

EXPLORING SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING DIFFICULTIES: TOWARDS AN ACADEMIC WRITING MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Undeniably, writing is an indispensable skill in different contexts of life. It is one of the pivotal components of education. With the advent of the K-12 Basic Education Curriculum, students are confronted with different academic writing tasks through the English for Academic and Professional Purposes and Practical Research courses. Despite the efforts of the educational sector to improve students' writing skills, many students still experience difficulties in academic writing. Therefore, there is a need to fill the gap and advance an in-depth understanding of students' academic writing difficulties. In order to satisfy the said aim, this Qualitative study grounds on Flower and Hayes' (1981) Cognitive Process Theory of Writing. Focus group discussion of 14 purposively selected Grade 11 Senior High School students was carried out. The results expound on the different Academic Writing difficulties encountered by the participants in terms of the Task Environment, Writers' Long-Term Memory and Writing Process. A model for teaching academic writing was formulated anchored on the identified difficulties. The model will benefit the teachers as it may serve as a guide in more effective and efficient teaching of academic writing.

Keywords: Academic writing, writing difficulties, senior high school, process writing, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Whether in basic or in tertiary education, subjects aimed to enhance students' proficiency in English, whether verbal or written, have always been part of the Philippine educational system. The new Enhanced Basic Education Curriculum (K-12) introduces three new English courses namely, Reading and Writing Skills, English for Academic and Professional Purposes (EAPP), and Oral Communication in Context. Among these courses, EAPP is considered as the most unaccustomed for Senior High School students as less emphasis is given to academic writing in the Junior High School (JHS) curriculum.

Additionally, SHS students are confronted with three research courses namely: Practical Research 1: Qualitative, Practical Research 2: Quantitative, and Inquiries, Investigation and Immersion. Hence, EAPP aims to develop and fortify students' writing skills in different disciplines such as in the academe and in the professional field. The course introduces students to research writing skills so that they can cope with research undertakings required in their respective disciplines. Writing in the academe is more than just the use of correct grammar and expressive words. Morley-Warner (2009) defines

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academic writing as a formal way to write a well-structured paper by using more formal vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure. Also, language use in an academic writing piece goes beyond grammar and lexical rules of creating sentences. It must sport well-organized structure from beginning till the end. This pertains to right chunking of paragraphs, correct use of cohesive and transitional devices, and others. Given its complexity, Al Fadda (2012) argued that academic writing in English at advanced levels is a challenge and difficult even for most native speakers, and more so with second language speakers like most Filipino SHS students. Mutimani (2016) asserts that when students enter a university, they are confronted with a new and unfamiliar context of teaching and learning through writing different tasks. It is truly evident that students' academic success is associated with their ability to write academic papers effectively. The SHS training should prepare students for these situations as they enter tertiary or university education. Despite the moves of the educational sector to scaffold students' writing skills, it is apparent that many students still experience difficulties in dealing with academic writing endeavors. In the context of the Senior High School, Pablo and Lasaten (2018) divulged that the prevalent difficulty of the students in terms of content and ideas is the absence of a variety of ideas, while for organization is the absence of connectives. For vocabulary and word choice, the students' most prevalent difficulty is the use of the incorrect word and word usage, while language use is the poor sentence structure. Meanwhile, the prevalent difficulty of the students along formality and objectivity is the evident use of first and second-person pronouns, while for referencing is the lack of citations. Albeit numerous studies that explore students' writing difficulties, limited empirical explorations on academic writing difficulties in the context Senior High School students exist. Most of the available literature focuses on investigating errors and difficulties based on the writing product rather than as an output. Therefore, the researcher seeks to fill the gap and advance an in-depth understanding of the students' academic writing difficulties in view of "writing as a process." This

study grounds on Flower and Hayes' (1981) *Cognitive Process Theory of Writing* which emphasizes that writing is a set of distinctive thinking process. The act of composing is a goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writer's own growing network of goals. Flower and Hayes (1981) also suggest that writing involves three major elements: a) task environment; b) writer's long term memory, and c) writing processes. Task environment considers all things outside the writer, starting with the rhetorical problem and including the text itself. Writer's long-term memory includes the knowledge of the topic, audience, and various writing plans. Writing processes involve planning, translating, and reviewing.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to explore students' academic writing difficulties and its causes in the context of the three elements of writing as a cognitive process as identified by Flower and Hayes such as 1.) Task environment in terms of Insufficient knowledge of academic jargons, Difficulty in comprehending task instructions, and Difficulty in formulating a topic; 2.) Writer's long-term memory; 3.) Writing processes in terms of Planning, Translating, and Reviewing. As an output, the researcher formulated an Academic Writing model anchored on identified students' difficulties.

