

Knowledge Management in Academic Writing Tasks of Undergraduate Students in Selected Kenyan Universities

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Abstract- *Being a critical component of learning in higher education in Kenya, academic writing has necessitated the Commission for University Education to suggest measures to regularize and standardize academic expectations that guide how institutions of higher learning manage this aspect of the study. Academic writing assignments are a measure of demonstrating acquisition of knowledge, development of critical thinking skills, as well as conceptualization and concretization of ideas through reading and writing. It has, therefore, been used over the years in form of assignments and research reports, especially in higher education. In the face of so much criticism in the recent past, ranging from negative attitudes to unethical practices among the students, this chapter seeks to illuminate this practice with a view of arguing that how knowledge is managed in institutions of higher learning has a huge role in influencing the realization of goals set for this academic space. The findings indicated that the practice of academic writing in institutions of higher learning is characterized by a myriad of challenges that may need to be addressed if students are to be adequately prepared. It also explores possible solutions that would enhance the credibility of writing tasks in higher education as a way of ensuring that Kenyan learners are provided with world-class standards in the acquisition of knowledge and skills. With the substantial expansion of higher education in Kenya, this study hopes that a conversation on acceptable standards of knowledge management would contribute to and revolutionize the academic undertakings of undergraduate students in Kenya and beyond.*

Keywords: Academic writing, knowledge management, writing tasks, critical thinking

Introduction

Irrespective of whether one is a fresh high school graduate or a mature student returning after years away from academic life, Murray and Hughes (2008) observe that the prospect of writing College or University assignments and research projects can be a daunting one. This, understandably, causes a lot of anxiety, especially when a student is faced with writing projects of more than 2000 words. In such a situation, an ability to be critical in one's own writing skills through awareness of the many facets of the writing process which may include: capturing, retrieving, sharing, retrieving information, as well as an understanding of the mechanics of writing is essential. These aspects are what this chapter refers to as *knowledge management* (Awad & Ghaziri, 2007).

It has been observed that many employing organizations have to re-train their employees, particularly, in the area of reading and writing, which raises the question of the quality of writing skills in the institutions of higher learning. According to The Daily Nation (2013), Kenyan Universities are churning out thousands of half-baked graduates annually, because a large number of students have been paying third parties to write their theses, academic reports and answers for take-home assignments. They further observed that the practice is so widespread that the scandal has made employers raise the red flag, saying that prospective candidates consistently fail industry tests. This kind of scenario has also been described by Ndivo (2014), who observed that the criticism came to the fore, yet again, during the occasion of releasing the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination (KCSE-2013) results, when the then Kenyan Cabinet Secretary for Education, Prof. Jacob Kaimenyi, decried the sorry state of performance in English even among those students who, seemingly, had performed well. Furthermore, while an avid reader would develop good penmanship, it has been observed that many students read for exams and not for knowledge.; Musgrove (2006) has argued that many students do not take written tasks seriously, while for Moore (2016), and hence, businesses spend many billions on remedial training of new employees in aspects such as report writing skills and emails writing, since weak writing skills can be a hindrance to business growth.

Many people consider English writing skills as essential, not only for academic reasons but for business, political and social concerns as well. Competence in linguistic and writing skills in the language of instruction enables a student to immensely benefit from the opportunities that such ability provides. It has, however, been observed that reading and writing skills are not very popular activities among today's aspiring elites in higher education. Investigations by the *Daily Nation* (2013) uncovered a racket in which students buy ready answers for take-away exams, projects, and thesis reports that are then presented for marking. The situation seems to persist, according to Lecturers' reports, despite universities putting in measures to curb the vice. This phenomenon has such significance in the life of a nation that it needs to be scrutinized if learners in higher education are to measure up to the expected standards. This study, therefore, in illuminating the issues affecting this aspect of learning, argues that the findings can contribute to the ongoing conversations surrounding acceptable standards of knowledge management in higher education and how the Kenyan undergraduate learner can be prepared to survive within world-class standards in the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Methodology

Descriptive survey design was used in this study. This enabled the study to collect a broad range of data such as attitudes, opinions, beliefs, values, behaviors, and facts. A random sample of twelve percent of all chartered Universities in Kenya was selected, where a sample of third- or fourth-year students from the sampled Universities responded to a questionnaire with both open- and closed-ended questions. Two Lecturers from each of the sampled universities also responded to an open-ended questionnaire. The target population included students from both public and private universities, as well as Lecturers in both categories of universities. The inclusion of both public and private universities provides diversity. Collected data were coded, summarized, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software as per the objectives of the study.

