on the phone stuttering with excitement. He reported five men were killed in a garage. Isaac Gershman, the city editor, wouldn't believe him, and turned Pastor over to me, but insisted that I write a bulletin that five men had been injured in a fight. So, I wrote the bulletin of which I am not proud: "Five men are reported to have been injured in a fight at 2022 North Clark Street."

A moment later Johnny was back on the line swearing by all that was holy it wasn't five men dead but six and one was on the way to the hospital dying, and all had been cut down by machinegun fire. Pastor bypassed the unbelieving desk and gave it to me. I pounded out a second and more accurate bulletin, flung it at Gershman, and announced I was on my way, without asking for approval.

As I went out the door, I turned to ask if I could take a cab, City Press being more cautious about expense accounts. "The Clark streetcar runs right past the door," Gershman said.

Even so, I was the first man on the scene of carnage, being careful to avoid the lunging of the crazed police dog chained to one of the garage trucks. The most memorable remark of the day was that of Willie O'Rourke of the Chicago Evening American, who looked down at his feet after tracking around the garage and said, "I've got more brains on my feet than I have in my head."

Other staffers joined me in tracing the path of ambush and the story of the slaying of six members of the George (Bugs) Moran mob, rivals of the Al Capone gang. I topped off the St. Valentine's Day murders by attending an all-star performance of Macbeth in Chicago's Auditorium Theatre. After all, the massacre was no more than a fitting prelude to the ten violent deaths in Macbeth.

Now, you can have the pairs prepare to tell one another what memorable events they might want to include in writing about their lives.

Be Kind (eleventh component)

In the beginning of his next book, after he wrote his autobiography, Oscar Levant was remorseful about things he had said in print about certain people. In regard to the Hollywood star Rosalind Russell, he apologized for what he had written. Then he blew the apology by saying that there was an element of truth in what he had said.

Being kind is like remembering to go to the restroom before leaving a restaurant. You'll never be sorry you did. But if you don't, later on you might regret not having done it.

An ancient Japanese proverb states that one kind word can warm three winter months. And in 1825, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said that kindness is the golden chain by which society is bound.

Being kind makes humans human. And in writing your autobiography you are image building. When you record with kindness your memory of others and of yourself, you will give the impression of having been an interesting and fair person. That's not all bad.

In her excellent autobiography, perhaps Katharine Graham made a mistake by including too much about her difficult marriage. Her intent might have been to set the record straight. But one might question the need for her great-great-great grandchildren to know that their great-great-great grandfather was such a bastard.

When writing her memoirs Margaret Thatcher was kind in her recollection of Jimmy Carter. She wrote:

In addition to these political flaws, he was in some ways personally ill suited for the presidency, agonizing over big decisions and too concerned with detail. Finally he violated Napoleon's rule that generals should be lucky. His presidency was dogged with bad luck from OPEC to Afghanistan. What it served to demonstrate, however,

was that in heading a great nation, decency and assiduousness are not enough.

Having said which, I repeat that I liked Jimmy Carter; he was a good friend to me and to Britain; and if he had come to power in the different circumstances of the post-Cold War world, his talents might have been more apposite.

During the following discussion period, ask the participants to discuss among themselves how, when writing life stories, they might want to sprinkle in nuggets of kindness. This is especially important in writing about one's family. With rare exceptions, we all like to propitiate our progenitors.

Reflections (twelfth component)

Your personality will be evident as your story unfolds. The force of your principles has been the activator of your achievements. For that reason, you should consider telling about the inner stuff that has determined your decisions and actions. Queen Elizabeth II described this as “mulling over with the hinter part of her head”.

In compiling your reflections, you can include your observations and thoughts about what you consider important. For many years, you've related your life to the world around you. Now you can interpret it as you like. It's your show.

In telling the story of his life, Frederick Douglass reflected on his feelings when he was no longer a slave. He stated:

I have been frequently asked how I felt when I found myself in a free State. I have never been able to answer the question with any satisfaction to myself.

It was a moment of the highest excitement I ever experienced. I suppose I felt as one may imagine the unarmed mariner to feel when he is rescued by a friendly man-of-war from the pursuit of a pirate.

In writing to a dear friend, immediately after my arrival at New York, I said I felt like one who had escaped a den of hungry lions. This state of mind, however, very soon subsided, and I was again seized with a feeling of great insecurity and loneliness.

The motto which I adopted when I started from slavery was this: "Trust no man!" I saw in every white man an enemy, and in almost every colored man cause for distrust.

At the end of her autobiography, Lillian Hellman, noted playwright, gives an interesting summation of her thoughts. This was the conclusion of her observations:

But I am not yet old enough to like the past better than the present, although there are nights when I have a passing sadness from the unnecessary pains, the self-made foolishness that was, is, and will be.

I do regret that I have spent too much of my life trying to find what I called "truth," trying to find what I called "sense." I never knew what I meant by truth, never made the sense I hoped for. All I mean is that I left too much of me unfinished because I wasted too much time. However — .

Now, have the group pair off to do their last exchange of stories.

At this time, it might be interesting to get comments from the participants about their plans for writing their autobiographies. Often a group will suggest a later meeting so that they can compare notes on the progress each has made.

(Note from the author)

If you would like to receive additional copies of this guide, contact me at the website below.

Also, at your convenience, please let me know the number of participants in each workshop.

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