METHODOLOGY

The study used Qualitative Research Design. As the study investigates learners' difficulties in an academic setting, this study can be categorized as an Educational Research. An exploratory approach was utilized since limited studies were done in the context of academic writing in the SHS level. FGD sessions were carried out to fourteen participants. Since the University offers seven strands, two students per strand were selected. The participants were students who garnered a grade of 70 to 79 in the English for Academic and Professional Purposes (EAPP) course. Data from the Focus Group



Discussion went through Thematic Analysis to produce major and subordinate themes. Excerpts from the FGD were included to provide a comprehensive discussion, guided by the study's Theoretical Framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Academic Writing Difficulties and its causes in Terms of the Task Environment

1.1 Insufficient knowledge of academic jargons

Due to limited vocabulary, the participants experienced difficulties in comprehending academic writing prompts. As Participant 6 said: *"I've encountered lots of difficulties such as not being able to comprehend the meaning of a highfalutin words or phrases, grammatical errors, and sentence structuring."*

Similarly, Participant 4 claimed that unfamiliarity with highfalutin words is a difficulty for them. Lack of motivation or interest in improving one's vocabulary and the lack of emphasis given in academic writing in the Junior High School level was one of the prevalent causes of the said difficulty. *"The first difficulty that I encountered in terms of how my teacher presented those tasks are there are certain times that there are words that I didn't encounter in my previous study (year level). This could be the result of me being not concerned about updating my own set of vocabulary."* Participant 6 further stated: *"I think the major problem is that some students are not that academically inclined when it comes to linguistics."* Some of the participants also agreed to the idea that preparation in the Junior High School level is a factor of this difficulty as they emphasized that.

Participant 7: *"I haven't encountered any difficulties before in JHS because we were assisted by our teacher in almost every step we took in doing our research paper. However, this turned out to be disadvantageous for me in Senior High School because I was too dependent when we wrote our research. I focused on complying with the research adviser's teaching and not on how it will work for our paper. Also,*

there were terms that I found hard to understand in Senior High School as it wasn't taught to us in Junior High School."

Participant 9: *"Not having sufficient prior knowledge about the tasks because of lack of proper curriculum from past school."*

1.2 Difficulty in comprehending task instructions

Students encountered troubles in comprehending instructions about the different academic writing tasks. The participants find teachers' instructions and prompt unclear. This may have something to do with students' level of mastery in English as most of the students' first language is Filipino or a different dialect. Participant 13 explained: *"I think the way the teacher presented the task is purely English. I can understand English but there are times that I can't understand the jargons. He didn't even gave us the meaning of that word so the whole lecture seems wordy and not understandable."* This issue also affects the quality of students' outputs. Participant 12 maintained: *"...there are times where the questions are stated using unfamiliar words which would give me a hard time defining therefore, the quality of my essay is lessened..."*

Another concern pointed out by the participants is the lack of clear and proper explanation of the task and giving of examples. Participant 9 retorted: *"Sometimes it lacks explanation and concrete examples that we can follow..."* It was worth noting that the use of models and examples can aid an understanding of the goals or expected output of the writing task. Conversely, Participant 10 claimed that there was no problem in terms of the way the teachers presented the task, but rather it is the environment that causes difficulties. *"I always felt distracted and unable to connect with how the teacher is presenting the tasks. I think it's something caused by outside factors... like noisy surroundings, stress from the subjects that came before... rather than by the teacher itself, as they are able to present them in a manner that we can easily understand."*

