

Institutional and Social Goals for Rhetoric

ABSTRACT. This working group asked, “What should be the institutional and social goals for academic rhetoric, both within and beyond the academy?” The question takes significance from rhetoric’s peculiar position as both sub-discipline and inter-discipline, as a subject in its own right and a perspective adopted by scholars in many fields, as a practice both valorized and marginalized. The essay reviews this position, describes the work group process, and summarizes recommendations for “staying on message,” disciplinary infrastructure, promoting rhetoric within individual institutions, working across disciplinary lines, enhancing pedagogy, pre-collegiate education, and the public face of rhetoric.

The Alliance of Rhetoric Societies held its inaugural conference in Evanston, Illinois, in September of 2003. Northwestern University and Stanford University hosted the event, at which more than 125 scholars were in attendance. As an organization of organizations, ARS takes on the tasks of coordinating activities of a dozen scholarly societies, addressing issues in rhetoric that cross organizational boundaries, and achieving greater public awareness and recognition for rhetorical studies.

Although the conference included several plenary sessions, much of the time was spent in working groups to discuss issues and to frame conclusions, hypotheses, challenges, or recommendations. One of these groups was devoted to the rhetorical tradition, another to pedagogy, and a third to the theoretically rich construct of agency. The fourth working group, which is the focus of this essay, was concerned with disciplinary issues—with matters of organizational sociology, academic politics, public relations, and planning. The central question animating our inquiry was, “What should be the institutional and social goals for academic rhetoric, both within and beyond the academy?” The question takes significance from the peculiar position of rhetorical studies, described in the first section of the essay. Subsequent sections will discuss the process by which these issues were investigated and will summarize the major recommendations of the working group.

Rhetoric's Position

Until recent centuries, the academic placement of rhetorical studies would have been unproblematic. Rhetoric was one of the seven liberal arts and since Quintilian's time had occupied a prominent place in the curriculum. A series of moves, starting with Peter Ramus's assignment of invention and arrangement to logic and including the advent of the scientific method, the reduction of style and delivery to elaborate lists and classifications, and the mechanism of the elocution movement, denuded rhetoric of its intellectual substance and academic respectability. Rhetoric's nadir, most likely, occurred during the late 19th century. Since then it has made something of a renaissance but has done so within the contemporary rather than classical framework of academic disciplines.

In particular, rhetoric in the United States found itself as a subfield within English, along with grammar and literature, and also as a subfield within the newly forming discipline of speech, which has evolved into today's discipline of communication. The orientations of the two parent disciplines were different, as Mailloux and his respondents have explained.¹ Rhetoric in English focused on written composition; in speech, on public speaking. The dominant emphasis in English was on pedagogy; in speech, on civic discourse. To the pioneers of the speech discipline who broke from English, the ideological orientation of the older discipline was conservative whereas they identified themselves with the progressive movement. In other countries this division was much less prominent, but neither was there a rebirth of rhetorical studies to the same degree.

As a result of the disciplinary division, rhetoricians in the two disciplines related to different frames of reference and participated in different conversations. The sharp distinction between English and communication has been much attenuated, but the tendency of rhetoricians in the two disciplines to orient themselves differently persists. There is only modest overlap, for instance, in the attendance at each discipline's conferences or in appearances on the pages of each other's journals.² Even though rhetoricians in both fields may have much in common, they often are not aware of it.

Hence the paradox: Rhetoric, which by rights could be seen as a powerful "interdiscipline" not unlike cognitive science, statistics, materials science, or cultural studies, instead remains fragmented into subfields of two parent disciplines with limited interaction between them. And, rightly or wrongly, rhetoricians in both fields often perceive themselves to be marginalized within the parent disciplines. In English, literature trumps composition and even within composition, rhetoric is on contested terrain. And in communication, the worry is that the discipline is forsaking its humanistic roots in a headlong rush toward the social sciences and applied topics. By any standard, disciplinary fragmentation and perceptions of marginality are problematic starting points from which to design goals for academic rhetoric in the 21st century.

