

ECLASSOPEDIA PRESENTS

How to Write Like an IB Topper

The Definitive 2026 Guide to IB Academic Excellence

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A NOTE FROM ECLASSOPEDIA

At Eclassopedia, we have spent years working alongside IB students who transform into top scorers — students who don't just know their content but know how to express it. The single most decisive skill separating a 6 from a 7, or a good essay from a great one, is the craft of academic writing. This guide distills everything we know about how IB toppers write, think, and communicate. Read it carefully, practice deliberately, and let it become the foundation of your academic voice.

1. Understanding What IB Examiners Actually Want

Before you write a single word of an IB essay, Internal Assessment, or exam response, you need to understand who is reading your work and what they are looking for. The IB examiner is not your teacher, not a sympathetic audience, and not someone who will fill in the gaps for you. They are a trained assessor working through a structured markscheme, evaluating your response against very specific criteria.

The most common misunderstanding among IB students is that examiners reward volume — that a longer, denser answer will score higher. This is fundamentally incorrect. Examiners reward precision, clarity, and the ability to demonstrate understanding through well-structured argument. A concise, analytically sharp response will consistently outperform a rambling one.

1.1 The Anatomy of an IB Markscheme

Every IB subject has a markscheme or assessment criteria, and the finest IB writers treat these as their blueprint. In subjects like History and English, you are assessed on knowledge and understanding, analysis and evaluation, and structure and presentation. In sciences, you are assessed on personal engagement, exploration, analysis, and conclusion. In Economics, criteria include use of diagrams, real-world examples, and evaluation.

A student who has internalized the markscheme writes differently from one who is simply trying to fill pages. They ask themselves after every paragraph: does this paragraph demonstrate analysis? Does it contribute evidence? Does it advance my argument? Top scorers run this internal audit constantly as they write.

**KEY
INSIGHT**

Read the markscheme for your subject before you write a single practice essay. Highlight the verbs — analyze, evaluate, discuss, compare — and build your writing habits around them.

1.2 Command Terms and Why They Define Everything

The IB uses precise command terms in its questions, and these terms are not decorative. They are instructions. 'Analyze' means break down into components and examine each. 'Evaluate' means make a judgment supported by evidence and considering multiple perspectives. 'Discuss' means present arguments for and against. 'Examine' means investigate in detail.

IB toppers train themselves to immediately identify the command term in any question and calibrate their entire response to it. When a question says 'evaluate,' a response that merely describes earns poor marks. When it says 'compare and contrast,' a response that only discusses one side loses marks automatically. The first sixty seconds of any IB writing task should be spent decoding the command term and planning accordingly.

1.3 What Examiners Notice in the First Paragraph

Experienced IB examiners frequently report that they can predict a student's final band within the first paragraph. This is not because they are prejudging — it is because skilled academic writers announce their analytical framework immediately. They define key terms, establish their argument, acknowledge complexity, and signal their plan. A student who can do this in a clear, confident first

paragraph has demonstrated the hallmarks of a top-scoring writer before even reaching the substance of their argument.

This does not mean writing a long introduction. The best introductions are economical — three to five sentences that do heavy lifting. Every sentence should serve a function: context, thesis, or methodology. Decorative sentences that 'warm up' to the argument are a waste of examiner attention and reveal a lack of confidence.

2. The Architecture of a High-Scoring IB Essay

IB writing is not free-form creativity — it is disciplined, structured argument. The top scorers understand that structure is not a constraint on their thinking; it is the vehicle for communicating their thinking clearly. An essay without good structure is like a building without a frame: impressive materials that cannot stand on their own.

2.1 Building a Thesis That Can Carry an Essay

The thesis is the single most important sentence in any IB essay. It is the claim your entire essay will prove. A weak thesis is a description: 'This essay will discuss the causes of World War One.' A strong thesis is an argument: 'While nationalist tensions and imperial rivalry created the conditions for conflict, the rigid alliance system was the decisive structural factor that transformed a regional crisis into a global war.'

