

## **Unit Two: Characteristics of Effective Sentences**

### **Objectives of this Unit**

At the end of this unit, the students will be able to:

- Identify qualities of effective sentences
- Recognize errors that affect clarity of sentences
- Find errors in their own writing
- Eliminate errors from their writing
- Write unified sentences
- Write coherent sentences
- Construct effective sentences

### **2. Characteristics of Effective Sentences**

Effective sentences should be free from any kind of error. When error is committed during sentence construction, it may sometimes distort meanings or may make meanings awkward. The most common errors which are frequently committed by students whenever they are engaged in writing are the following.

- subject-verb agreement
- ambiguous pronoun reference
- dangling modifier
- misplaced modifier
- run-on
- fragment
- faulty parallelism
- vague diction
- over involved sentence structure

## 2.1 Subject-Verb Agreement

As you read each pair of sentences below, write a check mark beside the sentence that you think uses the underlined word correctly.

There was too many people talking at once.  
There were too many people talking at once.  
The onions in that spaghetti sauce gives me heartburn.  
The onions in that spaghetti sauce give me heartburn.  
The mayor and her husband attends our church.  
The mayor and her husband attend our church.  
Everything seem to slow me down when I'm in a hurry.  
Everything seems to slow down when I'm in a hurry.

A verb must agree with its subject in number. A singular subject (one person or thing) takes a singular verb. A plural subject (more than one person or thing) takes a plural verb. Mistakes in subject-verb agreement are sometimes made in the situations listed below (each situation is explained on the following pages):

1. When words come between the subject and the verb
2. When a verb comes before the subject
3. With compound subjects
4. With indefinite pronouns

### 2.1.1 Words between Subject and Verb

Words that come between the subject and the verb do not change subject-verb agreement.

In the sentence

- The tomatoes in this salad are brown and mushy.

the subject (tomatoes) is plural, and so the verb (are) is plural. The words **in this salad** that come between the subject and the verb do not affect subject-verb agreement.

To help find the subject of certain sentences, you should cross out prepositional phrases  
Nell, with her three dogs close behind, runs around the park every day.

- The seams in my new coat have split after only two wearings.

### ACTIVITY

Underline the correct verb form in the parentheses.

1. The decisions of the judge (seem, seems) questionable.
2. The woman with the dark sunglasses (is, are) our mayor.
3. Many people in Europe (speak, speaks) several languages.
4. That silk flower by the candles (look, looks) real.
5. One of my son's worst habits (is, are) leaving dirty plates on the kitchen counter.

#### **2.1.2 Verb before Subject**

A verb agrees with its subject even when the verb comes before the subject. Words that may precede the subject include **there**, **here**, and, in questions, **who**, **which**, **what**, and **where**.

- On Glen's doorstep were two police officers.
- There are many pizza places in our town.
- Here is your receipt.
- Where are they going to sleep?

If you are unsure about the subject, look at the verb and ask who or what. With the first example above, you might ask, "Who were on the doorstep?" The answer, police officers, is the subject.

### ACTIVITY

Write the correct form of the verb in the space provided.

1. What \_\_\_\_\_ your middle name? is, are
2. Where \_\_\_\_\_ you go when you want to be alone? (do, does)
3. There \_\_\_\_\_ many hungry people in American cities. (is, are)
4. There \_\_\_\_\_ too many people in the room for me to feel comfortable. (was, were)
5. Here \_\_\_\_\_ the tickets for tonight's game. (is, are)

### 2.1.3 Compound Subjects

Subjects joined by and generally take a plural verb.

- Maple syrup and sweet butter taste delicious on pancakes.
- Fear and ignorance have a lot to do with hatred.

When subjects are joined by either. . . or, neither. . . nor, not only. . . but also, the verb agrees with the subject closer to the verb.

- Neither TV shows nor the Internet is as enjoyable to me as spending time with my friends.

The nearer subject, Internet, is singular, and so the verb is singular.

### ACTIVITY

Write the correct form of the verb in the space provided.