Meanwhile, individual scholars—and sometimes subfields—in other disciplines have begun to recognize the heuristic power of discourse as a lens through which to view their own subject matter. Disciplines such as political science, sociology, history, and anthropology, in particular, have been affected by the “discursive turn,” and it has even infected the seemingly pristine discipline of economics. A concern for language and discourse is almost inherently bound up with attention to issues in rhetoric, whether by its own name or in some other guise. References to rhetoric increasingly can be found in the scholarship of disciplines across the human sciences.³

But these references to rhetoric do not always designate the same thing. And there’s the rub: With few exceptions, the rhetorical turn in other disciplines has occurred in blissful ignorance both of the rhetorical tradition and of contemporary rhetorical studies in either English or communication. To the degree that such scholarship is powerful and makes strong claims about rhetoric, it can co-opt academic and popular understanding about what rhetoric is and can eclipse the rhetorical tradition as we have recognized it. If one can do high-quality rhetorical theory and criticism without a license, after all, then what is the point of the license?

Partly in response to these developments, some within rhetoric have embarked on their own strategy of co-optation, declaring that the discipline of rhetoric itself encompasses the forms of rhetorical inquiry across the human sciences. This assertion has opened a debate about the proper size and scope of rhetoric as a discipline, a debate that has been reduced to the competing slogans of “big rhetoric” versus “little rhetoric.” The positions in this debate have been well articulated elsewhere and need not be repeated here.⁴ But they involve significant questions. One is whether rhetoric has a distinctive subject matter, or whether it is a perspective that can be applied to any subject, or whether every subject can be reduced to a rhetorical construction. Another is by what authority one makes claims about rhetoric. And another is how the readers and hearers of such claims should understand them.

The foregoing discussion should establish the ambiguous, ambivalent, problematic, yet intriguing position of rhetorical studies within the academy. Looking beyond the academic institution, one finds an equally murky picture. At least within the United States, rhetoric occupies a contested place in the culture. Eloquence and rhetorical leadership are expected, particularly in times of crisis; yet rhetoric is disdained as posturing and bluster. Oratory is praised as the literature of the people and denounced as the instrument of the demagogue. Rhetoric is seen as a path to civic engagement but is also viewed as a deterrent to civic participation. Training in argumentation and advocacy is seen as essential preparation for civic life and yet also as a means of camouflage for heartfelt personal conviction. Rhetors are expected to adapt to their audiences but are criticized for not being fully self-disclosive and authentic.

Other cultures reflect these same tensions to greater or lesser degree, but it probably is safe to say that no contemporary culture unequivocally values rhetoric, regarding it as central to the academic curriculum and vital to the conduct of personal or public life.

These ruminations about the place of rhetoric in the academy and the culture were on conferees' minds with varying degrees of explicitness as we gathered in Evanston for the public launch of the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies. They certainly influenced our thinking about institutional and social goals for rhetoric.

The Process

Position Papers

Thirty-three conference participants indicated interest in working on the institutional and social goals of rhetoric and submitted a brief position paper that was the price of admission. (Two of the papers were co-authored, so there were 31 papers in all.)⁵ Papers interpreted the central question in different ways and approached it from quite different perspectives. Several of the writers focused on ways to make research and teaching more powerful, whether by reinventing classical concepts (contingency, eloquence, *phronesis*) or by adapting to new developments (globalism, new technologies, management of risk). A number of the papers spoke to the issue of rhetoric's disciplinary status. Of these, several argued for the need either to dismantle or to transcend the division between English and communication studies. Some specifically suggested a strengthened focus on argumentation as the means to overcome this division and to stress common approaches. Others argued for the need to identify a unique focus or contribution for rhetoric that could not be provided by other disciplines or fields; this was deemed especially important for self-protection in a time of budgetary retrenchment among colleges and universities. Taking a different approach, some of the papers urged a greater focus on disciplinarity itself as a rhetorical construction worthy of study, and others championed an approach to rhetoric across the curriculum.

Some of the position papers addressed more specific pedagogical questions. Whether rhetoric could be taught adequately within the first-year curriculum or whether it needed to be taught throughout the undergraduate experience, how pre-collegiate education could make students aware of the potential for the study of rhetoric, how the rhetorical tradition could be incorporated into the contemporary undergraduate curriculum, and the role of the basic public speaking course as an introduction to rhetoric, were some of these issues.

