#  Making the Familiar Strange Again

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This self-study reflects the work of two literacy teacher educators who built off their previous work in examining the effectiveness/quality of critical friendship (CF). The implications from their original study led to the creation of a guide called the Critical Friend Quality Assurance Guide (CFQAG). To contribute more nuance to their understandings of CF, they turned to the literature to see how self-study authors demonstrate commitment to describing and sharing the use of CF as a research tool, especially as many self-study scholars associate CF with the concept of 'trustworthiness'. They asked, "How do S-STEP authors’ transparent descriptions, or lack of, about their use of CF inform our understanding of how to promote more descriptive uses of CF in self-study research?". The theoretical framework was drawn from reflective thinking and social constructivism perspectives. Data sources included: 55 articles from the 2018 - 2021 journal

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, written dialogue exchanges, and audio-recorded conversation Three themes emerged: 1) reseeking quality, (2) implicit telling, and (3) explicit explanations. The researcher’s intentions were not to define CF quality or dictate what (or how) authors share, or do not share, about their use of CF. Rather, they offer an author’s guide for sharing quality descriptions of the ways CF impacts one’s study in meaningful and thoughtful ways. They still posit the original CFQAG can serve as a tool for overtly sharing and ensuring CF quality, however, their revised version (which now includes an added subtitle, revised questions, potential locations for explanations, and an additional column that explicitly connects the quality/trustworthiness descriptors we identified in the data) seems promising for richer descriptions of CF for the field of self-study scholars.

## Context & Objectives

We situate this self-study in the long-standing conversation about critical friendship (CF) as a research tool, firmly established in the field of self-study methods (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Russell & Schuck, 2004). Indeed, CF has become ubiquitous in the last decade, “Quantitatively, we noted a 7-fold increase in the 2020 Castle publications. Specifically, 67 chapters out of 72 used CF, compared to the 2008 Castle collection where only nine chapters out of 66 used CF” (Stolle & Frambaugh-Kritzer, 2022, p. 34 ). This is not surprising since CF is highly encouraged (Samaras & Roberts, 2011) and has been proposed as an additional “interactivity” (Fletcher et al., 2016a, p. 19) to support 'trustworthiness' while conducting self-study research.

For background, in a previous study (Stolle et al., 2019), we reviewed the 2008 – 2016 Castle Conference publications with the goal of gaining new understandings of CF. In this study, we found the term CF was “often referenced superficially, without a clear description of how critical friendship was overtly applied” (p. 19). We noted authors referenced CF in connection to the study’s trustworthiness, but failed to describe how their CF collaborations were effective. Ironically, we found that these limited, or missing, descriptions of CF disrupted our thoughts on trustworthiness. Our focus on CF quality is not to be confused with the larger conversations of those discussing what makes quality self-studies as a whole (e.g., Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Laboskey, 2004). Although, there are some parallel concepts that we will address later.

We recognize we are not the first to inquire about CF quality, as we follow ​​Russell and Schuck (2004) who asked, "How critical are critical friends and how critical should they be?". Others have also questioned CF quality (Loughran & Brubaker, 2015; Fletcher et al., 2016b). Moreover, we appreciate those who have offered CF guidelines such as Davey and Ham (2009) who created a continuum, reminding authors to highlight the number of critical friends involved, purposes for collaboration, decision-making in the inquiry, and intentions for benefit. Samaras (2011) specifically suggested critical friends: (1) create a working structure, (2) take a critical approach, (3) embrace alternative perspectives, and (4) acknowledge the complexity of collaboration.

In this same line of thinking, we created the "Critical Friend Quality Assurance Guide" (CFQAG) (see Figure 1) to provide more nuanced recommendations for self-study scholars connected to quality (Stolle et al., 2019). In the CFQAG, we presented questions authors might consider as they forge a collaboration. We offered this tool to improve our own quality of CF (acknowledging we, at times, lacked description/clarity in our own self-studies), while also encouraging other self-study scholars to use it. Since our 2019 study, we still remain curious to how scholars overtly describe their CF interactions and what this means to not only our own work, but to the S-STEP community.