1. Our cats and dog \_\_\_\_\_ at a neighbor's house when we go on vacation. (stays, stay)
2. \_\_\_\_\_ the birthday cake and ice cream ready to be served? (is, are)
3. Staples and Scotch tape \_\_\_\_\_ all our old photo albums together. (holds, hold)
4. Rent and car insurance \_\_\_\_\_ my biggest expenses last month. (was, were)
5. Neither the students nor the instructor \_\_\_\_\_ to postpone the final exam till after the holidays. (wants, want )
6. An egg and a banana \_\_\_\_\_ required for the recipe. (is, are)
7. Owning a car and having money in my pocket \_\_\_\_\_ the chief ambitions of my adolescence. (was, were)
8. My aunt and uncle from Ireland \_\_\_\_\_ us every other summer. (visits, visit )
9. Before they saw a marriage therapist, Peter and Jenny \_\_\_\_\_ planning to get divorced. (was, were )
10. Not only the landlady but also her children \_\_\_\_\_ unfriendly to us. (acts, act)

### 2.1.4 Indefinite Pronouns

The following words, known as indefinite pronouns, always take singular verbs:

(-one words)	(-body words)	(-thing words)	
one	nobody	nothing	each
anyone	anybody	anything	
everyone	everybody	everything	
someone	somebody	something	

**Note:** Both always takes a plural verb.

ACTIVITY

Write the correct form of the verb in the space provided.

1. Everybody at my new school \_\_\_\_\_friendly. (is, are)
2. Nobody in my family \_\_\_\_\_how to swim. (knows, know)
3. Each of the children \_\_\_\_\_some attention. (needs, need)
4. No one in our family\_\_\_\_\_ housecleaning, but we all take a turn at it. (likes, like)
5. Someone in our neighborhood\_\_\_\_\_vegetables from people's gardens. (steals, steal)

ACTIVITY

Each of the following passages contains two mistakes in subject-verb agreement. Find these two mistakes and cross them out. Then write the correct form of each verb in the space provided.

1. Few people recalls seeing baby pigeons. The reason is simple. Baby pigeons in the nest eats a huge amount of food each day. Upon leaving the nest, they are close to the size of their parents.

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

2. Everything in the mall stores are on sale today. Customers from all over are crowding the aisles. There is terrific bargains in many departments.

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

3. All the neighbors meets once a year for a block party. Everyone talks and dances far into the night. Huge bowls of delicious food sits on picnic tables. Afterward, everyone goes home and sleeps all day.

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

5. When Almaz comes home from school each day, her work is just beginning. The members of her family all works in their small restaurant. Nobody rest until the last customer is served. Only then do Almaz and her brother start their homework.

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

## 2.2. Ambiguous Pronoun Reference

A pronoun depends for its meaning up on its antecedent, the noun or other pronoun to which it refers. If the antecedents of the pronouns in your writing are not clear, your writing will not be clear. To avoid faulty reference of pronouns each pronoun should refer to a single antecedent. Pronouns can, of course, refer to compound antecedents in such sentences as:

- Daniel and Abel both believed they had performed well.

(Here, the pronoun *they* refer to *Daniel* and *Abel*.)

However, if a pronoun can refer to either of two possible antecedents, it will be ambiguous, and readers will not know which antecedent intended.

### Example

AMBIGUOUS     Arthur went with John to the airport, where **he** took a plane to Phoenix.

[Who took the plane to Phoenix, Arthur or John?]

CLEAR             After going to the airport with John, Arthur took the plane to Phoenix.

After Arthur went to the airport with him, John took the plane to Phoenix.

## 2.3. Dangling modifiers

### PATTERN DISCOVERY

**Instructions:** Examine these sentences especially the italicized parts, then answer the questions below.

- *Going to Egypt*, Daniel visited the ancient pyramids.
- *Driving through the mountains*, Edward saw three rabbits.
- *Rushing to the class*, she dropped the books all over the stairs.
- *Talking on the phone*, she felt the earpiece pinched her ear.
- *Excited by her Uncle Ned's visit*, Hanna invited her uncle.
- *Looking through the door's peephole*, I couldn't see who rang the door bell..

1. What is the function of the italicized part? (What is it doing in the sentence? Why is it there?)
2. Where is the italicized portion located? Does the location change?
3. How is the italicized portion punctuated? Does this change?
4. Look at the subject of the independent clause. Compare that to the implied subject of the italicized portion. How are they related?

