

University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Peter Elbow

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Appendix to A Unilateral Grading Contract to
Improve Learning and Teaching [written with
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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/peter_elbow/25/

A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Teaching and Learning

Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow

APPENDIX

I. Some Background on Contract Grading

Stephen Tchudi's edited collection, *Alternatives to Grading Student Writing*, summarizes alternatives and ranks their range of freedom relative to assessment, evaluation, and grading (see Figure 1, page xiii). In their ratings, contracts are relatively "free," falling halfway on the scale between the least free method ("graded papers") to the most free method ("credit/no credit"). In other words, contracts represent an evaluative middle ground: Some institutional mandates are satisfied (e.g. external criteria) and some best practices are fostered (e.g. a process-oriented approach).

Contract grading (earlier, contract learning) can be related to various theories of learning and cognition: self-efficacy or motivational theory (Bandura), mastery learning or outcomes-based education (OBE) (Glatthorn), and total-quality education (TQE) (Deming).

Improved motivation is usually a central goal of contract grading. From this perspective, grading should help students to achieve skills or content rather than be a measurement, post hoc, of performance or knowledge—as with most grading practices. According to "self-efficacy" theory (Bandura), behaviors ought to be connected to outcomes. The idea behind "outcome expectation" is that performing certain behaviors will lead to success, thus instilling a feeling of self-efficacy ("I can do it") in the student. A grading system geared toward achieving success or improving self-efficacy should (1) increase students' chances with success; (2) use instructional strategies that show students

how to succeed; (3) give students control over their outcomes in class; (4) use effective feedback to help students achieve success (Haladyna 137).

Another approach related to contract grading is what Stephen Adkison and Stephen Tchudi call “achievement grading,” a system that doesn’t depend on assigning letter grades to papers. They approach grading from a rhetorical point of view and argue that writing quality is inseparable from “the context of writer, audience, occasion, and content” (193). In other words, the teacher cannot specify the precise qualities of an A paper ahead of time and for all students. Achievement grading gives higher grades to students who complete a wider and deeper range of work. Papers are given pass/fail grades and points are given for “credible” tasks and assignments. This system rewards students for producing their best work rather than on absolute quality. Adkison and Tchudi believe that achievement grading motivates students’ growth, a goal they see as more important than whether or not grades of A or B, etc., represent the same level of quality. (Sources are listed at the end of appendix.)

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2. **A Passage from what Peter sometimes calls his “Police Log.”**

We want to illustrate how contract grading can simplify record keeping. For his first year writing course, he keeps a “grade file” in which he records only those occasions when someone has failed to meet the conditions for the contract—or exceeded them. Thus for some students (like Sarah Applebaum) he has no record at all for the whole semester: such students have simply done everything needed for the B. Of course he gives them lots of feedback. But no “grades” other than silence that means “You’re still fine for your B.”

Sometimes, as you'll see, he includes tiny notes about the student. (Names here are changed.)

About the code: The numbers 1 through 6 represent six essays done throughout the semester. Most but not all the essays went through drafts a through p: "a" means first draft; "b" is the midprocess draft; "c" is the "final revision" ("The best essay you can make but without worrying about copy editing"); "p" means publication draft ("Your only task is to copy edit so it is 'virtually without errors in standard edited English'.") He prints out their midsemester grades in ALL CAPS on little slips of paper for them and you'll see how he keeps them as a part of his police log. (Note that two cuts are legal for his class—which met twice a week.)

Sarah Applebaum. MIDSEMESTER GRADE: B. Final Grade B.

Chris Fuller. Out 9/18. 10/6 no 3b. Out 10/2. Out 10/9. 4a unsatisfactory, not enough effort. MID SEMESTER GRADE: B/C. 11/5 not enough journal. 11/6 letter too short; 11/11 5p unsatisfactory--full of errors. 11/13 no reading report--though he did the reading. Out 11/24 and 11/26. Final Grade: C.

