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Focusing on Feedback

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1. Introduction

There are typically a number of problems concerning teacher feedback on second language writing. For example, some students pay little attention to the feedback they receive – in particular self-rated poorer writers (Cohen, 1987). Cohen finds that many students make only a mental note of comments. This may be sufficient for good writers, but this strategy is also used by some weaker writers. Further, students sometimes do not understand, or know what to do with feedback (Cohen, 1987; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996). In addition, the kind of feedback desired by students is not always matched by the feedback offered by their tutors (Charles, 1990; Cohen, 1987; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990), and students would appreciate more information about what they are doing well, in addition to 'negative' comments (Cardelle & Corno, 1981; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 1995).

Cohen (1987) and Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) found that learners often have only limited strategies for handling teacher feedback, and suggest that raising learner awareness of possible alternatives would be useful. Ferris (1995) comments that her students' greater range of strategies may be due to the requirement that they should revise their work, and thus had more reason to use their feedback. This suggests that some learners may need a further goal or requirement, if they are to take their feedback into account (see Dehram, 1995).

Difficulties from the point of view of the tutor giving feedback include the fact that teachers often misdiagnose the grammatical misconceptions held by second language writers (Chambers, 1994), or do not understand the writer's intentions (Charles, 1990; Storch & Tapper, 1997). Zamel (1985) claims of ESL writing tutors that, like L1 writing instructors, they

. . . misread student texts, are inconsistent in their reactions, make arbitrary corrections, write contradictory comments, provide vague prescriptions, impose abstract rules and standards, respond to texts as fixed and final products, and rarely make content-specific comments or offer specific strategies for revising the text.
(Zamel, 1985: 86)

Although some studies show students to be happy with their feedback (e.g. Ferris, 1995), there is a need to address the above commonly found problems. This must be done in a way that will not restrict the kind of feedback that a tutor may wish to give, but that will at the same time encourage useful feedback. The computer can be used to support the provision of feedback by offering tutors a flexible framework through which comments can be given and which also encourages students to *use* the

feedback they receive. This accords with Hyland's (1990) view that students should "act on their feedback", achievable through "interactive feedback styles".

See Yourself Write was designed to address the above difficulties. It is a computational tool for tutors to provide both quantitative assessment, and unrestricted qualitative textual feedback. In addition to enabling learners to view their feedback easily, and compare comments across assignments, *See Yourself Write* encourages them to *interact* with their feedback, to help them *reflect* on the teacher's comments and on their work. The program itself gives additional comments to an individual, inferred from those made by the tutor. Thus additional information is provided for the student, without causing extra work for the tutor. *See Yourself Write* may be used in a variety of writing contexts.

2. 'See Yourself Write'

See Yourself Write is flexible. It does not assume that any particular approach to writing is followed. Neither is it concerned with issues such as the relative importance of marginal versus end-comments; feedback in the native or foreign/second language; whether or not teacher feedback could result in appropriation of student texts (see Reid, 1994); questions of teacher control (see Straub, 1996); the purpose of writing; differences and similarities in the needs of different learner groups, e.g. ESL and FL writers (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; 1996); etc. It is purely a method for the provision of feedback, which can be used as applicable to the particular educational situation. The main aim is to *promote learner reflection*.

See Yourself Write may be used to give feedback to students on their writing on any kind of writing task. It may be used at any stage of writing, e.g. initial or intermediate draft; final document. Thus it may lead to improvement between initial draft and final 'product', and also longer term. *See Yourself Write* can be used in conjunction with the student's wordprocessor, so attention can easily be given to previous feedback when students are writing a new document. Future larger scale research into *See Yourself Write* in use will also help to address the frequently raised research question of student application of feedback, and improvement, in *subsequent* written documents (e.g. Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996; Keh, 1990; Leki, 1990).

See Yourself Write may be used with any foreign language as the target language, and in a variety of adult learner contexts (e.g. EFL; university FL students; non-native Masters students). It may be employed in classroom or distance learning contexts. The program has two components:

- a *Teacher's Template* through which the tutor provides their comments to the learner, in both quantitative and qualitative form;
- a *Student Report*, composed of the teacher's feedback, and system comments derived from the teacher's quantitative evaluations.

