

Artificial Intelligence in EFL Writing Instruction: A Critical Narrative Review of Feedback, Pedagogical Integration, and Learning Outcomes

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Abstract.

Artificial intelligence is no longer a marginal issue in EFL writing classes. Students now use grammar checkers, automated writing evaluation platforms, and ChatGPT-like tools to test vocabulary choices, correct sentences, and sometimes reshape whole paragraphs before a teacher sees the draft. This situation has created a practical dilemma for writing teachers. AI feedback can increase the amount of response available to learners, yet it may also make revision less visible and authorship more difficult to judge. This article offers a critical narrative review of recent scholarship on AI-supported EFL/ESL writing instruction. It discusses automated writing evaluation, generative AI feedback, teacher mediation, learner engagement, feedback literacy, and assessment concerns. The review does not claim to be a systematic review; instead, it brings together selected empirical studies, research syntheses, meta-analytic work, and policy discussions in order to interpret a fast-changing area of practice. The central argument is that AI can be useful in EFL writing only when it is built into a guided writing process. Used as an unchecked correction service, it may produce cleaner texts without developing better writers. Used with teacher guidance and student reflection, it may help learners notice language problems, compare alternatives, and take more responsibility for revision. The article proposes a classroom-oriented framework that links three concerns: what AI can automate, what teachers must mediate, and what learners still need to do for themselves. It concludes by calling for more classroom-based research on independent writing development after AI support is removed.

Keywords:

artificial intelligence; EFL writing; automated writing evaluation; ChatGPT; narrative review; feedback literacy

1. INTRODUCTION

For many learners of English as a foreign language, writing is the skill in which several difficulties appear at once. A student has to choose words, control grammar, connect sentences, develop a topic, and imagine a reader, often under time pressure and with limited confidence. In large EFL classes, the problem is made worse by the amount of marking expected from teachers. A teacher

may want to comment carefully on every draft, but the number of scripts, exam preparation, and school timetables make this difficult. Feedback therefore becomes both necessary and scarce. This long-standing tension in L2 writing pedagogy has been discussed for many years (Ferris, 2014; Hyland, 2019; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). AI writing tools entered this situation not as an abstract innovation but as a possible answer to a very ordinary classroom problem: students need more feedback than teachers can usually provide. Earlier automated writing evaluation systems, including tools such as Grammarly, Pigai, and Criterion, mainly offered comments on grammar, spelling, mechanics, vocabulary, or sentence-level clarity. Such systems can help students notice local errors and attempt revision, but the value of the feedback depends on how students read it and how teachers frame its use (Bai & Hu, 2017; Li et al., 2015; Zhang, 2020). A correction is not automatically a lesson. It becomes useful only when the student understands why a change is needed and can apply similar reasoning later. The appearance of generative AI has widened the discussion. ChatGPT and similar systems can do more than mark an error. They can explain a grammar point, offer alternative phrasing, suggest an outline, simplify a sentence, or produce a sample paragraph. For EFL learners, this is attractive because the tool seems patient, available, and linguistically confident. Recent publications have therefore treated generative AI as a new kind of writing companion or feedback resource (Kohnke et al., 2023; Teng, 2024; Warschauer et al., 2023). At the same time, this fluency creates a new problem. The text produced with AI assistance may look more advanced than the learner's own independent writing. Teachers then have to ask not only whether the final text is accurate, but also what kind of learning, if any, happened during revision. The literature reflects this mixed picture. Some studies and reviews report that AI-supported feedback can help with accuracy, revision activity, and motivation (Karatay & Karatay, 2024; Polakova & Ivenz, 2024; Song & Song, 2023; Zhai & Ma, 2023). Other work draws attention to overdependence, academic integrity, privacy, and the weakening of authorial responsibility (Cotton et al., 2024; Kasneci et al., 2023; Perkins, 2023). Both sides are persuasive because they describe different uses of the same broad technology. A student who asks AI to explain one verb-tense error is not doing the same thing as a student who asks it to rewrite the whole essay. For this reason, the question should not simply be whether AI is good or bad for writing. The more useful question is how AI is used, under what conditions, and with what consequences for the learner's future writing. Recent broader reviews of AI in English language teaching also suggest that the value of AI depends less on the technology itself than on the wider pedagogical ecology in which it is used, including task design, teacher guidance, learner readiness, and institutional expectations (Daud et al., 2025; Jeon, 2025; Sapuan et al., 2025). This article reviews recent work on AI-supported EFL writing from that classroom-oriented perspective. It is guided by three questions: how AI tools are currently discussed in relation to EFL writing; what benefits and risks are most visible in recent scholarship; and how teachers might integrate AI without allowing it to replace the learner's own composing work. The review develops a framework around three linked ideas: feedback automation, pedagogical mediation, and learner agency. These terms are deliberately practical. They draw attention to what the tool can do quickly, what the teacher still needs to organize, and what the student must remain responsible for during writing.