Erik Smith. Excellent revision on 3c. Excellent at-home feedback you wrote on someone else's midprocess. MIDSEMESTER GRADE: NOT YET UP TO A OR A/B FOR FINAL GRADE, BUT IN THE RUNNING FOR IT IF YOU CAN HAVE SOME MORE EXCELLENT JOBS. 3/29 excellent for 4b. 4/15 skimpy journal, though he protests. Excellent job on 6b. Final Grade: A/B

3. Peter's End-of-Semester Self-Evaluation Form for First Year Writing

No matter what grading system we use, our grades tell students almost nothing about *what they have actually learned*. Contract grading—because it is decoupled from evaluation (up to a B) tells even less about what has been learned. But Peter,

understandably (especially given his nine years of using written evaluations instead of grades at Evergreen State College) wants to push students to think hard about what they actually learned. Therefore, at the end of the semester he asks them all to fill out the following form with short answers and bring it to a final short individual conference where he goes over it with them. In this process, he tells them any places where he disagrees with their answers. He finds he agrees with most of their answers. This illustrates an important principle in evaluation: the more specific the dimension being evaluated, the more different observers can agree.

NAME: _____ Date _____

About your grade:

Did you meet contract terms for a B? (Check out the contract again.)

Did you have many drafts that could open the door to a higher grade?—that is, drafts I told you I considered "excellent" or better than needed for the contract?

I list below the actual learning goals I had for you. Please give yourself a "plus," a "minus," or an "okay" for each item. Let your answer reflect yourself sense of yourself now—at the end of the semester.

Are you able to enjoy and use writing?

- To enjoy the process, to throw yourself into it, to take risks?
- To use writing in your life, figure things out, make decisions, deal with feelings?
- To use writing to help you learn material in other courses?
- To enjoy sharing writing with others—and give and get responses?

"Invention": are you able to find lots of ideas and words?

Thinking, perplexity: are you able to dig to real questions in your essays? To get to what really matters?—to push toward figuring something out--creating a movement of thinking?

Voice: can you make your writing sound comfortably like you--and get life and energy into your sentences?

Can you "show, not tell": find words that make people see what you see, feel what you feel?

Can you do genuine revising: rethink or "re-see" what you've written and try out new ideas, new structures, new voices?—develop or explore further what you've already written?

Can you copy edit successfully and get rid of virtually all mistakes in grammar and mechanics?

Feedback: can you give good feedback to others--and perhaps more important--can you *get them to give you* the feedback you need?

How well did you come to understand the writing process and learning process?

How was your level of effort over the semester?

How much do you feel you improved over the semester?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. **A Sample Contract Used in the UNC Writing Program with Commentary from Graduate Instructors**

Below is a contract that was developed and used successfully by graduate instructors in the UNC writing program. Two commentaries on their experiences with the contract follow: Risa Applegarth designed the contract itself which Erin Branch also used in her classroom. Note that students sign and return the contract to their instructors. In the Writing Program, students are assigned to permanent writing groups for the duration of the term.

Course Contract for English 102i.014
Risa Applegarth

Fall 2008

Your final grade for this course will be based on two things: your participation in class according to the contract outlined below, and the quality of the writing you include in your final portfolio. If you follow the contract for the entire semester, you will receive a B for the course. If the

writing you include in your final portfolio is exceptionally strong, your final grade may be higher.

Contract grading is intended to shift your focus productively: it assures you that, if you work hard and complete the contract, you will receive a grade that is above the average for English 102 courses. I hope this will permit you to concentrate on improving your writing in two or three manageable ways in each unit, rather than feeling pressure to master *everything* at once.

To earn a B for this course, you must:

1. Engage actively during every class period, and always use classroom time productively. Everyone has an off day from time to time, but for nearly every class meeting, your brain should be working from 10:00 to 10:50.
2. Participate actively during every workshop, and push yourself to provide your groupmates with consistently thorough, thoughtful, helpful feedback. You should help your groupmates to become better writers throughout the semester. Taking their work seriously enough to think hard about how it can be improved is crucial for your success, and theirs, in this course.
3. Use the feedback provided by your instructor and your groupmates to improve your writing. You do not have to make every change suggested by your readers, of course, as readers will sometimes disagree. But you must take all feedback seriously, and your drafts should show evidence of your careful consideration of your readers' suggestions.
4. Work with your groupmates to complete group assignments, particularly during Unit 3, to the satisfaction of everyone in the group. Divide group assignments fairly and complete, on time, all the work you agree to take on for your group.
5. Produce complete, thoughtful drafts of every assignment, and turn all work in on time. Post every assignment to Blackboard by the deadline, and bring a complete, printed draft to every workshop.
6. Revise thoroughly and thoughtfully after every workshop. Revision means substantially clarifying your ideas, reorganizing your argument, rethinking your claims, strengthening your evidence, deepening your research, adjusting your style, and/or re-imagining your relationship to your audience. Even if you have not received thorough feedback during a workshop, make at least one substantial revision before the next workshop and before turning in the final draft.
7. Proofread final drafts to eliminate distracting surface errors and typos. Final drafts do not have to be perfect, but you should learn any grammar rules that consistently cause you trouble, by talking with a classmate, using your *St. Martin's Handbook*, and/or meeting with me.

8. Attend all scheduled conferences with me and with your Graduate Research Consultant, and come prepared to use the conference time productively. If I indicate on a draft that I would like you to schedule an appointment to talk with me, do so within the week.
9. Avoid plagiarism by (a) taking careful notes to help you distinguish between your own ideas and language and those you have borrowed from sources, (b) attempting to cite all sources correctly even in first drafts, (c) mastering citation conventions and citing all sources correctly in all final drafts, and (d) never attempting to disguise another's work as your own, never purchasing essays online, and never engaging in any other act of academic dishonesty. New ideas only come about because we are all constantly borrowing ideas and sharing our work with others; be generous about attributing and citing those whose work has influenced your own.
10. Show respect for your classmates and your instructor. This includes using respectful language, taking each others' ideas seriously, and refraining from distracting behaviors, such as falling asleep, reading the *Daily Tar Heel*, or checking Facebook during class. Check that your cell phone is never on during class.
11. Be on time for class consistently, and be absent very rarely. Three tardies equal one absence. Being more than 20 minutes late for class counts as an absence. Five absences throughout the semester, two absences during any one unit, or missing **any** day when a workshop is scheduled will break the contract.
12. Be prepared for class consistently. Complete the required reading, print any required handouts, and bring your laptop and whatever drafts, revisions, or research I've required.
13. Submit a complete, fully revised Portfolio that meets all outlined requirements by the due date.

If you break the contract, your contracted grade for the course will be lowered as follows:

1. For minor breaches (excessive tardies, a non-workshop absence, or a slight drop in the quality of your workshop participation, for example): in each Unit, I will permit you one "Mulligan" —one minor misstep that will not break the contract. But two minor breaches during any Unit will lower your contract grade to a B-; two minor breaches during the next Unit, and your contract grade will be lowered further to a C+, and so on. These lowered grades can still be improved by an exceptionally strong portfolio.
2. For major breaches (missing a draft workshop, failing to participate actively in group activities, or failing to turn in or revise an assignment, for example): no Mulligans; your contract grade will immediately be lowered to a B- after the first major breach, C+ after the second, and so on. These lowered grades can still be improved by an exceptionally strong portfolio.

You are responsible for being aware of and following the contract stipulations. I will help you remain aware by notifying you, at the end of each unit or roughly every five weeks, of minor or major breaches of contract.

By signing below, I indicate that I have read and understood the course policies and contract requirements. I agree to abide by these policies and requirements.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

4a. Commentary by Risa Applegarth

1. Best reason for using contracts: Contract grading allows me to separate feedback from grades as two separate activities. So I give students feedback on their writing all semester long; I give them feedback on their critical reviews of each other's work during workshops; I give them feedback on their participation over the course of the semester. And all of this is focused on their improvement as writers, thinkers, and classmates. The result is a highly productive classroom, where students learn how to revise their writing, learn how to help others improve their writing, learn how to read critically and how to revise, and-- importantly--learn that even the best writer can improve. So while I do agree with many others that contract grades help shift focus away from grades, what's more important is what I get to shift focus toward through the contract, which is productive classroom behaviors, engagement with ideas, and constant, deep revision. I think my students at UNC are often inclined to feel complacent as long as they perceive themselves as more accomplished, talented, or proficient writers than their peers; contract grading (combined with portfolio evaluation, in this case) gives me a way to push those students by giving them feedback--not attached to an A or a B--that outlines the many, many ways even their most polished papers can be rethought, re-researched, and revised. My feedback simply would not motivate the same kind of deep revisions if it came attached to a high grade that students were already happy with. Likewise, extensive feedback attached to a low grade often inspires defensiveness or despair rather than revision. Using a grading contract that outlines my high standards for student behaviors, coupled with a portfolio assignment that asks students to select papers to revise and to critique their own work, has allowed me to create highly productive, challenging writing courses that push students no matter how proficient they are to begin with. I'm really a fan of contract grading; I can't imagine going back to traditional grading in my writing classes.

