

# The Current Status of Contingent Faculty in Technical and Professional Communication

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**A**lthough much attention has been paid to issues of contingent faculty in the university (American Association of University Professors [AAUP] position statements) and, more specifically, in composition studies (Schell; Bousquet, Scott, and Parascondola; Miller), the matter of contingent faculty in technical and professional communication (TPC) often goes unnoticed. Part of the inattention to labor issues in TPC might be that English studies has yet to fully recognize the presence of TPC programs in English departments. Kathryn Rentz's "Flare from the Margins" calls for those writing about English studies to take into account the increasing presence of TPC. Rentz's call is an important moment, one that asks English studies not only to pay attention to TPC, but also to attend to "the material terms of labor that frame everyday writing pedagogy and the production of students' texts" (Scott 83).

Rather than present another argument "intended to bring attention to the exploitation of teaching labor in writing instruction" (Scott 82), this article has a much simpler goal: to bring TPC into the conversations about "teaching labor" in English studies, and to uncover the status of contingent faculty teaching TPC service courses. After situating TPC in the current landscape of English studies, we will provide the details of a systematic data collection that begins to uncover the number of TPC service courses and who teaches them. Much of the quantitative and qualitative analysis will not be surprising to many readers of *College English*. But what is surprising is that there has been so little focus on contingent labor in TPC, which means that there have been few attempts to place TPC's labor issues into broader concerns facing English studies. We hope this article is just one of the first steps.

SITUATING TECHNICAL AND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION  
WITHIN ENGLISH STUDIES

In an era when colleges and universities feel increasing pressure to explain their missions, values, and contributions, individual disciplines often follow suit by examining, positioning, and defining. Unfortunately, some of the most common definitions of English studies fail to include TPC. For example, the Modern Language Association's (MLA) *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures* (Nicholls) ignores TPC completely, while the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) volume *English Studies* (McComiskey) contains but one paragraph on professional writing (in the rhetoric and composition chapter). *Transforming English Studies* (Ostergaard, Ludwig, and Nugent) contains a chapter that refers to TPC, but it is included under "technologized rhetorical subdisciplines" (Knievel 231). Even from those outside the discipline of English, TPC gets little recognition. The "Humanities Indicators," which the American Academy of Arts and Sciences offers as "a prototype set of statistical data about the humanities in the United States," explicitly excludes technical and business writing programs from the category of "English Language and Literature" (par. 2).

While the published scholarship concerning English studies might be ignoring TPC, Katherine Adams and Robert Connors have ably demonstrated that there has been a long historical affiliation between English departments and TPC, and currently, no one can deny the material reality of TPC's presence in English departments at both the programmatic and course levels. Sandi Harner and Anne Rich found that 61 percent of undergraduate TPC programs were housed in English departments, with another 13.5 percent in humanities departments (214). At the master's level, English departments award 65 percent of degrees, and humanities departments award another 5 percent (Meloncon, "Master's" 139). Not only are TPC programs primarily situated in English, they are growing at an explosive rate. From 1997 to 2005, undergraduate programs grew by 22.5 percent; from 1997 to 2007, master's programs grew by 31 percent (138) and doctoral programs by 153 percent (Meloncon, unpublished raw data). This growth rate suggests the vitality of TPC programs and the increasing student and stakeholder demand for degrees with a more pronounced emphasis on workplace writing. At the course level, TPC is used to recruit new English majors, in large part, by addressing the students' vocational needs through the addition of courses in technical and professional writing. Further, a 2003 MLA report on the English major stated, "Majors often increased after the faculty completed a review and reworking of the department's curriculum. [. . .] Among the tracks or majors mentioned [was . . .] technical communication" (Schramm et al. 84). Having TPC in English departments means that there is ample opportunity to expand course offerings to provide a "real-world" value to the English degree.

