

The Writing Footprint: How to Help First-Year
Students Develop Their Own Writing Voice

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Abstract

Each of us have our own way of writing. We all put words together differently, use different syntax, different vocabulary, and express our thoughts differently. This is our writing footprint. It is important that we empower our student writers to develop and expand their own writing footprint. Our students come to us with their writing footprints firmly established based on what they have learned about themselves and how they have written up until the time they enter our classrooms. It is up to us, as instructors, to help them refine that footprint and to get them to realize that since we all have our own footprints that it is okay to express themselves differently than other people. It is important that students realize that there is not one correct way to write an academic essay. If they persist in this thinking then they begin to doubt themselves and think that their way of writing is wrong which can lead to difficulties for them especially if they are trying to write like someone else. We have to nurture our students' ways of expressing themselves and help them develop their writing footprint so they become more confident writers.

Introduction

I remember the day clearly. I was in the last year of my PhD program. I was speaking with my advisor about one of the early drafts of my dissertation. He was explaining to me that I used the word *that* too many times in my writing, and that I had a habit of putting in commas where they did not belong. He said they informed my writing footprint. What? He went on to explain that each of us have a different writing footprint. I wasn't sure what he meant by that. I mean I knew what a footprint was but a writer's footprint? He explained that each of us have our own way of writing. The way we use words, how we put sentences together, and how we organize our thoughts are unique to each person. This made me think about fingerprints and how each of us have our own fingerprints that identify us. I wondered if that was what he meant. But, he went on to explain that unlike a fingerprint, our writing footprints can change over time as we mature as writers. That made sense since I knew I was not the same writer that I was thirty some years ago when I first began university.

The idea that each of us have our own way of writing, and that we could be identified by how we write, was a new concept to me. I had never really given it much thought before. I wrote papers, lots of papers but had assumed that each of us wrote in much the same way. He said no. There were eight of us in the PhD cohort, who were all getting our advanced degrees in Education, and he told me that even if we did not put our names on our assignments that he would be able to tell who wrote which paper based on our writer's footprint. He, also, said that if we wrote a collaborative paper he could still tell who wrote which part. He claimed that he could hear our speaking voice in our written work because each of us expressed ourselves differently. I was intrigued by his claims but then I promptly forgot about them.

When I began teaching an undergraduate writing course I came to understand what he meant. I can easily identify plagiarism in an essay now because the copied part changes in tone and semantics from the rest of the essay. It is glaringly obvious that the writing style is different. It's really quite abrupt. I appreciate his words now more than I did at the time he was telling me how each person has their own writing footprint.

In the Classroom

I speak to my students, at the beginning of term, about writing footprints and how each of them have a different one. They look at me blankly because they have no idea what I am talking about until I explain that each of us have different ways of writing and that there is no one right way to write. I explain that just as we all look different and dress differently, we all use words differently. I then get them to fill in an actual footprint listing their writing qualities or lack thereof. The first time I did it, I was amazed at how accurately the students could pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses. I came to the conclusion that writing instructors do not give their students enough credit identifying what they think they are good at and what they think they need to work on when they begin writing at the university level.

If I think back to my early days as a university student, in my first English course, I would have written down on my footprint the words confident, unsure, worried, organized, and wordy. You are probably wondering how I could be both confident and unsure. The answer is simple. I was confident I could write well but I was unsure what writing well meant in a university setting. I was right to be worried. I did not do well on my first written assignment because I was too worried about what exactly I had to do. I was organized in that I knew the basic structure of an essay which had to include an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. That was basic and I learned in high school how to write using the five-paragraph

model. It worked well for me in high school and my grades reflected that. I was also very wordy meaning that I wrote a lot. I used too many words to say what I needed to say. I used to write a lot but then I came to realize that I didn't need all of those words. I had to learn to pick and choose what were the most efficient words to get my message across. Did you notice I did not say the best words because there are no best words? The best words are the words that convey the meaning you are trying to get across to your reader. So, the notion of using words that everyone thinks constitute the best words does not exist.

