creative formats

across media and disciplines

assignments beyond the essay

Edited by Sarah Huber

the purpose

Students are often overwhelmed by the volume of information they must navigate in today's academic landscape.

Part of the challenge is that many instructors continue to guide their students with "decades-old approaches to teaching research-based writing, as there is little else available" (Bungert et al. 2022, 28). These traditional approaches tend to privilege the essay as the primary means of demonstrating understanding, narrowing the range of ways students can process and communicate what they learn.

In The Extended Mind, Annie Murphy Paul (2021) argues that our society places too much emphasis on the brain as the sole source of cognition. She explains that the brain alone lacks the biological capacity to manage complex information and instead relies on extensions such as bodily movement, physical environments, and collaboration with others. As Paul notes, "the lack of physical movement in our society is due in large part to academic learning and to knowledge work" (46). Libraries have traditionally supported access to and creation of knowledge primarily through text—a format that often keeps bodies still and cognition narrowly focused. Yet libraries are uniquely positioned to expand beyond this tradition by experimenting with information formats that activate embodied, spatial, and social ways of thinking. For example, a podcast interview can surface relationships, emphasis, and meaning through voice, timing, and interaction—dimensions that may remain implicit or invisible in an essay—demonstrating how format itself extends thinking.

Working as a librarian across educational settings, I have supported students creating knowledge beyond the traditional essay—through podcasts, videos, prototypes, textiles, and infographics. Across disciplines, however, I consistently observe uneven preparation and expectations for this work. Students in the liberal arts are often more familiar with art, design, and material principles that support work across varied formats, while students in other fields frequently select formats outside their disciplines without understanding how form conveys meaning or how to work within it intentionally. Many have never been taught foundational concepts such as material properties, visual hierarchy, or color theory. This gap across disciplines leaves students without shared language, tools, or consistent expectations as creators.

There are historical models for treating such principles as common intellectual groundwork rather than specialized or aesthetic concerns. At the Bauhaus, art, craft, and technology were positioned as equal forms of knowledge, united by purpose (Gropius 1965). This approach was extended at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, where design was taught as a systematic methodology for thinking, problem-solving, and communication (Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm n.d.; HfG-Archiv Ulm n.d.). Drawing on these models, this book treats format knowledge as a shared, teachable foundation—supporting instructors in helping students use diverse formats not simply to present ideas, but to think through them.

Formats as Pedagogy

Throughout this book, I use *format* to describe how content is structured and presented—such as a podcast, dance, or essay—while *media* refers to the sensory channels through which a format is experienced (audio, visual, kinesthetic, or textual). These terms often overlap: a podcast is a format experienced through audio, and a dance is a performance format that engages both kinesthetic and visual media. While disciplines may use different terms—such as medium, mode, or genre—there is broad agreement that the form of communication shapes meaning. This shared understanding is captured by Marshall McLuhan's well-known assertion in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* that "the medium is the message": the characteristics of how information is expressed influence what is understood, not just what is said.

This edited volume is a hands-on resource for instructors designing assignments that ask students to think and work creatively through and with different formats. Each chapter focuses on a specific format and includes an adaptable lesson plan written by an expert in that discipline, designed to help students understand the nature of the format—how it is constructed, what it affords, and how it shapes meaning—along with resources instructors can use to design related assignments. While formats function differently across disciplines, the book emphasizes shared art and design practices—such as visual hierarchy, color, perspective, and timing—that shape meaning across contexts. In this

way, format creation becomes a pedagogical method for teaching how information is organized, interpreted, and communicated. Although the contributors write from higher education contexts, the approaches and lessons are adaptable for use across K–12 settings.

Drawing on research with faculty and students, I argue that intentional format choice—and the quality of work within a format—is part of the content itself. In a study of visual assignments in engineering and business courses, participants valued multimodal work but claimed that content mattered more than its expression. When asked about support to create multimodal work, they described assignment expectations and resource finding as a "Wild West" (Huber et al. 2024, 12). In a study of student podcasters, this same assumption about format versus content shifted when students examined how pacing, timing, and sound shaped understanding—revealing that quality within a format is not separate from content but integral to its meaning, as uninformed choices can distract from the message itself (Bochenek et al. 2025). For example, an abruptly cut interview or music that lingers too long can pull attention away from an idea, while the same choices, made intentionally, can add emphasis, tension, or clarity.