Figure 1

Critical Friend Quality Assurance Guide

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Start | Why should I have critical friends?What is the purpose of the CF?What do I hope to gain? |
| Throughout | What do critical friends do?What should the critical friends reflect on? |
| End | How did CF impact the study?Did the critical friends offer alternate perspectives, lead you to new insights, or help to reframe your thinking? |

When the Castle 2022 Conference invited us to “pause at the threshold,” we were reminded of Moje’s (2009) stance, drawn from Bruce’s (1998) words, “We need to critically examine what has become commonplace, normalized, and even invisible” (p. 272). For us, two literacy teacher educators who have been engaged in self-study research over the past 15 years, often acting as critical friends, CF had become familiar. When this happens, Moje (2009) suggests researchers —make the familiar strange again by digging deeper. Thus, in this study, we are not proposing the necessity of CF, or even what CF should be; rather, we seek to continue developing our understanding of CF as a methodological choice in self-study. We turned to the literature to see how self-study authors (including us) demonstrate commitment to describing and sharing the use of CF as a research tool, especially as many self-study scholars associate CF with the concept of trustworthiness. For example, Kucera et al. (2020) proposed that when critical friends provide trustworthiness, they also raise “reliability related to the data analysis” and “credibility” (p. 3), which bolsters the quality of the study. Similarly, Allison et al. (2016) reported their CF collaborative inquiry provided a “a range of perspectives, thereby testing the validity or trustworthiness” of their analysis (p. 340).

Driven by this repetitive connection between CF and the term 'trustworthiness', we also investigated the criteria associated with trustworthiness in qualitative research, otherwise known as 'rigor', such as reliability, credibility, transferability, validity, dependability, and confirmability, linked to producing quality studies in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As noted earlier, connections exist between these terms and the descriptions we seek of authors’ uses of CF within a study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) are often credited for initiating the discussion of trustworthiness surrounding qualitative data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). With that, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested strategies for strengthening validity and reliability, such as: receiving feedback from participants, using peer feedback, corroborating data through triangulation, and using multiple coders. However, LaBoskey (2004) advised that if these four conditions of self-study were met: (1) self-initiated, (2) focused on inquiry into teaching practices, (3) aimed at transformation, and (4) dependent on qualitative methods, then the reader must judge its trustworthiness.

As stated previously, there are a number of commentaries that offer advice about the quality of CF, but we believe our study is the first to investigate how authors describe the effectiveness of CF in the form of a literature review while simultaneously constructing a guide for authors surrounding quality. Hence, we hope to contribute more to this line of inquiry, while also exploring new insights about our 2019 CFQAG. The research question guiding this self-study is: "How do S-STEP authors’ transparent descriptions, or lack of, about their use of CF inform our understanding of how to promote more descriptive uses of CF in self-study research?".

Two theoretical perspectives informed how we structured and engaged in this self-study. First, we drew upon Dewey’s (1933) reflective thinking, which includes a careful consideration of a supposed form of knowledge - in our case, CF and quality. In this, Rodgers’ (2002) synthesis of Dewey’s work resonated with us. Reflection is: (1) a meaning-making process highlighting relationships, (2) systematic and grounded in scientific inquiry, (3) collaborative and happening in community, and (4) personal and valuing intellectual growth. Second, we looked to Vygotsky’s (1978) understanding that learning occurs through dialogue when learners interact with sources of knowledge in social settings, as well as take an active part in reconstructing knowledge within their own minds. Through dialogue, we reflected on and interacted with our understanding and knowledge of CF and quality in a social setting, taking an active part in reconstructing knowledge of these concepts within our own minds.

## Methods

As stated above, not only have we been engaged in self-study research over the past 15 years, often acting as critical friends, we have also conducted research on the term CF (Stolle et al., 2018, 2019; Stolle & Frambaugh-Kritzer, 2022). Thus, we position ourselves as more experienced researchers on this phenomenon. In this study, we articulate our CF roles as ‘insiders’ (Stolle & Frambaugh-Kritzer, 2022), which means we are both embedded as critical friends in this self-study, and fully involved by conceptualizing the study, serving as participants, analyzing, and co-authoring. Additionally, for transparency, we are close friends (personally and professionally), acknowledging the biases this can bring. Yet, in our closeness, we note a deep trust that affords us more vulnerability, which is recognized as a critical attribute to self-study (Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2006). As critical friends, we sought to challenge each other to rethink and gain new insights on descriptions of CF quality, with ambitions of improving (LaBoskey, 2004) our CFQAG (see Figure 1).