### **Verbal phrase**

Verbal phrase are phrases that start with a verbal. Verbals come in three forms:

Participles, Gerunds, and Infinitives. We will focus, however, on the verbal phrase (participles) that is needed for this topic.

Participles function as noun modifiers. They have three forms: present, past, and perfect.

- The present participle ends in –ing (dancing, waiting).
- The past participle usually ends in –ed (danced, waited).
- The perfect participle is formed by the past participle preceded by *having* (having danced, having waited).

A participial phrase contains a participle and any complements and modifiers it may have. The entire phrase functions as an adjective, modifying a noun or pronoun:

- ***Coming in for a landing***, the plane skidded off the way.
- ***Built in the 1700s***, the church was a historic place.
- ***Having finished the cake***, James started on the cookies.

When we come to a dangling modifier, it occurs when the implied subject of a verbal phrase is not the same as the subject of the independent clause. Who or what is doing the action in the verbal phrase must be named as the subject in the independent clause. When these two subjects are not the same, you have created a dangling modifier. It is obvious that a modifier must have something to modify, but a dangling modifier has nothing to modify because the word it logically should modify is not present in its sentence. A modifier that opens a sentence must be followed immediately by the word it is meant to describe. Otherwise, the modifier is said to be dangling, and the sentence takes on an unintended meaning. For example:

*Driving through the mountains*, three bears were seen.

*Driving through the mountains* is a participial phrase that can modify anything capable of driving. The sentence says that the bears are driving, but common sense tells us bears can't drive. Although the writer surely meant that the bears were seen by some person who was driving, the sentence contains no words directly identifying such a person.

There are two ways to correct / revise a dangling modifier:

1. Change the subject of the main clause or state an appropriate subject for the main clause so that the stated subject goes with the implied subject of the modifying phrase.

**Error**      *Driving through the mountains, three bears were seen.*

**Revised**    Driving through the mountains, he/she saw three bears.

2. Change the dangling phrase into a subordinate clause by adding a subordinating conjunction (while, as, after...) and a subject.

**Error**      *Driving through the mountains, three bears were seen.*

**Revised**    **While Edward** was driving through the mountains, he saw three bears.

### EXERCISE

**INSTRUCTION:** The following sentences have problems. Revise them as necessary. You may have to change a word or two to make the sentence meaningful. Rewrite the sentence on the line provided.

1. Blowing at 100 miles per hour, the roof was ripped off.
2. Shaving in front of the steamy mirror, the razor nicked Edward's chin.
3. Reading the newspaper, my dog sat with me on the front steps.
4. Pitching his tent, a snake bit Tony on the ankle.
5. Sitting in the back of the auditorium, the announcement could hardly be heard.
6. Chopping the onions, the knife cut her finger.
7. Distracted by my mobile phone, my car almost drove off the road.
8. Invited to the White House, Bill Clinton met Michael Jackson.
9. Attracted by the bright light, the candles were surrounded by moths.
10. Wearing her new dress, her friends called my sister to go to church.



## 2.4. Misplaced modifiers

Modern English relies heavily upon word order to show relationships among words for word order is crucial to meaning in English. Just as word order is the principal way to keep subject–verb–object relations clear, so it is the principal way to keep many modifiers attached to the words they modify. Phrases and clauses that modify nouns require special care, since they normally attach to the nearest noun preceding them.

Misplaced modifiers are words that, because of awkward placement, do not describe what the writer intended them to describe. Misplaced modifiers often confuse the meaning of a sentence. To avoid them, place words as close as possible to what they describe.

Example:

Error: Frozen shrimp lay in the steel pans *that were melting rapidly*.

(The italicized clause is a misplaced modifier.)

Revised: Frozen shrimp *that were melting rapidly* lay in the steel pans.

Error: Katherine performed the role *with a dark attitude*.

(The italicized phrase is a misplaced modifier.)

Revised: Katherine with a dark attitude performed the role.

### EXERCISE

**INSTRUCTION:** Underline the misplaced word or words in the following sentences. Rewrite the sentences and place the misplaced modifiers next to the words they describe.

1. Mr. Yassir Arafat was born in Jerusalem who was the first president of Palestine.
2. The sweater was torn which I bought from Tana Supermarket.
3. The bank robber pointed his gun at the teller in the ski mask.
4. The girl is my sweetheart with a long hair.
5. The woman is a medical doctor in a green coat.