This approach aligns with librarians Silke Higgins and Ngoc-Yen Tran's work on "alternative assignments," which notes that "a growing number of students no longer believed that traditional research assignments aligned with the goals and outcomes they had set for their academic journey" (Higgins and Tran 2022, ix).

It also reflects evidence that "when instructional style matches the nature of the content, all learners learn better, regardless of their differences" (Brown et al. 2014). While students regularly create meaning across modes in everyday digital contexts, effective communication beyond familiar classroom audiences requires shared language and expectations that allow varied meaning-making practices to be recognized, discussed, and assessed. This book begins a shared conversation by offering format entry points that help students communicate clearly across academic and public contexts.

Knowledge Organization Through Formats

I first encountered the idea that reorganizing informational systems could reshape how we think through the Sitterwerk Foundation, as described in *The Dynamic Library*. Sitterwerk's dynamic, nonhierarchical library prioritizes discovery, embodied interaction, and associative thinking over linear retrieval. When I visited in 2023, its catalog, smart tables, and material archives revealed cross-disciplinary connections that emerged through movement, making, and annotation rather than text alone.

This experience led me to consider how external systems of organization shape internal cognition. As Anthon Åström, Fabian Wegmüller, and Lukas Zimmer (2015) argue, our systems of organization remain "heavily based on the physical world," privileging linear and hierarchical structures; challenging these systems can "lead to fundamental changes in our ideas, how we

organize things, and our sense of knowledge itself" (93). Just as the Sitterwerk challenged linear systems through its library organization, regular engagement with varied information formats can challenge the primarily linear nature of text. Is this another way of looking at what Paul (2021) discusses in *The Extended Mind*—that working with information in diverse ways extends our minds' capabilities? While research explicitly connecting format, cognition, and internal knowledge structures remains limited, the Sitterwerk model suggests this relationship merits further investigation.

The Human-Centered Classroom in the Age of AI

Many lesson plans are hands-on and tactile; others focus on visual expression, movement, and interaction. Students design, collage, tell stories, and work collaboratively, using digital tools when needed but not always required. These approaches emphasize active participation and shared meaning-making, in contrast to the increasingly solitary and automated nature of contemporary learning technologies.

Working across material, visual, auditory, and kinesthetic formats brings attention to the decisions through which learning happens. Through making and revising work in different forms, students can actively construct knowledge and gain insight into how disciplines organize information and meaning. This exposure broadens perspectives beyond a single field and supports informed choices about when—and when not—to integrate

approaches into their own work.

As AI tools become more embedded in academic contexts, the content provided asks how educators and librarians can design learning experiences that preserve human-centered thinking and sense-making while still helping students use AI intentionally and effectively. Format knowledge, alongside art and design skills, helps students make informed judgments about AI outputs rather than treating them as authoritative or complete.

Building Communities of Practice

When I joined Purdue University as an assistant professor of library science, I was asked to develop STEM-focused makerspace programming. Early attendance was low, prompting a reconsideration of what "making" could mean in a library context. Expanding beyond engineering-centered practices to include craft-based and material forms of making significantly increased student engagement and reshaped the space I now direct, the Knowledge Lab. Through this work, I began to see how a library makerspace could function as a foundation for a multimodal writing center—one where students creatively make and communicate knowledge through a range of formats.

This insight became especially clear through a project with Dr. Pamela Sari, director of Purdue's Asian American and Asian Resource and Cultural Center (AAARCC), in which students transformed archival images into a multimedia quilt combining fabric,

narrative, and sound. The project demonstrated how material formats communicate meaning in ways text alone cannot. At the same time, it revealed a familiar challenge: without shared language, documentation, and institutional frameworks, non-textual work is often undervalued or difficult to assess. This aligns with Loveless's (2019) argument that creative practices function as legitimate forms of inquiry but require institutional recognition to be sustained.



Image: AAARCC quilt
Photo credit: Sarah Huber

These experiences connect directly to the Association of College and Research Libraries' Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education, particularly the frame "Information Creation as a Process," which emphasizes how meaning is shaped by format as information moves across contexts. Students already live in a media-rich environment where ideas constantly change form, yet academic coursework often remains narrowly text-centered—leaving little room to reflect on how formats shape understanding.