Notice the difference. The strong thesis is debatable — someone could reasonably disagree. It is specific — it identifies a precise claim. It is complex — it acknowledges contributing factors while asserting a hierarchy. And it is complete — a reader knows exactly what the essay will argue before reading a word more. This kind of thesis is what IB toppers produce.

ECLASSOPEDIA TIP

A reliable thesis formula: 'Although [counterargument or complexity], [your main argument] because [reason 1] and [reason 2].' This formula forces you to acknowledge nuance while committing to a position — exactly what examiners reward.

2.2 Paragraph Structure: The PEEL Framework and Beyond

Most students learn the PEEL paragraph structure (Point, Evidence, Explanation, Link), and it is genuinely useful as a foundation. However, IB toppers go further. They do not simply apply a formula — they understand why each component exists and how to make each one more powerful.

The Point (or topic sentence) should connect directly to your thesis. It is not enough to introduce a new idea — the topic sentence must show how this idea advances your central argument. 'Another cause of the crisis was...' is a weak topic sentence. 'The alliance system amplified every diplomatic failure into a potential *casus belli*, demonstrating how structural factors can override individual decision-making' is a strong one — it is analytical from the first word.

The Evidence must be precise and well-selected. Do not use evidence because it is all you can remember. Use evidence because it is the best available support for your point. IB toppers are selective — they would rather use one perfectly relevant piece of evidence and analyze it deeply than scatter three vague examples across a paragraph.

The Explanation is where most students lose marks and where IB toppers gain them. Explanation is not repetition of the evidence. It is the analytical work — the reasoning that connects the evidence to your point. 'This shows that...' is not analysis. 'This suggests that the decision-makers were constrained by institutional logic in ways that individual choice could not overcome, revealing how systemic factors operate independently of human agency' is analysis.

The Link brings the paragraph full circle and transitions smoothly to the next idea. IB toppers use their links not just to close a paragraph but to foreshadow the next argument, creating a sense of intellectual progression throughout the essay.

2.3 The Introduction That Signals Excellence

A compelling IB introduction does four things in rapid succession. First, it contextualizes the question within a broader intellectual framework — not with a sweeping historical generalization, but with a precise statement that shows understanding of the terrain. Second, it defines any terms that are

ambiguous or contested in the question. Third, it states the thesis clearly and directly. Fourth, it outlines the methodology — how the essay will approach the argument.

Top IB writers do not open with 'Since the dawn of time...' or 'Webster's dictionary defines...' These openings are cliches that signal inexperience. Instead, they open with a specific observation, a tension within the question, or a direct engagement with the central debate. The examiner should feel, from the opening sentence, that they are in the hands of a writer who knows exactly where they are going.

2.4 Crafting a Conclusion That Elevates, Not Repeats

The most common error in IB conclusions is treating them as a summary — a recitation of points already made. Examiners find this formulaic and it gains no additional marks. An outstanding conclusion should do something more: it should synthesize rather than summarize, consider the implications of the argument, acknowledge what remains uncertain or debated, and leave the reader with a sense of the essay's broader significance.

A powerful technique is the 'so what' test. After writing your conclusion, ask: so what? Why does this argument matter? What does it reveal about the bigger picture? If you can answer that question within two sentences and those sentences could not have appeared earlier in the essay, your conclusion is adding genuine value.

3. The Language of IB Excellence

IB toppers write with a distinctive academic voice — one that is precise without being jargon-heavy, confident without being arrogant, and complex without being unclear. Developing this voice is one of the most important things a student can do in the two years of the IB Diploma Programme.

3.1 Precision Over Complexity

A common mistake is confusing long words with sophisticated thinking. IB examiners are looking for precision — the right word in the right place — not vocabulary for its own sake. Using 'demonstrates'

when you mean 'shows' is fine. Using 'demonstrates' when 'proves' would be more accurate is sloppy. Using 'epistemological framework' when you mean 'way of knowing' without understanding the distinction is a red flag to any examiner.

