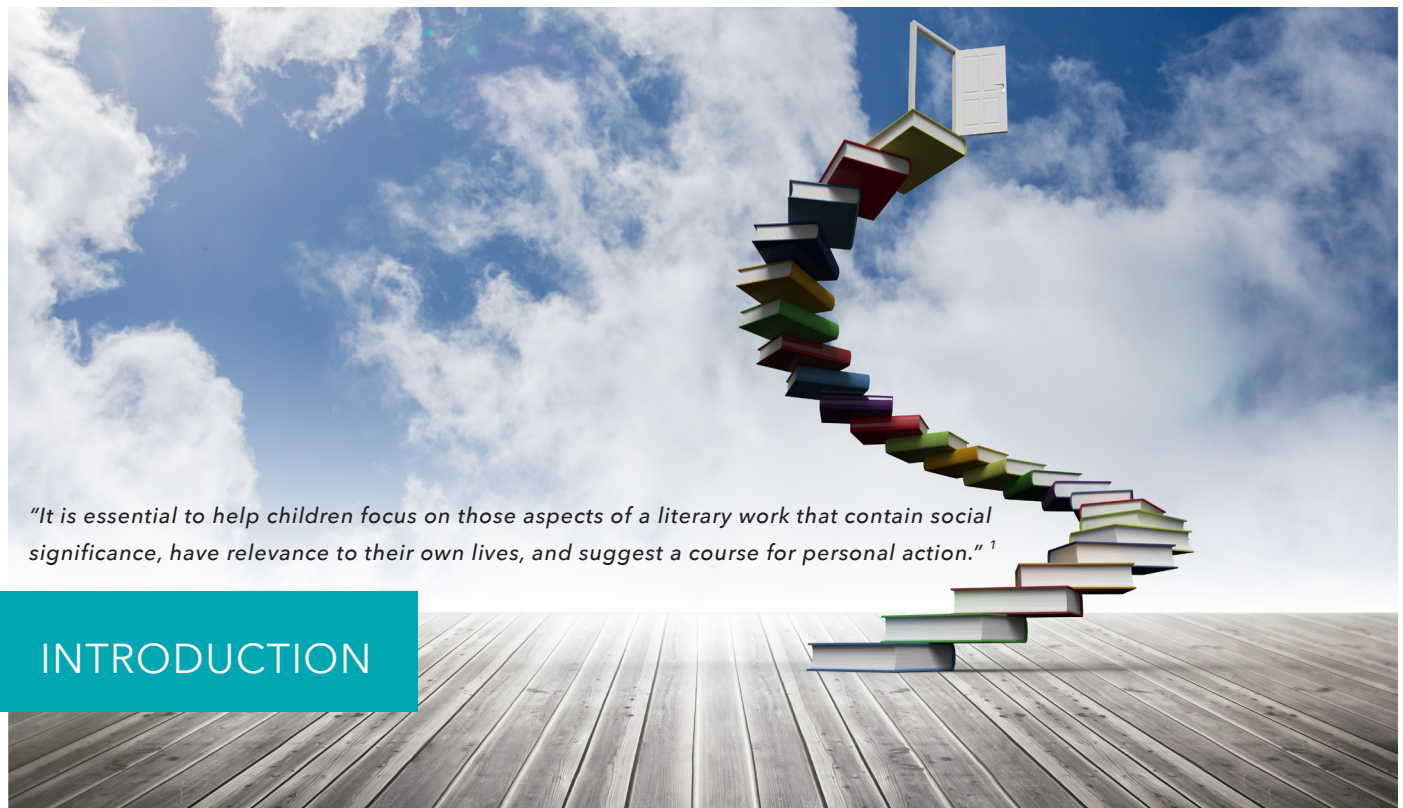




WHITE PAPER SERIES

WEAVING LITERATURE INTO SOCIAL STUDIES:
PAIRING LITERARY WORKS WITH NONFICTION CONTENT





"It is essential to help children focus on those aspects of a literary work that contain social significance, have relevance to their own lives, and suggest a course for personal action."¹

INTRODUCTION

A widespread understanding exists among educators that interdisciplinary curricula can benefit students' learning. Educational research supports this understanding. In particular, research shows that the use of literature in the social studies classroom can promote students' comprehension of important social studies concepts. Educational standards reflect this research by requiring students to draw topic information from a range of text types in order to build critical thinking and content-area literacy skills.