This work offers a practical foundation for building a community of practice around format-based learning and communicating. Echoing Bauhaus and Ulm's emphasis on foundational practices rather than siloed specialization, the book provides accessible points of entry rather than advanced design training. The text is primarily grounded in Western art and design traditions, whose codified principles—such as hierarchy and grid-based composition—provide a structured starting point for exploring diverse approaches. While not everyone will become a designer, shared introductory skills help students work more intentionally with form. Rather than teaching discipline-specific content, these materials treat format creation as pedagogy—supporting students in communicating ideas through diverse forms.

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contents

Introduction p. 1

Part 1: Getting Started p. 21

1. How to Use This Book p. 23
2. Accessibility and Inclusion Guide p. 33
3. Information Formats Table p. 41

Part 2: Lesson Plans: Compositional Principles p.60

4. Logics of Space: The Rule of Thirds in Photography and Video p.62
   Sarah Huber
5. Hands-On Hierarchy: Designing a Concert Poster p.70
   Sarah Huber
6. Indigenous Knowledge: Learning to Tell Stories from Native Americans and First Nation Peoples p. 78
   Alyssa A. Nez, Diné (Navajo)
7. Making Poems: Exploring Ekphrasis and Text/Image Poetics p. 88
   Sara Veglahn

Part 3: Lesson Plans: Discipline-Specific Formats p. 96

8. Making Photographs Versus Taking Photographs: From Observation to Visual Communication p. 98
   Eli Craven
9. Visual Essay: Capturing Video for Narrative Communication p. 105
   Liz Evans
10. Visual Essay: Editing Video for Narrative Communication p. 112
    Liz Evans
11. Writing: Leveraging an Old Medium to Reflect on Learning p. 117
    Jennifer Bay
12. Book as Arena p.125
    Brian Hitselberger
13. Research Beyond the Paper: Exploring Knowledge Creation Through Zines (Part 1) p. 135
    Sarah Huber
14. How Media Choice Impacts Readers' Zine Experience (Part 2) p. 145
    Sarah Huber
15. Remembering Air p. 152
    Matt Olson
16. Meaning in Music: Everyone Can Be Creative p. 158
    Dan Guberman
17. Dance: Communicate Meaning from the Kinesphere p. 169
    Renee Murray
18. Try on an Artist's Format: Reimagine the Fit for Your Own Practice p. 176
    Kathleen Hickey
19. Student Life Exhibition Using University Archives p.183
    Sammie Morris

Part 4: Student Stories p. 192

20. Networks to Needles: Sewing to Communicate Belief, Identity, and Sustainability p. 194
Interview with Osighe Akpeokhai

21. Materialized Narratives: Knitting as Both a Method of Research and an Output p. 202
Interview with Rebecca Eli-Long

Part 5: Lesson Plans: Formats Across the Disciplines p. 210

22. Podcasting as Public Scholarship in Africana Studies: A Laboratory Model p. 212
Jasmine Harris

23. Podcast My Lecture p.217
Ian M. Cook

24. Midden in Plain Sight: What Our Trash Says About Us p. 221
Mary Kosuth

25. Filmmaking as Social Research p. 229
Courtney Wittekind

26. Smartphone Data: Communicating Hidden Patterns Creatively p. 237
Shannon McMullen and Sarah Huber

27. Quilting Compositional Language Through Data p. 246
Sarah Huber

28. Data Made Practical: Quilting Temperature Potholders p. 254
Alison Roth

29. Buttons and Visual Discourse p. 260
Patricia Swanson

30. The Information of Ritual: Understanding Food and Aging Across the Life Course p. 267
Sherylyn Briller and Erika Carrillo

31. Boiling it Down: Plain Talk and Effective Visuals to Inform Audiences p. 278
Alexandria Johnson

32. Landscapes as Living Documents: Photos and Stories as Tools to Find Place p. 286
Hui-Hui Wang

33. Shaped by Format: Exploring Radiation Therapy Through Different Forms of Engagement p. 294
Alison Roth

Conclusion: p. 302
Toward a Community of Practice

Practical Skills Index p. 304
Contributor Biographies p. 310
Acknowledgments p. 314
About the Editor p. 315
Colophon p. 318

STUDENT LIFE EXHIBITION USING UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Sammie L. Morris

ine: Special Collections and University Archives

ct: Three-Part Archives Workshop

Information Qualities of the Format

Exhibits are curated presentations of information—visual, textual, audio-visual, or artifactual—that communicate interpretation to a public audience. They require selecting, contextualizing, and arranging items to tell a coherent story. Archives and special collections, once primarily used for humanities research, now support disciplines from STEM to social sciences and art.