Top IB writers build a vocabulary of analytical precision — words and phrases that do specific intellectual work. Words like 'nevertheless,' 'in contrast,' 'this suggests,' 'it is worth noting that,' 'a critical limitation of this view is,' and 'the evidence is consistent with, though not conclusive of' are not fancy flourishes. They are precise tools for signaling analytical moves.

**LANGUAGE
NOTE**

Build a personal glossary of analytical connectives and use them deliberately. The difference between 'but' and 'however, it is important to note that' is the difference between conversation and academic argument.

3.2 Hedging and Qualification: The Language of Nuance

One of the most striking features of high-scoring IB writing is the careful use of hedging language — the acknowledgment of uncertainty, limitation, and complexity. IB toppers do not say 'World War One was caused by the alliance system.' They say 'The alliance system can be interpreted as a primary structural cause, though historians continue to debate the relative weight of this factor against others such as imperial rivalry and domestic political pressures.'

This is not weakness or indecision. It is intellectual honesty, and it is exactly what IB assessment criteria reward. The ability to acknowledge that evidence is incomplete, that interpretations differ, and that conclusions are conditional — this is the mark of genuine critical thinking. It is also, not coincidentally, the approach taken by actual scholars and researchers in every discipline.

Useful hedging phrases include: 'the evidence suggests,' 'one interpretation is,' 'it could be argued that,' 'while this view has merit, it overlooks,' 'the data is consistent with, though not definitive of,' and 'scholars remain divided on.' Practice incorporating these phrases naturally until they become part of your academic reflex.

3.3 Signposting: Guiding Your Reader Through Complexity

Academic writing is a guided tour, not a scavenger hunt. IB toppers make their logical moves visible to the reader through clear signposting. They announce when they are introducing evidence, when they are shifting perspective, when they are acknowledging a counterargument, and when they are returning to their central thesis. This transparency is not hand-holding — it is sophisticated rhetorical control.

Effective signposting phrases include: 'This argument is supported by...', 'A compelling counterargument comes from...', 'Returning to the central question...', 'This analysis points toward...', 'To substantiate this claim...', and 'It is instructive to compare this with...'. These phrases create a reading experience that feels organized, intentional, and intellectually controlled — exactly the impression you want to make.

3.4 Writing About Evidence: The Difference Between Citing and Analyzing

One of the most important distinctions in IB writing is between citing evidence and analyzing it. Citing means presenting it. Analyzing means explaining what it means, why it matters, what it proves, and what its limitations are. Many students cite; far fewer analyze well.

When you use a statistic, a historical event, a scientific finding, or a textual quotation as evidence, you should follow a consistent analytical pattern. Name the evidence specifically. Explain its relevance to your argument. Assess its significance — is it typical or exceptional? Acknowledge its limitations — is it from a biased source? Is it a single data point? Does it prove your point conclusively or just support it?

This deeper engagement with evidence is what examiners mean when they refer to 'critical analysis' in their markschemes. It is the difference between a student who has done research and a student who has genuinely thought about what their research means.

4. Subject-Specific Writing Strategies

While the principles of academic writing apply across all IB subjects, each discipline has its own conventions, expectations, and examiner priorities. IB toppers understand these subject-specific requirements and adapt their writing accordingly.

4.1 History: Argument, Evidence, and Historiography

IB History rewards students who can construct a coherent, evidence-based argument while demonstrating awareness of historical debate. The finest History essays do not simply recount events — they argue about their significance, causation, and interpretation. Every claim is supported by specific historical evidence, and that evidence is situated within a broader historiographical context.

The most powerful tool in IB History writing is the integration of historiography — references to historians and their interpretations. When you write 'Historian A.J.P. Taylor controversially argued that Hitler was a conventional European statesman responding to opportunities rather than pursuing a grand design,' you are not just dropping a name. You are demonstrating that historical understanding is contested, that interpretations evolve, and that you can position evidence within this debate. This is exactly what Higher Level History examiners are looking for.

