



:LitMagJag: 2nd e.

A Student's Guide to Publishing.

Editor's Note

Six years ago, Silpa Swarnapuri created the term “litmagjag,” defining it as: *noun: To be in a state wherein the being is consumed with the desire to see one's work in print.* From there, began this hefty project. Her hope was to create a comprehensive list of publishing guidelines and suggestions for all her fellow aspiring writers.

The original Litmagjag has lain dormant while the publishing industry has sped forward, transforming and reinventing itself. Electronic submissions, online journals, and self-publishing have (for better or worse) taken hold and become more acceptable venues in the literary world. While Silpa's project gave me a great deal of food for thought, much of the original version needed to be overhauled to express the current climate in the writing world. My hope is that the second edition will act as a quick and easy guide to the arduous and nerve-wrecking challenge of seeing the aspiring writer's words appear in print.

As a senior in the BFA program, I have finished several short stories and non-fiction essays as well as one manuscript begging for a larger audience without knowing how to get these pieces noticed. This project transformed the publishing process, a tangled web of mysteries, into an accessible world.

I owe a great deal of gratitude to the creators of *Poets and Writers* and *Writer's Digest*, websites I spent a great deal of time exploring, as well as the generous help of SUNY Potsdam professors, Dr. Joanna Luloff, Professor Stephanie Coyne-DeGhett, and Dr. Jennifer Mitchell.

To anyone who has picked up this little book, I hope you can learn as much as I have. I wish you luck and success!

John Chapman

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Writer's Digest:

On their website, they offer free, weekly tutorials. These free videos are limited, but helpful. For around \$7-15, you can purchase individual tutorials or you can subscribe monthly for them. These tutorials include self-publishing, building a platform, revising, etc and range from fiction, short stories, children's stories, etc. They also offer free tips of the day. They have a large number of free articles to search through. Some are genre specific; others fall under the "Editor Blog" and discuss publishing and agents.

You can register for online writing workshops. They also offer writers the opportunity to submit a manuscript or short story and pay (\$3-4 per page) for a professional to read through and give an evaluation of your writing. You can also submit a query letter and synopsis for critique. They will also line edit your work (\$4 per page) or proofread the draft (\$2 per page).

They will also help a writer create a platform to help sell their book. This largely helps you to develop who your audience is and how to reach them. This helps you to be more authoritative and may help catch the eye of an agent or editor.

For \$6 a month or \$40 annual (as of 2013), you can subscribe to *Writer's Digest*. This gives you access to publisher listings and agent listings. Subscription also includes weekly magazines that include articles about writing, including tips on writing, submitting, publishing, etc.

Writer's Digest offers a mode of self-publishing through their Abbott Press. They also have a large number of competitions, ranging from screenplays, pop fiction, thrillers, crime, romance, and several others. The prizes ran from a small money prize and exposure, to a few thousand and conference time.

Poets and Writers:

Poets and Writers is primarily a magazine that publishes bimonthly. Some of these articles can be found online and include discussions of contemporary issues in literature, and publishing.

On their website, under "Tools for Writers," they offer writing prompts as well as lists of agents, contests, literary magazines, small presses, MFA programs, and conferences. These lists are fairly easy to search. The contest page includes information about genre, entry fee, prize, and application date. The literary magazines and small presses include genres, reading period (aka, submit before this time), and whether they allow simultaneous submissions and electronic submissions. The list of MFA programs includes basic information, such as location, genre, program size, deadline, and whether it's a full or low residency. This section also offers job listings for writers that fall into the publishing, marketing, or similar field. *Poets and Writers* offer unpaid development and marketing internship for the spring semester.

The website has a number of open forums where writers can share thoughts and ideas. Many are organized into genres or topics.

You can apply for grants and funding through *Poets and Writers* to help fund a writing related event or workshop.

Advice From the Professors

Stephanie Coyne DeGhett is a fiction writer and poet with recent fiction in *The Missouri Review*, *Confrontation*, *Cottonwood*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. She has an article due out in *The Writer's Chronicle* on emphasis and fiction. Her novella -- *Hazzard's* -- won the 2012 Press 53 Novella Contest. She holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and teaches in the Creative Writing BFA Program at SUNY Potsdam.