Literature Selection and Review Approach

This article adopts a critical narrative review approach. This approach is appropriate because research on AI-supported EFL writing is still developing rapidly and includes diverse forms of evidence, including empirical studies, research syntheses, meta-analyses, technology-focused discussions, classroom-oriented reports, and policy documents. Rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive statistical synthesis of all available studies, this review aims to interpret major

pedagogical issues that have emerged around AI-supported writing instruction, particularly in relation to feedback, teacher mediation, learner agency, academic integrity, and writing development. Relevant sources were identified through targeted searching and reference tracing in applied linguistics, language education, educational technology, writing studies, and higher education outlets. Search terms combined references to artificial intelligence, generative AI, ChatGPT, large language models, automated writing evaluation, automated written corrective feedback, EFL writing, ESL writing, L2 writing, writing feedback, revision, writing quality, academic integrity, learner engagement, and feedback literacy. Because recent work on AI writing is distributed across several disciplinary areas, the search was not restricted to a single publisher or database platform. Most sources foregrounded in the review were published between 2020 and 2025, since the rapid spread of generative AI has substantially changed classroom practice during this period. A few earlier studies were retained because they remain central to L2 writing feedback, automated writing evaluation, or feedback literacy. The review therefore combines recent AI-focused work with foundational studies that help explain why feedback, revision, and learner uptake matter (Bai & Hu, 2017; Carless & Boud, 2018; Ferris, 2014; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Li et al., 2015). Sources were selected when they contributed directly to one of the concerns of this article: AI-mediated feedback, writing development, learner engagement, teacher-AI integration, academic integrity, or feedback literacy. Studies focused mainly on speaking, reading, listening, translation, or general attitudes toward technology were not emphasized unless they had a clear connection with writing instruction. In reading the literature, attention was given not only to reported benefits but also to the classroom conditions under which those benefits might occur. This distinction is necessary because a tool may appear effective in a short university intervention but have different implications for younger learners, lower-proficiency writers, or examination-oriented classrooms. The synthesis below is organized thematically. It first considers automated writing evaluation, generative AI, teacher mediation, learner engagement, and ethical use. It then draws these themes together into a three-part framework for EFL writing pedagogy. Numerical claims are avoided unless they come directly from cited review or meta-analytic work. This conservative approach is useful for a narrative review because it prevents the discussion from appearing more precise than the evidence allows.

Major Themes in the Literature

1 Automated Writing Evaluation and Corrective Feedback

Automated writing evaluation is the earlier form of AI-supported writing instruction and remains important for EFL contexts. Its appeal is easy to understand. Students can submit a draft, receive quick comments, and revise before the teacher marks the text. In classes where one teacher faces many writers, this can create an extra feedback opportunity that would otherwise not exist. Studies of AWE suggest that such feedback can support attention to grammar, mechanics, and other local language issues (Li et al., 2015; Zhai & Ma, 2023).

The limitation is equally clear: AWE feedback is not the same as teacher feedback. It is often strongest with surface-level language problems and weaker with meaning, argument, genre, and rhetorical purpose. Bai and Hu (2017) showed that learners respond differently to fallible automated feedback. Some students treat the comments as prompts for reflection, while others accept or reject them mechanically. Zhang (2020) also found that engagement with AWE involves more than editing; students have to perceive the feedback as relevant, judge it, and decide how to revise. These findings are useful because they remind teachers that feedback is not learning until the learner has worked with it.