The following sections consider the literature on teacher feedback on L2 writing, and in relation to this, describe: (1) the way in which teachers provide feedback through *See Yourself Write*; (2) the manner in which students view this feedback and generalisations made by *See Yourself Write*, based on the feedback; and (3) how students may interact with their feedback. This interaction with feedback is designed

to promote learner reflection in ways which cannot be achieved so readily with more traditional forms of teacher commentary.

2.1 Teacher feedback

Fathman and Whalley (1990) state that feedback on both form and content can be effective, and it does not overburden the student to receive each. Ferris (1995) found many writers paid attention to feedback on both grammar and content.

Nevertheless, there is disagreement. Dheram (1995) and Zamel (1985) argue that meaning-level issues should be addressed first, and Truscott (1996) argues against feedback on grammar, claiming that it is ineffective, and even harmful. Teachers may wish to follow Robb et al's (1986) conclusion regarding surface errors, that the amount of teacher time spent in making learners aware of problems is not sufficiently reflected in student improvement. A similar finding is described by Semke (1984). Kepner (1991) found message-related feedback to be more useful, resulting in higher-level writing and formal accuracy, whereas error correction did not lead to significant improvement in either of these. The implications of Pienemann's (1985; 1989) *Teachability Hypothesis*, which states that learners can acquire some aspect of grammar only when they are *developmentally ready*, suggest grammatical correction may sometimes be ineffective, as argued also by Sharwood Smith (1991); Storch and Tapper (1996); and Truscott (1996). Storch and Tapper's (1997) study on undirected student annotations revealed a high level of student interest in content.

However, Leki (1990) states that some students may be less interested in comments on content, feeling that it has little impact on the quality of their writing. Tutors may prefer to place more importance on findings such as Radecki and Swales' (1988), that learners *expect* their surface-level errors to be corrected; that they *want* grammatical errors to be pointed out (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996); and that they *pay attention* to comments on grammar (Ferris, 1995). As stated by Cumming and So (1996):

. . . it seems inevitable that adult students who write competently in their mother tongues, and who have drafted compositions to their personal satisfaction in a language they are learning, will seek input from proficient speakers of that language on precisely those aspects of their language production where they recognize they lack knowledge that they are seeking to acquire.
(Cumming & So, 1996: 202)

Different students are likely to have different needs and preferences. Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994) found their EFL students were very concerned about issues such as content, structure and style, whereas the foreign language learners were much more form-focused. Storch and Tapper urge:

there still seems to be a need to find out more about the areas of writing about which students wish to receive feedback comments.
(Storch & Tapper, 1997: 246-7)

It can be seen that arguments about what is important in feedback are not sufficiently resolved for *See Yourself Write* to *itself* favour any particular theory or approach. Further, there is more to the discussion of teacher response than the simple issue of feedback on form versus content (Ferris et al, 1997), in particular with

reference to *See Yourself Write*, since it is designed to be used in a range of L2 writing contexts. Moreover, the preferred commentary of an individual teacher may differ according to the writing genre, point in time, ability and personality of the individual student (Ferris et al, 1997). Therefore, with *See Yourself Write* the teacher determines the kind of feedback appropriate to their situation: whether to favour feedback on form, content, or both; whether to concentrate feedback on issues relevant to lesson objectives (e.g. Keh, 1990); whether to concentrate on an individual's major problems, or to focus on issues raised by the student (e.g. Storch & Tapper, 1997); etc. i.e. the level of detail of feedback given in *See Yourself Write* in each category is left to the individual teacher operating in the individual situation.

See Yourself Write _ teacher's template

reset student profile

reset teacher's template

student name

student number

date

assignment title

assignment type

assignment number

content good coverage give example
 structure / argument inconsistent give example
 style / vocabulary appropriate give example
 grammar
 spelling
 punctuation
 general comments

Please select the level of grammar

good okay weak

teacher's notes send information Quit

Figure 1: The Teacher's Template

Figure 1 shows the Teacher's Template of *See Yourself Write*. Tutors may provide entries to identify the student's work: the learner's name and/or number; the date; the type and title of the document; and the number of the assignment. The only obligatory piece of information in terms of the functioning of the program is the *assignment number* in order that the feedback is sent to the right part of the system for student viewing (because *See Yourself Write* holds information on a number of assignments at the same time). Other information can be provided for the teacher's convenience. (The Teacher's Template will already be linked with the appropriate Student Report at this time, thus name, etc. need not be provided again here.)