Adding to the increasing demands for new courses and new majors, there is also consistent demand for TPC service courses (Latterell 322–23). By *service courses*, we mean introductory courses for nonmajors delivered primarily as a service to other departments and programs on campus. These service courses are designed to better prepare students for the writing they will do on the job, and they are consistently a nonmajor's only classroom interaction with TPC prior to graduation. To illustrate the outside pressures placed on English departments and TPC, take as an example the curricular needs of engineering departments. The accrediting body for engineering programs, ABET, substantially revised the accreditation requirements that resulted in Engineering Criteria 2000 (EC2000). A technical writing service course housed in English is normally used by engineering departments to satisfy ABET criterion 3(g), which states, "Engineering programs must demonstrate that their students attain [. . .] an ability to communicate effectively." More than 1,600 employers completed a survey to rank student-learning outcomes, and *communicate effectively* was ranked highest out of the eleven competencies found in criterion 3, outranking technical proficiencies (Lattuca, Terenzini, and Volkwein 11). Faced with such a dramatic growth rate at the programmatic level and increasing pressure to offer more service courses, staffing TPC courses becomes a major concern for colleges and universities.

Concerned about labor conditions within composition, Tony Scott argues that discussions about creating new writing majors should consider "institutional pressures, constraints, and professional contradictions that already characterize writing education" (82). Scott's emphasis on the material realities created by institutional bureaucracy is a cautionary tale for rhetoric and composition. But most striking about Scott's position are the parallels between his argument and "the material terms of labor that frame everyday writing pedagogy" (83) that are already being played out in TPC in the number of contingent faculty members teaching the TPC service course. In this article, we employ AAUP researchers John Curtis and Monica Jacobe's definition of contingent faculty as including part-time faculty, full-time term faculty outside tenure lines, and graduate student employees (6).

#### RESULTS OF DATA COLLECTION

For our purposes, the service course is a good starting place for indications of labor issues within TPC. The TPC service course usually takes on one or both of these roles: the business writing course or the technical writing course. The business writing course focuses on the kinds of writing done in business organizations, such as memos and reports. Technical writing, in contrast, incorporates a greater emphasis on the practical knowledge of subject matter in a technical or scientific field (for example, engineering) and the kinds of writing done in more technical workplaces, such as

specifications and technical descriptions. The TPC service course is a mainstay in most English departments, but insufficient attention, especially in terms of published literature, has been given to courses that serve many thousands of students per year and generate a substantial number of credit hours in the process. In other words, labor issues within TPC service courses reflect how inadequately English studies, as well as the TPC programs that exist within English studies, value the kinds of writing that students will most likely perform on a daily basis after graduation.

For the purposes of this study, we collected data from five public universities in each of six Carnegie classifications: baccalaureate diverse (BAC), master's medium (MM), master's large (ML), doctoral research university (DRU), research university high (RUH), and research university very high (RUVH). These thirty universities all award a degree (either undergraduate or graduate) in TPC out of the English department. We then selected a Carnegie-equivalent school with similar enrollment that did not award a degree in TPC. This made our sample size sixty universities.

For each university, we collected the numbers of TPC service course sections offered in fall 2009 from the online schedule of classes. We then determined who was teaching those courses, either through publicly available information or by contacting an administrator in the department. We put faculty into four categories: tenured or tenure-track (TT); full-time, non-tenure track (FTNTT); part time (PT); and graduate students who serve as instructor of record (GA). We defined FTNTT faculty as those employed full time outside of the tenure track and usually on renewable contracts in one-, three-, or five-year terms. PT faculty were those who were not classified as full time by their universities, including adjuncts. Figure 1 shows the results of our research.

Based on 742 sections, 83 percent of TPC service courses are taught by contingent faculty (FTNTT, PT, and GA). The only significant difference in faculty profiles between schools that award degrees in TPC and those that do not is in the number of graduate students teaching service courses. Graduate students teach 17