Back to my professor for a minute. I once wrote him an assignment that was supposed to be 25 pages, mine was 50 pages. Do you see what I mean about being too wordy? He made me edit and revise it down to 27 pages. I did it and I came to realize that my message was getting lost due to the excessive amount of words I had used. First-year students often think that the more words they write the better their essay will be or at least the better their grade will be. This is not true as I discovered when my professor refused to read my paper. I was annoyed but he really taught me something about my writing style. I realized that if I wanted my reader to understand what I was writing I had to change my writing footprint.

Now, if I was to fill in my writing footprint, to describe my style, I would use the following words – confident, organized, careful, knowledgeable about process, and relaxed. Notice that I have kept two of the words from my young self. I am still confident and organized. But now my confidence comes from the fact that I am knowledgeable about what makes a good writer. I am also more relaxed about my writing because I know what I am doing, for the most part, and I am careful as a result. I now think about word choice more and about what I am saying as it pertains to my audience. It has taken me over 40 years to develop into the writer I am today and I have to thank the many mentors I have had over the years who have helped me

on my writing journey. As one of my first-year students told me recently “writing is hard and it takes a lot of time to get your assignment to say what you want it to say”. I agreed with him.

It’s true.

Writing is hard. It would be easier if we could just write down whatever we wanted and hope that the reader understood what we wanted to say but writing is not that easy. Students have to be taught that writing is a decision-making strategy. They first have to think before they can write. I, myself, spend more time thinking than writing now. My early self-spent more time writing than thinking which probably explains my lower than expected grades in my first-year of university. First-year students do not often think before writing as this is not a concept they are aware of or have ever practiced. Writing before thinking is also a result of writing to a deadline which does not leave much time for thinking. It is perhaps time that we, as writing instructors, considered teaching our students how to think about writing and not just teaching them how to write. I know that since I implemented this strategy, in my writing courses, that my students have developed into more confident writers who are able to make their own writing decisions without my constant support. At the beginning of the class they require a great deal of scaffolding, due to the fact that they are scared to make mistakes, but as the term progresses they ask fewer and fewer questions because they have come to trust their own ability to make writing decisions. I tell them that I can’t promise to make them Pulitzer Prize writers but I can promise that they will leave my class knowing more about writing than they did when they started.

If you have ever read a number of novels, by the same author, you know what I am talking about. We get used to the same authors and how they write. We pick up their books because we know what to expect. Each writer writes in their own style and it is that style that gives them their unique writing footprint. If we enjoy a writer and the way they put words

together we tend to gravitate to their work because it is familiar. And, if a favourite author, changes their style we are often not happy with that change because their book is not what we expected. This is the same as reading students' essays. When they are not what we expect we are suspicious that it is not their own work.

Factors that Affect the Writing Footprint

In order to understand our students and how they write we need to look at the factors that can influence their individual writer's footprint. It is important that we recognize the different influences that contribute to how students write. It is only through that understanding that we can read their essays without forming judgments based on what we think and perceive should be an effective essay. There are, of course, basics that all students have to adhere to when writing at a university level but sometimes we fail to take into account that each student comes to our class with their own preconceived notions of how to write, what to include, and what they can and can't say. The following discussion on culture, assumptions, and values can serve as a reminder that our students all come from different places and have different ways of thinking. This knowledge will help us better understand their individual writer's footprint.

Culture

Student writing is informed by the culture they have been exposed to. This is perfectly normal as students tend to write about what they know, and their culture informs what they know based on the cultural values they have grown up with. For example, writers from a different country and culture will have distinctive ways of expressing themselves that vary from others who do not share the same culture. I, also, teach for an International college and I can verify that each culture has their own way of writing which is characterized by the words they use and how they put those words together. Their culture also informs the topics they choose to write on and

their point of view on those topics. In the beginning of term, their way of writing cannot be separated from where they are from and, as instructors, we have to be more aware of how their culture defines their writing footprint.

I have found that as students develop their critical thinking skills their writing footprint changes to reflect their new way of thinking. They still acknowledge their culture but the critical thinking leads them to question their long-held beliefs that there is only one way to view a topic. This is to say that a person's writing footprint changes the more they think about how they write. I was speaking to a graduate student recently, who is from a different culture, about his writing footprint and he admitted that the more he writes the more he changes how he writes. He had never heard of a writing footprint before but he could relate to the concept. He explained that if I read some of his earlier work I would see a different style of writing because he was approaching writing from a very limited perspective. Now, that he is more aware of himself and what he wants to express, his writing has evolved so that he hears more of himself in his writing. It has become more personal.