Teachers can input a quantitative evaluation of the learner's document in any or all of six categories: content; structure/argument; style/vocabulary; grammar; spelling; punctuation. A category is selected by clicking on its name on the left hand side of the screen. In Figure 1 the teacher is in the process of entering their assessment for the category *grammar*, and is offered the choice between three levels of assessment. (A second version of *See Yourself Write* is being designed, where teachers will themselves be able to define the number of options available.) Upon choosing one of the options, this is filled in opposite the category title, as illustrated in Figure 1 for *content*, *structure & argument* and *style & vocabulary*. General qualitative comments, and qualitative comments relating to a particular category, may be given by clicking

on *general comments* or the appropriate *give example* button. Figure 2 shows the edit field in which the tutor may type their descriptions.

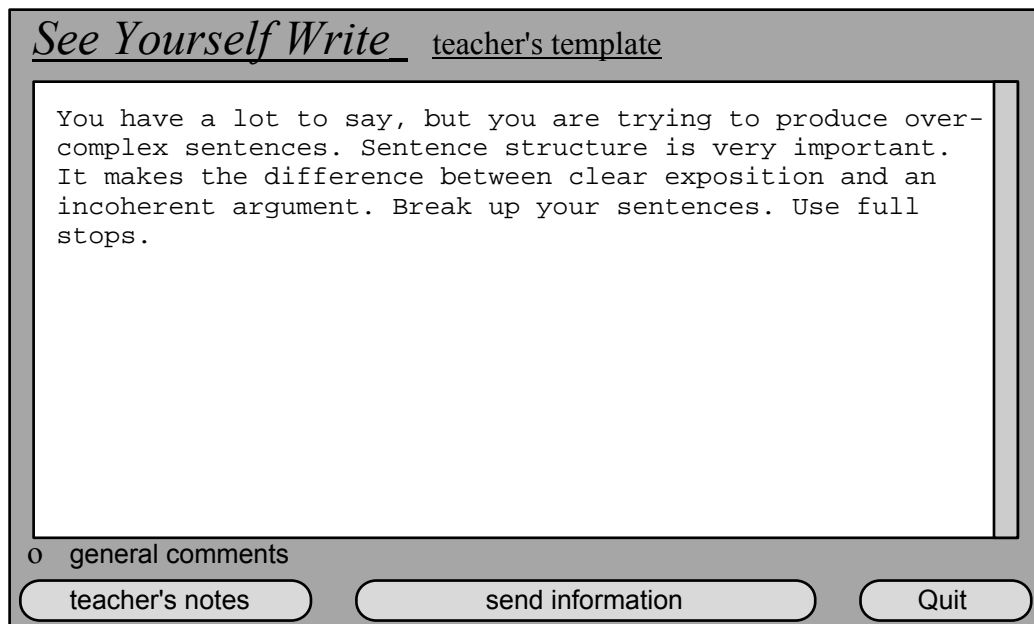


Figure 2: Edit field for the provision of qualitative comments

Feedback may be given in the native or target language, as appropriate for the particular teaching approach, student group, or individual learner. Excerpts of each in the context of use illustrated in this paper are as follows. Examples of qualitative feedback throughout this paper are taken from *See Yourself Write* used by British 2nd Year foreign language undergraduate students writing essays in French, on the subject "Tourism and the Environment". On this occasion feedback was given only on final drafts.

Student 1:

VOCABULARY: APPROPRIATE

But you are getting English and French confused.

Give the French versions of the words in your text which I have marked 'ang!'.

Student 2:

VOCABULARY: APPROPRIATE

Attention à l'influence de l'anglais, par ex: 'contentment', 'decline', 'provide'.

Trouver d'autres mots.

Student 4:

GENERAL

This is not very satisfactory. It suggests very little effort,

both on thinking through the content and checking your written French.

Student 2:

GENERAL

Un très bon travail; certaines phrases sont vraiment très bien exprimées.