HISTORY TIP

For every major argument in your History essay, ask: which historian supports this view? Which disputes it? How do primary sources complicate the debate? Building this habit will dramatically improve your analytical depth.

4.2 English Literature: Close Reading and Contextual Awareness

IB English Literature rewards close, precise engagement with texts. The most common error is writing about themes in the abstract without grounding claims in textual evidence. 'The novel explores themes of isolation' is a weak observation. 'Fitzgerald renders Gatsby's isolation through the recurrent image of the green light — an object Gatsby can see clearly but never reach, suggesting that the American Dream is constitutively unattainable' is analysis.

IB toppers in English write with a dual focus: they pay attention to what is being said (content and theme) and how it is being said (language, form, and structure). Every significant literary observation should be accompanied by attention to the craft choices the writer made. Why does the author use

this particular word? Why is the text structured this way? What effect does this stylistic choice create for the reader?

Contextual awareness is also essential at Higher Level. Understanding the biographical, historical, and cultural context of a text — and knowing how to deploy that context without letting it overwhelm close reading — is a hallmark of sophisticated English Literature writing. Context illuminates the text; it does not replace engagement with it.

4.3 Economics: Diagrams, Theory, and Real-World Application

IB Economics writing has a distinctive requirement: the integration of economic theory, diagrams, and real-world examples into a seamless analytical response. Students who excel in Economics write with three things in mind simultaneously — the theoretical model, the real-world case, and the evaluative judgment.

Diagrams in IB Economics are not decorative. They are analytical tools, and they should be clearly labeled, accurately drawn, and explicitly referenced in the written text. A diagram that appears without textual explanation earns minimal marks. A diagram that is explicitly analyzed — 'As illustrated in Figure 1, the imposition of a price ceiling below the equilibrium price creates a supply shortage equivalent to Q_2 minus Q_1 ' — demonstrates genuine understanding.

Evaluation in Economics means more than listing pros and cons. IB toppers make judgment calls: which effect is more significant? Under what conditions does this theory hold? What are the limitations of this model? These evaluative judgments, supported by real-world examples and theoretical reasoning, are what distinguish a Level 4 response from a Level 3.

4.4 Sciences: Clarity, Precision, and Methodological Awareness

In IB Science writing — particularly the Individual Investigation and extended experimental responses — the demands are different but equally rigorous. Scientific writing prizes clarity, precision, and methodological transparency. Top scorers write in a voice that is objective, cautious, and precise about the scope and limitations of their conclusions.

The most important skill in science writing is distinguishing between what your data shows and what you can conclude. 'The results show a positive correlation between variable X and variable Y in this experimental setup' is accurate. 'The results prove that X causes Y' is overreach unless the experimental design explicitly controls all other variables. IB toppers are careful about this distinction, and examiners notice and reward it.

5. The Extended Essay and Internal Assessment

The Extended Essay (EE) and Internal Assessment (IA) components offer students the greatest opportunity to demonstrate independent academic writing. They also represent the greatest risk — because without the structure of a timed exam, students can drift, lose focus, and produce work that is long but not substantive. IB toppers approach these components with exceptional discipline.

5.1 Choosing a Research Question That Enables Excellence

The quality of an Extended Essay or Internal Assessment is fundamentally constrained by the quality of its research question. A research question that is too broad will produce a survey rather than an argument. A question that is too narrow will run out of material. A question that is poorly framed will generate description rather than analysis.

The best research questions have three characteristics. They are specific — scoped to allow genuine depth within the word limit. They are contestable — there is a non-obvious answer that requires argument, not just research. And they are appropriate — matched to the level of evidence and analysis a student can realistically access and deploy.

Eclassopedia advises students to test their research question by trying to answer it in one sentence. If the answer is obvious, the question is too simple. If the answer is impossible to formulate, the question is too vague. A good research question produces a tentative, qualified, arguable one-sentence response — and that response becomes the seed of the thesis.