2. Biggest challenge: Grade inflation, which contract grading can contribute to. My contract establishes high standards that I'm satisfied warrant a B, but I also feel that I have to work to make students realize that they won't earn a B by default--just by showing up and turning in assignments. I've written a contract that prioritizes the quality of student feedback during workshops, the quality of student revisions in response to feedback, and the quality

of their engagement with course issues; and then in my feedback (twice during the term) I let students know where they're not pushing themselves sufficiently to meet the contract and earn the B -- but still, I think contracts can contribute to student expectations that meeting "minimum" requirements should still merit a B, rather than a C. I've thought of offering students three contracts, where students can elect to do the work required to earn a C, a B, or an A, but I've never actually tried that.

Risa, now an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, can be reached at Risa_Applegarth@uncg.edu.

4b. Commentary by Erin Branch

I have used a modified version contract grading for almost two years. Like many writing instructors at UNC who use contracts, I combine the contract with a final portfolio. In this portfolio, I ask students to submit two pieces which have undergone extensive revision and which they feel demonstrate their growth as writers. I also ask for a letter of assessment in which students, if they wish to, can argue for a grade higher than the one for which they have contracted.

I originally adopted this evaluation method for several reasons, but chief among them is my desire to strike a balance between ostensibly quantitative evaluations (rubrics, for instance) and methods that seem too subjective to me (such as traditional grading.) On the one hand, while many students seem to find rubrics reassuring and concrete, I worry that rubrics can sometimes foster the idea that "good writing" essentially amounts to completing a checklist. On the other hand, traditional grading always seems far too dependent on my own idiosyncrasies and preferences as a reader and writer, no matter how objective I try to be.

What I like about contract grading is that the question of objectivity/subjectivity can largely be set aside, and instead students are asked to focus on the behaviors and practices that will lead to better writing. Rather than grading a final product, the contract allows students to cultivate habits of mind and action that encourage collaboration, revision, and the sense that all writing can always be revisited and improved. In other words, contract grading seems, to me, to best reinforce the idea that writing is a *process*. And obviously, contract grading can remove some of the unproductive anxiety associated with grades, and with trying to figure out "what the teacher wants."

My concerns with contract grading are largely outweighed by what I see as its benefits, but I do worry that contract grading leads to grade inflation. I build in consequences for all sorts of infractions (late drafts, lack of participation, etc.), but I have found that if students haven't been made to see the contract as all but legally binding, they don't always see breaking it as a big deal. I think it can sometimes give students a false sense of security, too—at first reading, the contract items seem relatively straightforward and undemanding. Since they do not ever experience the shock of a bad grade on a paper, I have found that they sometimes

start to coast around mid-semester. I think, however, that providing them with regular feedback on both their writing *and* the status vis à vis the contract stipulations can help.

Erin, a graduate instructor at UNC, can be reached at elbranch@email.unc.edu.



5. Criteria List for A-Quality Essays for Jane’s First Year Honors Course

To guide students who are trying to write A-quality papers, Jane publishes a list of desirable qualities for each of the four life-writing genres students produce. Here is an example of one of those lists. The qualities or features are discussed and fleshed out as the students move through drafting and conferences. The examples on her list are drawn from readings in the course. These minimal descriptions are adequate for students because particular qualities like “voice” are discussed in the context of students’ papers as they move through the course. Jane suggests that a teacher who wanted to create an explicit contract for an A would need to expand the definition or description of each quality.