“My biggest misconception [about publishing] was that there was a secret, magic path through the maze. My biggest surprise? Maybe that writing continues to reward the effort.”

“Write, write, write, read. Keep a notebook. Write, write, write, read. Keep a notebook.”

Dr. Joanna Luloff received a BA in English from Vassar College, an MFA in fiction from Emerson College, and a PhD in English and Creative Writing from the University of Missouri. Before all of those years of graduate school, she was a Peace Corps volunteer in Sri Lanka. Her short stories have appeared in journals including *The Missouri Review*, *Confrontation*, and *New South*. Her short story collection *The Beach at Galle Road* was published by Algonquin Books in October 2012, and was selected as a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers Holiday pick. My novel *Remind Me Again What Happened* is forthcoming from Algonquin Books.

“I had hoped that once I had revised and revised and then revised some more, and I sincerely believed my short story was in the best shape it could possibly be, that it would find a home in a journal fairly straightforwardly. Instead, it was really demoralizing to receive so many rejection letters from journals I admired. I was surprised that I had to create a vast spreadsheet on Excel that kept track of all of my submissions, all of my rejections, all of my supportive rejection letters, and so on.”

“One of my biggest surprises recently was how little control I had over my book once it was in my publisher's hands. This isn't the case for everyone, but I had to surrender control over my title, cover art, and even whether the book would be marketed as a collection of stories, a novel in stories, a novel, and so on.”

“Write as often and as consistently as you can. I've never been a writer who follows a strict schedule, but I do know that I have to snatch any free moment I can to put words onto a page. Getting into some kind of habit of a writing routine can help keep up momentum and inspiration. You have to be willing to write even on the days when nothing feels like it's going well. There is always something to salvage in the mess.”

When Am I Ready to Publish?

One of the biggest wastes of time is submitting pieces before they're ready or trying to find an agent before you're mature enough as a writer to start publishing¹. So how do you know when that day has finally arrived?

Tips:

- Put a lot of time into writing. It's the only way to get better and the only way to create manuscripts.¹
- Read enough to understand where you fall on the spectrum of ability and to know what's currently out there.¹
- Work on things you enjoy to avoid burn out.¹
- "Don't wait until you're absolutely sure, because that certainty may never arrive."²
 - Send poems in a batch of three to five of your strongest.
 - Consider waiting to send off a short story until it's not the only one you have ready.

Are you ready?¹

- If you have been writing for many years, have a couple of full manuscripts, and have 1-2 trusted readers (critiquers), you're well positioned for publishing. This likely means that you know your strengths and weaknesses and have some kind of structured revision process.

Some things you might have to accept:¹

- Even after revision, your first manuscript might never be publishable. Keep working on new things.
- If you've been working on the same piece for years and years, that might show a motivation problem and stagnation in learning.
- If your work is "too narrow, too quirky, too intelligent," you might want to consider self-publishing and not traditional publishing.
 - REFER to "[How Does Publishing Work](#)" for more information about traditional versus self-publishing.

Think like an editor / literary agent:³

- Publishing is a business.
 - It's not personal if they reject you.
- Query letters, cover letters, and sample writing creates the first impression.
 - If there are errors and it doesn't sound professional, why would they want to work with you?
 - REFER to "[How to Prepare a Query Letter](#)" and "[Writing Samples](#)" for more help.

¹ Friedman, Jane. "Your Straight-Forward Guide to Publication," *Writer's Digest*.

² Stephanie Coyne DeGhett. Interview.

³ Kelly, Diane. "How to see your work through an agent or publishers eyes," *Writer's Digest*.

- Read and follow submission guidelines exactly.
 - They're reading so many manuscripts, that if you can't take the time to follow their rules, they won't take the time to read it.

When you're wasting your time:⁴

- Submitting something that isn't your best work. If you don't feel 100% about it, there's probably something wrong.
- Turning to self-publishing because no agent or editor will publish it.
 - There's a good chance they're not picking it up because it's not ready or doesn't have an audience.
 - If you don't market it effectively, it won't sell.
- Trying to take a niche story / work and publish for a national / major publisher.
- Focusing on publishing instead of writing.
 - First things first, you need to write something and have something good to try to sell.
 - Once you have one piece done, don't put all your energy into getting it published. Keep writing so you have more to work with.