Assumptions

Writing from a cultural perspective also leads to assumptions on the part of the reader. If we read authors from different cultures we make assumptions about what topics they will write about and how they will approach those topics. We also expect a different way of writing especially concerning word choice. I notice this when I read authors from Japan who write very sparingly. Each word conveys the meaning they intend without a lot of filler words and so the writing is very specific. When I read black authors, I find that the language they use is very regional, they use slang, and expressions that are specific to their culture. This vernacular is

specific to a certain culture and it is often difficult to understand, as a reader, until we become familiar with the dialect they use.

I gravitate to writers from different cultures if I want to learn more about where they come from and the experiences they have had. But this often leads me, as a reader, to make certain assumptions of what the authors can and can't say. If someone is writing from a different culture we assume that we can trust their narrative. This is not always the case as different people, from the same culture, can experience things differently. Each writer has had different experiences and it is those experiences that inform their writing footprint. My International students, from the same country, will often express views that are contradictory to each other because their circumstances reflect their differing points of view. This does not mean that one person is wrong and another is right, it simply means that their own writing footprint has been informed by their own life. This is why it is so important that we understand where a writer is coming from if we hope to learn why they have the writing footprint they have.

Values

Students' values also have an impact on how they write. For example, if they value things like integrity, they will not plagiarize someone else's work because it goes against their fundamental beliefs of right and wrong. Values are things they learn from growing up within their family dynamics. It is interesting to speak to students who I have flagged as having plagiarized their essays because I often ask them if their parents would be proud of what they have done. They invariably say no because they tell me that was not how they were raised. They were raised to respect other people's property and not to steal. I then ask them if they would tell their parents that they were caught using someone else's words and pretending they were their own. Even students who come from cultures where intellectual property is not

recognized say no. They tell me their parents would be very disappointed in them. I can get through to those students and I know they will learn from what they have done. I am more worried about the students who seem to have no conscious when it comes to taking other people's words and ideas without giving proper credit. Those students appear to have developed their own values that may not be consistent with what they were taught or maybe they are. It is hard to tell.

The students who plagiarize are often the ones who do not feel confident in their writing abilities and thinking abilities. They are usually writing to impress someone by pretending they know more than they actually do. I tell them that there are many purposes for writing but writing to impress should not be one of them. It is always interesting for me to see people who pretend to have academic integrity but then they will use other people's ideas and words and claim them as their own. This indicates, to me, the fact that their values differ from my own. I would not use someone else's ideas or words and pretend they were mine because I am confident in my own writing ability and because my parents taught me not to steal. The students, who plagiarize, are not confident and try to make themselves seem more knowledgeable than they really are. So, their values determine how they write and thus describe their writing footprint.

Try to Pattern their Writing after someone they Admire

The fact that everyone writes differently means that students who try to copy, other more successful writers, will often fail because they cannot sustain the style. It has been said that copying is the sincerest form of flattery. This may hold true for decorating a house, cooking the same dish, or dressing a certain way but it is not conducive to writers developing their own writing footprint. If students are given templates and asked to replicate that writing they will fail. They cannot write like someone else because they are not that person. It is good to read

other people's writing to get an idea of how they express their thoughts or how they think about certain topics but that is where it should end. A person who tries to imitate someone else's approach can never carry it off. Not even in decorating, cooking, or dressing because each person has their own style which is dependent on things like their height, their weight, their colouring, and their panache.

This is what happens when students try to write like someone they admire. It never works because they cannot think like the other person, they often do not have the same vocabulary, or the same experiences, values, and culture. It is not who they are and therefore their writing comes across as insincere because they are trying too hard. Students often fail to realize that an author, they admire, did not just become the writer they are by copying someone else. What makes a good writer great is that they developed their own writing footprint over time. They did not wake up one day a good writer. Their writing style developed based on their experiences, their values, and their personality. These cannot be duplicated which explains why children who grow up in the same families are all so different. Their way of looking at the world is informed by their place in the family. The oldest sibling will have different experiences from the youngest in a large family because the oldest sibling was once an only child and had all of the parents' attention whereas the youngest one never knew what it was like to be the only child.