The Universities are coded as A-F and, thus, appear as UA for University A up to UF for University F (UF). The respondents are coded with numbers. For instance, the first respondent in university A is referred to as UA R1 (University A, Respondent 1), during the analysis of qualitative views. Lecturers, too, are coded depending on the universities that they come from and are identifiable by numbers. For instance, a second Lecturer from the second university will be UB, L2. Universities A, C, and E are public, while universities B, D, and F are private. The results from the data collected, which are in frequency tables, are presented in percentages, while qualitative responses have been used in qualifying quantitative results, as well as different perspectives during discussions of the findings.

Results and Discussions

Knowledge management in this paper refers to the sourcing, interpretation and organization of content meant for writing academic tasks. It is influenced by a clear understanding of the process of academic writing and all that it entails. Stark (2003) argues that writing a good research paper requires the student to understand all the phases of writing such as finding a topic, locating and evaluating sources, framing the thesis question and, eventually, writing. She observes that each aspect of this process depends on the others, and understanding this sequence is critical if one is to write a coherent paper. Good writing in her view starts with an investigative mind regarding a topic that is of interest to the writer; collecting the right information from different sources; organizing and interpreting it; all of which constitute the eventual product: the academic paper.

Knowledge management in institutions of higher learning encounters a number of challenges which, if not addressed, can ruin the good intentions meant to be achieved through this learning activity at the University. Some of these areas are established by the current study. The frequency distribution tables, below, present the challenges facing students during academic writing. They are scored on a scale of 1(Strongly disagree) 2 (Disagree); 3 (Neutral); 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly agree).

Challenges facing students

The study established that learners in Kenyan institutions of higher learning face numerous academic writing challenges. One of such challenges is a negative attitude that arises from students feeling like the activity is not seriously handled by their Lecturers and the entire University community, so, they do not think that it contributes much to their academic excellence. The frequency distribution Table 1, below, is a representation of those views from students.

Table 1
Students’ attitude towards academic writing as a non-serious activity

University	Likert Scale Scoring (%)				
	S/Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	S/Agree
A	4.0	4.0	4.0	20.4	67.3
B	10.2	2.5	25.6	25.6	35.8
C	13.0	4.3	8.6	26.0	47.8
D	13.3	3.3	6.6	20.0	56.6
E	7.5	12.5	12.5	30.0	37.5
F	2.0	0.2	12.5	31.2	54.1
Mean ± SE	8.33±1.91	4.43±1.73	11.63±3.10	25.53±1.90	49.85±4.90

A combined score of those respondents who agreed and those who strongly agreed from all the Universities is a significant score of 75.4%, with University C which is public having a combined score of 73.8%and University F which is private having a high score of 85.3%. This study, therefore, reveals that when students have such a negative attitude, they may not see the need to put in as much effort to excel in this academic activity. It eventually just becomes an academic routine. Some students, too, do not view written assignments as having lifelong learning benefits, but rather, as an activity that will boost their grades: instant gratification. In such a case, the seriousness accorded to the activity may, thus, be wanting. Consider a respondent’s view:

UF, R31: Term papers are essential if taken seriously because they can assist a student to boost their grades. As for me, I can do anything to get good marks on a term paper...

Another respondent argued that if term papers were important, it would be seen in the way Lecturers handled this kind of learning activity. Consider the response below:

UB, R44: Students need guidance from their Lecturers on how to write well. Most of them just give questions, do not explain how to do them and when they are returned, they are full of negative comments.

There is also the view that students may be treating the activity as a waste of time as in the response below:

UD, R23: Some students consider term papers as a waste of time, since many times we just see grades with no evidence on the paper as to how the Lecturer arrived at that grade.

With such perceptions, negative attitudes are nurtured and these have adverse effects eventually on the overall goal of academic writing tasks as a means of academic growth. Another challenge is how students perceive their own writing abilities and whether such a perception contributes to their attitudes towards academic writing tasks, as can be observed from the table below:

Table 2
Students' perceptions towards their writing abilities.