To answer our research question, data included: (a) published articles, (b) written dialogue exchanges, and (c) audio-recorded conversations. Published articles were selected based on our original analysis of the 2008 – 2016 Castle publications, which had fewer word limits than other journals (e.g., Studying Teacher Education [STE]). This time, we sought articles with a higher word count, reviewing a total of 70 articles published from January 2018 – August 2021 in STE, to secure a deeper view of how authors were applying CF and describing their use of CF. To begin our process, we first used the PDF ‘find and search’ digital tool to determine who was using CF, searching keywords such as: critical, friendship, and collaboration. In case of digital errors, we also manually skimmed each article. This resulted in 55 articles for analysis. Next, we read each article and created a table to record descriptions of how CF was being enacted juxtaposed to the CFQAG. Then, we engaged in dialogue to determine how we would categorize CF quality in these articles. In a previous study (Stolle et al., 2019), we noted CF is applied most consistently in two areas in which one or more critical friends: (1) support/coach the transformation of another’s teaching/pedagogy, or (2) support the trustworthiness of research methods. For this study, we found the same delineation.

Next, acting as critical friends, we engaged in both written and real-time dialogue, which also served as data sources we later analyzed as critical friends. We wrote dialogue exchanges two times a month for five months. The written exchanges not only opened space for us to reflect upon and explore what we were discovering in our literature review but also provided us an opportunity to reflect, wonder and re-examine our CFQAG against what other authors were doing and sharing around CF. Simultaneously, we met virtually twice a month over 6 months to share emerging themes and persisting questions about the data. Through this iterative process, we both generated data while also engaging in ongoing analysis to uncover ways we were rethinking, or rediscovering, CF in similar, yet distinct and unique ways. These conversations were organic and provided us a space to “make the familiar strange again”. These meaningful exchanges, both written and spoken, allowed us to live out our theoretical beliefs about reflective thinking (Dewey, 1933) and the social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978).

Data analysis included: (a) both open coding and direct content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005); (b) “real-time” dialogue (Taylor & Coia, 2009); and (c) “writing as a way of ‘knowing'’” (Richardson, 2000, p. 923). First, we individually coded our discussions as we reread the data, looking for recurring themes. We also employed direct content analysis where we used predetermined codes established from our CFQAG protocol as we examined the articles from the selected literature. Then, using both real-time dialogue and writing as a method of discovery to process and discuss meaning, we analyzed our codes, grouping/categorizing them in various ways, which led us to the following three themes: (1) reseeking quality, (2) implicit telling, and (3) explicit explanations. Themes were brought forward in our analytic discussions while serving as critical friends, visible in all data sources, and supported in the literature we reviewed. In this way, we systematically analyzed our data (Samaras & Freese, 2009).

## Outcomes

Overall, our findings showed that we constructed new meaning, specifically concerning descriptions of CF quality, as we engaged in ongoing conversations with the selected literature. Accordingly, we present our findings organized by each theme, while also describing/evidencing our own CF. As a result of our CF collaboration, our new understanding also prompted us to revise our CFQAG, which we will share in the final discussion as it relates to our implications.

### Reseeking Quality

Analysis of both our written and real-time conversation data showed that we initially sought to better understand the characteristics of CF quality. However, as we examined the 55 STE articles we identified using CF, we ultimately realized we were actually attempting to solidify our expectations around how CF quality is described in the literature.

