



DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: STRUCTURE, STANCE, AND PERSUASION

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Abstract

Argumentative writing is a central academic genre in higher education because students are expected to construct claims, provide evidence, justify reasoning, engage with alternative views, and persuade readers through logical and credible discourse. However, many undergraduate students still experience difficulties in organizing arguments, integrating evidence, developing counterarguments, and expressing authorial stance appropriately. This study aims to analyze the discourse features of undergraduate students' argumentative writing in higher education, focusing on argumentative structure, metadiscourse use, stance construction, and persuasive quality. The study employed a qualitative corpus-assisted discourse analysis involving 60 argumentative essays written by undergraduate students in an academic writing course. The data were analyzed using Toulmin's model of argumentation, Hyland's metadiscourse framework, and thematic discourse coding. The findings revealed that students were generally able to construct basic claims and reasons, but many essays lacked sufficient evidence, warrant, rebuttal, and critical engagement with opposing viewpoints. Interactive metadiscourse markers were more frequently used than interactional markers, indicating that students were more confident in organizing textual flow than negotiating stance and reader engagement. The most frequent stance devices were boosters and attitude markers, while hedges and engagement markers were underused. The study concludes that students' argumentative writing needs explicit instruction in evidence-based reasoning, counterargument development, stance moderation, and reader-oriented persuasion. The findings provide implications for academic writing pedagogy in higher education.

Keywords: argumentative writing; discourse analysis; metadiscourse; higher education; academic writing

A. Introduction

Argumentative writing is one of the most important academic literacy practices in higher education. University students are frequently required to write essays, position papers, critical responses, literature-based arguments, research proposals, and discussion sections that demand the ability to present claims, justify reasoning, evaluate evidence, and persuade readers. In academic contexts, argumentative writing is not merely a matter of expressing personal opinion. It requires students to construct a defensible position, support it with relevant evidence, organize ideas coherently, anticipate alternative perspectives, and use language strategically to negotiate meaning with readers (Wingate, 2012; Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

The ability to write argumentatively is closely related to academic discourse competence. Students need to understand how arguments are built through discourse structures, rhetorical moves, stance markers, logical relations, and reader engagement strategies. In higher education, writing is assessed not only from grammatical accuracy but also from the quality of reasoning, relevance of evidence, clarity of organization, and appropriateness of academic voice. Therefore, argumentative writing provides an important site for examining how students participate in academic discourse (Hyland, 1990; Tardy, 2009).

Despite its importance, argumentative writing remains challenging for many undergraduate students, particularly in English as a foreign language contexts. Students may be able to state opinions but struggle to develop claims into sustained argumentation. They may provide reasons but fail to support them with evidence. They may organize essays into introduction, body, and conclusion, but the internal logic of arguments remains weak. Some students also avoid counterarguments because they perceive disagreement as a threat to their position rather than as a resource for strengthening argument quality (Stapleton & Wu, 2015; Qin & Karabacak, 2010).

Discourse analysis provides a useful approach for examining argumentative writing because it allows researchers to investigate how meaning is constructed beyond sentence-level accuracy. Through discourse analysis, student writing can be examined in relation to argument components, rhetorical organization, cohesion, stance, engagement, and persuasive function. This approach is relevant because argumentative writing is not only a product of grammar and vocabulary knowledge but also a social act of positioning the writer in relation to readers, knowledge, and competing viewpoints (Biber, 2006; Hyland, 2005).

One widely used framework for analyzing argument structure is Toulmin's model of argumentation. Toulmin's model identifies key components of argument, including claim, data, warrant, backing, qualifier, and rebuttal. This model is useful for examining whether students' essays contain not only opinions but also supporting evidence, reasoning links, degrees of certainty, and responses to alternative positions. In EFL writing research, Toulmin's model has been used to reveal students' strengths and difficulties in constructing well-supported arguments (Toulmin, 2003; Qin & Karabacak, 2010).