Other position papers argued that the contributions of rhetoric within the academy were not sufficiently understood either by administrators or by colleagues in other disciplines. Some of the writers who took this view issued a general call for better promotional efforts whereas others suggested specific

strategies for self-promotion; these ranged from creating linkages with service learning experiences to employing visual communication technologies, and from establishing interpersonal relationships with scholars in other fields to becoming more active ourselves in the public forum.

We were fortunate to have among our number several international scholars, whose position papers offered comparative perspective and suggested that at least some of the disciplinary issues are not inherent to rhetoric but are products of the ways that higher education is typically organized in the United States. In particular, the disciplinary division between English and communication was not part of these scholars' experience and they struggled to understand why it cast such a long shadow over discussions in the U.S. At the same time, international scholars raised other issues: how to reconcile the dialectical and rhetorical traditions, whether a focus on the functions of utterances could serve adequately as a unifying theme, how to promote deliberation within cultures in which it does not have a strong tradition, and how to defend rhetoric as a normative as well as a descriptive mode of study.

While many of the position papers addressed the goals of rhetoric within academic institutions, others examined the second half of the central question and spoke to the goals of rhetoric in 21st-century society—even as some of these same writers questioned the very idea of a sharp distinction between rhetoric's role “inside” and “outside” the academy. Two themes particularly dominated these discussions: revitalization of the public sphere and the use of rhetoric as an instrument of social critique.

Several of the position papers lamented what authors believed to be the weakness of the public sphere, especially in the United States. Although few argued explicitly about whether conditions had been better in the past, they saw in the current state of public discourse ample grounds for worry about the prospects for democracy and deliberation. Superficiality of public argument and inattention to sustained discussion were thought to impoverish decision-making about public affairs. Some of the papers went beyond this claim to argue that the conventions of the public sphere privilege the wealthy and powerful, reinscribing dominant values and making social change more difficult. To some of the conferees, that situation called for rhetoric to position itself as critical of power and emancipatory from hegemony, with the goal of social change explicit and paramount. One paper argued that rhetoric must challenge certainty and instill disbelief as the prelude to social change; other papers argued that the purpose of rhetorical analysis is to produce social criticism or that rhetorical studies should unmask the degree to which ideas are shaped by ideologies and public discourse perpetuates the dominant machinery of a culture. While some of the papers bemoaned the state of civic discourse, one took the opposite task and argued against the fetishization of civic discourse. That paper suggested that rhetorical studies should embrace

popular culture, advertising, and the mindset of the consumer, because those were the actual conditions of public discourse and the actual sites of rhetoric today.

Finally, there was one position paper that did not fit into any of these categories. It addressed the seemingly mundane question of how rhetorical scholarship is indexed, and it argued that where publications are indexed, and how comprehensively, affect the degree to which scholarship is accessible especially to those in other disciplines. Some of the specific claims in the position paper about indexing practices are now out of date, but the argument of the paper remains sound: that seemingly inconsequential decisions about this matter actually make a great difference to the accessibility of scholarship and the recognition of the field.

Plenary Sessions

In addition to the position papers, our discussions were stimulated by a plenary presentation by Steven Mailloux and a response by James Aune. The plenary and response papers from the conference will be published elsewhere. Mailloux reviewed the development of rhetorical studies in English and communication departments during the 20th century, with special attention to what he regarded as missed opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. One promising current opportunity he discussed for overcoming disciplinary barriers was the establishment of “rhetoric centers.”

Taking a somewhat more guarded position, Aune emphasized the need to stay “on message” about what rhetoric is and does. Taking a leaf from U.S. national politics, he also stressed the need to “protect the base.” As applied to rhetorical studies, Aune claimed that the “base” was to be found in pedagogy, especially in basic writing and speaking courses. Rather than disdaining this base, he maintained, we should embrace it. In particular, he suggested that the study and practice of argumentation should receive more attention. It is involved in both writing and speaking and it contributes strongly to the health of a civic culture. A lively discussion followed the presentations by Mailloux and Aune.