Exhibits promote primary source literacy, historical empathy, and institutional belonging by connecting students with the history of their own university or community. In this lesson plan, students collaboratively use university archives to create a narrative exhibit. This experience helps students find meaning in their place at the university. In the following example, students highlighted voices from Purdue's past that are often unheard

As stated in the example exhibit for this lesson plan, "By opening up and looking into the stories and artifacts that were left aside in order to create the dominant narrative, researchers can help to transform that narrative into something that more accurately reflects the world that formed that prior moment in time and space."

Student Life Exhibition Using University Archives

Who This Is For

> Faculty: Those interested in developing students' primary source analysis, communication, and curation skills.
> Students: Learners who benefit from hands-on exploration of archives or personal artifacts to understand information creation, preservation, and presentation.
> Additional Benefits: Strengthens institutional connection and helps students situate their own experiences within broader histories.

Learning Outcomes

> **Analyze** archival collections, considering their context, provenance, and limits.
> **Select, evaluate, and synthesize** sources to build a clear research narrative.
> **Interpret** archival materials and **communicate** their significance for a public audience.
> **Create** a physical exhibition with a clear theme and logical flow.

Instructional Context

> Structure: Three workshops (plus optional installation session)
> Class Size: Best for ≤12 students for collaborative curation
> Preparation:
- Conduct an introductory session on archives: locating, handling, and citing materials.
- View physical or digital exhibits for inspiration (study label tone, layout, flow).
- Arrange with archives staff regarding access, handling, and materials.

Materials and Equipment

> Smartphones for photographing non-digitized items
- Exhibit cases or display boards; labels or cardstock
- Preservation-quality mounts or cradles (provided by archives or museum partners if needed)
- Optional: digital tools for virtual exhibits (e.g., Padlet)

Resources Students Should Review for the Assignment

If your university has online finding aids for archival collections or an online catalog of the collection(s) students will be working with, have them review before the first workshop. This will help them prepare for new terminology and get a better understanding of all that goes into preserving and making a collection accessible. Below is a list of terms, adapted from the Society of American Archivists' Dictionary of Archives Terminology, to help students prepare for their visit. Students can reference this resource throughout the workshops. https://dictionary.archivists.org/

Archival Basics

- **Archives / Special Collections**: A repository managing and preserving unique, primary source materials that fall outside the general library collection, such as archives, manuscripts, rare books, etc.
- **Primary Source**: Original, firsthand evidence (letters, photos, artifacts) created during the time under study.
- **Finding Aid**: A guide or descriptive record describing the contents, structure, and context of an archival collection.
- **Collection Identifier**: A unique code or name used to cite and locate materials.
- **Provenance**: The origin and ownership history of an item or collection.
- **Series / Box / Folder**: Hierarchical levels used to organize archival materials.
- **Handling Guidelines**: Rules for safely using materials (clean hands, no pens, proper supports).

Exhibition and Interpretation

> **Curation**: Selecting, interpreting, and organizing materials to convey a theme or narrative.
> **Exhibition Label**: Concise, audience-friendly text accompanying an object.
> **Contextualization**: Providing background or connections that explain an item's significance.
> **Interpretation**: Explaining the meaning or story behind a source, not just describing it.
> **Theme / Narrative Flow**: The unifying idea and logical arrangement guiding an exhibit.
> **Audience**: The intended viewers or readers and their information needs.

Rights and Ethics

> **Copyright / Permissions**: Legal considerations for reproducing or displaying materials.
> **Citation Practices**: Accurate attribution using collection name, box, folder, and date.
> **Cultural Sensitivity**: Respecting communities or identities represented in the materials.