AWE is therefore better placed at the beginning of a feedback cycle than at the end. For example, a teacher may ask students to write a first draft independently, run it through an AWE tool, and then bring both the original and revised versions to class. The class discussion can focus on which suggestions were helpful, which were questionable, and what kinds of problems the tool could not see. In this arrangement, AWE is not a substitute for teacher response. It becomes a noticing device that prepares students for more meaningful discussion of content, organization, and genre (Karatay & Karatay, 2024).

2 Generative AI as a Writing Support Tool

Generative AI has changed the writing classroom more visibly than earlier grammar checkers because it can respond in ordinary language. A learner can ask ChatGPT to explain why a sentence sounds unnatural, to compare two expressions, or to suggest a more formal opening. This conversational quality makes the tool attractive to EFL students who may not have easy access to individual teacher consultation. It also makes the tool more difficult to control. The same prompt that asks for help with a sentence can be expanded into a request for a complete paragraph or essay. Several recent studies report positive learner experiences with ChatGPT-supported writing. Song and Song (2023) found benefits for academic writing and motivation, while Teng (2024) reported that learners often viewed ChatGPT as a companion for feedback rather than as a threat. Kurt and Kurt (2024), Polakova and Ivenz (2024), and Yan (2023) also show that generative AI can be used productively in L2 or EFL writing settings. These findings matter, but they need careful interpretation. A learner who receives a better draft after using AI has not necessarily become a better writer. The important question is whether the learner can explain the changes and repeat the improvement without the same level of support. This distinction is especially important in EFL settings where students are assessed through timed or semi-controlled writing tasks. A student may become used to asking AI for topic sentences, transitions, or vocabulary alternatives at home, but the examination room may not allow that support. If classroom practice does not address transfer, AI-assisted writing may create a gap between supported performance and independent performance. Warschauer et al. (2023) describe AI-generated text as both an opportunity and a contradiction for second and foreign language writers. It can provide models and reduce anxiety, but it can also hide the writer's actual developmental level.

3 Teacher-AI Integration and Pedagogical Mediation

The most defensible position in the current literature is not that AI should replace feedback, but that it should be placed within teacher-designed routines. Teachers decide the task, the timing of AI use, the acceptable level of assistance, and the evidence students must provide about their revision process. Without these decisions, AI use easily becomes private and invisible. A polished essay arrives, but the teacher cannot see whether the student corrected, copied, learned, or simply delegated the work. A useful classroom sequence might include four stages. First, students produce a short draft without AI assistance. Second, they use an AI tool for a limited purpose, such as identifying grammar problems or asking for an explanation of unclear sentences. Third, they annotate the changes they made and write two or three sentences explaining why they accepted or rejected particular suggestions. Fourth, the teacher responds to higher-order issues such as argument, genre, paragraphing, and audience. Such a sequence keeps AI inside the writing process, but it does not allow AI to become the main author. This mediation is particularly important for lower-proficiency learners. They may lack the grammatical or rhetorical knowledge needed to judge whether an AI suggestion is appropriate. A fluent sentence can still be inaccurate, too formal, off-topic, or inconsistent with the learner's intended meaning. Teachers therefore need to model questions such as: Does this suggestion keep my meaning? Is it suitable for this assignment? Can

I explain the grammar change? Would I be able to write a similar sentence next time? These questions turn AI from a correction machine into an object of classroom inquiry.

Teacher mediation is also ethical. A teacher understands the syllabus, examination expectations, students' previous writing, and the affective side of feedback. AI does not know these things in the same way. It may supply language, but it does not know what a particular class has studied or what a particular learner is ready to attempt. For that reason, AI feedback should be treated as raw material for learning, not as a final judgment on a student's writing (Ferris, 2014; Karatay & Karatay, 2024).