Student's Viewpoints about their Writing Footprint

The problems students, especially first-year students, have with finding their writing voice have been well documented (Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002; McCarthy, 1987; Soiferman, 2012, Soiferman, 2017). The majority of first-year students, in these studies, discussed their lack of confidence as writers once they entered university. They expressed the viewpoint that they were unsure what to do or how to write despite many of them being very successful high school

students. In order to better understand how students view themselves as writers I conducted an informal survey with my university students and asked them to write down what attributes they consider make up their writing footprint. I had 78 student responses, 51 students were in first-year and 27 were in fourth and fifth year. It was interesting to compare the students in the two groups. My first-year students used words like insecure, not-organized, not confident, fragmented, cautious, scattered, not a big vocabulary, still-learning, slow, no planning, rushed, a procrastinator, and frustrated to characterize their writing footprint. There were four students, in first-year, who said they felt confident in their writing ability but still struggled with things like finding the time necessary to write effectively, and they knew they did not take enough time to edit and revise as they should. They attributed these issues to not being good organizers and planners.

The responses of the first-year students, in this informal survey, are typical of the responses that are described in the literature (Carroll, 2002; McCarthy, 1987). As can be seen in the responses, students are often unsure of their writing ability. However, it is important as instructors that we do not characterize all first-year students the same way or think that they all have the same problems in writing. In their research, Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005) discovered that instructors still persist in characterizing all first-year students the same way. The problem with this thinking is that every first-year student is an individual even if they have many similar characteristics and should not be grouped together. There still persists the myth of the first-year students as:

Primarily middle class, eighteen years old, single, fresh out of high school, studying full time, living on campus, enrolled in a four-year college, living away from home for the first time, meeting traditional standards of academic preparedness, and completing one-

fourth of their courses in one year has been debunked for at least twenty-five years; yet that myth persists (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 13).

If, we as instructors, continue in this mode of thinking than we are short-changing our students by not taking the time to find out how they think of themselves as writers and thinkers.

Research from the University of Manitoba (2007) reported 88% of first-year students were confident entering university with their writing abilities. Bandura (1982) reported that students were more likely to engage in new tasks if they felt confident in their abilities to handle the new situations. Almost half of the first-year students surveyed by Soiferman (2012) reported that they felt confident in their writing abilities coming out of high school. This is consistent with the literature which suggests that first-year students are confident coming into university with the writing ability they possess. However, this confidence often gives way to a feeling of inadequacy once they receive their first essays back from their instructors (Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002; McCarthy, 1987). McCarthy (1987) observed that students experienced some degree of shock and disappointment upon receiving a lower than expected grade on their first assignment. This often led to the realization that the expectations of the instructors were not always compatible with the writing knowledge students brought from high school. In addition, in an individual interview McCarthy conducted with a first-year student, the student confessed that “first, you’ve got to figure out what your teachers want. And then you’ve got to give it to them if you’re gonna get the grade . . . and that’s not always so easy” (p. 233). The level of confidence in writing ability reported by the four students, in this research, may be linked to their academic success in high school.

In her research Soiferman (2012) found that a majority of the high school students, she surveyed, had a high level of confidence in their writing abilities as they prepared to enter first-

year university. Not surprisingly, students who identified themselves as being successful writers in high school had a higher level of confidence in their abilities as writers than did the students who did not identify themselves as being successful writers in high school. However, these same students, who had been successful, emphasized that their first-year of university was very difficult for them because they felt like they didn't know anything which led to a lack of self-esteem. This lack of confidence stopped them from seeking help. In this current survey of writing footprints, the students had already lost that level of confidence that they may have brought with them from high school. This survey was conducted near the end of their first term which may have accounted for the results. It would have been enlightening to find out what they thought of themselves as writers when they first started the course and how they felt when they ended the course.

Non Traditional First-Year Students

Eighteen of the first-year students who filled in their footprint, for the survey, were first-year students but did not fit the demographics for typical first-year students. They were older than traditional first-year students with an average age of 30. They were not right out of high school and had all worked before coming to university. These students wrote that they were confident, organized, thoughtful, creative, critical, concise, detailed, explicit, lazy, opinionated, passionate, careful, and had good word choices. This is in contrast to the first-year students who came straight from high school. These findings indicate that confidence may come from age and experience rather than previous grades.