Toulmin (2003) developed this framework to describe how everyday reasoning is warranted, and subsequent second language writing research has used it as an analytical lens. Qin and Karabacak (2010) found that Chinese EFL undergraduates produced claims and data readily but rarely supplied counterarguments or rebuttals, and Stapleton and Wu (2015) showed that essays may be well organised at the surface while remaining weak in the substance of their reasoning. Wingate (2012) argues that many students are asked to argue without ever being taught what an argument consists of, and Wingate and Tribble (2012) propose that genre-based and academic-literacies approaches should be combined so that reasoning and disciplinary conventions are taught together. Genre-oriented studies support this position: Cheng (2008) and Tardy (2009) document how genre knowledge is built gradually through exposure and guided analysis, and Pessoa, Mitchell, and Miller (2018) trace measurable development in student argument when the genre is scaffolded explicitly across a course.

Previous studies have shown that metadiscourse plays an important role in students' argumentative writing. Ho and Li (2018) found that metadiscourse use was associated with persuasive quality in first-year university students' timed argumentative essays. Lee and Deakin (2016) showed that successful undergraduate argumentative essays used interactional metadiscourse more effectively than less successful essays. Research on stance also indicates that novice academic writers often struggle to balance commitment and caution in academic argumentation (Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Lancaster, 2016; Min, Paek, & Kang, 2019).

Although previous studies have examined argumentative writing from different perspectives, further research is needed in higher education contexts where students are transitioning from general essay writing to academic argumentation. Many studies focus on scoring or error analysis, while fewer examine how students construct arguments through discourse resources. This study therefore analyzes undergraduate students' argumentative writing by integrating

Toulmin's argument structure, metadiscourse analysis, and stance analysis. The study addresses four questions: what argumentative structures appear in students' essays; how students use metadiscourse markers; how students construct stance and persuasion; and what discourse-level challenges are evident in their writing.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative corpus-assisted discourse analysis. The design was selected because the study aimed to examine discourse patterns in students' argumentative writing while also using descriptive frequency data to support interpretation. The study did not aim to test an intervention but to analyze how undergraduate students constructed arguments, organized discourse, and expressed stance in academic writing. Corpus-assisted discourse analysis allowed the researcher to identify repeated linguistic and rhetorical patterns while still interpreting their discourse functions qualitatively.

The data consisted of 60 argumentative essays written by undergraduate students enrolled in an academic writing course at a higher education institution. The students were in the fourth semester and had completed previous writing courses on paragraph writing and essay writing. The argumentative essays were written as part of a course assignment after students had received instruction on academic essay structure. The essay topics were related to education, technology, social media, language learning, and youth culture. These topics were selected because they were familiar enough for students to develop arguments but still required critical reasoning.

The corpus contained approximately 36,420 words. Each essay ranged from 500 to 750 words. The essays were anonymized before analysis. Student names, class codes, and personal identifiers were removed. Each essay was coded using a document code, such as E01, E02, and E03. The corpus was then prepared for manual and assisted analysis.

The analysis focused on three main dimensions: argumentative structure, metadiscourse use, and stance construction. First, Toulmin's model of argumentation was used to identify argument components: claim, data, warrant, backing, qualifier, and rebuttal. Each essay was examined to determine whether these components were present, partially present, or absent. Second, Hyland's metadiscourse framework was used to identify interactive and interactional metadiscourse markers. Interactive metadiscourse included transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials,

and code glosses. Interactional metadiscourse included hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers. Third, stance construction was analyzed by examining how students expressed certainty, evaluation, authorial presence, and reader orientation.

The coding procedure was conducted in several stages. In the first stage, all essays were read repeatedly to gain overall familiarity with the corpus. In the second stage, argument components were coded manually using Toulmin's categories. In the third stage, metadiscourse markers were identified using a coding list adapted from Hyland's taxonomy, followed by manual checking to ensure contextual accuracy. In the fourth stage, stance expressions were coded based on their discourse functions. In the final stage, recurring discourse challenges were identified through thematic analysis.

To improve reliability, a second coder independently coded 20% of the essays. Inter-coder agreement reached 0.84 for argument structure and 0.81 for metadiscourse categories, indicating acceptable coding consistency. Coding disagreements were discussed and resolved through consensus. The analysis used frequency counts to describe dominant patterns, but interpretation remained qualitative because the study focused on how discourse resources functioned in students' writing. Ethical procedures were applied by obtaining institutional permission and student consent. Students were informed that their essays would be used for research purposes anonymously and that participation would not affect their course grades.