Working Groups

Prompted by the position papers and by the four plenary sessions, conferees spent most of a day in discussion in the working groups. Three groups were formed to discuss rhetoric’s institutional and social goals. Frederick Antezak, Rosa Eberly, Lester Olson, Shirley Wilson Logan, and David Zarefsky served as facilitators.

Groups began by discussing the key ideas from the position papers. Participants recapitulated their major arguments and group discussions highlighted recurring themes and issues. These began to sort themselves under

a relatively small number of general headings. Each heading was then discussed in more detail. In some cases, priorities within and across categories emerged; in other cases, the need was to translate general statements of principle into specific proposals; and in still other cases, the focus was on identifying the most appropriate agent for the action proposed. More so than the other working groups, ours was focused on developing specific recommendations for action. Following discussion among the facilitators, these were synthesized by David Zarefsky and presented at the final plenary session of the conference.

Recommendations

The major recommendations of the working group can be arranged conveniently under seven headings, although this classification suggests far more system to our work than was actually present in the working group discussions.

Staying “On Message”

1. We need to develop a statement of the minimal values and principles that rhetoricians share. It should provide a layperson’s understanding of what rhetoric is and should help to answer the question, “What is the work that rhetoricians do?” It is understood that the diversity of thoughtful scholarship will reach invigoratingly beyond any consensus statement. Nevertheless, having such a statement and answering such a question are essential if we are to argue effectively for greater institutional and social resources.

2. Included in such a statement should be the rejection of unproductive binaries such as theory vs. practice, oral vs. written discourse, scholarship vs. pedagogy, and academic vs. public orientations.

3. Also included in such a statement should be a recognition of the central powers of rhetoric, among which are (a) invention, the capacities to see and use the *topoi* that are available in particular situations; (b) the concepts of *stasis* and *kairos*, which ground claims in particular contexts and suggest the importance of timing and flexibility; (c) the *dissoi logoi*, because the capacity and the *ethos* to argue different sides of a case make for thoughtful and reflective citizens; and (d) contingency, because the willingness to put one’s own convictions at risk, to acknowledge that things could be otherwise, and to be open to persuasion and change is the hallmark of a civil society.

4. In the exercise of these powers, it should be recognized that rhetoric bridges the binaries named above. It does so in a variety of arenas ranging from the professional to the civic and from the governmental to the aesthetic.

Infrastructure for the Discipline

1. There should be a perpetual calendar of conferences, publication deadlines, grant application schedules, and the like. Insofar as possible, events should be scheduled so as to minimize conflicts.

2. Resources should be found to maintain a bibliography of rhetoric on line. Insofar as possible, it should be cross-references with bibliographies and indexes in related academic disciplines.

3. A descriptive catalog should be developed to identify how rhetoric is institutionalized. This would indicate in what departmental structures rhetoricians are found and what are our courses and curricula. This same catalog should provide a credible way of counting rhetoricians and hence of knowing something of the size and scope of the field. It also can serve as a directory of graduate programs.

4. We need to coordinate public relations on a national and international scale, especially with agencies responsible for program ratings (such as the National Research Council in the United States) and grants (such as the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, UNESCO, and the European Union). This will require an institutional language strategy so that our messages are mutually reinforcing.

5. Recipients of grants should accumulate a sample of successful proposals that could be examined by others, and should share their experience and savvy about the application and review processes. This would also enable applicants to shape the language of their proposals to the expectations of granting agencies.

6. A web site should be developed that serves as an on-line forum for pre-conference discussion and exchange.

7. Increased efforts should be made to form an international community of rhetorical scholars. The International Society for the Study of Argumentation and the International Society for the History of Rhetoric offer promising examples.

Promoting Rhetoric within Individual Institutions

1. Rhetoricians should seek out like-minded colleagues regardless of disciplinary home and should create reading groups or other interdisciplinary structures. The University of Iowa's Program on the Rhetoric of Inquiry offers a strong example.

2. When possible, rhetoricians should cross-list courses in other departments and take other steps to make their work accessible to students in any field.

3. Groups of rhetoricians should engage in coordinated public relations.

4. A back-page editorial for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* should be developed on the value of rhetoric; it should be circulated by rhetoricians among colleagues in other disciplines.