In this example, Student 2 (S2) is considered well able to receive feedback in French, the target language. (He may, however, request clarifications if he is unsure of the meaning of any comment. See Section 2.3.) The comment to S1 about vocabulary is very similar to that given to S2 in this category, but to help ensure that this learner understands it fully, it has been given in English. Similarly, S4's feedback was in English. (Note that this example is of a general summary comment. Strategies for dealing with problems are provided within the relevant categories, e.g., for *vocabulary*: "Use a dictionary to find more appropriate words for the underlined words in your first paragraph".)

Because several pre-defined feedback categories exist, teachers may provide feedback on a larger range of issues than they might otherwise do. The existence of prompts for feedback in each category also leads to teachers giving positive evaluations, where these are deserved, as encouraged by Grabe and Kaplan (1996). However, feedback is not compulsory on any area. This is partly because it is not the aim to try to direct teachers as to how they should give feedback: if they are to use *See Yourself Write*, it must not restrict them from providing the kind of feedback *they wish to give*. It is also the case that not all categories will be equally important in all kinds of writing task. For example, *argumentation* will not be an issue in a translation, but it will be very important in a research paper. Finally, of course, as already discussed, there is no consensus as to what may constitute 'the right feedback'.

When giving feedback through *See Yourself Write*, teachers may request information, clarification or corrections from students. Thus learners must at least look at the feedback they have received, to find out whether any further work or comments are required from them. This is the first step towards encouraging those who tend generally to disregard teacher comments, to take account of them.

2.2 Viewing feedback

In the same way that teachers may be encouraged to provide feedback on a wider range of issues, the existence of explicit categories through which to view feedback also raises learner awareness of different issues to consider when writing.

Learners view their feedback through the Student Report, as illustrated in Figure 3. In this example, three assignments have been completed to date. The tutor has given quantitative evaluations of the learner's work for each of these assignments, in each of the categories. For example, in *content*, the learner initially had superficial coverage of the content, then improved a little, but in the third assignment, the content coverage was again rather superficial.

<i>See Yourself Write</i> student model				
	assignment 1	assignment 2	assignment 3	summary
content	SUPERFICIAL	OKAY	SUPERFICIAL	SUPERFICIAL
struct/arg	INCONSISTENT	GOOD	GOOD	GOOD
grammar	GOOD	OKAY	OKAY	OKAY
spelling	OKAY	OKAY	GOOD	GOOD
punctuation	GOOD	GOOD	GOOD	GOOD
style/vocab	GOOD	GOOD	GOOD	GOOD
<input type="button" value="student's notes"/> <input type="button" value="send information"/> <input type="button" value="Quit"/>				

Figure 3: Viewing feedback

To view qualitative comments given by the teacher, the student clicks on the appropriate cell in the table. Figure 4 shows tutor qualitative feedback for content (for S4), as displayed to the student:

<p>CONTENT COVERAGE A patchwork of facts about environmental issues, which were not of great relevance to the topic of tourism.</p>

Figure 4: Qualitative teacher feedback

See Yourself Write itself makes some generalisations to learners about their performance, based on the teacher's quantitative assessments. This is not restricted to the current assignment, but relates to feedback across time. The final column in Figure 3 shows *See Yourself Write's* summary of the student's efforts across all assignments so far completed. This is achieved by assigning numbers to the teacher evaluations, and averaging the score for the first two assignments in a category. The score for the third assignment, and the result from comparing the first and second, are then averaged. This process is repeated for all assignments completed. For example, for the category *spelling* in Figure 3:

OKAY = 4, GOOD = 6 (on the scale of 2-4-6).

Thus: $(4 + 4) / 2 = 4$; $(4 + 6) / 2 = 5$.

Odd numbers are rounded up one point, thereby ensuring that greater weighting is awarded to more recent assignments. Thus the final summary score in this category is 6, which is translated back to GOOD (see Bull, 1997).

As with the teacher feedback, a textual description of the program's summary can be retrieved by clicking on the appropriate cell. An example for *content* is given in Figure 5.

CONTENT COVERAGE

Your overall coverage of the content area in the assignments completed to date is a little weak.