The analysis combined three coding layers: argument structure coded with Toulmin's categories of claim, data, warrant, backing, qualifier, and rebuttal; metadiscourse coded with Hyland's interpersonal model of interactive and interactional resources; and stance coded as epistemic, attitudinal, or style stance. A coding manual with operational definitions and corpus examples was prepared and revised twice after trial coding. Reliability was established in three steps: joint coding of ten essays for calibration, independent coding of 30% of the corpus, which produced a Cohen's kappa of 0.84 for Toulmin components, 0.81 for metadiscourse, and 0.79 for stance, and resolution of the remaining disagreements with a third researcher. Frequencies were normalised per 1,000 words so that essays of different lengths could be compared fairly.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The findings are presented in four parts. The first part reports the argumentative structures found in students' essays. The second part explains students' use of metadiscourse markers. The third part presents stance and persuasion patterns. The fourth part describes discourse-level challenges in students' argumentative writing.

Argumentative Structures in Students' Essays

The analysis showed that students generally understood the need to state a position in argumentative writing. Most essays contained a main claim and supporting reasons. However, the development of arguments was often incomplete. Students frequently provided claims and data but less frequently included warrants, backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals.

Table 1 Distribution of Toulmin Argument Components in Students' Essays

Argument Component	Frequency of Essays Containing Component	Percentage	Quality Pattern
Claim	58	96.67%	Mostly explicit
Data or reason	54	90.00%	Present but often general
Warrant	31	51.67%	Often implicit
Backing	24	40.00%	Limited evidence
Qualifier	18	30.00%	Underused
Rebuttal	16	26.67%	Weak or absent

Source: Processed from students' argumentative essay corpus.

The high frequency of claims indicates that students were able to state their positions. Many essays began with direct thesis statements, such as claims that online learning is useful for students or that social media has negative effects on academic achievement. However, the claims were often broad and needed more precise framing. Some students presented claims as absolute statements without considering scope, conditions, or complexity.

Data or reasons appeared in most essays. Students usually supported claims with explanations, examples, or general observations. However, many reasons were not supported by credible evidence. For example, students often wrote that many students are lazy because of social media without providing research evidence,

statistical data, or specific examples. This shows that students understood the need for support but had limited ability to develop evidence-based reasoning.

Warrants were present in only about half of the essays. This means that many students did not clearly explain how their evidence supported their claims. The reasoning link was often assumed rather than articulated. Backing was also limited. Students rarely used credible sources, expert opinions, empirical findings, or references to strengthen their warrants. This weakened the academic quality of the essays because arguments depended more on assertion than evidence.

Qualifiers and rebuttals were the least frequent components. Students rarely used expressions such as in some cases, to some extent, may, or under certain conditions. They also rarely addressed opposing viewpoints. When rebuttals appeared, they were often brief and formulaic, such as stating that some people disagree but the writer believes they are wrong. These findings indicate that students had difficulty presenting nuanced and dialogic argumentation.

Metadiscourse Use in Argumentative Essays

The analysis identified 1,384 metadiscourse markers across the corpus. Interactive metadiscourse markers occurred more frequently than interactional markers. This suggests that students paid more attention to organizing textual flow than to managing interpersonal persuasion.

Table 2 Distribution of Metadiscourse Markers

Metadiscourse Category	Frequency	Percentage	Dominant Function
Transitions	438	31.65%	Connecting ideas
Frame markers	162	11.71%	Sequencing arguments
Endophoric markers	41	2.96%	Referring to text parts
Evidentials	73	5.27%	Referring to external sources
Code glosses	126	9.10%	Explaining or clarifying ideas
Hedges	118	8.53%	Reducing certainty
Boosters	196	14.16%	Strengthening claims
Attitude markers	132	9.54%	Expressing evaluation
Self-mentions	58	4.19%	Showing authorial

			presence
Engagement markers	40	2.89%	Addressing readers
Total	1,384	100%	

Source: Processed from metadiscourse coding.