Literary texts can be used to provide background knowledge for social studies topics, especially for ones with which students have little or no experience. Literary texts can also prompt students to make connections to the social studies topics.

Literature that is appropriate for the social studies classroom should encourage the exploration of challenging social and cultural issues. Appropriate literary works may include literary fiction, literary nonfiction, and poetry that artfully construct layers of meaning in support of social studies themes. The literary work should allow students to develop an understanding of the different perspectives—as well as empathy for the people—associated with the historical event or theme under study.

This white paper focuses on how to identify and use different literary works effectively in the social studies classroom at any grade level to promote active learning, civic participation, and global citizenship. It examines the kinds of connections that students can make between literary texts and themselves, literary texts and other resources, and literary texts and social studies themes.

USING FICTION TO CONNECT TO SOCIAL STUDIES

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a classic example of fiction that is recommended reading for high school social studies. The novel chronicles the life of Okonkwo, the leader of an Igbo community in Nigeria, from the events leading up to his banishment from the community for accidentally killing a clansman, through the seven years of his exile, to his return. The novel addresses a particular problem of emergent Africa—the intrusion in the 1890s of white missionaries and colonial government into tribal Igbo society.

As part of a social studies unit, students can discuss how such a work teaches history without actually being factual.

"Each teacher needs to develop his or her own guidelines or criteria for choosing appropriate literature to use in a geography classroom. Knowing the special needs of one's students and clearly defining course objectives are both important factors."²

¹ Neil O. Houser, "Critical Literature for the Social Studies: Challenges and Opportunities for the Elementary Classroom." *Social Education* 63, no. 4 (May–Jun 1999).

² Susan E. Hume, "Using Literature to Teach Geography in High Schools." *ERIC Digests*. Bloomington, Indiana: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 1996. <https://www.ericdigests.org/1996-4/high.htm>

IDENTIFYING & CHOOSING A LITERARY WORK

Before literary texts are used in the classroom, it is important to establish how they differ from nonliterary texts.

Literary Texts: Prose and poetry that depend on the use of literary or poetic devices to build layers of meaning in support of a theme or several themes. Examples of literary and poetic devices include plot, setting, narrative/poetic structure, theme, mood, moral, characters, conflict, dialogue, sound, imagery, figurative language, alliteration, irony, allegory, personification, simile, and metaphor. A literary work may be fictional, nonfictional, or a combination of both. The form that a literary text uses is valued for its artistry and emotional effect.

Nonliterary Texts: Prose that does not depend on its use of literary or poetic devices to inform or convince an audience. Nonliterary texts often follow a structure of cause and effect to present information. A nonliterary work is most often nonfictional. (A novel or poem can be considered “nonliterary” if they do not use literary or poetic devices with much craft.) The form that a nonliterary text uses is not valued for its artistry or its emotional effect.

Text Types Used in K–12 Education

Text Type	Prose Nonfiction (Informational)	Prose Fiction	Poetry
Literary Texts	Essay, journal, memoir, biography, autobiography, speech, some kinds of persuasive text	Realistic fiction, historical fiction, and fantasy (novel, short story, fable, myth, folktale, play)	Narrative poem, epic, ballad, idyll, lay, lyric, ode, elegy, psalm, sonnet, haiku, drama, dramatic monologue, tragedy, comedy, prose poem

Text Type	Prose Nonfiction (Informational)
Nonliterary Texts	Expository text (encyclopedia article, newspaper article, magazine article) Instructional or technical text (educational textbook, recipe, directions, guide, manual, schedule) Persuasive text (advertisement, position paper, critique)