Qualities of Autobiographical Writing

Your autobiography should include

- Ø rich and plentiful details (hooks—and the wagon/wheelbarrow)
- Ø symbolic objects or events (Erdrich—the blue jay, the owl, the wild boars)
- Ø making something common-uncommon (Erdrich—taking a walk becomes a confrontation with loss)
- Ø evoking a specificity of time, place, feeling (Erdrich—face to face with the boar)
- Ø having a controlling idea or central meaning (Toth—“Going to the Movies”)
- Ø Tells the life by way of stories or narrative (Erdrich—saving the kitten)

Ø a wealth of information from both inside (memory, etc.) and outside (books, people, etc.) the writer (Brodkey-recurring image of the library (inside) and her mother's sewing (outside))

Ø more showing than telling, but include some direct statements: (Erdrich showing: "The struck jay thrusts out its head, screams, raises its wings...."; Erdrich telling: "Death is the least civilized rite of passage.")

Ø identifiable purpose(s) or function(s): e.g. wonder, explain, describe, research, question, imagine, reflect, create, recall, provoke, dramatize (dialogue), explore, conclude, reveal, etc.

Ø an identifiable chronology or coherent form, either traditional (e.g. narrative) or composite or fragmented (e.g. flashbacks, mixed chronology, multiple points of view); e.g. fragmented Chavez—"Independence Day, Manley Hot Springs"

Ø voice—an embodied person behind the language (whether first "I" or third person "she"); Erdrich—I am a writer.

Ø a critical awareness or self-consciousness that one is in the act of producing autobiography—"personal publicity", and that autobiography "does" something, has ramifications for selves as well as others (e.g. why Brodkey advocates that everyone writes on the bias).

6. Peter's Experiment with an A Contract for First Year Writing—During His Visiting Year at the U of Honolulu

We referred in the essay to Peter's experiment with an A contract. It was too daunting, but it illustrates examples of *non-judged* activities that could correlate with excellent writing. The contract starts off with the complete contract for a B as described in the essay. Then:

You are guaranteed an A if you do the following things:

- (1) Fulfill the contract for a B.

- (2) In your process writing for the final draft of each paper, describe (a) the structure or organization of your paper, and (b) how your paper pursued a line of inquiry and thinking--didn't just describe a static opinion.
- (3) At some point during each major writing assignment get an additional person's feedback on your mid-process or final draft (in addition to regular class process). For this extra response, you can use someone in this class or outside it. On one occasion before mid-semester, get this feedback in the form of "skeleton feedback," and on another occasion, a "descriptive outline" (I'll have a handout describing these). The rest of the time you can get whatever kind of feedback you find most helpful, as long as it is thoughtful and substantive, not perfunctory. Please show me this feedback in writing: a good page long at least--though informal is fine. (It's okay a couple of times to get oral feedback and write up a summary for me.)
- (4) At some point during each major assignment, give extra feedback to someone else--someone in this class or not. (Same guidelines or conditions as in #3.)
- (5) At some point around the middle of the semester, take a paper you've already written for this course or for another course and make a major, substantive revision of it. Include with this paper a write up of the substantive feedback you've gotten from someone else and a descriptive outline of the revised version. Also, some process writing about the changes you've made.
- (6) Make a good effort to get something published. Send out something in good shape to a suitable place. Possibilities: a letter, essay, or feature story to a local paper or campus paper; an essay, story, or poem to a magazine or journal.
- (7) Make some genuine efforts to help others learn and to help the class go better. Possibilities: help bring out the thinking of others, especially people who are not being heard; listen well to others; set an example of being open and honest in class--without hogging the floor; help your peer group work better. Drop me an informal note at mid-semester and at the end explaining or exploring ways you have tried to fulfill this admittedly fuzzy condition.

The contract ends with a paragraph of peptalk and exhortation—as in the contract for a B.

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7. Peter's A Contract for a Graduate Seminar

Grades in small doctoral graduate seminars tend to run high; traditionally, a B is awarded to work that faculty consider unsatisfactory. In a context like this, faculty often put a great deal of attention and effort into using grades to distinguish between excellent work and merely good work and thus giving great weight to the intermediate grades of A- and B+. For more than a decade, Peter has come to use graduate contracts for an A where he gives plenty of evaluative feedback and tries to be as specific and detailed as possible, but where he doesn't use *grades* to represent fine differences in quality.