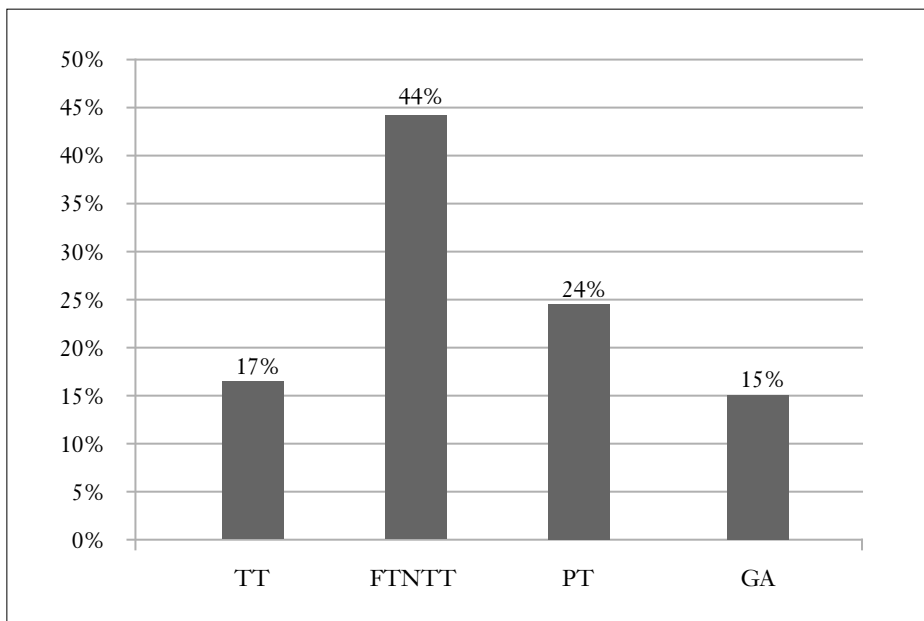
**Figure 1. Percentage of sections taught by faculty type and by institution type; N=742 sections**

	BAC	MM	ML	DRU	RUH	RUVH	AVG
TT	26%	49%	28%	17%	13%	6%	17%
FTNTT	27%	4%	32%	64%	44%	56%	44%
PT	47%	47%	39%	15%	20%	15%	24%
GA	0%	0%	1%	5%	23%	24%	15%

percent of sections at schools offering a TPC degree but only 9 percent of sections at schools not offering a degree.

Although reports on the large numbers of part-time faculty are widespread, in our study we found that part-time faculty teach 24 percent of sections overall. However, that figure increases dramatically at ML, MM, and BAC institutions. At those institutions, part-time faculty teach 39 percent, 47 percent, and 47 percent (respectively) of service courses offered. As shown in figure 1, FTNTT faculty bear by far the largest load of teaching service courses in TPC.

**Figure 2. Percentage of TPC service courses taught by faculty type regardless of institution**



Our data collection methodology was structured so we would feel confident that the results could be generalized. Although there are some variations in the percentage of contingent faculty across institution types, figure 2 shows that TPC relies heavily on contingent faculty. Before proceeding, we want to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of contingent faculty members. We also want to make clear that the issues discussed here are complex and generally tied to and embedded within larger institutional structures, as well as being connected to broader issues within higher education. In the next three sections, we will discuss issues revealed from the data that seem to typify the problems related to teaching the TPC service course: an

overreliance on the “humane lectureship”; the qualifications and training of those teaching; and the effects of what we call *non-place* on teaching and learning. We conclude with implications for English studies, including several possible solutions to the issues we raise.

### THE HUMANE LECTURESHIP

The Wyoming Resolution resulted in what was called the humane lectureship—the full-time, renewable position, which is directly analogous to what we refer to as FTNTT. Eva Brumberger’s analysis and critique of such lectureships in composition highlights many of the same problems experienced in TPC. Problems such as larger teaching loads, lower salaries, greater stress about getting renewed, and lack of professional development opportunities lead to “not one, but two ‘sub-cultures’” within the department (98). These subcultures are played out at many of the locations with large numbers of both FTNTT and PT faculty. Subcultures exist among PT faculty (many of whom have taught for the department for years); FTNTT faculty who teach composition; FTNTT faculty who teach TPC courses; and TT faculty.

One of the most noticeable aspects of these subcultures is the issue of teaching loads. AAUP found that FTNTT “faculty typically carry a heavier teaching load than assistant professors on the tenure track (50 percent heavier in research institutions, 15 percent heavier in other four-year institutions)” (109). Our data show that those faculty teach an average of only 2.2 sections of the TPC service course, but this number does not account for other teaching assignments. TPC courses, like composition, are writing intensive, which means large volumes of assignments, grading, and individualized instruction. A spot check of several faculty members showed that they were also teaching first-year composition or literature surveys, making for a total load of four or five courses per semester.