## 2. 5. Sentence Fragment

A fragment is a piece of a sentence punctuated as if a complete, independent clause.

Fragments can create misunderstanding and distract your readers.

Most of the time, the problems occur when the writer added a thought which is not complete. But the most common fragments are caused when the writer punctuates as a sentence one of four different constructions that cannot stand alone.

In general, a fragment is a group of words that looks like a sentence, is punctuated like a sentence, but is not a sentence. Writing a sentence fragment a major error in grammar because it reveals that the writer is not sure what a sentence is. There are two easy steps that can help you check your writing for sentence fragment.

1. Check each group of word punctuated like a sentence, looking for a subject and a verb.
2. If you find a subject and a verb, check that the group of words makes a complete statement.

### Correcting Fragments

A writer can correct fragments easily if he/she follows the two steps for identifying them.

#### Step-1:

Check for a subject a verb. If a group of words is a fragment because it lacks a subject or a verb or both, add what is missing.

**Fragment:** My father being a very strong person. (This fragment lacks a main verb.)

**Corrected:** My father is a very strong person. (The verb “is” replaces “being”, which is not a main verb.)

**Fragment:** Doesn’t care about the party. (This fragment lacks a subject)

**Corrected:** Hanna doesn’t care about the party. (A subject “Hanna” is added)

**Fragment:** Especially on dark winter days. (This fragment has neither a **subject** nor a **verb**)

**Corrected:** I love a bonfire, especially on dark winter days. (A subject “I” and a verb “love” are added.)

### Step-2:

If you find a subject and a verb, check that the group of words makes a complete statement. To correct the fragment, you can turn a dependent clause into an independent one by removing the subordinating conjunctions, or you can add an independent clause to the dependent one to create a sentence.

**Fragment:** When the rain beat against the windows.(The statement doesn't make sense by itself. The subordinate conjunction "when" leads the reader to ask, "What happened when the rain beats against the windows?" the subordinating conjunction makes this a dependent clause, not a sentence.)

**Corrected:** The rain beats against the windows. (Removing the subordinating conjunction makes this an independent clause, a sentence)

**Corrected:** When the rain beats against the windows, *I considered my plans for the picnic.* (Adding an independent clause turns this a sentence.)

**Note:** Sometimes you can correct a fragment by linking it to the sentence before it or after it.

This is because, some fragments are caused when the writer punctuates as a sentence that cannot stand alone. Here, the fragments may be continuations of a sentence before. Sometimes, however, it seems they attached well with the next sentence, so the student need to read the sentences and decide which sentence the fragment belongs to.

See how the fragments are corrected.

**Fragment:** *Even though the pizza was hot.* He ate it quickly.

**Corrected:** *Even though the pizza was hot,* he ate it quickly.

**Fragment:** *Traveling through six cities in one week.* They lost their luggage.

**Corrected:** *Traveling through six cities in one week,* they lost their luggage.

**Fragment:** *As a result of this event.* He had learned this lesson.

**Corrected:** *As a result of this event,* he had learned this lesson.

### EXERCISE

Turn each of the following word groups into a complete sentence.

1. Jumped over the fence.
2. Titanic movie has two stars. Leonardo Decaprio and Kate Winslet.
3. She sending an e-mail to her brother in California.
4. He a job last year.
5. Wanted to get married.

#### 2.6. Run-ons

The term run-on sentence labels an error with several different names, the most common being **fused sentence** and **comma splice**.

**Fused sentence** refers to the error of two independent clauses put together without any separating punctuation or linking device between them.

Example

(The last four sentences in the Pattern Discovery box on pp. 24 are fused sentences)

- The witness was unwilling to testify, he was afraid of the accused man.
- I avoided deserts I was trying to loose weight.

**Comma Splice** refers to the error of two independent clauses punctuated as one sentence. Placing a comma in between two main clauses without a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet) results in the comma fault or comma splice.

Example

- The witness was unwilling to testify, he was afraid of the accused man.
- I avoided desserts, I was trying to loose weight.

Fused sentence and comma splice can be corrected in one of the following ways:

- Connect the main clauses with a coordinating conjunction and a comma.
- Replace the comma with a semicolon.
- Make a separate sentence of each main clause.
- Change one of the main clauses to a separate clause.