University	Likert Scale Scoring (%)				
	S/Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	S/Agree
A	12.2	18.3	8.1	22.4	38.7
B	5.1	7.6	30.7	28.2	28.2
C	21.7	30.4	4.3	21.7	21.7
D	0.0	3.3	6.6	43.3	46.6
E	20.0	12.5	15.0	35.0	17.5
F	6.2	10.4	10.4	43.7	29.1
Mean ± SE	10.86±3.53	13.75±3.90	12.51±3.92	32.38±4.02	30.30±4.39

As can be observed from the findings of the study, students generally perceive their writing abilities as an aspect that can be an impediment to good writing. According to their views, an average of above half the number of respondents from five Universities responded in the affirmative with regard to the question on whether writing abilities can impact negatively on the

overall performance in writing tasks. This means that they regard writing skills as a critical component of good writing, subsequently, translating into academic excellence as illustrated through the views below from some of the respondents:

UA, R21: Good writing skills can make a graduate more appealing to an employer and, so, students should be made to write well, even though, at times they do not want to. As a working student, I know this is important.

UD, R3: I did not know how important writing on my own is, until we went to an interview that required us to do a write-up in our own handwriting, after which, we were also to go through an oral evaluation in English. The points for disqualification, as it later emerged, included: the inability to explain a point without switching to Kiswahili, poor paragraphing in the written work, spellings, and poor handwriting. I now take writing seriously.

However, some Lecturers who gave their responses regarding their students' writing abilities and linguistic competence argued that critical though this aspect is, students are either not well prepared by the time they join University, or they do not care enough to want to improve, as can be observed from the responses below:

UB, L1: One wonders whether the English taught in high schools really prepare students for higher education, because they are just too weak in grammar.

UE, L1: The linguistic background of most of our students is wanting. The high stakes exam model only prepares them for passing exams. Few go to University for academic purposes, other than earning credentials that will get them a job. Intellectual pursuits are the last things on their minds.

UC, L2: Our students are not adequately prepared for writing tasks. Most of them struggle with the basics of language such as sentence formation, punctuations and word utilization

Galco (2001) has argued that good writing involves learning how to read and understand a writing assignment, ability to demonstrate language competences required, use of conventional approaches to writing, as well as use of strategies that make a writer confident and proficient. He further observes that writing is a lifelong skill that is needed, not only in school, but in our professions as well. It, therefore, means that students at University need to enhance their writing capabilities for them to stand out academically and professionally.

The study also sought to find out whether issues related to the use of secondary sources when responding to writing tasks pose any challenges. Academic writing in many institutions, and for many disciplines in undergraduate studies, involves an investigation from secondary sources of information. Some institutions refer to such an activity as desktop research. Sometimes, the way students perceive this undertaking, can be the source of the challenges that they face while writing. However, the findings of this study show that students do not perceive the use of secondary sources as a significant challenge. This is evident through the frequency distribution mean of those who strongly disagreed (25.78 with a standard error of ± 3.67) against the mean of those who just disagreed with this view, who had a mean of 24.35 with a standard error of ± 3.58 , whose representation is seen in Table 3, below:

Table 3
Students' perceptions towards the use of secondary sources as challenging.

University	S/Disagree	Likert Scale Scoring (%)			S/Agree
		Disagree	Neutral	Agree	
A	18.3	26.5	16.3	14.2	44.8
B	25.6	17.9	25.6	15.3	15.3
C	21.7	21.7	8.6	30.4	17.3
D	43.3	40.0	0.0	10.0	6.6
E	25.0	15.0	17.5	22.5	20.0
F	20.8	25.0	27.0	22.9	4.1
Mean \pm SE	25.78 \pm 3.67	24.35 \pm 3.58	15.83 \pm 4.18	19.21 \pm 3.02	18.01 \pm 5.92

Students do not perceive sourcing for information as a challenge. Nevertheless, the Lecturers view the matter differently. They argue that the use of secondary sources involves an ability to read, evaluate sources for credibility, reliability, accuracy and timeliness, all of which must contribute significantly into the written product that students eventually come up with. The use of appropriate use of documentation is a critical part of this process. Consider the Lecturers' responses below:

UD, L2: Synthesizing information from reading is a problem for most students. They will, either copy everything they think is useful without bringing in the context of the question, or they may not even mention that they read from some sources, so, end up with a plagiarized write-up.