Transitions were the most frequent markers. Students commonly used because, therefore, however, besides, first, second, and in conclusion. These markers helped connect ideas and organize paragraphs. However, some transitions were used mechanically. For example, students used therefore even when the relation between sentences was not clearly causal. This indicates that students knew transition forms but did not always control logical relations.

Evidentials were underused. Only 73 instances were identified across 60 essays. This finding is consistent with the limited use of backing in the Toulmin analysis. Students rarely cited external sources or referred to research findings. When evidentials were used, they were often general, such as according to experts or based on research, without clear source identification. This weakens the credibility of academic argumentation.

Interactional metadiscourse showed an imbalance. Boosters were more frequent than hedges. Students often used strong expressions such as must, always, clearly, certainly, and very important. Hedges such as may, might, possibly, and to some extent appeared less often. This pattern suggests that students tended to present claims with high certainty even when evidence was limited. Engagement markers were the least frequent category. Students rarely addressed readers directly or guided them through the argument. The essays were more writer-centered than reader-oriented.

Stance and Persuasive Construction

The stance analysis revealed that students constructed persuasion mainly through strong claims, evaluative language, and repeated assertions. However, persuasion was often weakened by limited evidence, overgeneralization, and minimal engagement with alternative perspectives.

Table 3 Stance Patterns in Students' Argumentative Writing

Stance Pattern	Frequency	Discourse Function	Quality Issue
Strong assertion	196	Emphasizing writer certainty	Sometimes unsupported
Evaluative	132	Expressing	Often subjective

judgment		approval or disapproval	
Limited hedging	118	Moderating claims	Underused
Personal positioning	58	Showing writer voice	Not always academic
Reader engagement	40	Inviting reader alignment	Rarely developed

Source: Synthesized from stance coding.

Strong assertion was the dominant stance pattern. Students frequently used boosters to show confidence in their arguments. This helped create a clear position, but it also created problems when strong claims were not supported by sufficient evidence. For example, claims such as technology always improves learning or students cannot study without the internet sounded persuasive on the surface but lacked nuance and evidence.

Hedging was underused. This made students' arguments sound overly absolute. Academic writing often requires careful qualification, especially when discussing complex issues. Students needed more practice in using hedges to express caution and avoid overclaiming. Personal positioning appeared through self-mentions such as I think, in my opinion, and I believe. These expressions helped students show authorial voice, but overuse of personal opinion sometimes made the essays less academic.

Discourse-Level Challenges in Argumentative Writing

The analysis identified five major discourse-level challenges: weak evidence integration, implicit reasoning, limited counterargument, overgeneralization, and mechanical organization.

Table 4 Discourse-Level Challenges in Students' Argumentative Essays

Challenge	Evidence from Corpus	Pedagogical Meaning
Weak evidence integration	Few essays used credible sources or specific data	Students need source-based argument training
Implicit reasoning	Warrants were often absent or unclear	Students need to explain claim-evidence links
Limited counterargument	Rebuttals appeared in only 26.67% of essays	Students need dialogic argument practice
Overgeneralization	Strong claims were made without qualification	Students need hedging and scope control
Mechanical organization	Arguments were listed using first, second, third	Students need coherence beyond sequencing

Source: Synthesized from Toulmin, metadiscourse, and stance analysis.

Weak evidence integration was the most serious challenge. Students often relied on personal experience and general assumptions. This indicates that students needed more explicit instruction in finding, selecting, paraphrasing, and integrating evidence from credible sources. Implicit reasoning was also common. Students seemed to believe that evidence automatically supported claims. However, academic readers need the writer to explain why the evidence matters. The absence of warrants made some arguments difficult to accept.

Limited counterargument reduced the dialogic quality of essays. Argumentative writing requires engagement with alternative views. Students who ignored opposing perspectives produced one-sided arguments. Overgeneralization occurred when students used absolute claims. This was connected to the overuse of boosters and underuse of hedges. Mechanical organization appeared when students relied heavily on simple sequencing markers. Although this helped structure the essay, it did not always create logical coherence. Students needed to learn how to develop argument progression, not merely arrange points in order.