Example 1

- Revised 1 The witness was unwilling to testify, **for** he was afraid of the accused man.
- Revised 2 The witness was unwilling to testify; he was afraid of the accused man.
- Revised 3 The witness was unwilling to testify. He was afraid of the accused man.
- Revised 4 **Because** the witness was afraid of the accused man, he was unwilling to testify.

Example 2

- Revised 1 I avoided desserts, **for** I was trying to loose weight.
- Revised 2 I avoided desserts; I was trying to loose weight.
- Revised 3 I avoided desserts. I was trying to loose weight.
- Revised 4 **Because** I was trying to loose weight, I avoided desserts

**Exercise**

Revise the following run-ons. Hint: Locate the split in each of the following run-ons. Some of the run-ons are fused sentences, and some are comma splices-run-ons spliced, or joined together, with only a comma. Correct each run-on by putting a period at the end of the first thought and a capital letter at the start of the next thought.

1. Last summer no one swam in the lake a little boy had dropped his pet piranhas into the water.
2. Ice water is the best remedy for a burn using butter is like adding fat to a flame.
3. Thousands of people are waiting for organ transplants my sister is one of them.
4. Last week a student brought a gun to school the principal has now decided to install metal detectors at the school's entrance.
5. A bird got into the house through the chimney we had to catch it before our cat did.
6. Some so-called health foods are not so healthy, many are made with oils that raise cholesterol levels.
7. Ermias needs only five hours of sleep each night his wife needs at least seven.

## 2.7. Faulty Parallelism

The other error which affects the clarity of our sentences is faulty parallelism. But before we directly proceed to faulty parallelism let's see what a parallelism is.

Parallelism is a basic principle of effective writing. Sentences that have coordinated clause phrases or words are considered as having parallel structures (parallelism) when matching ideas are expressed in similar ways. Parallelism is useful for constructing effective sentences, for combining successive sentences to achieve economy and clarity, and for maintaining coherence through out an entire paragraph. When you coordinate two or more elements in a sentence, the writer is expected to state them parallel, that is, to state them in the same grammatical form. Noun should be matched with noun, verb with verb, phrase with phrase, and clause with clause. On the other hand, lack of parallelism can throw a reader off and produce ineffective sentences.

FAULTY: This product is sturdy, light and costs very little.

PARALLEL: This product is *sturdy*, *light* and *inexpensive*.

FAULTY: Ms. Kramer told us to check the value of the property and that our insurance should be increased

PARALLEL: Ms Kramer told us that we should check the value of the property and that we should increase our insurance.

OR Ms. Kramer told us to check the value of the property and to increase our insurance.

### Parallel elements after a pair of correlative conjunctions

Parallelism works not only for pairs of words but also for pairs of conjunctions. Whenever it is not awkward, have the correlative conjunctions taken parallel positions within a sentence; where ever possible, and use parallel elements after both parts of conjunctions used in pairs. For example, If **not only** is followed by a noun, **but also** should be followed by a noun;

If **either** is followed by a modifier or by a verb or by a whole clause, **or** should be followed by a modifier or by a verb or by a whole clause. Elements so joined should be of equal weight.

FAULTY: The man gave **not only** money, **but also** advised me.

(Not *only* is followed by a *noun*; *but also* is followed by a *verb*)

PARALLEL: The man gave me **not only** money, **but also** advice.

(The terms on both sides of the coordinating conjunctions match.) The man not only **gave** me money but also **advised** me.

FAULTY: Our president **not only** visiting the casualties **but also** arranges immediate aid.

PARALLEL: Our president **not only** visits the casualties **but also** arranges immediate aid.

### **EXERCISE**

INSTRUCTION: Revise the following sentences, rewording as necessary to express coordinate ideas in parallel grammatical form.

1. My job includes checking the inventory, initialing the orders, and to call the suppliers.
2. Chocolate makes me gain weight, lose my appetite, and breaking out in hives.
3. Adam convinced most of the audience because he argued logically, calmly, and was reasonable.
4. Britain, Russia and Americans were allies in WWII.
5. The jewel thief saw the diamonds on display and for the next morning planning the robbery.
6. He is either visiting the buildings or work in his office.
7. like baking and to eat cakes.