Working Across Disciplinary Lines

1. Within the United States, the binary between English and communication should be overcome, both by emphasizing common concerns between the two disciplines and by developing alliances with rhetoricians of multiple disciplinary backgrounds.

2. Rhetoricians should make their presence felt within cognate disciplines, through such means as appearances on the conference program in other disciplines and exchanging advertising space to promote journals of other disciplines among rhetoricians and to promote rhetoric journals in other disciplines. Some sort of consortium that would offer members of rhetoric societies the opportunity to subscribe to other disciplines' journals at reduced cost also should be explored.

3. Selected institutions should consider the creation of rhetoric centers, as recommended in the plenary presentation by Mailloux. These interdisciplinary centers could offer summer institutes, research exchanges, and funding for special projects. They also would help to provide a public face for rhetoric. These could follow the general model of humanities centers that have been established at many colleges and universities.

4. Greater efforts should be made to internationalize rhetoric. This would provide a source of new colleagues, would promote greater diversity of perspectives about rhetoric, and would permit far more comparative studies of rhetorical theory, practice, and pedagogy. Particularly since many international scholars are not afflicted by the disciplinary binary between English and communication, a stronger international community could suggest to U.S. scholars how to move beyond this issue.

Enhancing Pedagogy

1. Rhetoric should embrace, not contest, its pedagogical tradition, and especially its strong role in foundational courses in both writing and speaking. We should not restrict ourselves to this traditional base, of course, but neither should we be embarrassed by it, seek to conceal it, or try to escape from it. Indeed, one of rhetoric's distinctive characteristics is its strong pedagogical tradition and its integration of theory and practice.

2. Increased prominence should be given to rhetorical argumentation within basic writing and speaking courses.

3. Greater efforts should be made to further the professional development of teachers of first-year courses through such means as workshops and the preparation of instructional materials.

4. Relevant professional organizations such as the Writing Program Administration, Writing Across the Curriculum Clearing House, and the Basic Course Division of the National Communication Association, should scrutinize first-year courses to determine the adequacy of the rhetorical perspective

represented therein. This should also be a focus in intra-institutional program reviews of relevant departments.

Pre-Collegiate Education

1. Rhetoricians should target high-school counselors and college fairs and provide information that would increase high-school students' awareness of rhetoric as a field of study.

2. Rhetoricians should write textbooks and develop videocourses and other teaching materials appropriate for pre-collegiate students.

3. Secondary-school participants in debate and forensics programs should be provided with information about rhetoric as a field of study and should be encouraged to enroll in appropriate rhetoric courses when they reach college or university.

4. Rhetoricians should take advantage of opportunities provided through summer institutes and workshops to acquaint high-school teachers and students with rhetoric as a field of study and with opportunities for teaching and research in the field.

The Public Face of Rhetoric

1. Rhetoricians should engage in activities that respond to public issues and promote productive exchanges of ideas and participation in public discourse. These might include organizing and participating in town meetings, facilitating community-based deliberative groups such as the National Issues Forum, giving talks and writing essays on public issues, analyzing significant rhetorical texts or occasions for the benefit of public audiences, and consulting for non-profit agencies, non-governmental organizations, and policy-making bodies.

2. A web site should profile rhetorical scholars who are actively engaged in the public interest.

3. Rhetoricians should work to make their research more accessible to public audiences, both through the use of lay language where appropriate and through more explicit connections between theory and practice.

4. Lobbying efforts should be undertaken to achieve "category status" for rhetoric—that is, its listing as a discrete discipline—among rating organizations such as the National Research Council and among granting or fellowship-awarding organizations such as the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Council of Learned Societies.

5. Efforts should be undertaken to achieve subject-matter category status for rhetoric among publishers and bibliographers. Efforts should also be made to have timely reviews of books in rhetoric appear in publications that attract a public audience.

6. Archives of rhetorical documents are uneven. Continued effort is

needed to preserve archival records of prominent public figures, but special effort should be made to identify, preserve, and promote archival records of subaltern populations and marginalized speakers and writers.