4 Learner Engagement, Self-Regulation, and Feedback Literacy

The effectiveness of AI feedback depends heavily on learner engagement. Engagement is not simply the number of changes made in a draft. It includes reading the feedback, understanding the reason for a suggestion, deciding whether it fits the text, and feeling confident enough to revise without losing one's own voice. Yan and Zhang (2024) show that learners' engagement with ChatGPT-generated corrective feedback includes behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions. This is a useful reminder that students may appear active on the page while doing very little thinking, or they may reject a suggestion after careful reasoning. Feedback literacy provides a helpful lens here. Carless and Boud (2018) describe feedback literacy as the capacity and disposition to understand and use feedback. AI makes this capacity more urgent. In teacher feedback, students usually know that a human reader is responding to their text. In AI feedback, the source appears confident but may not understand the task in the same contextual way. Students therefore need to learn that a fluent response is not necessarily a correct or appropriate response. They should also learn that disagreement with AI can be academically responsible when it is justified. Self-regulation is the point at which AI support becomes most ambiguous. On one hand, AI can reduce the time students spend locating local errors, giving them more attention for content and organization. On the other hand, it can weaken monitoring if students rely on the tool for planning, phrasing, correcting, and revising. One practical way to protect self-regulation is to require a revision trail: the first draft, selected AI feedback, the revised draft, and a short explanation of revision decisions. This kind of record helps the teacher see learning rather than only surface polish. It also asks students to remain accountable for their final text.

5 Academic Integrity, Authorship, and Ethical Use

Generative AI has made academic integrity a practical writing issue. In earlier digital writing support, a student might use a spellchecker or dictionary. With generative AI, the same student can obtain a complete introduction, a list of arguments, or a rewritten essay. The boundary between help and substitution is therefore less obvious. Cotton et al. (2024) and Perkins (2023) argue that institutions need clearer responses to ChatGPT and similar tools. In EFL writing classes, this clarity has to reach the level of everyday task instructions. A complete ban is rarely convincing. Students can access AI outside class, and many will need to understand such tools in future study and work. A more useful response is to describe acceptable and unacceptable uses in plain language. For example, a teacher may allow students to ask AI to explain grammar errors, compare two vocabulary choices, or identify unclear sentences. The same teacher may prohibit asking AI to produce the essay, invent examples, or rewrite the whole draft. Disclosure can also be required. Students might submit the prompts they used and briefly explain what changed after AI feedback. UNESCO's guidance on generative AI in education and research stresses transparency, privacy, equity, age-appropriate use, and human agency (Miao & Holmes, 2023). These principles are relevant to EFL writing because learners may turn to AI partly from insecurity. If they believe their own English is not good enough, they may accept machine language too quickly. Ethical AI use

therefore requires more than a policy statement. It requires classroom practice in which students learn how to use assistance without surrendering authorship.

A Classroom-Oriented Framework for AI-Supported EFL Writing

The reviewed literature points to a simple but useful framework: feedback automation, pedagogical mediation, and learner agency. These three terms are not meant to create a new theory of writing. They are intended to help teachers and researchers describe what has to be balanced when AI enters the writing classroom. Feedback automation refers to what AI can provide quickly: comments, corrections, explanations, and alternative expressions. This is the obvious strength of the technology, especially in large classes. Pedagogical mediation refers to the teacher's work in deciding how the tool is used, when it is used, and how its feedback is evaluated. Learner agency refers to the student's responsibility for judging, revising, and explaining the final text. The three dimensions need one another. Automation without mediation can lead to mechanical acceptance. Mediation without agency can turn students into rule-followers. Agency without support can leave weaker learners unsure how to improve. For EFL writing instruction, the framework suggests a practical principle: AI should make revision more visible, not less visible. When AI use disappears behind the final draft, teachers lose evidence of learning. When AI use is documented, discussed, and connected to reflection, it can become part of the learning process. This does not remove all risk, but it gives teachers and students a clearer basis for responsible use.

Figure 1 visualizes this framework as a guided revision cycle in which AI feedback is used only after independent drafting and is followed by learner evaluation, teacher mediation, and reflective revision.

AI-Supported Writing as a Guided Revision Cycle

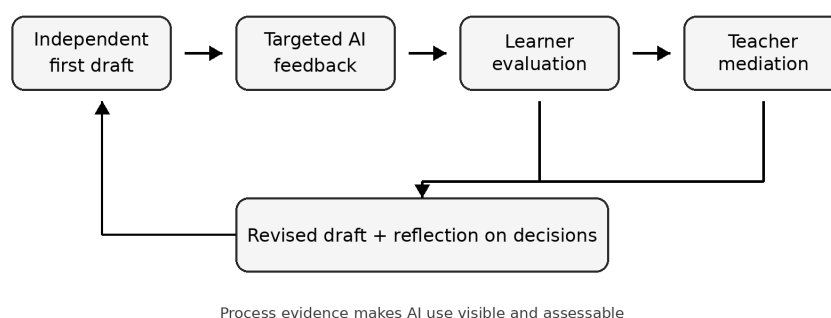


Figure 1. AI-supported writing as a guided revision cycle.