1.3 Difficulty in formulating a topic

Academic writing topics should be new and informative as one of its main purpose is to disseminate information. As Participant 8 said: *"I encountered difficulty in coming [up] with topics... especially difficulty of coming up with something new and viable at the same time."* Participant 11 further maintained: *"In choosing, what is the best one. Simply because there are topics that are already common so that you need to think something new."* Moreover, the students also consider the interest of their readers—they were hesitant about the topics because they thought that the readers will not be engaged in reading their piece. Participant 6 said: *"I think remembering what exactly happened at that time and thinking of the readers. Are they going to love the topic that I'm going to use? Is the topic relatable?"* The participants asserted that they also considered the readers' perception of the topic. Usually, students avoided topics that were complex and sensitive. Participant 14 stressed: *"The difficulty that I encountered in coming up with those topics is the complexity or the sensitivity of the said topics."* In support, Participant 3 further stated: *"So we come up with the topic that we will not degrade, insult, or anything that will discriminate an individual. And it is pretty hard to do."*

On the other hand, there were also instances that the topics formulated by the students did not meet the standards of the course and the teacher. Participant 13 expressed: *"We encounter difficulties like when a topic seems to be interesting, but it's not suitable for the task at hand."* Similarly, Participant 14 explained that coming up with a unique topic was really difficult thus they resorted to formulating a new one. *"There are times that our topic already existed in the research department so what I'm going to do is create another topic."* Participant 7 further supported the concept: *There are times that I run out of topics especially when the teacher says we're not supposed to have the same topics with our classmates."* Another aspect that the students must consider was the alignment of topics with their strands. For instance, a STEM student should formulate topics relating to sciences and

technology. Participant 1 claimed that it hindered them in formulating new and unique topics. *"Before coming up with the final topic, we proposed lots of topics that were too general or too wide to study. It was hard to think of a topic with a set limitation like when in Senior High School, we must only present a topic that is STEM-related."*

Group members' interest was also a factor. Since some of the academic writing tasks were done collaboratively, the students experienced conflicts in deciding on a good topic. Participant 10 averred: *"Conflict po sa interests, since hindi lang naman iisang tao yung gumagawa ng research, yung iba gusto to, yung iba gusto yan, mahirap magcome up sa isang main topic."* [Conflict in interests, since it is not only one person who will do the research, the other members do not approve of the suggested topics, that is why it is hard to come into a consensus.] In addition, students' amount of background knowledge may be determined by their level of interest in a certain topic. In support, Participant 5 said: *"Some topics are not my interest or is new to me so I find it difficult to follow because I lack information / knowledge of it."*

2. Academic Writing Difficulties and its Causes in terms of the Writers' Long-Term Memory

Most of the students use internet and online sources to gather information needed in their academic writing pieces. Accessibility was one of the compelling reasons.

Participant 4: *"Mostly internet because it's very accessible. Internet has a lot of information in it you should just know how to extract [pieces of] information..."*

Participant 6: *"The usual sources that I used are first, Google because it gives a lot of information and it is so easy to access..."*

Participant 14: *"Google Scholar, sometimes from various articles from reliable sites. They, especially Google Scholar, are the most reliable ones yet. It is very useful as it has the most accessible sources that I could get hold of."*

Participant 5: *"I stick to online sources because it is just one click away. Unlike books*

from the library, which we mainly used to get information, it is less time-consuming. The search engine I use gives access to thousands of websites that relates to the topic I am researching.”

However, it was also emphasized that libraries and published materials were the most credible sources of information. As explained by Participant 10: “*Mostly, nagbabase kami sa news and other reliable sources sa libraries. Hindi po kasi talaga masyadong advisable yung internet, kaya minsan bumibisita talaga po kami sa library. tapos kung pwede pa po, we really visit institutions like D.O.S.T. para lang mag patest for outputs...*” [Mostly, we base on news and other reliable sources in the library. Internet is not really advisable that’s why we see to it that we visit the library. If possible, we really visit institutions like D.O.S.T. for verification of our outputs.] Most importantly, one should learn how to identify valid and credible online sources as anyone can simply proliferate unverified and false information. On the other hand, a participant also claimed that schema or background knowledge was still incorporated in their academic writing pieces. Participant 7 said: “*What I write in my essays came from personal experiences and opinions and also about my personal views...*”

2.1. Insufficient Amount of Reliable Information

Since the students mostly utilized online sources, they experienced difficulties in obtaining complete and reliable information about their topic. Participant 4 stated: “*When I’m doing research there are sites that needs you to pay for their collection of journals that is why it is so hard to find a journal...*” In conformity, Participant 14 expressed: “*There are times that when I scan on academic websites you need to buy that paper in order to read it.*”

The participants further pointed out that they encountered difficulties in terms of verifying the information that they were able to find.