Signs you're getting closer to publication:⁵

1. You start receiving personalized, "encouraging" rejections.
2. Agents or editors reject the manuscript you submitted, but ask you to send your next work. (They can see that you're on the verge of producing something great.)
3. Your mentor (or published author friend) tells you to contact his agent, without you asking for a referral.
4. An agent or editor proactively contacts you because she spotted your quality writing somewhere online or in print.
5. You've outgrown the people in your critique group and need to find more sophisticated critique partners.
6. Looking back, you understand why your work was rejected, and see that it deserved rejection. You probably even feel embarrassed by earlier work.

⁴ Friedman, Jane. "Your Straight-Forward Guide to Publication," *Writer's Digest*.

⁵ Quoted directly from: Klems, Brian A. "6 Signs You're Getting Closer to Publication," *Writer's Digest*.

How to Publish a Short Story / Poem

Short stories and poems typically get published first in a literary magazine or journal. Eventually these stories or poems may get added to a collection of pieces, such as *The Best American Short Stories* or *The Best American Poetry*, or the author may publish a collection of their own pieces that were well-received.

How do you find a literary magazine to submit to?

- “This research is not a fast process – but there is not expedient way through the maze.”⁶
- “There is a lot of research involved with being a writer, from researching the content of your fiction, to researching literary journals, but most of all, the research involves reading the literature that moves you, surprises you, productively frustrates you, intimidates you, and challenges you to be a better writer.”⁷
- If you read a short story / poem you really enjoy or that is similar to your style, see where it was first published. ^{6,8}
 - READ: *The Best American Short Stories; The Best American Mysteries; The O. Henry Prize Stories, New Stories from the South, Best of the Midwest, The Pushcart Prize*
- Read literary magazines and see if you fit their aesthetic/style/message. ⁹
 - CHECK OUT: *Poets and Writers* to see their comprehensive list of literary magazines.
- Universities with MFA programs in Creative Writing often have two levels of magazines.⁷
 - Professor run literary magazine. These magazines are usually of higher quality and more selective.
 - Graduate student run literary magazine. While still quality magazines, they may not be as selective as the higher end magazine run by their professors. If you’re an emerging writer with polished short stories, these might be the best places to begin.
- Universities with BFA or BA programs in Creative Writing, and some without, may have an undergraduate run literary magazine. These journals are likely the best place for an early writer to start submitting their work. ⁷
 - SUNY Potsdam hosts the North Country Literary Magazine, an undergraduate run magazine.
 - SUNY Geneseo hosts a literary magazine called Gandy Dancer and accepts work from any student in the SUNY system.
- “The alphabet is a good place to start”:⁶
 - Find a list of literary magazines.
 - Spend one day looking at just the Ms, or Js, and work your way through systematically.

⁶ Professor Stephanie Coyne DeGhett. Interview.

⁷ Dr. Joanna Luloff. Interview.

⁸ “Literary Journals & Magazines,” *Poet’s and Writer’s*.

What other options are there? ⁹

- Online journals:
 - Make sure it's a reputable journal.
 - The pros: you have a larger audience because access is typically free.
 - The cons: it's harder to put together a collection of pieces if they're already published and available free, online.
- Themed anthologies:
 - These look for stories that fit a certain theme and are published as a collection of pieces.

What should you know when you're submitting? ⁹

- You don't need an agent to submit to a literary magazine.
- Know the literary magazine:
 - They each have their own voice, mission, etc and you need to fit what they're looking for.
 - Read bios of authors they've published and see if you fit in.
- Know if they permit **simultaneous submissions**.
 - This means sending the same piece to multiple places.
 - If you send submissions to multiple places and more than one accepts your piece, this can cause problems.
 - Keep track of where you send your pieces. Once one is accepted, notify the other magazines.
- **Guidelines:** ⁹
 - Every magazine has its own rules for submitting, which may include page / word limit, font size / style, etc.
 - Most submissions are done online. However, if you're sending in print, you need a **self-addressed stamped envelope**.
 - SASE are used to send a response.
 - Make sure it has your current address and enough postage.
- **Cover Letters:**
 - These aren't always required, but they're expected. ¹⁰
 - Keep it simple: ¹⁰
 - Tell them what you've submitted.
 - Give a very brief bio, 2-3 lines.
 - If you check the Contributors page, you can use their bios as templates.
 - Don't discuss merits or themes of your work. ¹¹
 - Don't summarize your writing as a whole, just this particular piece. ¹¹

Will I get paid? ¹²

- You may receive some money per page. This may range from \$25-300.
- Instead, you may receive a few free copies and / or a year's subscription.