Our first attempts at ‘reseeking’ were apparent in our conversations as we reflected on our original CFQAG (see Table 1). In one of her written dialogues, Charlotte explored key terms typically related to rigor/trustworthiness within qualitative research and began to wonder if we actually meant 'trustworthiness' when we said 'quality'. Thus, we dug into the criteria/terms associated with trustworthiness: reliability, validity, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Although multiple definitions could be found in the literature for each concept/criterion, we drew upon the following notions as a result of our dialogue:

'Credibility' is analogous to internal 'validity' (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) and addresses the “fit” between respondents' views and the researcher's representation of them (e.g., peer debriefing, member checks) (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

'Transferability' is comparable to external 'validity', noting the degree to which results can be transferred to other contexts/settings. Thick descriptive data can assist in facilitating transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

'Dependability' is linked to both 'reliability' and 'confirmability' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In that, dependability often seeks objectivity, which can be achieved through external audits and replication (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

While reflecting, Charlotte recognized how the specific term trustworthiness dominates the self-study literature surrounding CF. She started wondering how trustworthiness and quality are connected, along with how these other terms should be addressed with regard to trustworthiness and CF. She wrote:

When we first created the CFQAG, I fixated on the term ‘trustworthiness’ because we kept seeing CF described as a way to ‘ensure trustworthiness’. But I never equated quality with trustworthiness. I don’t recall thinking about different characteristics/criteria (e.g., credibility, etc…) connected to CF quality, which would also be connected to trustworthiness. But now I see that some of the questions we posed in our CFQAG actually promote, or better align with, specific criteria of trustworthiness. Therefore, I created a new chart (see Table 2) and tagged our existing questions with what I think are matching characteristics linked to quality that dig into rigor and trustworthiness descriptors. I also recognize that my interpretations of the questions may cause disagreement as I see overlap in Lincoln and Guba’s definitions. Nevertheless, I propose revised wording (in bold) to include more characteristics that will ensure deeper CF quality. And, maybe we change the title to be trustworthiness, instead of quality?

Figure 2

Critical Friend Quality Assurance Guide Revision

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Process steps**  | **Questions**  | **Tied to Quality Descriptor** |
| Start | Why should I have critical friends?What is the purpose of the CF?What do I hope to gain? | DependabilityDependabilityDependability |
| Throughout | What do critical friends do?What should the critical friends reflect on? | TransferabilityTransferability |
| End | How did CF impact the study?Did the critical friends offer alternate perspectives, lead you to new insights, or help to reframe your thinking? | CredibilityTransferability |

Elizabeth expressed some concern, and several discussions ensued as we pushed each other in our revisions around definitions and criteria of quality and trustworthiness in the CFQAG (e.g., credibility, dependability, etc…). Elizabeth noted:

I reviewed one of the STE articles using CF, and the author equates “member checking”to CF. It’s hard for me to completely make sense of the author’s justification that the participants could both member check and serve as critical friends, but he makes that leap. I would love to know how the author defines CF, but I can infer it has something to do with digging deeper and complicating interpretations, while ensuring credibility.

In this instance, we reflected that member checking is an integral part of creating credibility for trustworthiness in qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Yet, similar to CF, despite its ubiquity, there is little written about member checking outside of it being an item to be crossed off a research project’s task list (Hallett, 2013; Koelsch, 2013). This dissonance did not settle well with us. Thus, as critical friends, we kept digging deeper into what we meant by quality CF. One example of this digging came when we considered one question in our CFQAG, "Why should I have critical friends?", which appeared quite linked to member checking. We asked ourselves, could researchers use CF as a way of “member checking”, bringing in a person to validate the experiences and analysis? And, although we see this as a possibility, we also note the limitations of using CF for these purposes, as LaBoskey (2004) connects CF to challenging another beyond the immediate, in hopes of gaining new perspectives and insights. However, ultimately, we don’t seek to dictate what is and what is not quality CF. Rather, we seek authors’ descriptions around the why and the how of CF, noting how CF created quality for them within their study.

After further “real-time” conversation, we acknowledged our original pursuit - seeking to define CF quality - appeared quite positivistic. We realized that we do not see quality as a specific “thing". Rather, we equate our pursuit of quality to the ways we engage in literary response. In other words, we embrace all answers/thinking/transactions, yet we are responsible to justify and support these with adequate textual support. This is true in self-study research, as well. There is no set way of using CF, or one way to define CF quality. Rather, we celebrate the unique ways authors use CF within self-study research to grow their thinking, yet we recognize the importance of fully describing CF with “textual support”, which illuminates the quality/effectiveness of the CF.