Participant 5: “*The difficulties is you need to validate every information that you gathered and also you need to make sure that the information that you get is related to your topic...*”

Participant 8: “*The difficulties that I have encounter is the fake information so that I have to confirm that the information that I have gathered is legitimate. And in surveys or interviews, we had a hard time to convince our interviewees to answer some questions.*”

Participant 9: “*I struggle with managing my time in finding the right information for my output. Each information that I include from the online source I found must be accurate thus, I takes me time to check the validity of a certain idea.*”

Participant 14: “*Lots of fake news/articles and untrusted or fake sites, and of course the lack of strong information that will lead me to the output.*” The uniqueness of a certain topic was also a concern. They pointed out that since the topic that they have was unique or net yet well-explored, they encountered scarcity of available information. Participant 6 attested: “*Sometimes, when the topic is one of the firsts, or when it is not yet explored as much as other topics, it is difficult to gather information.*” Participant 10 further noted: “*Minsan wala pang available na literature and kung mamamalas malasin, wala po talagang research or journals man lang na available sa topic namin...*” [Sometimes, there is no available literature, it so unfortunate that sometimes, not even a single journal is available...] Apparently, the students did not rely on their long term memory in accomplishing their academic tasks, but rather they used available resources to fill in the information that they needed.

3. Academic Writing Difficulties and its Causes in terms of the Writing Process

3.1. Planning Stage

The participants start the writing process by having a clear understanding of the objectives or goal of the task, as well as the topic.

Participant 4: “*What I usually do is to review the task well... it would help me to know how to approach it.*”

Participant 5: “*I usually ponder on what is the true objective of the teacher before starting my work.*”

Participant 7: “*The first thing that I do is to list down the things that is essential to the paper*

that I'm doing. I also take note of the validity of the sources."

Participant 12: "What I do is I think about the topic carefully and I need to be sure that I am well aware of topic."

Some of the participants also gathered and verified information that were relevant to the task or topic. The students seemed aware of one of the most important features of academic writing—the accuracy and veracity of information.

Participant 4: "Of course making sure that my supposed information are relevant... and then I Fact-check every information that I'll be putting in."

Participant 12: "I make sure that I gathered the right information by double checking and I draft my ideas to a scratch paper so I can just follow it."

In connection, some participants started by building background knowledge about the topic before proceeding to the actual writing.

Participant 3: "I make sure to remember all my past experiences and gather information that can be used when writing academic tasks..."

Participant 11: "I first try to gain more knowledge about the topic that was given before proceeding to writing the paper..."

Participant 1: "Nothing... Maybe just reminiscing the memories so that I can use it as a topic for my writing..."

Participant 10: "What I do is mentally practicing my mind by reading finished academic writings online help me before I start my own. I note things in my head that I must include in my own work."

The participants also used pre-writing strategies like formulating a thesis statement, brainstorming, and outlining. Moreover, they also minded the structure of the paper.

Participant 14: "I think of a structure of how I am going to write... Depending on the task, I prepare the main points of what I am going to write so that it will be easier to expound on them."

Participant 8: "For me, I come up with an outline or layout of each paragraph as well as a list of words that I would want to include - it's a must for me."

Participant 2: "We usually do brainstorming with my group mates as well as sharing of information and searching on the web..."

Participant 5: "Also, it is important to know the topic well, then choosing a good thesis statement, after that is outlining and the rest will follow."

3.2. Translating

The participants have varied ways in turning their ideas into words such as using different resources (e.g. dictionary, Google translate) to aid their difficulties.

Participant 4 stated: "It is actually hard to turn my ideas into words because it can get tangled up at times. So, I make it a habit to use dictionaries and an online translator whenever I do my academic writing." In agreement, Participant 1 and 6 said:

"I also use Google translate to transform ideas and looking on dictionaries for the jargons to be used..."