UE, L1: Some students are too lazy, so they just copy and paste from the Internet and

present that as an answer to whatever question they were answering. Sometimes, relating what they submit to what was asked is, many times, a problem.

Students, therefore, should be made aware that there is more to desktop research, over and above mere reading, since being a process, as well as a product, writing serves learning. It possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond to powerful learning strategies, such as composing, creativity, analysis and synthesizing, among others (Emig, 1977). All these must be evident in the write-ups that students generate.

Another major challenge plaguing writing tasks in institutions of higher learning is the presence of unethical practices in academic writing among Kenyan students, as evidenced by the findings of this study. These are captured in Table 4, below:

Table 4

Whether or not unethical practices exist in academic writing among Kenyan students

University	S/Disagree	Likert Scale Scoring (%)			S/Agree
		Disagree	Neutral	Agree	
A	10.2	4.0	8.1	26.5	51.0
B	10.2	10.2	23.0	15.3	41.0
C	21.7	17.3	4.3	17.3	39.0
D	0.0	6.6	6.6	16.6	70.0
E	10.0	15.0	12.5	22.5	40.0
F	12.5	4.1	18.7	31.2	33.3
Mean ± SE	10.76±2.82	9.53±2.30	12.20±2.99	21.56±2.58	45.73±5.38

The results are astounding. Student respondents agree to the view that, sometimes, student writers demonstrate some unethical traits in their writing. The total mean for respondents who strongly agreed and those who just agreed that unethical practices are prevalent amongst our undergraduate scholars is about 67 %, which is quite significant. Most common unethical practices are cheating and plagiarism.

The quantitative findings are further accentuated by some qualitative views as shown below:

UA, R46: Some students pay others to do assignments for them. They should be discouraged right from the time that they join University.

UD, R20: Some students pay people to do assignments for them. Such people should be treated as criminals, because they kill a desire for growth in those students.

UF, R 29: Lecturers should not assume that every student is familiar with the writing

requirements such as plagiarism.

UB, R11: Sometimes, I am told that I have plagiarized, yet I thought that they were my ideas, I don't understand...

UA, R34: I believe that research assignments if managed well, would be better because when tests are given, students just carry 'mwakenyas' (short notes) and copy answers. Those of us who do not have the guts feel very bad.

These observations demonstrate the fact that unethical behavior is present in the academic practices of students, and as Kaufman (2008) has observed, students who cheat in class can easily build a non-moral unethical character and value system which is likely to affect their adult and professional lives. Such can easily adapt to a life of 'shortcuts', where they may be dishonest in the working world as well. Institutions of higher learning should, therefore, treat academic dishonesty with the seriousness that it deserves.

A fifth major challenge emanates from the use of the digital library. Taylor (2009), argues that many students' writing problems arise from the uncertainty of what it is that they have to communicate in their writing and what it is that they have to do. Most students will approach sources of information without clarity on what is expected in terms of the research task at hand. They end up experiencing 'library anxiety that could be as a result of information overload from significant amounts of irrelevant information, especially from search engines such as Google. This user anxiety can be relieved by having librarians available to assist users to navigate through the many sources of information that are available in different formats. Table 5 below is a representation of students' views regarding the use of the digital library.

Table 5
Whether or not students face difficulties when using the digital library

University	Likert's Scale scoring (%)				
	S/Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	S/Agree
A	14.2	18.3	16.3	24.4	26.5
B	7.6	20.5	15.3	20.5	35.8
C	13.0	17.3	13.0	26.0	30.4
D	3.3	13.3	20.0	40.0	23.3
E	15.0	15.0	15.0	20.0	35.0
F	12.5	22.9	20.8	20.8	22.9
Mean ± SE	10.93±1.85	17.88±1.43	16.73±1.24	25.28±3.10	28.98±2.31

A significant 51 % of respondents agreed to the fact that they face difficulties when using the digital library. Considering that 16 % were unsure, these statistics can be an indicator that this is a matter that institutions need to address if, at all, the academic experiences of students are to be enhanced. This is more so, because, although the Commission for University Education in Kenya (CUE) insists on printed resources during the process of program accreditation, many Universities have also subscribed to the digital platforms, because this allows them to access a richer number of resources such as E-books and journals. Such efforts would be futile if those resources are not being utilized by the students. Consider the respondents' views below:

UE, R2: Universities should ensure that students have enough knowledge on how to use online books. We only use a few books in the library and they are old and not enough.