Seeking to answer our new questions led us to our two next themes. While analyzing the STE articles through both written and real-time discussions, it was not always easy to determine CF quality/trustworthiness/effectiveness. However, when we brought a critical light to these articles, specifically focused on the CF descriptions, two findings emerged, categorized as implicit and explicit. We do note that when pointing to examples from the STE articles, we did not reference any authors when our tone could be implied as critical, as our goal is to reveal how the article helped us to make new meaning of describing CF quality. Thus, we attempt to mask our examples by speaking more generally and refraining from direct quotes or exact language.

### Implicit Telling

An analysis of our written and real-time conversations showed that we struggled to see the effectiveness of CF when little detail was shared in the telling. For example, Elizabeth wrote in her dialogue entry, “Just like in our original study (2018 & 2019) with the Castle chapters, I also noted several STE articles where CF was ‘name dropped’.” Charlotte confirmed this same analysis. We both agreed this left us craving more detail. In our coding, we noted that this issue was the hardest for us to decipher when authors only tell us they had a CF in their methods, yet left out specifics about the relationship or contributions. This required us to draw our own conclusions about the impact of CF on the study, which impacted our thoughts about trustworthiness. Although we acknowledge various reasons authors may not choose to share those details (e.g., space limitations, alternate focus), the absence of description left us wondering. Specifically, Elizabeth wrote, “I wonder if any of these studies actually experienced negative CF, leading them to ignore or exclude the details”. To that point, we have only found one study detailing a negative CF outcome. If others experienced negative CF outcomes, those are left for interpretation. And yet, we imagine descriptions around CF downfalls or shortcomings could be as important to a study as brilliant and cohesive CF. As we continued to challenge each other, we came to the agreement that the quality of a CF isn’t static, but rather dynamic and connected to the ways the relationship impacts the study in meaningful ways. And thus, self-study researchers have the responsibility to provide the textual support necessary for the reader to see how the CF impacted the study in quality/effective ways.

Alternately, our analysis and ongoing dialogue demonstrated we appreciated when authors described their CF evidence. Yet, as Charlotte pointed out,

While reading one article, I noted their use of CF in the first phase of data analysis, explaining that they worked individually to develop initial codes and then came together later to work as critical friends. However, the authors never elaborated on how they served as critical friends. Although they note the use of journaling to help them as critical friends, they never offered a description of their written work as critical friends.

Our data revealed that we desired more details (e.g., roles, actions, and benefits) . . . literally wanting authors to articulate, “As critical friends, we did XYZ”.

Additionally, analysis revealed many authors showed how CF impacted the study, rather than explaining. These authors detailed, throughout their findings, various accounts of critical friends asking specific questions, wondering aloud in analysis meetings, etc., which often helped us, as readers, experience the CF anecdotes. These showings offered an in-depth view of how CF contributed to the quality of the study. However, we still needed to draw some of our own conclusions because the quality descriptions were more implicit. For example, another article explained in the methods section how the author came to bring in a critical friend as an expert. Then, throughout the findings, the author described specific instances where the critical friend asked questions to help the author think deeper and in new ways, but this was never specifically acknowledged as the act of CF or explained as such. Thus, we were left to draw inferences about the relationship, purposes, and interactions. With that, we also acknowledge some self-study researchers use and describe what we might define as CF, but they do not name it CF. Thus, there were opportunities in the data to implicitly explore quality collaborations that were considered something other than CF.

### Explicit Explanations

Out of the 55 STE articles, we did identify several articles that provided explicit information surrounding their CF throughout their study. Our analyzed conversations showed how much we appreciated when authors accounted for the CF purpose and explicitly explained their process. We also examined how some articles did both by telling and showing. Yet, as we continued to discuss certain articles, we came to have even more appreciation for authors who explicitly explained the impact of their CF work and those who showed how CF offered an alternate perspective which led to new insights. For example, Elizabeth wrote,

Check out this article by O’Dwyer, Bowles and Chróinin (2019). I think they provided a stellar example of sharing their CF impact. They explained their rationale and thinking behind the use of a dual layering of critical friends, highlighting the identities of the critical friends, the rationale behind the procedural processes, and the purpose of using CF. Then, they explicitly described how contributions from the CF guided analysis and understanding of the data. Finally, they shared examples of how the critical friend offered critique, support and encouragement to improve practice, noting CF was key in pushing reflections further beyond self-justification.