"Every time I write an activity, I have my phone with me and I opt to keep my Merriam [dictionary] open."

Some students use free-writing. Participant 12 retorted: "I just write them. It just comes to my mind on-the-spot; that is, when I am already writing it." Likewise, Participant 8: "I'm just writing down what is playing on my mind and I'm assuring that it is well written so that I will have a great output."

3.2.1. Vocabulary Difficulties

Majority of the participants claimed that translating their thoughts into words was a problem due to insufficient knowledge of academic jargons. It was the same difficulty that they have encountered in Task Environment. Participant 7 averred: "I have to admit that I don't have this extensive vocabulary that I run out of the appropriate words to use..." In consonance, Participant 5 expressed: "I find it hard to come up with the right or appropriate word to use to make my work look professional..." Participant 14 further voiced: "Sometimes, I'm having a hard

time choosing the right word for the theme to be described.”

First language was also a factor— it seemed that there was a language barrier between the students and their writing tasks. Participant 13 maintained: *“I sometimes forget what words suit my ideas the best. Sometimes, it's when the idea in my mind is in Filipino ar 15 don't have a clear idea of how to turn it into English...”*

Another concern was the difficulty in organizing and maintaining coherence as they write. Participant 11 expressed: *“I think the arrangements of words inside the paragraph. And how will I maintain the connection of ideas in succeeding paragraphs.”* Participant 10 shares the same idea: *“...minsan pag natapos na yung map, malilimutan ko kung ano namang connection ng isang topic sa main topic o kaya minsan po nahihirapan akong ikonekta yung iba sa main topic...”* [Sometimes, I forget the connection of one topic to the main topic...]

3.3. Reviewing

Majority of the participants focused on checking for grammar and mechanics lapses.

Participant 3: *“Grammar wise, sometimes I use an application. On the other hand, for the information[s] I gather, I double-check such informations...”*

Participant 10: *“I proof read, I double check for grammar errors and punctuations then double check if I'm writing directly to the topic then double check if I gathered the right information.”*

Participant 13: *“I reread my output, then seek for any grammatical errors. If the whole paragraph isn't good for me, I will scrap it and rewrite it again.”*

Organization was also concern for the participants. According to Participant 6: *“...by means of ensuring that the flow of my output came up the way I wanted it to be. Lastly, to check for the grammatical errors that are present in to my work and correcting them immediately...”*

Participant 10 also raised the idea of checking for plagiarism. *“I check for the mechanics, and other elements talaga ng*

academic writing. I check the citations, grammar and others. nagamit po ako ng isang app for grammar errors and plagiarism, then minsan minamano mano po yung checking lalo nakung nasa rrl ka...” [I check for the mechanics and other elements of academic writing. I check the citations, grammar, and others. I use an app for spotting grammar errors and plagiarism then sometimes I manually check for errors especially if I am doing the RRL.]

Students also considered feedback when reviewing their writing piece. Participant 11 noted that: *“...by reading it from the very start until the end. I always follow my teacher's comment on it so that I know what to change or what to add...”* Participant 7 also added: *“After I check my output, I also ask my teacher on what parts that we need to revise so that I easily review my output...”* Furthermore, Participant 8 emphasized: *“I reread my output to check if what I write is correct. Group mates can be essential in this part because they will help you to revise your work if there are things that you have missed out an error or information...”*

3.3.1. Time constraint

Managing the time allotted to complete the academic writing tasks also qualmed the participants.

Participant 1: *“Time, because in a paper making it costs a lot of time that results having tiny amount of time for revisions...”*

Participant 4: *“Sometimes revising just takes a little time. But the greatest problem is when you had a serious problem with your paper and you have to start all over again from scratch...”*

Participant 14: *“...also the time consumption because sometimes they're just giving us enough time to write. By practicing it, we'll learn to write without many erasures or errors...”*

In relation to time, the participants also pointed out that the probable cause was procrastination. Participant 5 said: *“I think the common difficulty that one may face when reviewing or revising a paper might be due to procrastination. We usually tend to hurry up to the*

point that we rush in revising our paper. With that being said, time management is a must..." Participant 13 also shares the same thought: *"I get too lazy to review and reread it again sometimes. I think this is caused by temptations to sleep on the job the needs to be done..."* In support, Participant 12 stated: *"When I am too lazy or too distracted to do so. Sometimes it's because of being too lazy, sometimes it's because of feeling anxious that I am taking too much time..."*