“As a history teacher, I know that helping students make cross-discipline connections lies at the heart of engaging history instruction. As a language arts teacher, I know that finding deeper meaning is a goal often reached through reading and writing. Although I have used many interdisciplinary projects and products, I have found there is no better or more consistently successful vehicle than historical fiction.”³

A literary work for the social studies classroom should be chosen and read differently than one for a language arts classroom. The parsing of literary devices and text complexities that are so important in language arts will not be the primary focus of reading literature in social studies. To determine if a literary work will meet your classroom needs, ask the following questions:

- ✓ Do I find this work interesting? Will it spark my students’ curiosity?
- ✓ To what degree is this work historically inaccurate?
- ✓ Does this work include historically plausible settings, characters, or events?
- ✓ Does it present a fresh view on a historical topic? Did even I learn something from it?
- ✓ Will my students readily connect to its social studies themes?

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and the Children’s Book Council (CBC) create annual lists of exceptional trade books to use in K–12 social studies classrooms. Descriptions for titles include grade ranges and social studies strands to help teachers select books that match classroom needs.

³ Carol Sliwka, “Connecting to History Through Historical Fiction,” *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* 23, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2008). <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1125&context=lajm>

STUDENTS' WORK WITH LITERARY TEXTS



Reading comprehension strategies and skills are necessary for strengthening students' content-area literacy. Below are strategies and skills that can be used with students as they read a literary work for social studies.

Before Reading: Building Prior Knowledge / Questioning / Making Predictions

Allow students to discuss or learn more about the historical setting and events featured in a literary work before they read it. For example, before reading Elie Wiesel's *Night* or Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, have the class briefly research and share out some important basic facts about the Holocaust. An allegorical children's story, such as Dr. Seuss's *The Sneetches*, may benefit from just a few prereading questions about where children see certain groups of people being excluded in history or in today's world. Based on what students share and the historical themes they are currently studying, ask students to make predictions about the literary work's purpose and share questions they think of before reading it.

During Reading: Questioning / Making Connections / Visualizing / Inferring / Determining Importance

Ask students to note where they have empathy for a character or speaker and where they do not. Students can set their own criteria for why they may have empathy for someone in the work, based on the historical context and themes they are studying. Explanations for their notes should incorporate students' personal connections to the work, visualizations, inferences, and what they think is important in terms of the work's historical themes and context. Students should continue to note and share their questions and predictions about the work and its historical context as they read.



After Reading: Synthesizing / Evaluating

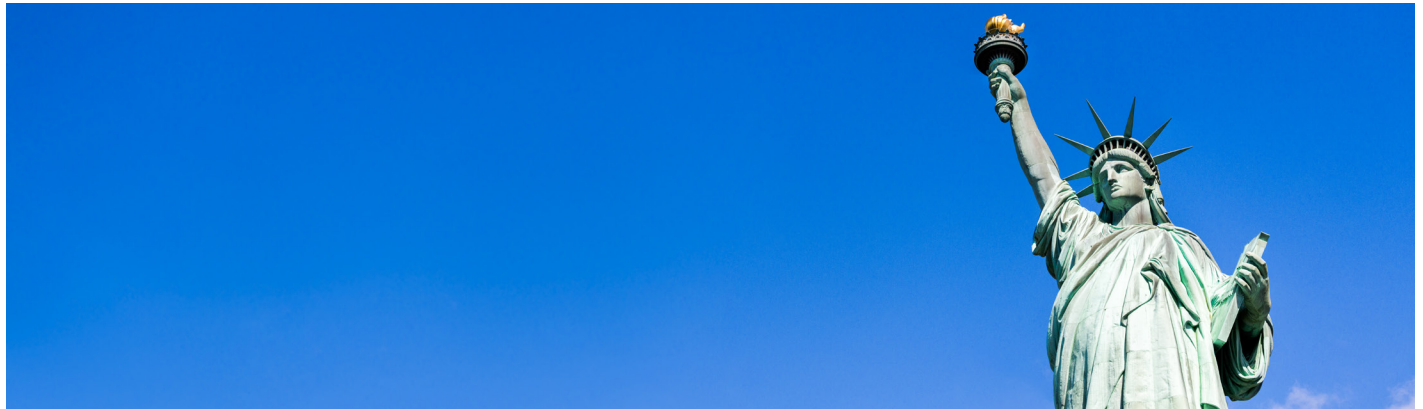
Graphic organizers can be used to help students make comparisons between resources. For example, students could complete a Venn diagram of the explicit or inferred factual information they learned from the literary text and from another resource. Students should also make notes with regard to the following questions:

- ✓ Was there anything in the literary text that was implausible, too generalized, or might promote a stereotype?
- ✓ Did messages from the literary work and another resource agree or disagree?
- ✓ Did the two resources complement each other in terms of providing an opportunity to better understand a historical theme?

Observations such as these will be important to discuss, as well as what might make the literary work worth reading in spite of any inaccuracies it may have. Students can compare and evaluate sources based on how well each answered their questions about a topic. Students can also weigh the costs and benefits of acquiring information from a literary text and from the other source.

INCORPORATING LITERARY WORKS INTO THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

Here are specific examples for using literary works in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms:



ELEMENTARY SCHOOL—SOCIAL STUDIES

Literary Work: *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey*, by Margriet Ruurs, illustrated by Nizar Ali Badr, translated by Falah Raheem, 28 pages, Orca Book Publishers, October 18, 2016

Text type: dual-language (English and Arabic)
realistic fiction picture book

Ages: 4–8

Rama and her family live a happy life in their peaceful village. When war comes the family must flee with many others. Rama and her mother, father, grandfather, and brother carry what they can as they walk among a river of people and sail across the sea seeking freedom in a new land.

SOCIAL STUDIES/HISTORY THEMES:

Refugees, Immigration, Current Events,
the Syrian Refugee Crisis

1 Before Reading: Building Prior Knowledge / Questioning / Making Predictions

Have students preview the book's cover and talk about the meaning of the word "refugee." Ask students to share what they know about refugees, immigration, and why people move to other countries. Have students make predictions about the purpose of the book and have them share any questions they think of before reading it. Display students' predictions and questions in the classroom.

2 During Reading: Questioning / Making Connections / Visualizing / Inferring / Determining Importance

Ask students to notice where they feel strongly about what is going on in the story as you read it aloud. After the reading, walk through the pictures with students page by page, and ask volunteers to share where they feel strongly about something and why.

Go through the list of questions that students asked before the reading. Were any of these questions answered by the text? Work as a class to identify the questions that have not yet been answered. Ask students to share one question they still have after the reading. Add those questions to the class list.

3 After Reading: Synthesizing / Evaluating

Have students use a different resource, such as an expository text, to find answers for remaining questions on the class list. Students can note the evidence they find and how it answers a question. After students work independently, have them share what they found. Record answers next to the corresponding questions on the list. Prompt students to compare the two resources they used and the information they found from each.



MIDDLE SCHOOL—SOCIAL STUDIES

Literary Work: “Ozymandias” by Percy Bysshe Shelley, published in 1818

One of Shelley’s most famous short works, the poem offers an ironic commentary on the fleeting nature of power. It tells of a ruined statue of Ozymandias (the Greek name for Ramses II of Egypt, who reigned in the 13th century BCE), on which is inscribed, “Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” Around the statue, “The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Text Type: Sonnet (Lyric Poem)

Ages: 12 and up

SOCIAL STUDIES/HISTORY THEMES:

Ancient Civilizations, Ancient Egypt, Ramses II of Egypt, Power, Human-made Landmarks

1 Before Reading: Building Prior Knowledge / Questioning / Making Predictions

Display the poem’s title. Ask students to share anything they might know about Ozymandias or Shelley. Encourage them to speculate. Next explain that Ozymandias is the Greek name for Ramses II of Egypt, who reigned in the 13th century BCE. Have students make predictions about the poem’s purpose and have them share any questions they think of before reading it. Display students’ predictions and questions in the classroom.