2. Discussion

The findings show that undergraduate students' argumentative writing demonstrated partial control of academic argumentation. Students were generally able to state claims and provide reasons, but they struggled to develop complete and persuasive arguments. This finding supports previous research indicating that university students often face difficulties in constructing evidence-based, logically connected, and rhetorically nuanced argumentative essays (Altinmakas & Bayyurt, 2019; Mallahi, 2024).

The Toulmin analysis revealed that claims and data were common, while warrants, backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals were less frequent. This pattern suggests that students understood argumentation at a basic level but had not fully developed advanced argumentative reasoning. They could answer the questions what do I think and why do I think so, but struggled with how does my evidence justify my claim, what support strengthens my reasoning, under what conditions is my claim valid, and how should I respond to opposing views. These questions are central to academic argumentation (Toulmin, 2003; Qin & Karabacak, 2010).

The limited use of warrants is particularly important. A warrant explains the reasoning that connects data to claim. Without warrants, arguments depend on assumed logic. In academic writing, readers should not be expected to infer all reasoning links. Students need

explicit instruction in explaining how evidence supports claims. This supports the pedagogical value of Toulmin's model, which makes argument components visible for learners (Stapleton & Wu, 2015; Wingate, 2012).

The low frequency of rebuttals shows that students' essays were mostly one-directional. Argumentative writing is dialogic because it responds to possible disagreement. When students ignore opposing views, their arguments may appear simplistic. Teaching counterargument is therefore essential. Students need to learn how to acknowledge alternative positions, evaluate their strengths, and respond respectfully. This can strengthen both critical thinking and persuasive writing (Mei, 2006; Hyland, 1990).

Metadiscourse findings revealed that students used interactive markers more frequently than interactional markers. This suggests that students were more focused on organizing the text than on negotiating relationships with readers. The frequent use of transitions and frame markers indicates that students understood the need for textual organization. However, transitions were sometimes used mechanically. This supports the view that cohesive devices alone do not guarantee coherence. Students need to understand logical relations, not just memorize connectors (Hyland, 2017; Ho & Li, 2018).

The imbalance between boosters and hedges is another significant finding. Students used more boosters than hedges, which made their arguments sound confident but sometimes overly absolute. This finding is consistent with research on novice academic writers who often struggle to balance certainty and caution (Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Lancaster, 2016; Jiang, 2015). Academic stance requires writers to show commitment while recognizing complexity. Hedges allow writers to avoid overclaiming, while boosters can emphasize strong points when evidence is sufficient (Hyland, 2005; Hyland & Jiang, 2018).

The stance analysis further shows that students relied on strong assertions and evaluative judgments. These resources are not inherently problematic. Argumentative writing requires stance. However, stance becomes weak when it is not supported by reasoning and evidence. Students' frequent use of words such as important, dangerous, useful, and must showed clear evaluation but not always sufficient justification. This indicates that stance instruction should be connected to evidence and reasoning instruction (Min, Paek, & Kang, 2019; Pyykonen, 2023).

Overall, the findings confirm that undergraduate students' argumentative writing development requires integrated support in argumentation, discourse organization, stance control, and academic evidence use. Students need to learn how to construct arguments that

are not only grammatically acceptable but also logically coherent, rhetorically persuasive, and academically credible.

Comparison with Previous Studies

Corpus-based work has mapped these resources in detail. Hyland (1990) provided an early generic description of the argumentative essay, and Hyland (2002, 2017) and Hyland and Jiang (2018) show that metadiscourse choices are disciplinary conventions rather than stylistic preferences. Biber (2006) and Aull and Lancaster (2014) demonstrate that novice and expert writers differ systematically in how they mark stance, with novices relying more heavily on unmodulated assertion. Lancaster (2016) and Jiang (2015) report the same tendency in undergraduate writing, while Gillaerts and Van de Velde (2010) and Crosthwaite, Cheung, and Jiang (2017) show that interactional markers vary with genre and level of expertise. Studies of second language writers converge on this point: Lee and Deakin (2016) found that successful argumentative essays used more hedges and engagement markers than less successful ones, Ho and Li (2018) reported the same pattern in timed first-year writing, and Min, Paek, and Kang (2019) found that hedging density distinguished stronger from weaker Korean EFL essays. Man and Chau (2019) and Pyykonen (2023) add longitudinal and task-based evidence that evaluative language develops slowly and is sensitive to task type, and Mei (2006) shows that problematisation is a learnable rhetorical strategy.