In this calculation more weight is given to your most recent assignment, but the previous ones are also taken into account.

(Click on the relevant areas to read feedback received for individual assignments.)

* You have been having problems in ensuring that your coverage of content area is adequate. It may take some effort to improve this, but your work would benefit greatly if you paid attention to this. Your second assignment showed that you CAN achieve a reasonable standard. It may be useful to think about how you approached this second task. Click on 'My Comments' to review your earlier thoughts.

Figure 5: Qualitative system feedback

Although the system comment is here negative, *See Yourself Write* also points out that the student has already *demonstrated* that they can do better, and suggests a strategy which may help. Clicking on the button 'My Comments' displays to the learner their responses to earlier system prompts about their approaches to the task (see Section 2.3), to remind them of their previous considerations.

2.3 Interacting with feedback

See Yourself Write encourages student writers to take more notice of feedback than many would otherwise do, by involving them in *interaction* with their feedback. This occurs in a number of ways.

Teachers may request clarifications or corrections from learners in their qualitative feedback, therefore students *must* view their feedback. The following are two examples of feedback presented to students, from the category *vocabulary* (for S4 and S9, respectively):

What is 'asthatiques'? What did you intend to write?

You need to improve your range of vocabulary.
 What is a better word than 'opportunité', 'gens'?
 How could you improve on 'En voyant...'?
 What is the adjective used for 'à l'ouest'?

Figure 6: Teacher questions

Learners answer such questions directly in the edit fields where the questions are asked. In addition to ensuring that learners view their feedback, and through their answers, clarify any problems to the tutor, teacher questioning also promotes reflection by forcing learners to make their views clear to *themselves* (see Bull, 1997).

Students may choose to be prompted by *See Yourself Write* to think about their feedback, considering why they have received those particular evaluations, or how they may improve, as appropriate for the individual, e.g.

How do you think you could improve your content coverage?

- by consulting information
- by planning better
- by discussing the subject
- by evaluating my writing
- by revising my writing
- (other)

Figure 7: System prompts

This information is stored for the learner, for future reference. For example, if, after the second assignment, the learner in Figure 3 was prompted to consider why the content of this document was better than the first, they might select the option: *I planned more*. After the third assignment they might consider that more background research on the topic would have been helpful. Learner selections are kept, and built up, for each of the categories. The information collected by prompts from *See Yourself Write* is displayed as in Figure 8:

- **How content coverage was improved**
- by planning
- **How to improve content coverage**
- consult information

Figure 8: Student responses to system prompts

As stated above, this serves to remind students what *they themselves* have thought about the quality of their work. In this example, the learner's work was better (in the area of content) when they planned more. They also feel that consulting references would help. This is useful information to refer back to for the next assignment.

It is also useful for writers to see acknowledgement that what may, on the surface, appear to be a decrease in standard, has reasons – e.g. some prompts contain options such as: *I took more risks this time*. Selection of this choice indicates that the learner has probably learnt something, positive or negative, from trying that approach.

If none of the options offered matches the student's opinion they may select *other*. Although this provides no specific information to be held for future consultation, it will at least have made the learner think at the time, about how they may improve,

which is also beneficial. *Individually* constructed information such as occurs in this manner is important, since different writers use different composing strategies (see Chandler (1995); Wyllie (1993) for investigations of the composing strategies of academic writers; and Krapels (1990)).

Ferris (1995) found that learners sometimes do not agree with the feedback they receive. *See Yourself Write* asks learners directly, whether they agree or disagree with their feedback. An edit field is provided where students can state their arguments. For example, they may challenge the tutor's feedback if they dispute it for any reason. This may help to correct a teacher's misdiagnosis of misconceptions, and it may prompt learner reflection and hence increase learner awareness of a problem, through the need for students to state their disagreement explicitly (see Bull, 1997). It enables students with different attitudes and preferences towards written feedback (see Radecki & Swales, 1988; Enginarlar, 1993), to respond as suits them (and, of course, for teachers also to respond to student comments). It could be used in a way analogous to Ferris' (1997) description of the "revise-and-resubmit letter", where students review the feedback they have received.

Further, students may: request information from their tutors about areas where no feedback has been given; request elaboration of feedback that they do not understand; request clarification of how to handle feedback in cases where they are unsure; make notes alongside their feedback for their own easy future reference.