3.3.2. Identifying and correcting errors

Identifying and correcting errors was a difficulty for the participants. Even after revision, there were still errors that were not addressed. Participant 7 said: *"I still miss out some errors after revising. In the middle of reviewing the paper, I start to feel like my brain comes into a halt causing me not to process information. It makes me skim the paper instead of reading it carefully..."* same with Participant 8: *"...difficulty of, sometimes, finding mistakes. Maybe because it is my work and I don't necessarily know what experienced researcher think or whatsoever..."* hence, feedback from other people is needed.

CONCLUSION

Considering the findings presented in this study, it concludes the following:

1. In terms of the Task Environment, the participants mostly encountered difficulties in relation to their knowledge of academic jargons. In addition, the participants also encountered troubles in formulating topics.
2. Looking into the Writers' Long Term Memory, students mostly use internet and online sources to gather needed information due to its accessibility. It can be concluded that the students do not rely on their long term memory or schema in accomplishing their academic tasks, but rather use available resources to fill the needed information.

3. The participants make use of varied strategies such as formulating a thesis statement, brainstorming, outlining, and gathering necessary information. The participants seem to be well-versed when it comes to Planning.
4. The participants use different resources in translating ideas into words. It was raised that insufficient knowledge of academic vocabularies and jargons became a hindrance in accomplishing an academic writing piece. Another apprehension of the participants is the difficulty when it comes to organizing and maintaining coherence.
5. Grammar and mechanics is a major concern. The participants experienced difficulties in terms of identifying and correcting errors. The participants also experienced constraints in managing the time allotted in completing academic writing tasks due to procrastination.

RECOMMENDATION

To address the academic writing difficulties, a two-phase, multi-stage academic writing teaching model was formulated based on the results of the study.

Phase 1. Preparatory Activities

1.1. Activating and Gauging Schema. The teacher should provide different activities in order to activate students' schema about a certain topic relating to the writing prompt. Moreover, activating students' schema will give the teacher an idea of how much the students know about the topic or theme of the task to be given. In that way, the teacher may opt to redesign or revise the given task.

1.2. Unlocking Vocabulary. After giving the prompt, difficult vocabulary shall be unlocked. The teacher shall give an opportunity for the students to ask if there are any vocabulary or jargon that may hinder a clear understanding of the writing task.

Phase 2. Output Production

2.1. Pre-writing

2.1.1. *Establishing Central Idea.* The students must be given enough time in formulating Thesis Statement in order to establish the direction of the academic writing piece. Moreover, in this phase, the use of an outline shall be encouraged by the teacher.

2.1.2. *Looking for Resources and Gathering Data.* Guided by the formulated outline, the students must be given enough time to gather data from different sources. Moreover, in this phase, the students must be able to make sure that the sources are credible and the information is valid. This also makes the students exposed to academic writing pieces.

2.2. During Writing

2.2.2. *Drafting.* The student must produce a rough draft of the paper following the outline and incorporating the gathered data.

2.3. Post Writing

2.3.1 *Reviewing and Revising.* In this stage, the teacher makes sure that content is parallel to the Thesis Statement. This will promote clear focus, cohesion and coherence of ideas included on the paper. Afterwards, the students must perform necessary revisions regarding the content of the paper.

2.3.2. *Editing.* It is noteworthy that Grammar and Mechanics is the major focus of the students when they are revising their paper. In the editing stage, grammar and mechanics shall be the sole focus. Peer-assessment must also be encouraged in the Reviewing, Revising and Editing stage.

In addition, the education sector and curriculum planners should revisit the current

curriculum and give more weight in the academic writing discipline. The students should be given tasks and learning activities that will expose them to the academic writing discipline.

As for future directions of this study, researchers in the field of education are encouraged to conduct a similar study on a wider scope to validate the results and findings of the present study. Also, more studies should be conducted to explore the difficulties of students not only in academic writing, but also on other types of writing such as creative, and technical writing. An academic writing intervention program may also be devised anchored on the results of the present study.

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46-47

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