While FTNTT faculty may have the basics of workplace necessities, such as an office, a phone, and a library card, they still lack the full benefits of being tenured. Administrators like the flexibility of hiring contingent faculty for handling changes in enrollments and last-minute faculty leaves, but renewable contracts mitigate this (Thedwall). Moreover, the large increase in FTNTT hires suggests that instances of staffing flexibility are outweighed by large increases in overall enrollment that demand a consistent increase in faculty. Even though these are full-time jobs with benefits, the fact remains that FTNTT faculty members are still on renewable contracts with extremely limited options for conversion to tenure lines, and they often are facing *non* renewal after a single year. In today’s economic climate, stories of college realignments and college closures are not unusual, and those realignments lead to the nonrenewal of many FTNTT (and PT) faculty members. Moreover, the renewal process means that even with superior performance, contracts might not

be renewed. In addition to stress regarding renewal, these faculty also have to bear differences in compensation. FTNTT faculty members typically earn substantially less than TT faculty members and have fewer options for pay raises. Many FTNTT faculty members are paid on rigid scales and told that there is no negotiation when it comes to salary, regardless of performance.

The issue of compensation is exacerbated when funds for conferences and professional development activities are added to the equation. TPC contingent faculty members are rarely funded for these activities. Again, this is comparable to the funding support available to contingent faculty members in composition or literature. In TPC, however, a lack of currency in the field is particularly problematic. The nature of TPC is that it encompasses both academic study and workplace practice. In this regard, TPC is similar to technical fields such as engineering. Many tenure-track TPC faculty members attend conferences and publish in venues that are geared more toward practitioners than researchers in order to minimize the gap between campus and industry. Academics and practitioners struggle to stay in fruitful contact despite the (often) conflicting goals of professional versus academic work. In TPC, this gulf is recognized and frequently discussed (Hayhoe; Spilka; Whiteside).

Although computer technology is not the central feature of TPC, it is the tool through which most of the work is performed; thus, faculty members need access to and training in up-to-date hardware and software, which can be expensive and complex. The TPC service course, then, might be staffed by instructors who are unable—through little fault of their own—to keep current on the latest technological trends and maintain proficiency in industry standard software. Thus, as former AAUP General Secretary Ernst Benjamin claims, contingent faculty “are less likely to keep current in their fields” (80). Because TPC changes rapidly in the workplace, new technologies and changes in genre call for curricular changes; however, “contingent faculty lack the professional support necessary to provide their students with quality instruction” due to institutional factors that limit the necessary professional development needed by faculty members to remain current (Curtis and Jacobe 13).

#### QUESTIONS CONCERNING QUALITY

As a TPC scholar, David Sapp discusses the challenges faced by those who “are often lured to workplaces in which they are the sole technical writing faculty members: lone rangers.” One of the challenges he reports is “hiring, training, supervising, and retaining qualified part-time instructors” (200). Fresh out of his doctoral program, Sapp had to address issues about program integrity including not renewing the contracts of several adjunct instructors. Sapp acknowledges the “tension between faculty-labor justice and academic program integrity,” but argues that “the increasingly rigorous academic training of business and technical writing faculty members along

with the growth and more formal administration of professional writing programs necessitate[s] change and increasing attention to program integrity” (205). Adding to Sapp’s claims, Ray Watkins writes that “[p]rofessional or business writing courses ‘attract students at a low labor cost’” and are “‘orphaned’ because these classes are generally understood to be intellectually unsubstantial” (220). Anecdotally, one of the authors of this study was told that a high teaching load was acceptable within TPC because it can be taught with the “brain turned off.” These instances suggest a need to help professionalize faculty members who teach TPC service courses, while simultaneously educating non-TPC colleagues about the intellectual endeavors of the field.

To address concerns about “intellectually unsubstantial” courses and a shortfall of qualified instructors, TPC has evolved into employing contingent faculty members who have industry or specialized experience. As Brumberger describes, this approach involves identifying lecturers with “special expertise” (96). To our minds, however, this special expertise only complicates the issue of contingent labor in TPC. One possible reason that TPC has not addressed the issue of contingent labor is that, many times, programs proudly advertise that “working professionals” or people with “industry experience” teach courses. For example, many job listings include a desire for industry experience or for experience in a specialized skill such as technical editing, Web design, or science writing. In the report “Non Tenure Track Faculty,” Louise August and colleagues found that 6 percent of responding institutions required practical experience, while 54 percent preferred it (21). Because of the practical and applied nature of TPC, faculty members who have this expertise are able to make richer connections between the classroom and the workplace. Although we agree that specialized expertise is a positive benefit for students, we hesitate to endorse this hiring practice because it seems to mask, and simultaneously to justify, the use of contingent faculty.