Because of this detail (showing and explicit explaining), we see not only trustworthiness, but confirmability criteria in their study linked to quality. Based on this study, and the other exemplars we analyzed, we hope to bring these same descriptions of CF quality to our own future work because we see how easy it is for the trustworthiness criteria to be missed. In other words, we noted how many authors fail to end their article by describing the impact of CF.

As we identified the importance of explicit explanations, we started to unpack the idea of where we should find these explanations within the text of any written study. In that, Charlotte started challenging ideas around the chronological order noted in our original CFQAG: Start, Throughout, and End. As we pushed each other’s thinking in both our dialogue journal and our real-time conversations, we came to see that we no longer needed these linear markers, as we recognize CF work is cyclical and dynamic. Yet, we left them as helpful markers for researchers, while also adding locations for sharing information about CF for authors to consider when writing up a traditional study, thus noting the expected locations in our revised CFQAG (see Table 3).

## Conclusions

Based on our written and real-time conversations, which served as both a reflective (Rodgers, 2002) and collaborative (Vygotsky, 1978) space, one of our biggest discoveries is that we do not need to define CF quality, but rather offer an author’s guide for sharing quality descriptions of the ways CF impacts the study in meaningful and thoughtful ways (i.e., “textual support”). Another discovery we made was surrounding the pressure we put on ourselves to model our own call for full descriptions of CF within a study. While we tried our best to demonstrate our commitment to describing our CF in this particular study (e.g., purpose, positioning, actions, structure, impact, new insights), in the end, the reader must decide if we met this goal.

As a result, we revised our "Critical Friend Quality Assurance Guide" (CFQAG) (see Table 3) to include: an added subtitle, revised questions, potential locations for explanations, and an additional column that explicitly connects the quality/trustworthiness descriptors we identified in the data.

Figure 3

Critical Friend Quality Assurance Guide: An Author’s Guide to Quality Descriptions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Process steps**  | **Questions** | **Tied to Trustworthiness Descriptor** |
| StartIntroduction & Methods | Why should I have critical friends?What is the purpose of the CF?What do I hope to gain from my CF(s) support?How am I positioning my critical friend(s)? (i.e., strangers/close, insider/outsider, expert/non expert)What is determined as fair participation in the study for the critical friend? | DependabilityDependabilityDependabilityDependabilityDependability |
| ThroughoutMethods & Findings | What do critical friends do? (i.e., describe their actions and timing within the methods)What should the critical friends reflect on? Is it specified or open-ended?How was the CF structured and what was the process for providing feedback/alternate perspectives?How was the feedback/critique received by the researchers? | CredibilityCredibilityCredibilityCredibility |
| EndFindings & Implications | How did CF impact the study?Did the critical friends offer alternate perspectives, lead you to new insights, or help to reframe your thinking? | TransferabilityTransferability |

Our intention is not to prescribe or dictate what (or how) authors share, or do not share, about their use of CF. Rather, we offer the revised CFTAG as a tool to guide, challenge, and encourage self-study authors as we see value in the deeper descriptions and the showing, especially when authors articulate CF experiences from start to finish in the study. Admittedly, we have missed the mark in fully describing our own CF over the years. Thus, we challenge all researchers using CF, including ourselves, to be responsible brokers of CF. That is, given our findings, we think CF can be tied to ensuring trustworthiness. However, for true trustworthiness, the quality factors must reveal more about the CF relationship so that the reader can see and understand the criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability. In reflection, we still posit the original CFQAG (see Table 1) can serve as a tool for overtly sharing and ensuring CF quality, however, this revised version (see Table 3) seems promising for richer descriptions of CF for ourselves and the field.

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