To translate this framework into classroom practice, Table 1 presents three guiding questions that teachers may use when planning AI-supported EFL writing tasks.

Table 1
Questions for Teacher-Guided AI Use in EFL Writing

Area	Guiding classroom question
AI feedback	What exactly is the tool being asked to do?
Teacher mediation	How will students check, discuss, and document the feedback?
Learner agency	What evidence shows that the student made the final revision decision?

While these questions apply broadly to AI-supported writing, different AI tools do not support writing in the same way. Table 2 therefore compares automated writing evaluation and generative AI in terms of their classroom functions, feedback scope, interaction patterns, risks, and recommended pedagogical roles.

Table 2
Comparison of Automated Writing Evaluation and Generative AI in EFL Writing Contexts

Feature	Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE)	Generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT)
Primary function	Grammar, spelling, and mechanics checking	Explanation, rephrasing, outline, and text generation
Feedback scope	Surface-level errors; limited rhetorical feedback	Surface and discourse level; can address argument and style
Interaction style	Automated scoring and flagging	Conversational; responds to learner prompts
Key risk	Mechanical acceptance without understanding	Overdependence; authorship and integrity concerns
Recommended classroom role	Noticing device at the start of the feedback cycle	Mediated writing companion within teacher-designed tasks

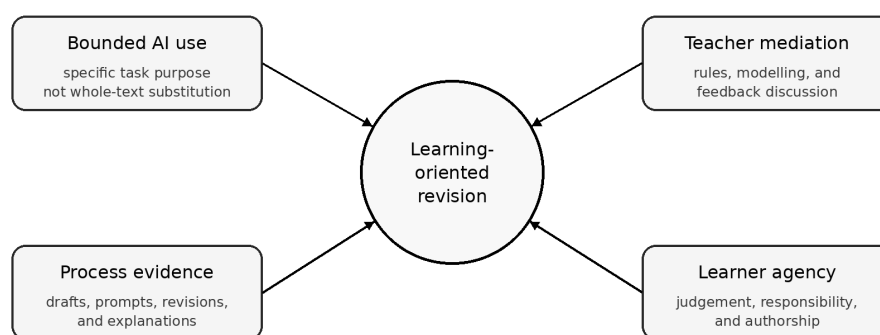
This comparison shows that AI-supported writing should not be treated as a single pedagogical practice. Automated writing evaluation and generative AI differ in their functions, risks, and classroom roles. Therefore, teachers need to make tool-specific decisions about when AI should be used, how its feedback should be checked, and how students should remain responsible for their own revision. The following discussion builds on this point by considering the implications of AI-supported writing for feedback, assessment, learner responsibility, and future classroom research.

Discussion

The literature reviewed here suggests that AI can increase access to feedback in EFL writing. That is a real benefit. In many classrooms, students write, receive a grade or a few comments, and then move to the next topic. AI can interrupt this pattern by giving students something to respond to while the draft is still open. It can also reduce some routine correction work, allowing the teacher to spend more time on meaning, organization, and rhetorical effect. However, the same evidence does not support a simple claim that AI produces better writers. A better-looking text is not always evidence of development. The learner may have understood the feedback, or may simply have accepted a machine-generated revision. This distinction is important for EFL settings because students often need to demonstrate independent writing ability in examinations or controlled classroom tasks. If AI practice does not transfer to unaided writing, its pedagogical value is limited. The most useful implication is to design AI use around process evidence. Teachers can ask students to keep original drafts, prompts, AI comments, revised versions, and short explanations of revision choices. This is not only an integrity measure; it is also a learning measure. It shows whether students can notice a problem, compare alternatives, and justify a change. It also gives teachers a basis for discussing feedback literacy in concrete terms. Assessment also needs to be reconsidered. Take-home writing tasks cannot be interpreted in the same way when generative AI is widely available. Teachers may need to combine take-home drafting with in-class writing, oral