The same study indicates that, across disciplines, contingent faculty are hired to teach service courses, but that “only one in ten (11 percent) institutions require prior teaching experience, although three quarters (74 percent) prefer that candidates have it” (August et al. 22). In both instances, hiring for teaching experience or for practical experience, there is no mention of being trained as a teacher. A recent comprehensive curriculum review of TPC master’s programs nationwide brings to the forefront questions of teacher quality, as one of us has noted:

The absence of courses on teaching technical communication does not bode well for having qualified instructors in classrooms. [. . .] [A]re we assuming that a composition pedagogy course automatically qualifies someone to teach technical communication? [. . .] [W]hat minimal qualifications are expected for teachers of technical communication? (Meloncon, “Master’s” 145)



The standard composition pedagogy course required in many master's programs in English fails to consider the more pragmatic aims of TPC, the complexities of audience and situation, and the myriad genres found in the workplace. Although we agree that preparing students to write academic essays is important, that is simply not the goal of TPC. If few institutions require prior teaching experience, then what mechanisms are in place to help these new faculty members adjust to classroom teaching, particularly when a new faculty hire may have professional writing experience but no pedagogical training? And if attending to "institutional concerns" means accepting instructors without a TPC degree or professional TPC experience for teaching "everyday writing," then universities and departments alike should be concerned with the message we are sending our students and those who hire our students. Moreover, to build and sustain programs and curricula in TPC, faculty members are needed who have appropriate degrees and training in teaching TPC rather than just composition, new media, or literature.

Identifying the capabilities that establish someone as qualified is a sticky problem, but one idea would be to ask departments and universities to consider *potential*. Hiring committees could ask, hypothetically, whether a given contingent faculty member would be qualified to enter the tenure track if such a position were available. If the answer to this question is no, which as Benjamin points out is often the case, then the issue of being qualified becomes less murky. If the answer is yes, then that contingent faculty member could be converted to a tenure-line position if and when those positions became available.

#### NON-PLACED

Compounding the challenges of teaching a marginalized subject is the issue of what we call non-place, a notion that Patricia Sullivan and Jim Porter suggest in two coauthored essays (Sullivan and Porter; Porter and Sullivan). They forego attempts at defining professional writing, and instead try to locate it. They want to construct a curricular geography of English departments that includes TPC on the same institutional level as majors in literature and composition/rhetoric. We are defining non-place as a disconnect between individuals and their interaction with their surroundings. If individuals feel connected, they have a sense of place; if individuals do not feel a connection, they exist in a non-place. Ties to the institution—the place—are tenuous at best when 24 percent of TPC sections are taught by part-time faculty and another 15 percent are taught by graduate students.

As we have discussed, English studies has not embraced the presence of TPC, and composition programs, too, are often separate from programs in TPC, when the TPC program exists at all. What this means is that TPC itself is often located in a "queasy space" (Porter and Sullivan 15). Many TPC programs have a program coordinator responsible for staffing service courses and supervising and training

instructors for those courses. This administrator, more often than not, is separate from the writing program administrator (WPA) responsible for first-year English. This TPC administrative layer has received no scholarly attention, and the ramifications of this omission are that these lone rangers have different (and largely unexamined) problems than do composition WPAs. Second, WPAs have worked hard to have their position recognized as both an important advocate for their programs and an area of scholarly concern. The relative newness of the TPC WPA only compounds issues of training and professional development for the contingent faculty members on their watch because the TPC WPA may lack the appropriate infrastructure and experience to leverage campus resources. Thus, contingent faculty members are located in a non-place where they are neither recognized as needed nor integral to larger departmental concerns.