Receiving feedback with *See Yourself Write* facilitates and necessitates learner interaction with their feedback, in a way which seldom occurs when feedback is given in a more conventional form. This kind of interaction is *encouraged* by the program, thus learners need not feel shy about challenging their tutors, or requesting more information. As well as encouraging learner reflection, student responses to teacher feedback can help the tutor to understand learner misconceptions. It was found that some learners will spend considerable time responding to feedback received through *See Yourself Write*. A brief example is given in Figure 9 (for S10):

<p>STRUCTURE/ARGUMENT: INCONSISTENT</p> <p>A number of illogicalities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Surely to make your point, you need to argue that expansion of tourism has led to excessive development of transport systems?
<p>Student response</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Yes, but it also works the other way around in that transport systems have allowed tourism to spread to remote parts of the world.
<p>Teacher response</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Yes, that's fine. But in your essay you've first said that transport has developed, then further suggested that tourism was the cause of people wanting to travel - rather than the means of travelling (i.e. transport) leading to more tourism. The organisation of your ideas is confusing.

Figure 9: A teacher/student interaction

In the above example, S10 challenged the tutor's interpretation of the point she was attempting to make. This shows that she has both read the comment, and thought about it. The teacher's response explains that although the intended meaning was acceptable, this was not actually what had been stated in the student's essay. This interaction served to clarify to the tutor what the writer's intentions actually were, and to the student, that the problem lay with the organisation of the argument, and not with the argument itself. Without this interaction the misunderstanding between the teacher and student would probably not have been revealed.

Students can also make their own comments on their writing at the time of submission of their document, to further enhance reflection (see Bull, 1998). This takes place through the interface shown in Figure 10. This is aimed also at encouraging feedback on issues that *students* consider useful (Storch & Tapper, 1997). This is important, since students are more likely to award greater attention to the feedback they receive if they have themselves initiated questions (Charles, 1990; Storch & Tapper, 1996). As with the main program, this aims to promote student/teacher dialogue, and self-monitoring, as advocated by Charles (1990).

<i>See Yourself Write</i> diyM		Please give your assessment of your work. Remember to justify your comments.	
content coverage:		spelling:	
structure/argument:		punctuation:	
grammar:		style/vocabulary:	
o general comments			
student's notes		send information	
		Quit	

Figure 10: Interface for student commentary at the time of writing

Charles (1990) claims the following advantages for self-monitoring at the time of submission of a draft:

- students are active participants in dialogue;
- students gain some control, and also take more responsibility for their writing;
- positive feedback is encouraged;
- information about writer intentions is revealed;
- issues and questions important to the writer are apparent to the teacher.

Using the interface of Figure 10, students may raise any questions they wish for discussion, resulting in the advantages found by Charles with student annotations on drafts. An additional benefit of *See Yourself Write* is that commentary is easily consulted during future assignments, both by the student and the teacher.

See Yourself Write is not necessarily intended to be the 'end-point' of feedback: issues arising from its use may prompt face-to-face interaction, or conferencing between the teacher and student. Since learners will already have reflected and considered their views carefully when responding to feedback through *See Yourself Write*, they (and their tutors) are likely to gain more from one-to-one discussion than if they had not thought their arguments through.

3. Summary and conclusion

See Yourself Write addresses some of the problems inherent in giving and receiving teacher feedback on foreign and second language writing. Given the diversity of arguments about feedback, *See Yourself Write* was designed to be flexible, to enable it to be used in a variety of contexts.

One of the main advantages of *See Yourself Write* is that it provides a way to get students to notice their feedback and, furthermore, to actually reflect on it and act on it. In general, learners are likely to spend more time viewing and discussing their feedback when it is given through *See Yourself Write*, thereby benefitting more from the feedback.

Teachers using *See Yourself Write* may give as much or as little feedback as is appropriate to their situation. Therefore they are themselves in control of both their feedback and their time. Should they wish to give detailed comments, this is greatly facilitated with *See Yourself Write*.

The program itself makes some generalisations based on the teacher's feedback, thus providing additional information for the student without causing additional work for the teacher.

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