UC, R7: I once heard that there is a platform called 'out of campus access' which allows people to read online books without going to the library. I wish I knew how to do that. It sounds cool.

UD, R34: Some students are ignorant about the role of a library in their academic journey. If they find no book on the shelves, they go complain that there are no books and that's why they Google. I am a fourth-year and only learned about the e-resources this semester.

UC, R19: Digital resources are not easy to access, due to poor internet on our campus. So, we just Google for answers using our phones.

It has been observed that librarians can empower students through Information literacy programs. This way, the students will be able to identify credible information sources, use them appropriately, and even consider the ethical issues regarding information use. Librarians can also contribute by gathering evaluative meta-information and designing it in a creative, timely, and transparent manner. Thus, as Koopman (2004) observes, the librarians will be adding value to knowledge management within this document-centered domain of academic writing. Otherwise, students often feel like there is a total disconnection between them and the library staff as seen through the following response:

UB, R26 The library staff are very rude. I do not feel like asking them anything, because the few times I have ever attempted, I have been disappointed.

Such sentiments are a pointer to the need for university management systems to be involved in monitoring the functions of the library since it is a critical organ of the academic division in a

university.

Knowledge management and academic writing

The study also sought to find out whether the respondents, being stakeholders in academic writing, had any suggestions towards how the identified challenges would be resolved. The figure below constitutes one such view, where respondents are of the opinion that students need training on how to engage in academic writing tasks.