⁹ "Literary Journals & Magazines," *Poet's and Writer's*.

¹⁰ Stephanie Coyne DeGhett. Interview.

¹¹ "Literary Journals & Magazines," *Poets and Writers*.

¹² "How (&Where) to Get a Short Story Published," *Writer's Digest*.

Contests and Cash?

There are a couple of different ways to get cash as a writer. Some literary magazines will pay per page of work you submit, usually with a maximum cap, and can pay anywhere from \$25 to a couple hundred.

Another way is to enter into contests. Many contests offer prizes from \$1,000 - \$10,000, with second and third place prizes usually offered as well. The higher prizes are most often for novels or collections, while the smaller prizes are for single short stories, essays, or poems. Often these prizes, especially first place, come with an opportunity to publish your work. It's important to note, however, that most of these contests require a fee, ranging from \$5-40 dollars to enter. These fees go toward the contest prizes as well as other fees, such as reading fees, advertizing, etc¹³.

Some MFA programs (Master's of Fine Arts) that specialize in creative writing will offer fellowships and stipends to help afford a graduate education and living expensive while you write. You likely won't make a lot of money, but it will help off-set living costs and give you time to write and access to professional writers and other resources.

There are also awards and grants available to writers. Grants are usually professional development grants, which help to pay for tuition or attend writing conferences and workshops. There are also project grants which help pay for special projects, such as a public event like a reading or workshop. Applying to grants requires a statement of artistic goals, the project description, and a writing sample that lives up to the goals and project described¹⁴.

You can find a large list of grants and contests offering cash prizes at <http://www.pw.org/grants>.

¹³ *Poets and Writers*.

¹⁴ Klems, Brian A. "Free Money for Writers," *Writer's Digest*.

Do I Need A Literary Agent?

A Literary Agent will give some editorial suggestions, create contacts with editors and publishers, explain contract terms, and sell rights to your work¹⁵. Overall, they help facilitate your interactions with publishing houses and act in your best interest to ensure that you have new opportunities and a contract that benefits you as much as possible. Because many editors won't accept unsolicited work (work submitted directly from the author), Literary Agents are one of your few opportunities to get noticed by an editor.

Who should get a Literary Agent?¹⁵

- Fiction writers working on selling novels and series.
- Non-fiction writers hoping to sell memoirs, collections, etc.

Who shouldn't get a Literary Agent?¹⁵

- Fiction writers working on individual short stories.
- Poets, as they typically submit 1-3 poems to literary magazines at a time. After enough success in magazines, poets submit a collection of poems directly to the publishing house.

How to find a Literary Agent?¹⁵

- Put together a list of books you admire and which are similar to the book you're writing. Find out who the agent was. Ask the publishing house if you can't find out from the book.
- Send a **query letter** to each one. Send out about five at a time, but tailor them to each agent.
 - REFER to "[How to Prepare a Query Letter](#)" for more information.
- If they're interested, they'll ask to see a few chapters or full manuscript. Follow the submission guidelines exactly.

Agent Negotiations:

- Know who the agent is, who they represent, and their plan to represent your work before signing a contract with them.¹⁵
- Commission is currently around 15%. It's 20-25% for foreign sales and 10-20% for movie, TV, and theatre deals.¹⁶
- Insist on timely payment. The publisher may give you your cut directly or may pay it all to the agent, who will give you your cut.¹⁶
- Avoid agents who charge speaking fees or reading fees, as well as agents who sell to vanity presses. Name a cap on any unusual expenses, like long distance calls.¹⁶

¹⁵ "Literary Agents," *Poets and Writers*.

¹⁶ Zaharoff, Howard G. "5 Quick Tips for Writer / Agent Negotiations," *Writer's Digest*

Are There Ways Around Having An Agent?