### **2.8 Vague Diction**

Before we directly proceed to the discussion, let us see the meanings of the two words.

**diction** – choice of words

**vague** - something which is not clear or ambiguous

One of the errors which affect the clarity of a sentence is vague diction. Vagueness is one of the major weaknesses in diction. Words are vague when, in context, they do not convey to a reader one specific meaning. We may have a word with several meanings.

And any word that has more than one meaning is bound to cause trouble. Consider this sentence:

Example:

I could tell by the funny look on her face that she was mad.

If you take the word **mad**

**very angry:** affected by great displeasure or anger

*She'll go mad when she finds out.*

**mentally ill:** affected with a psychiatric disorder

**exciting:** very exciting or boisterous

**passionate about something:** very fond of, enthusiastic about, or interested in something, often to the exclusion of everything else

*I'm not mad about the color.*

football mad

**markedly aggressive:** unusually aggressive or ferocious (*refers to animals; offensive in some contexts*)

Words like “funny” and “mad” can have quite specific meanings, but not in this context. What does “mad” mean here ? Certainly not “insane”, which it might mean in another sentence. “angry”, then, or “annoyed”, “irritated” , “offended”? A reader cannot be sure . But the writer can remove any doubt by using more specific diction:

I could tell by the way her face stiffened that she was offended.

In order to make our messages clear, when we choose words, we should deserve special caution, i.e., the words we choose should be which give one clear interpretation; they should be free from vagueness.

The other major weakness in diction is jargon. **Jargon** is a language that is used by a particular group, profession, or culture, especially when the words and phrases are not understood or used by other people. The chief characteristic of jargon is: highly abstract diction, often technical, with a fondness for “learned” rather than popular words.

A word in one profession may give a different meaning in the other profession.



Medical jargon

patient

stool

examination room

Common Use

patient

stool

examination room

patient (common) (ordinary use) - capable of waiting, able to tolerate difficult circumstances

patient (medicine) (jargon)- somebody who is being given medical treatment

stool(common) (ordinary use) - a simple seat with three or four legs and no back or arm rests

stool( medicine) (jargon)- a piece of excrement

stool(botany) (jargon)- the base of a plant, a clump of shoots or suckers

examination room(common) (ordinary use) – a place where students are evaluated with paper and pencil.

examination room (medicine) (jargon)- a place where a patient is investigated for a disease

Note:

- During diction
- Know your audience.
  - Don't use jargons in ordinary writing.
  - Use common words which give one clear interpretation for all peoples.

**2.9 Over involved sentence structure**

The other failure in clarity comes from over-involved sentence structure. The following example deals with the lack of clarity that comes from trying to handle too many ideas in one sentence.

*Last month while I was visiting the federal buildings in Washington on a guided tour, we went to the National Art Gallery, where we had been for an hour when the rest of the group was ready to move on to the*

*Treasury Building and I told a friend with the group that I wanted to stay in the Art Gallery a while longer and I would rejoin the group about half an hour later, but I never did, even though I moved more quickly than I wanted to from room to room, not having seen after about four hours all that there was to see.*

As written, this sentence of 106 words consists of three main clauses and eight subordinate clauses. This involved structure is hard going for both writer and reader. The revision should seek to simplify the structure by reducing the number of clauses per sentence. This can be done by either or both of two methods; by distributing the clauses into two or more sentences, or by omitting material not necessary to the statement. The second method depends on the writer's view of what is necessary. There are several ways of revising the sentence. Let us consider two:

*While I was visiting the National Art Gallery with a tour group last month, I decided to stay longer when the group left after an hour, and so I told a friend that I would rejoin the group at the Treasury Building in about half an hour. I moved from room to room much more quickly than I wanted to, but after four hours I still had not seen all there was to see. I never did rejoin the tour group that day.*

This revision distributes the entire original into three sentences and makes the passage easier to read. In addition the revision saves twenty-three words, a reduction of 20 per cent.

The following revision cuts the original drastically by leaving out material not considered significant.

*While visiting the National Art Gallery with a tour group last month, I stayed for four hours after the group left. Even then I did not see all I wanted to*

This version reduces the original eleven clauses to four and condenses the 106-word sentence to thirty-one words in two sentences.

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