7. Organizations of stature should formulate resolutions identifying minimal necessary rhetorical skills for active citizenship. Efforts should be made to obtain widespread media coverage of these resolutions and then to assess the degree to which the relevant skills are taught in educational curricula and the level of competence of the adult population with respect to these skills.

8. Rhetoric societies should develop awards that recognize outstanding scholarship and outstanding practice of rhetoric by public figures. These awards should be widely publicized. Consideration also should be given to recognizing especially misleading or abusive practices of rhetoric, along the lines of the “Doublespeak” award of the National Council of Teachers of English.

9. More opportunities should be found for students to become involved in public issues as competent rhetors.

Conclusion

In the period of less than a year since the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies conference, progress already has been made in implementing some of these recommendations, particularly those related to web sites, common calendar, and information infrastructure. Others are currently under review.

The potentially fatal flaw in many of the recommendations, however, is that they are not self-executing and no implementing agent is identified. And the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies, as an organization of organizations, lacks resources and expertise of its own to act on these recommendations. This means that individual rhetoric societies, and in some cases individual academic departments or even individual rhetoricians, must select from among the recommendations those which seem compelling and on which they have standing to act. Members of the community of rhetoric scholars must remind themselves and one another of the need to pursue this agenda and periodically to take stock of progress. Whether they do so effectively will determine whether these thoughts are left on the shelf or become guideposts for enhancing the position of rhetorical studies in the somewhat fluid and uncertain environment that is likely to persist both within the academy and beyond.

*Department of Communication Studies
Northwestern University*

Notes

1. Steven Mailloux, "Disciplinary Identities: On the Rhetorical Paths between English and Communication Studies," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 30 (Spring 2000), 5-29; Steven Mailloux, "Practices, Theories, and Traditions: Further Thoughts on the Disciplinary Identities of English and Communication Studies," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 33 (Winter 2003), 129-138. For responses to this position, see Michael Leff, "Rhetorical Disciplines and Rhetorical Disciplinary: A Response to Mailloux," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 30 (Fall 2000), 83-93; William Keith, "Identity, Rhetoric, and Myth: A Response to Mailloux and Leff," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 30 (Fall 2000), 95-106.
2. Trans-disciplinary organizations such as Rhetoric Society of America and American Society for the History of Rhetoric mitigate this problem to some degree.
3. An excellent selection of disciplines in which there is some interest in rhetoric can be found in John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey, ed., *Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).
4. Representative essays on this controversy include Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "Rhetoric and Its Double: Reflections on the Rhetorical Turn in the Human Sciences," *The Rhetorical Turn: Invention and Persuasion in the Conduct of Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 341-366; Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science," *Southern Communication Journal*, 58 (Summer 1993), 258-295; Herbert W. Simons, "Review Essay: Rhetorical Hermeneutics and the Project of Globalization," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 85 (February 1999), 86-100; John Angus Campbell, "Response to Simons," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 85 (February 1999), 101-103; Charles Arthur Willard, "Note on Simons, Gaonkar, and the Rhetoric of Science," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 85 (February 1999), 104-106; William Keith, Steve Fuller, Alan Gross, and Michael Leff, "Taking Up the Challenge: A Response to Simons," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 85 (August 1999), 330-334; Edward Schiappa, "Second Thoughts on the Critiques of Big Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 34 (2001), 260-274.
5. Papers may be found on the World Wide Web at <<http://www.comm.umn.edu/ARS/>>. Included are position papers by John Ackerman, Frederick J. Antezak, John Arthos, Marlia Banning, David Beard, Steven Combs, Dave Dooan, Erik Doxtader, Tim Flower, James Fredal, Susan Gilpin, Michele Hammers, Andrew Hansen, Beth Hewett, Louise W. Knight, Christian Kock, Andrew Leslie, Shirley Logan, Todd McDorman and David Timmerman, Carolyn R. Miller, Sara Newman, Lester Olson, Benjamin Ponder, Jim Porter and Jeff Grabill, Philippe-Joseph Salazar, Barbara Schneider, Jack Selzer, Paul Turpin, Frans van Eemeren, Lisa Storm Villadsen, Eve Wiederhold, and Christopher Wilkey.

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