We have to keep in mind that the changing demographic profile of first-year students means that first-year students are no longer a homogeneous group, if they ever were (Merrill, 2001). First-year students "have vastly different prior experiences to one another, varying levels

of education, express diverse needs, and exhibit different academic potential (McKenzie & Gow, 2004). In addition, McKenzie and Gow (2004) found that “mature-age students, compared to younger students, have different views of themselves as learners; approach the task of learning differently; have different achievement related characteristics; and, their ability to predict performance differs across groups” (p.108). Nunn (1994) found that older students have a more positive view of themselves as learners, and endorse learning goals not performance goals. This view was certainly borne out in the footprints that the more mature students filled in.

In addition, Ballantyne, Madden, and Todd (2009) administered an on-line questionnaire with first-year students that explored students’ perceptions of their experiences in their first year on campus. The authors found that non-traditional, mature students reported significantly different perceptions of their first-year experience compared to younger students, in terms of motivation, enjoyment, and confidence (Ballantyne et al., 2009). Ballantyne et al. (2009) found that mature-aged students:

- reported a significantly stronger sense of purpose, greater learning, and stronger motivation;
- were significantly more likely to enjoy being a university student and the associated intellectual challenges;
- were significantly less likely to have chosen to study based on the expectations of their family (p. 307).

The authors also found that students who entered university directly from high school were generally more uncertain about expressing their opinions on the questionnaire. These students were more likely to choose responses such as ‘neutral’ or ‘I don’t know’ rather than provide

emphatic opinions unlike the more mature students. These findings support the results of the writing footprint survey where it was discovered that the non-traditional students felt more comfortable and confident as writers than the younger demographic.

Upper-Year Students

Fifteen of the fourth and fifth year students, when filling in their writing footprint, characterized their writing as detailed, emotional, descriptive, organized, creative, articulate, confident, highly critical, detail oriented, unique, controversial, succinct, minimalist, thoughtful, perfectionist, strong vocabulary, and focused. The other twelve students wrote that they were disorganized, chaotic, slow, confused, stressed, self-conscious, unconventional, second-guessing writing decisions, not confident, many grammar and spelling errors, verbose, rambling, emotional, informal, work in progress, always learning, and had difficulty condensing ideas. Just to clarify, these twelve students also characterized themselves as sometimes confident, creative, thoughtful, serious, fluent, organized, and imaginative. While the younger students tended to see themselves as either competent writers or not, the older students expressed both strengths and weaknesses in their footprint indicating that they were perhaps more self-aware and understood that they could be both confident and confused. This idea of being more self-aware was similar to the graduate student, I spoke to, who said that his writing style has developed the more cognizant he is about what makes up his own writing footprint.

Upper-year students are often more comfortable as individuals than first-year students who are trying to fit into a new environment and this lack of confidence is reflected in their writing. In a study, conducted with university students, Soiferman (2017) reported that one hundred and thirty-seven students, out of 713 students, said that they were more comfortable with upper year courses because they had figured out the university setting which made them

more confident. They knew their way around campus, they understood the expectations better, were more comfortable asking questions in class, they had a better understanding of how much time was needed to do their assignments and study for exams, and they were more aware of the resources that were available to them if they needed help with something. This sentiment was repeated by many students “I think [university] has gotten easier. Once you find your groove and understand the day to day on goings of university, you get the hang of it pretty quick” (p. 28) and “[I am] more experienced, know how to study and manage [my] time better. [I] prioritized school and grades over other things. I made an effort to get to know other students and now have friends in all my classes” (p. 28).

Soiferman (2017) also noted that seventy-seven students said that even though the courses were more difficult, the upper year courses were more specific to their majors so they were more interested in the courses which made it easier to attend and pay attention in class. As this student put it “upper year courses are so much better. They are more specific and there is more time to ask questions and pursue your interests within that course” (p. 28). Thirty-three students said they enjoyed the upper year classes because they made an effort to get to know their professors since they were not intimidated by them as they had been in first-year. As this student put it “A lot of second year courses are smaller in size and so I have more opportunities speaking to my professor on a one to one basis” (p. 29). A fourth year student said “because class sizes are smaller, it’s easier to get to know instructors” and “as the years progressed classes have become smaller. I am more confident with myself to speak in class, made more friends due to the ability to have a dialogue with the smaller classes and thus got to know people much quicker and easier” (p. 29). And another student reiterated that “compared to the first year I have definitely more interaction with the profs. Also more respect and recognition from profs but that

also comes with higher expectations of you. Also, profs seem to want you to succeed now, as compared to first-year when you were expected to keep up or fail” (p. 29).