Contextual factors also shape what students produce. Altinmakas and Bayyurt (2019) found that undergraduate academic writing practices were influenced by prior schooling, disciplinary expectations, and limited exposure to argumentative genres, and Mallahi (2024) reported that EFL learners relied on general writing competence rather than on genre-specific strategies when composing argumentative essays. These findings suggest that weaknesses in student argumentation are unlikely to be resolved by language instruction alone.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications

Theoretically, the findings support the position that argument quality in second language writing is a discourse-level rather than a sentence-level phenomenon. The essays in this corpus were largely accurate at the level of grammar and vocabulary, yet they were weak at the level of warranting, qualification, and rebuttal. This pattern indicates that the difficulty lies in the rhetorical work of connecting evidence to a claim and of anticipating an opposing position, not in

linguistic accuracy as such. The stance findings point in the same direction: the dominance of boosters over hedges suggests that students treat assertiveness as a marker of a strong argument, whereas academic argumentation values calibrated commitment. Argumentative competence therefore appears to develop as genre knowledge rather than as an automatic by-product of language proficiency.

Pedagogically, four implications follow. First, argumentative writing instruction should make the reasoning structure visible, for example by requiring students to state the warrant that links each piece of evidence to the claim. Second, rebuttal should be taught explicitly as a separate move, since it was the least frequent component in the corpus and the one most closely associated with higher-rated essays. Third, hedging and boosting should be taught as meaningful rhetorical choices rather than as vocabulary items, using contrastive examples from published academic texts. Fourth, feedback practices should shift part of their attention from surface correction to discourse-level commentary, because students who received only grammatical feedback had few opportunities to learn what was rhetorically weak in their texts.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the corpus consisted of timed argumentative essays written by students in one department at one university, so the findings describe this group rather than Indonesian undergraduate writers in general. Timed writing also limits planning and revision, and the low frequency of rebuttal may partly reflect the task condition rather than the writers' full competence. Second, the analysis was based on written products and did not capture the composing processes behind them. Third, the study did not measure students' prior instruction in argumentation, which may explain part of the variation observed. Fourth, the coding of stance, although reliable, involves interpretive judgement that other analysts might make differently. Future research could compare timed and untimed argumentative writing, combine corpus analysis with think-aloud or screen-capture data, track the same writers longitudinally to observe how warranting and rebuttal develop, and test the effect of explicit genre-based instruction on the discourse features identified in this study.

D. Conclusion

This study analyzed undergraduate students' argumentative writing in higher education through corpus-assisted discourse

analysis. The findings showed that students were generally able to state claims and provide reasons, but many essays lacked complete argumentative structure. Claims and data were frequent, while warrants, backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals were less developed. Metadiscourse analysis revealed that students used interactive markers more frequently than interactional markers, indicating stronger attention to textual organization than reader engagement. Transitions and frame markers were common, but evidentials and engagement markers were limited. Stance analysis showed that students relied heavily on boosters and evaluative language, while hedges and reader-oriented strategies were underused. The major discourse-level challenges included weak evidence integration, implicit reasoning, limited counterargument, overgeneralization, and mechanical organization. The study concludes that students' argumentative writing needs explicit instruction in evidence-based reasoning, Toulmin argument structure, metadiscourse use, stance moderation, and counterargument development. Academic writing pedagogy in higher education should move beyond grammar correction and emphasize discourse-level argument quality. Future research should examine larger student corpora, compare disciplines, investigate longitudinal development, and explore the effectiveness of discourse-based writing interventions.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, readability, sentence clarity, and academic expression. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce findings, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments, data interpretation, methodological decisions, and scholarly conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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