Teaching Tips

> **Normalize Uncertainty**: Reassure students there are no "wrong" choices in what they select—choose what intrigues them. Having autonomy in the selection process will keep them engaged and help build confidence in their primary source research skills.
> **Focus the Search**: Provide parameters to prevent overwhelm (e.g., specific decades or themes that students can narrow their research within).
> **Model Analysis**: Show an example label and walk through its components. Ask students to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the label, its visibility/readability and clarity. Discuss accessibility in planning for the class's selection of a uniform font size and color for all labels that will accommodate a range of visitors' needs.
> **Encourage Personal Connection**: If archives are limited, students can substitute meaningful items from their own lives (e.g., family photos, club memorabilia) and follow the same steps to curate a "personal archive" exhibit.

Assignment

As part of a semester-long Libraries and School of Information Science course on print and digital archives, graduate students from English, History, and Political Science programs collaborated to create a digital exhibition focused on diverse aspects of student life at Purdue University. This exhibition, titled by student curators, *Voices, Identities, and Silences: Investigating 150 Years of Diversity in the Purdue Archives* was created using Omeka. Each student selected a decade in Purdue's history and located an item relating to a diverse person or group in that decade. The lesson plan has been adapted for this work in recognition that creating an online exhibition requires more time to become familiar with digital exhibition tools than can be accommodated in a few workshops. In addition, digital exhibitions have a short life span as technologies evolve. The Purdue digital exhibit was captured by the Wayback Machine when it was not feasible to continue to maintain the original look and feel of it over time.

Voices, Identities, and Silences: Investigating 150 Years of Diversity in the Purdue Archives
(Please allow a few moments for the page to load as it is archived.)
https://bit.ly/47wtpuU

Student Life Exhibition Using University Archives

Session 1: Explore and Register Process and Steps

1. Visit the university archives or browse online finding aids.
2. Choose a theme or parameter (e.g., student life in a specific decade, discipline-related clubs). Register as an archive's user on the university archives website and request one box from a relevant collection.
3. Read the finding aid, list initial questions, and gather contextual background (articles, department histories, websites).

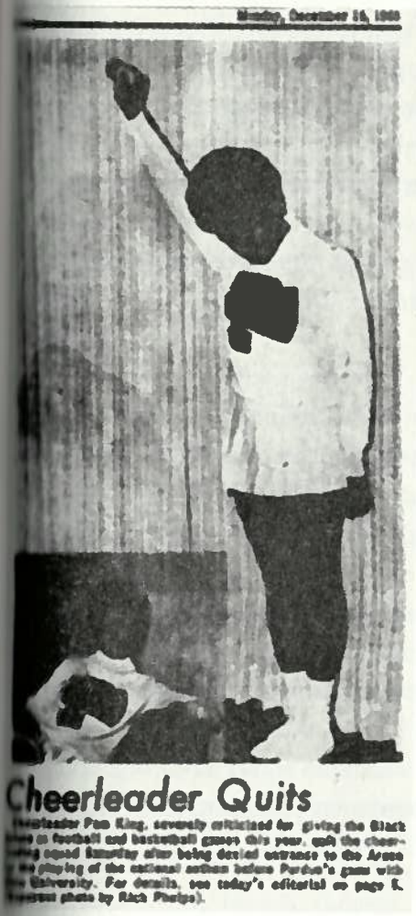
Session 2: Analyze and Select Process and Steps

1. Review your requested materials in the reading room.
2. Select one item that sparks your interest for inclusion in the class exhibit.
3. Record full citation details: collection identifier, title, box, and folder numbers.
4. Photograph your item and answer guiding analysis questions (e.g., What story does this tell? Who created it? What's missing or surprising?).

Session 3: Share and Curate Process and Steps

1. Submit a photo of your item before class for a compiled slideshow.
2. Present your item: Why you chose it, key context, and one lingering question.
3. Collaboratively discuss how the items fit together into a narrative.
4. Draft an exhibition label for your item: concise, engaging, accessible, audience-friendly.
5. Reflect briefly on what you learned about archival research and storytelling and share with class.

Artifact



Cheerleader Quits

Cheerleader Pam King, severely criticized for giving the Black Power salute at football and basketball games this year, quit the cheerleading squad Saturday after being denied entrance to the Arena for the playing of the national anthem before Purdue's game with the University. For details, see today's editorial on page 6.