It was not surprising that upper-year students were more comfortable with the university environment and enjoyed their classes more. The first-year of university is always the hardest because everything is new. Once students know the routine of courses, instructor expectations, and services available to them it makes it much easier for them to get the help that they require in order to be successful. It makes sense that upper-year students find that they begin to enjoy going to university because they now feel like they belong. Many of the students referenced the fact that first-year is really hard because they are not only trying to find classes, they are trying to figure out how the university works, they are intimidated by their instructors due to prior understandings about the role of professors that may not be true, they feel alone without friends for the first time in years, and they do not have the support of teachers who know them. This is similar to how all of us feel when we are put in positions that are outside our realm of experience. It is the fear of the unknown that can cause difficulties and this appears to be the case for the first-year students who participated in this study (Soiferman, 2017).

Recommendations

If we are honest with ourselves, we often expect our students to write like we do. This is not feasible, nor desirable, if we think about it. As mentioned, each student writes differently, and we have to acknowledge that before we can help them move forward. Here are some recommendations of how we can do that:

1. Have students write down, at the beginning of the term, what they see as their writing footprint. This will help them become more aware of what things they are confident in

and what things they would like to change. It is only by being conscious of how they write that they can begin to make changes.

2. When students write their papers have them keep track of what they had difficulty with. If they were having difficulty with organization, for example, they can be given instruction in how to outline their essays before they begin writing.
3. If they have problems with word choice, you can instruct them to use the words that they are comfortable using because they know the meaning of them. Tell them not to rely on a thesaurus to find their words because this often leads to mixed results due to the fact that first-year students, especially, try to use the longest word they can find as they think that will make them appear more intelligent. I tell them that I know a lot of big words so if they are trying to impress me, big words won't do it. I say that what impresses me is if I can understand what they are trying to say.
4. If students are not confident in their writing ability, they can be given confidence by the markers/graders who can point out what they did well such as using effective word choices or making a good argument that just needs refining. It is, unfortunately, easier to point out the mistakes students make but this can be countered with some positives as well. This is especially fitting for first-year students who have not matured into the writers they are capable of becoming. They need to know that not every part of the essay they write is not working. It is beneficial if they understand that there are also some positive aspects of their papers.
5. Talk about your own writing footprint and how that informs how you write and what you write about. Explain that your footprint has changed over the years as you have changed over the years. None of us look exactly the way we did when we first began university,

we cannot do the same things we once did, and we don't dress the same way. Students need to be able to relate to their writing instructors who admit that mistakes were made along the way and that they became the writers they are today through a process of critical thinking.

Conclusion

One of the problems with teaching students how to write arises when, as university instructors, we fail to realize that everyone writes differently. We may be aware of this mentally, but in practice we do not follow this axiom. We tend to group all of our writing students together as requiring our assistance in all aspects of learning how to write. This does a disservice to those students who have already grasped some of the finer points of writing. I often wonder if those students who do well in my courses would have done just as well with their writing assignments if they did not take the class. It is a sobering thought. When grading we have to be aware of those differences in writing ability so we don't expect cookie cutter essays. If we hope to get students to leave our classrooms with more confidence as writers than when they began the course we have to provide them with opportunities to gain that confidence. When my students leave my writing classroom I ask what they have learned over the course of the term and the majority say they have become more confident writers. That makes me feel good about what I am doing in my classroom. As instructors, we need to help students understand their writing footprint and how the writing decisions they make are dependent on how they see themselves as writers. Think about your own writing footprint. If you were to record your writing attributes what would they say? Would it convey your strengths and weaknesses? Students have to be made aware that writing requires thought and without understanding where they are coming from it is difficult for students to improve and move forward. We have to help them discover their

writing footprint and then decide how they can change their footprint to become more effective writers.

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