Diane Kelly explains how to get editors to notice your work without an agent. Her method requires a strong commitment to the process and a willingness to listen to criticism and put yourself out there. Here are the four ways she managed to get several manuscripts noticed and published without using a Literary Agent.¹⁷

Enter contests with editors as judges:

- She entered several manuscripts into several different contests, ensuring that editors of many different publishers that work with her genre saw her manuscripts.
- She claims that the judges' feedback on her pieces alone was worth the entrance fee. She made the changes the editors suggested and re-submitted them.
- Her manuscripts that earned honorary mention or won brought offers from editors.

Attend conferences which include pitch sessions or workshops with editors:

- She advises perfecting your **pitch** before attending. Keep the pitch within the time limit, leaving time for questions.
 - A pitch is a brief, couple sentence summary of your piece. It may also include who the target audience is, the motivation of the main character, etc.
- If there isn't a formal pitch session, it's appropriate to give an informal pitch during lunch/dinner or at a meet and greet. Keep this pitch even shorter. Never approach them at inappropriate times.
- When selecting where to go, remember:
 - Large conferences host a lot of editors from a variety of publishing houses.
 - Small conferences have fewer editors and a smaller variety, but they also have fewer attendees and therefore less competition.

Volunteer at editor-attended conferences:

- This gives you the opportunity to meet editors and agents informally.
- Volunteers are sometimes given empty pitch session slots.

Build a platform to target editors directly:

- Having a blog or website that promotes your career or hobby helps to pull in a certain readership. This is something editors can build on.

¹⁷ Kelly, Diane. "How to Sell Your Manuscript Without an Agent," *Writer's Digest*.

How to Prepare a Query Letter

A query letter is a formal letter to an editor, literary agent, or publishing house intended to pique interest in the writer's work. REFER to "[How To Publish a Short Story / Poem](#)" to compare query letters to cover letters.

A cover letter should be **short, fast, and exciting** to read with a hook right at the beginning, as a reflection of the piece itself. **This letter should:**¹⁸

- Introduce the topic of the piece
- Give a synopsis of the plot
- A brief biography of the author
- Address who the target audience will be

What should the synopsis do?¹⁸

- It should introduce the lead character(s) and the key conflict.
- The most important character should be introduced first. Included other characters in order of importance.
- It should provide only necessary details about central characters, and no one else. These details might include marital status, occupation, race, ethnicity, origin, etc.
- Character motivations and emotions should be addressed.
- It should highlight only pivotal plot points and do so as concisely as possible.
- It should reveal the novel's ending.
- Regardless of the point of view in the story, the synopsis should be written in third person present (i.e., "Liam travels to LA where he meets Clarissa.").

Important tips:¹⁹

- Proofread! Any typos in the letter will immediately decrease your credibility and likelihood of receiving an offer.
- Don't tell them how hard you worked on the piece; the detail and concision in the letter and the plot and characters should speak to that.
- Don't give complicated directions about how to reach you. Give a phone number or email address that you can easily be reached at.
- Always have a salutation.
- Know who you're writing to! While much of the information will be the same regardless of who you're sending it to, make sure to change information based on what the literary agent or editor specifically wants to see in a book or author.
- Don't start with a piece of wisdom or comment about not wanting to waste the agent / publisher's time. That wastes their time.
- Don't make a grand claim, such as "this book will sell 50,000 books easily" or "every woman will want to read this book".
- Keep it to a page with standard format. Make sure the print is in a comfortable size.

¹⁸ "10 Synopsis Dos and Don'ts," *Writer's Digest*

¹⁹ Rittenberg, Ann. "10 Query Letter No-nos," *Writer's Digest*

Writing Samples

If a Literary Agent or Editor receives a query letter and wants to see some of your work, they'll request an excerpt, or writing sample. What they want to see is a hook at the beginning that draws them in. They want compelling characters and an immediate connection to the material to keep reading. There are a number of problems that may make an agent or editor stop reading²⁰.

Avoid These Language Problems:

- Grammar or spelling errors.
- Long lists of descriptions.
- Weather descriptions.
- Clear point of view – don't make the reader feel awkward or disoriented.
- Cheesy openings or hooks.
- Poor, unnatural dialogue, especially to show who characters are or relationships.