2 During Reading: Questioning / Making Connections / Visualizing / Inferring / Determining Importance

Have students read along silently as you read the poem aloud several times. Incorporate the following questions in between readings and solicit answers from students. Encourage volunteers to read the poem aloud to the class or in small groups, as students continue to answer the questions below.

- ✓ What words in the poem give you a sense of its tone? What is the tone of the poem?
- ✓ What does the speaker think is the relationship between the sculptor and Ozymandias? What words tell you this?
- ✓ What do you think is this poem’s message?
- ✓ Why do you think Shelley chose to write about a statue of Ramses II of Egypt (a.k.a., Ozymandias)?

3 After Reading: Synthesizing / Evaluating

Have students fill in a T-chart with the following question at the top: Who was Ramses II? Students can write what they learned about Ramses II from the poem and from another source. After completing the chart, have students note if the sources provide any of the same information and answer the following: Did the sources complement or conflict with one another in any way?

“OZYMANDIAS”

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, 5
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: 10
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

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HIGH SCHOOL—SOCIAL STUDIES

Literary Work: *March: Book One*, by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, illustrated by Nate Powell, 128 pages, Top Shelf, 2013

Text type: Graphic memoir

Ages: 13 and up

John Lewis shares his experiences as an African American who went from being the child of a sharecropper on a remote Alabama farm during the days of segregation to being a United States Congressman. His personal accounts about his education in nonviolence and leadership in the American civil rights movement tell an even larger story about the struggle for civil and human rights in the United States.

SOCIAL STUDIES/HISTORY THEMES:

American Civil Rights Movement,
Nonviolent Protest

1 Before Reading: Building Prior Knowledge / Questioning / Making Predictions

Have students preview the cover and flip through the pages of *March*. Ask students to share what they know about the American civil rights movement and John Lewis. Have students make predictions about the graphic memoir's purpose and have them share any questions they think of before reading it. Display students' questions in the classroom.

2 During Reading: Questioning / Making Connections / Visualizing / Inferring / Determining Importance

Ask students to note how different characters in the book deal with racism as they read. At different points in the memoir, update the class list of questions as answers are found in the text and more questions are posed. Have students share how they see different characters dealing with racism and whether they think it is effective. Encourage students to explain their interpretations using evidence from the memoir, especially when they disagree.

3 After Reading: Synthesizing / Evaluating

Ask students to research the following question: Why was nonviolent protest used during the civil rights movement? Encourage students to find answers to the question in the graphic memoir and in other resources about the American civil rights movement. Next facilitate a discussion of the question in which students explain their answers using evidence from the sources they used. After the discussion, ask students to compare and evaluate how well different sources helped them answer the question.

**POETRY CONNECTION TO
SOCIAL STUDIES**

"Harlem," also called "A Dream Deferred," is a poem by Langston Hughes that was first published in 1951 as part of his *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, an extended poem cycle about life in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem. The 11-line poem, which begins:

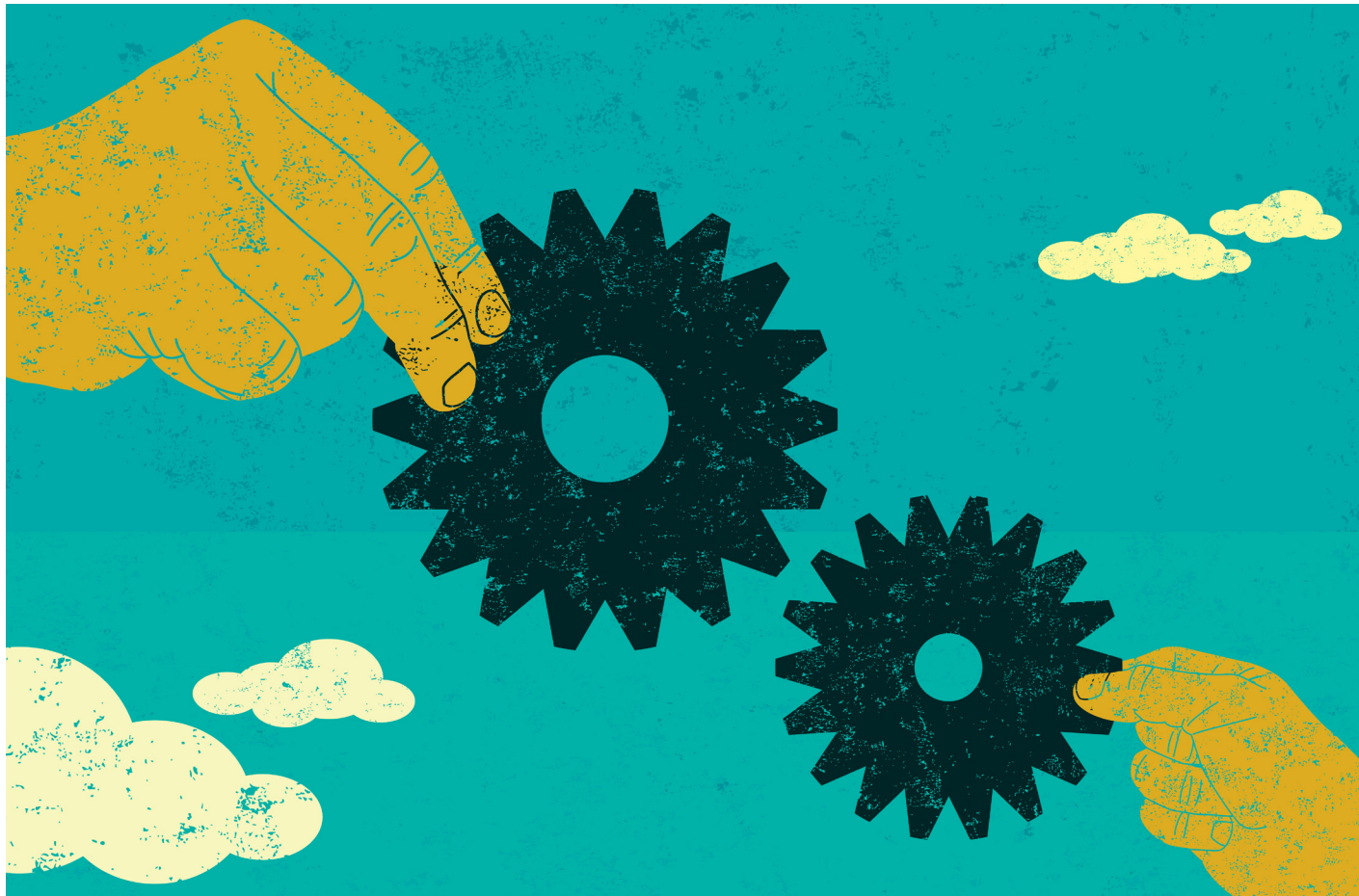
What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

considers the potential consequences of white society's withholding of equal opportunity.

IN CONCLUSION...



High-quality literary and nonliterary texts that help students build contextual knowledge and practice historical empathy are texts that support literacy in social studies. Using a literary text to teach across disciplines can support literacy in more than one content area and build significant connections across curricula. However, it is important to understand how a particular text should be read differently for different subjects, such as for language arts and social studies. Reading strategies and skills should vary in application among the disciplines. Key concepts related to each discipline must be meaningfully introduced and developed with appropriate depth.

“Using fiction may help break down artificial barriers between disciplines, engaging students in reading and thereby truly integrating literacy with social studies. Discussions of form and its impact on shaping the presentation of content are rarely clearer than they are when reading literature, and this can make students more aware of the ways content is represented in text books and primary source documents.”⁴

⁴ Diana B. Turk, Emily Klein, and Shari Dickstein, “Mingling ‘Fact’ with ‘Fiction’: Strategies for Integrating Literature into History and Social Studies Classrooms.” *The History Teacher* 40, no. 3 (May 2007).



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