Harvest photo by Rich Phelps).

Image 1: "Cheerleader Quits."
Photo credit: Purdue Exponent, December 18, 1968.
Reproduced with permission.

Example Artifact Label

Pam King Takes A Stand
Purdue University, 1968

In December 1968, cheerleader **Pam King**, the first African American woman on Purdue's squad, **resigned after being barred from entering the basketball arena during the national anthem**. She had earlier faced criticism for raising the **Black Power salute** at games. Her actions reflected student activism and the fight for racial justice during the civil rights era.

Newspaper clipping, December 18, 1968

Optional: Session 4: Install or Publish

> **Physical Exhibit**: Work with archives staff to install items or submit label text and images for them to mount. Discuss with the archives staff whether there are opportunities for the students to share and discuss their work by giving talks at an exhibit opening or event, for example.

> **Digital Exhibit**: Upload curated images and labels to an online platform (if available). If the archives has a blog or easy-to-use tool for sharing the exhibit online this can be an easier entry point than taking the time to learn digital exhibits software.

Cross-Disciplinary Adaptation

> STEM: Prototype Evolution Exhibit—Students locate early lab notebooks, blueprints, or hardware from the department archives and pair them with their own prototypes. The exhibit traces the evolution of design thinking and shows how past innovations influence current projects.

> Computer Science: Code Histories—Computer science students uncover punch cards, legacy code, or software manuals in the archives, curating a display that connects historic programming practices to modern development.

> Fine Arts: Artistic Histories—Art students select archived student or faculty artworks and exhibit their own re-interpretations alongside, showing how style and themes evolve.

Instructor Try-It Activity

Process and Steps

1. Select an Object:

> Choose a personal or nearby item (e.g., a lab tool, photo on your phone, or book on your desk).

> Imagine it as an artifact for an exhibit in your discipline.

2. Create a Quick Label:

> Explain the item's relevance within an exhibit being held for your department.

> Include:

- Title (creative, audience-friendly)
- Discipline lens (e.g., environmental science, sociology, design)
- Key takeaway for a public audience

3. Share and Discuss:

> Pair with a colleague or small group of colleagues: read your labels aloud.

> Discuss:

- How the exhibit format reframed the object's meaning
- Ways this method could foster critical thinking, storytelling, or cross-connections in your courses
- Whether the format, font size and type, color selection, and wording support accessibility and diverse audience needs

Accessibility considerations: Use sans-serif fonts, and take into account the distance the label will be from the audience, ensuring it can be read easily. Avoid information overload. Using less text is often more impactful and memorable.

Additional Resources/ References

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I thank my colleagues at Purdue University Libraries for supporting the Knowledge Lab as a space for work that extends beyond traditional academic forms. I am especially grateful to the staff who volunteered their time to develop early programming and workshops, helping shape the ideas that led to the Lab, as well as to the staff who now run and sustain the Knowledge Lab through their ongoing care, expertise, and commitment. I also thank collaborators across campus and beyond who trusted unconventional assignments and helped demonstrate how multimodal work can deepen the learning experience across disciplines.

I am sincerely grateful to the designers, artists, educators, and scholars whose work appears throughout these pages and whose ideas about form, materiality, and communication continue to influence how I teach and learn. Their contributions made it possible to situate classroom practice within a wider landscape of making and meaning.

About the Editor

Sarah Huber is an associate professor of Library Science at Purdue University Libraries and director of the Knowledge Lab, a makerspace that supports low-stakes experimentation with multimodal forms of assignments and scholarship. Her teaching and research focus on visual literacy and on how information formats shape ideation, meaning-making, and scholarly communication across disciplines.
Her creative practice—including textile art, creative writing, and painting—has shaped this work, emphasizing the value of moving across formats to explore and communicate ideas. She approaches both scholarly and creative projects through shared frameworks grounded in principles of composition, language, color, and design, holding each to the same expectations of clarity, rigor, and purpose. Whether using traditional or AI-assisted tools, she treats format as a deliberate means of exploring and expressing ideas with intention.

Colophon

Set Margins' #105
Creating Formats Across Media and Disciplines: Assignments Beyond the Essay
Sarah Huber

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