These are his reasons: he often has great trouble deciding on the difference between “excellent” and “good” work in graduate seminars—and when he graded conventionally, he often found himself doubting the distinctions he ended up making. Even good and serious graduate students are often quite tense about whether they'll get an A or something lower, and this anxiety often prevents them from producing their best work. He concluded that more is gained than lost by using a contract that emphasizes lots of work and a public social process. (In his seminars, students are required to write reading responses every week and share them with the rest of the seminar on line; and also share drafts of their major papers. At the end of the seminar, final versions of their major papers are informally published in a book for everyone.) In his contract below, you can see how he

handles the biggest problem for graduate students: poor work that results when they get behind or fall into life troubles.

CONTRACT OR LETTER OF AGREEMENT

891J, ORALITY AND LITERACY, FALL 2001, PETER ELBOW

I will use a kind of contract for grading this course. My goal is to separate two processes that are almost universally and mistakenly equated: the giving of an institutional grade vs. the evaluation of work: grading vs. evaluating. I will avoid grading (giving numerical rankings of any sort). Your final grade for the course will be determined in a procedural and *nonevaluative* way--and not be affected by any evaluation I make of the quality of your work. (Perhaps I shouldn't call it a contract, because it is unilateral; I'm not asking your consent.)

In doing this, I'm trying to emphasize a point of pedagogy and theory that I care a lot about. Contract grading is not running away from evaluation, it's decoupling evaluation from grading. I see it as a way to make evaluation stronger and healthier. With the contract, I can evaluate and point out problems in your work more vigorously—and I believe you can hear them and ponder them less defensively—because these evaluations have no bearing on the grade.

This point needs emphasizing because so many people fear that a contract is just an excuse for a love fest and too much softness. The trouble is (let me speak among friends), I guess I do in fact seek a love fest and too much softness. For this course in particular, the things I ask of you are particularly hard to evaluate--much less to grade. Nevertheless, I am doing a lot of writing and thinking about evaluation and grading--not only as an interesting issue in theory but also as a matter of deep feeling: I *do* want to do some kind of *justice* to evaluation. This explains why there's a kind of legalistic flavor in what follows.

Requirements for the grade of A:

- Show you are doing the weekly reading and weekly email to everyone else—with care and investment. This is not to say you won't slide over a page of the reading here and there--but still, the requirement is for overall care and investment.

- Do the other assignments with care and investment (including the two process letters). In particular, this means making substantive revisions in revising your final paper. I'll need brief self-evaluations and evaluations of the course at mid- and end-semester (but I'll try to take some class time for some of this writing).
- Don't miss more than one [weekly] class, nor be late on more than one writing deadline. (*AND DON'T BE LATE AT ALL* with your draft for your final paper: the process of sharing it with others for feedback on the due date is central to this course). If circumstances make it unavoidable to miss more than one class, I need you to make me a proposal for something you can do to compensate in some way.
- Somehow find a way to help us on our voyage of creating human and supportive intellectual community that enhances learning. Being a good listener is key here, but perhaps the prime requirement (perhaps the prime overall requirement of the course?) is to successfully embarrass and make a fool of yourself so as to make it safe for the rest of us to do the same.
- If life circumstances prevent you from giving the time, effort, and involvement that I'm specifying, please come and see me so that we can work out a fair grade below an A. Also, do talk to me if this grading arrangement will get in the way of your best learning.

On my side, here's what I promise: I'll do the tasks. I'll give as much leadership and direction as I can—yet try to avoid being too pushy and directive and talkative. I'll try to give you my best thinking and perplexity—that is, to be open. I'll try to be brave about making a fool of myself. Once or twice only, I'll write a note in response to each person's weekly email reading response. I define these weekly responses as "writing-not-for-any-evaluation-or-response" (that is, writing for sharing, not for response). But I acknowledge that it would be nice for me to write a brief response once or twice. Otherwise, I'll try to give you the best feedback I can: very briefly on your oral report; more fully on the draft of your final paper; but *not* on your final version of your final paper.



A List of Sources Related to Learning Contracts and Grading

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