explanation, annotated revisions, and reflection notes. Such assessment does not assume that AI will disappear. Instead, it asks students to show what they can do with and without support. This is especially relevant in secondary-school EFL contexts, where students may be preparing for examinations that do not permit AI assistance. In practical terms, this review suggests that teachers should not introduce AI writing tools as general-purpose correction services. Instead, AI use should be linked to specific writing goals, such as identifying recurring grammar problems, comparing alternative expressions, improving paragraph clarity, or reflecting on revision decisions. Students should also be asked to preserve evidence of their writing process, including the original draft, selected AI feedback, revised text, and a brief explanation of accepted or rejected suggestions. Such practices can help shift AI-supported writing from product improvement to learning-oriented revision. Figure 2 further summarizes the conditions under which AI use is more likely to support learning-oriented revision rather than simple text improvement.

Conditions for Learning-Oriented AI Use in EFL Writing



AI contributes to writing development only when support, visibility, and responsibility are aligned.

Figure 2. Conditions for learning-oriented AI use in EFL writing.

The contribution of this review is therefore not a general endorsement of AI writing tools. It is a more cautious argument: AI-supported writing can be educationally useful when it is made visible, limited by task purpose, mediated by teachers, and connected to learner responsibility. Without these conditions, the tool may improve the text while doing little for the writer.

Limitations of This Review

This article has several limitations. It is a narrative review rather than a systematic review, so it does not offer an exhaustive search record, duplicate screening, formal quality appraisal, or a complete included-study table. Its claims should be read as an interpretive synthesis of selected literature. The choice is appropriate for the purpose of this paper, but it also means that the review cannot estimate the overall effect of AI feedback on writing outcomes. A second limitation is the unevenness of the current literature. Many studies on generative AI and writing involve university students, short interventions, or perception-based data. The findings cannot be transferred automatically to younger learners, lower-proficiency writers, or examination-oriented classrooms. A third limitation is the speed of technological change. Tools available in 2026 may differ substantially from those examined in studies published only a few years earlier. For this reason, the article emphasizes classroom principles rather than tool-specific recommendations.

Finally, the review brings together different kinds of evidence: empirical studies, reviews, meta-analyses, technology reviews, and policy documents. These sources do not carry the same

evidential weight. Empirical studies are used to illustrate classroom possibilities; reviews and meta-analyses are used to indicate broader patterns; policy documents are used to frame ethical concerns. This distinction should be kept in mind when interpreting the argument.

Future Directions

Future research should examine what learners can do after AI support is removed. A revised draft may improve immediately after ChatGPT or an AWE tool is used, but this does not show whether the learner has developed independent control. Longitudinal studies should therefore compare supported revision with later unaided writing. Measures could include accuracy, organization, lexical choice, self-editing behavior, and students' explanations of their own revision decisions.

More work is also needed in secondary-school EFL classrooms. Much of the available evidence comes from higher education, where students may have stronger academic literacy and more developed self-regulation. Younger learners may need clearer boundaries, more modeling, and more teacher supervision. Studies should examine how age, proficiency, task type, teacher guidance, and assessment context interact instead of treating AI use as a single variable.

Finally, feedback literacy and AI literacy should be treated as learning outcomes. Students need to learn how to ask useful questions, compare feedback sources, identify unsuitable suggestions, preserve their own meaning, and disclose assistance honestly. Teachers need support as well, since designing AI-mediated writing tasks requires time, policy clarity, and professional judgment. The most important future question is not only whether AI improves scores, but whether it helps learners become more capable and responsible writers.

Conclusion

AI has changed the conditions under which EFL writing is taught and assessed. Automated writing evaluation and generative AI can give learners more feedback than teachers alone can usually provide. They can support noticing, revision, and experimentation with language. These advantages are particularly relevant in EFL classrooms where feedback is limited by time, class size, and examination pressure. Yet AI is not writing instruction. It can correct, suggest, and generate, but it cannot ensure that students understand the changes or can write independently later. For this reason, AI should be placed inside a teacher-guided process that keeps revision visible and keeps students responsible for their final texts. The framework proposed in this article—feedback automation, pedagogical mediation, and learner agency—offers one way to think about that process. For EFL writing teachers, the central task is not simply to permit or prohibit AI. It is to design writing activities in which AI support strengthens, rather than replaces, students' own capacity to write.

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