Education scholars M. Kevin Eagan and Audrey J. Jaeger have studied the effects of contingent faculty on introductory courses and found that “students appear to be significantly and negatively affected” by having introductory courses taught by part-time faculty (49). Eagan and Jaeger conclude that the reason is not necessarily poor teaching or preparation, but rather the lack of campus connections. Although Eagan and Jaeger’s work has received considerable criticism, their contention about connection to the university as a place cannot be uniformly discounted, especially among contingent TPC faculty who might feel they do not really “fit in” with an English department in the first place. At this point, we can only speculate that faculty members’ lack of connection, a lack of a deep sense of place and belonging, adversely affects student learning. Because contingent TPC faculty often take university jobs based on their love of teaching, their institutional positions ultimately might inhibit their ability to do other things: prepare adequately for class, offer assistance outside of class, keep up to date on the latest TPC methods and technology, and mentor and advise students.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH STUDIES AND TPC

For the first time, TPC has empirical evidence concerning the numbers of contingent faculty members teaching service courses, which adds another dimension to English studies’ understanding of the discipline’s reliance on contingent faculty. Consistent data gathering allows a way to define quantitatively the concerns of the profession, and makes possible the start of conversations about what the data mean. We now know that in fall 2009, 83 percent of all TPC service courses were taught by contingent faculty. As we noted earlier, what was most surprising from the data collection was that there was little difference in the use of contingent faculty across all Carnegie classifications. All university types, with varying missions and varying enrollments, relied on contingent faculty to meet and maintain their curricular activity, including the TPC service course. Because TPC is so connected to both

academic and nonacademic workplaces, those of us who align ourselves within TPC should be even more aware of labor issues, and we should also stand at the forefront of trying to combat them. This raises a complex question: what can TPC do to help address the concerns discussed here?

Recognizing that there would be unique institutional constraints, and also recognizing that the ideal solution of more tenure lines is not realistic, we offer a multifaceted solution that can be implemented without major monetary expenditures. To offset issues raised by the humane lectureship, TPC administrators, with the support of their departments, need to make every effort to enfranchise contingent faculty in all decisions that directly impact their teaching lives. Involving contingent TPC faculty members in curricular revisions and decisions, and rewarding this important work with course release time, is a simple first step, and one that would also help offset the feeling of non-place. Additionally, as Curtis and Jacobe conclude, “The central problem of contingent academics is not the people who fill these positions” but the “lack of support structures” (6). English departments need to do a better job of providing home-grown professional development opportunities. These opportunities would provide support structures related to maintaining and improving classroom teaching and to keeping contingent faculty members current in technologies and trends within the field. Examples include inviting corporate speakers or practitioners to offer workshops or presentations on current technologies and practices; leveraging training programs on campus for refresher courses in technology; scheduling pedagogy sessions to enhance teaching effectiveness; and creating opportunities for peer observation to improve teaching practices. Increasing professional development opportunities would also help contingent faculty members feel as though they belong to and are valued members of the department.

Beyond these “quick fixes,” more information is needed to understand fully the impact of relying heavily on contingent faculty in TPC programs, and by extension in the English departments where those programs reside. We need to address questions such as the following: What kinds of professional development (if any) are made available to contingent faculty? How are these faculty supported in their efforts to stay current with pedagogical trends? What are the credentials of those teaching the service course? More specifically, have contingent faculty members taken a pedagogy course? If not, what can be done to maintain and improve teaching effectiveness? What are the conditions of renewal for FTNTT faculty? What decisions should be made concerning the splitting of TPC courses and courses in other areas? Do FTNTT faculty have industry experience? If so, of what kind and duration? What are the salary differentials between TT and FTNTT faculty? This partial list only scratches the surface of additional research areas that, if addressed, could not only improve the “teaching labor” of TPC service courses, but also deepen our understanding of the relationship between TPC and English studies.

Until English studies as a whole begins to recognize the integral role that TPC plays in its departments, labor issues within TPC will probably continue to go unnoticed or receive little critical attention. We hope that this article does three things: (1) bring TPC into the larger conversations of contingent labor within English studies, (2) open up a broader conversation about the nuances of the use of contingent labor in higher education, and (3) encourage other TPC scholars to critically examine the issue of contingent faculty. Part of what we teach in TPC is to write effectively within organizational structures, but we also teach students to be critical knowledge workers and change agents so that they are able to argue for or question the status quo in those same organizations. It is ironic that TPC is not questioning the bureaucracy of writing program management that is bounded within our own institutional structures and has major ramifications for our programs.

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