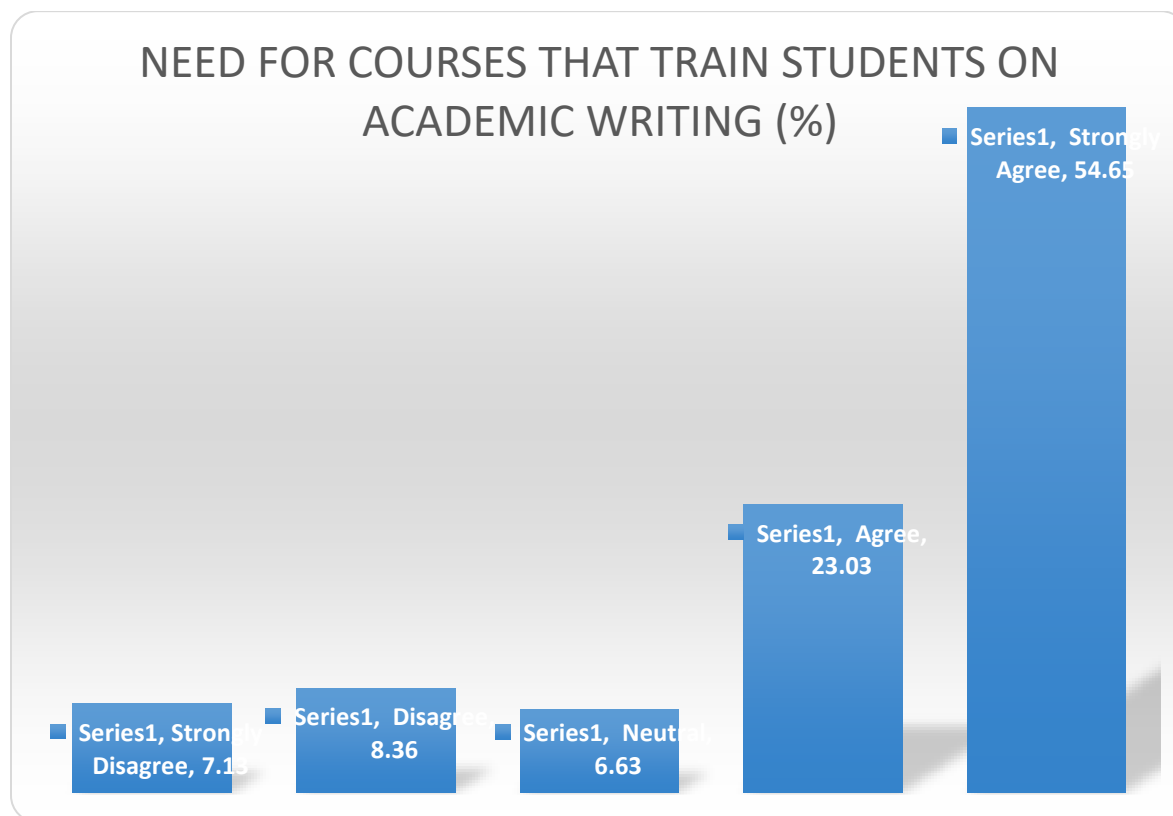


Figure 1: The need for courses that train students on academic writing.

The figure, above, is a representation of the extent to which Universities ought to offer courses that teach academic writing to their students. A combined percentage of 77 for those who agreed and those who strongly agreed indicates that there is a need for institutions of higher learning to train students on aspects of academic writing. Lecturers and professors too gave responses that attest to this deduction as observed from some of their views as indicated here below:

UB, L1: Universities should conduct seminars that will enhance the little accomplishments of the communication Skills course.

UC, L1: Universities to introduce more writing units as it is done in some private Universities. These should be compulsory for all students because my experience is that some who are quite brilliant are not up to standard in the speaking and writing skills department.

UD, L2: Universities can think of having a program that rewards students who write well, do not plagiarize and have high language competence, as a way of showing the students that this is valuable.

UE, L1: Universities can think of award-winning writing competitions as a way of encouraging students.

UF, L2: Lecturers to stop behaving as though these students were being taught research writing skills in high school. That attitude is damaging for students who come to university eager to learn, only to find professors who always criticize how they write.

As Whitaker (2009) has argued, academic writing is essentially the writing that students produce as responses to academic questions. It involves skills such as researching, evaluating, expressing ideas clearly, evaluating information, arguing, and responding to other people's arguments, among others. These skills are valued by employers and, so, academic writing becomes an essential form of training. When institutions enable their students to grow in these skills, they are empowering them; thus, increasing their chances for employability.

On the issue of acceptable standards for knowledge management in higher education, Kimile and Kemoni (2015) have argued that most Universities do not adequately, leverage on their knowledge as they lack a systematic and well-coordinated approach in Knowledge Management. There is no in-house policy that clearly states the position of the University with regard to this phenomenon, and there is no deliberate effort in ensuring that the University documents and shares her knowledge with outside users and knowledge seekers as a way of giving the University a competitive edge.

According to Caruana, Ramaseshan and Ewing (2000), unethical practices have been reported in both the public and private Universities. They affect students in almost all fields of study: Engineering, Business, and Humanities, among others. McCabe (1992), too, has observed that students are lured into unethical practices; for example, cheating, due to factors such as self-esteem, grade point average, pressure to obtain good grades, and intelligence levels. They suggest that Universities may need to partner with organizations that promote positive character

development in order to have programs that will help in the implementation of the same. All these efforts will underscore the unique value that writing has on an individual. Emig (1977) is of the opinion that ‘not writing’ should be seen as a loss to learners, since writing entails much more than merely fulfilling an academic requirement. The above suggestions if further explored and eventually implemented would go a long way in ensuring that the academic experience of the learner is one that molds them into becoming better students and, eventually, better professionals.

Conclusion

It is the contention of this study that academic writing constitutes an important aspect of learning in higher education. The study has identified a number of challenges that affect this domain such as weak writing skills, students’ perceptions, presence of unethical practices of writing, and lack of support by library staff, especially with regard to technical issues such as the e-platform, use of kindles and other soft wares like Zotero. University organs should know that they have a critical role in supporting students to develop the requisite skills that are critical in ensuring that they are provided with world-class standards as they acquire knowledge and skills which will enable them to become better scholars and, eventually, better professionals. As argued by Awad and Ghaziri (2007), by librarians storing, retrieving, and sharing information with library users, they will be supporting the objectives of Knowledge Management. This way, institutions of higher learning will nurture graduates who are well equipped for the modern globalized market.

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