Write a Strong Opening:

- First chapter should move quickly.
- Something needs to happen in chapter one.
- Opening needs to be unique and surprising.
- Many editors and agents hate prologues. They consider this a lazy way to reveal backstory.
- Don't "information dump" in the first few pages. Too much information at once can be disorienting or confusing and may turn off the reader.
- Don't give too much backstory and especially don't start with backstory.
- Don't open with "My name is" or equivalent.

What not to do:

- Don't kill the main character in chapter 1.
- Don't turn the book into a dream, or equivalent.
- Characters can't be too perfect, either physically or morally.

²⁰ Sambuchino, Chuck. "What Agents Hate," *Writer's Digest*.

How Does Publishing Work?

Traditional Publishing:²¹

- Begins with you or your Literary Agent submitting a query letter to a publishing house.
 - REFER to “[How to Write a Query Letter](#)” for more information.
- If the publishing house is interested, they’ll ask for a writing sample or the manuscript to read.
 - REFER to “[Writing Samples](#)” for more information.
- If the editor likes what he/she reads, it will go to a committee for approval. Only after that will they offer you a contract.

Book Contracts:²²

- With or without an agent, you should read your book contract.
- Understanding these contracts isn’t difficult. If necessary, read up on contract language and negotiating contracts.
- Always try asking for more, just make sure what you ask for is more than what you’re willing to take.

After Your Book Gets Accepted, What Happens?²¹

- Set up a meeting with your publishing team.
 - These are the people responsible for getting your book ready for publishing.
 - The more involved you become, the more you know and the more control you have.
 - Your publishing team will always go the extra mile for you if you’re involved, polite, and agreeable with them.
- Editing
 - You are under contract to make the changes the editor wants.
 - Maintain a professional relationship with the editor and don’t pester him/her.
- When will your book be published?
 - Your book may not be in print until 1-2 years after you sign the contract.
 - This has to do with maximizing sales by reducing competition within the publishing house and with other books, as well as other factors.
 - Don’t stop writing new material during this time, otherwise you’ll have nothing new to offer once the first book starts selling.

²¹ Simmons, Jerry D. “Publishing 101: What You Need to Know,” *Writer’s Digest*.

²² Sims, Elizabeth. “The 7 Biggest Myths of Publishing (Know the Truth),” *Writer’s Digest*.

Marketing, Sales

Marketing:²³

- Advertising – putting out ads about the book.
- Promotion – anything that draws attention to the book.
- Publicity – promoting the author.

Sales:²³

- Suppliers, such as chain bookstores or local bookstores, will likely only order a small number of your books. This is a good thing. Otherwise, they may end up with more books than they can sell, which lowers the profit made, and would make it harder to sell your next book.

Self-Publishing

There is some controversy concerning the legitimacy of self-publishing, but it is a flourishing new industry and worth exploring if you're working on a piece that may not be accepted by traditional publishing or if it seems to be more appropriate to your goals.

Pros of Self-Publishing:²⁴

- Profit with minimal expense.
- After selling 5,000 books in one year or less, you have a high chance of selling to an agent or publishing house.

Cons of Self-Publishing:²⁵

- Publishers find and nurture talent by promoting the author as well as the book.
- Publishers invest in the author to give them time to write.
- Publishers advertise, promote, and distribute the book to a wide audience.
- Publishers are also able to control price and take care of copyright and legal issues.

How do you do it?²⁶

- You can go through a major e-book retailer:
 - Amazon's Kindle, which offers 70% royalties on certain prices
 - Barnes & Noble
 - Google Books
 - Apple
 - Whoever you chose, understand fully the agreement. They each have different royalty rates and ownership laws. If you hope to eventually publish the piece through conventional means, ensure that the agreement allows it.
- You can alternatively go through an aggregator

²³ Simmons, Jerry D. "Publishing 101: What You Need to Know," *Writer's Digest*.

²⁴ Hurst, Andrea. "The Reality of Self Publishing: An Agent's Perspective," *Writer's Digest*.

²⁵ Thielen, Winter. "Do You Need a Publisher Anymore?" *Writer's Digest*

²⁶ Versteegh, Adrian. "Digital Digest: New Tools Transform Self-Publishing," *Poets and Writers*.

- Aggregators distribute titles to big vendors.
- While some people find this method very substantial, most self-published authors receive a small side income at best.
- In order to do well, you will need to learn about:
 - Design
 - Distribution
 - Marketing
 - Promotion
 - Social Media

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