5.2 Writing the EE: Sustained Academic Argument

The Extended Essay is an exercise in sustained academic argument at 4,000 words. Many students think of it as a long essay — four times their normal school essay. IB toppers think of it as a miniature academic paper, with all that implies: a clear research question, a theoretical framework, a methodological approach, a structured argument, and a conclusion that reflects honestly on what the research achieved and where it fell short.

The most common weakness in Extended Essays is insufficient analytical depth. Students often have good research but fail to do enough with it — they cite evidence without interpreting it, present multiple perspectives without evaluating them, and reach conclusions that the evidence does not fully support. Every section of the EE should be doing analytical work, not just informational work.

**EE
STRATEGY**

Write your EE with the 'so what' question in mind at every paragraph. Why does this evidence matter for your argument? What does this analysis reveal that a simple description could not? How does this paragraph move your argument forward?

5.3 The IA: Precision, Methodology, and Reflection

Internal Assessments vary by subject, but across all of them, the highest scores go to students who demonstrate not just what they investigated but why they investigated it that way, what the limitations of their methodology are, and what their findings genuinely reveal within those limitations. This metacognitive awareness — thinking about the thinking — is the hallmark of the best IAs.

In writing your IA, pay particular attention to the reflection sections. These are often treated as afterthoughts — places to note quickly that 'more data would improve the study.' IB toppers treat reflections as opportunities to demonstrate genuine scholarly humility and insight. They identify specific methodological limitations, explain why those limitations matter for the validity of their conclusions, and suggest concrete, specific improvements that go beyond the generic.

6. Building the Habits of an IB Topper

Outstanding IB writing is not produced in a single draft under pressure. It is the product of deliberate practice, consistent habits, and a disciplined approach to reading, thinking, and writing throughout the two years of the programme.

6.1 Read Like a Writer

The single most effective way to improve your academic writing is to read academic writing carefully and analytically. Not just for content — for craft. When you read an essay by a professional academic, notice how they open their argument. Notice how they transition between points. Notice how they use evidence. Notice how they acknowledge complexity and counterarguments. Notice what makes their writing feel authoritative and clear.

IB toppers are voracious readers — not just of their subject matter but of the kind of writing they are aspiring to produce. Reading quality academic journals, high-caliber newspaper opinion pieces, and exemplary student essays trains your intuition for what good academic writing feels like. Over time, this exposure shapes your own writing voice without you even consciously realizing it.

6.2 Practice Timed Writing Regularly

One of the most consistent findings from students who score at the top of the IB is that they practiced writing under timed conditions throughout the programme, not just in the weeks before examinations. Timed practice achieves something that open-ended drafting cannot: it forces you to make decisions quickly, to organize your thoughts under pressure, and to develop automatic writing habits that perform reliably under exam conditions.

The goal of timed practice is not to produce perfect essays. It is to develop writing fluency and analytical reflex. After each timed practice, spend equal time reviewing what you wrote: Did your introduction establish the argument clearly? Did each paragraph advance the thesis? Did your conclusion synthesize rather than repeat? This reflective review is where the learning happens.

6.3 Seek and Act on Feedback

Top IB scorers treat feedback as data, not criticism. They actively seek out detailed, specific feedback from teachers, mentors, and peers. More importantly, they act on it systematically. They track the

errors that appear repeatedly in their writing and create deliberate strategies to eliminate them. They note the comments that praise strong analytical moves and try to replicate those moves in future work.

At Eclassopedia, we have observed that students who improve most dramatically across the IB are not necessarily those with the most natural talent — they are those who are most responsive to feedback. They ask specific questions: 'Is my thesis specific enough? Does my evidence fully support my point? Is my analysis deep enough or does it remain too descriptive?' These are the questions of a student who is actively developing their craft.

6.4 Write with Intentionality, Not Volume

A final habit that distinguishes IB toppers is that they write with intentionality. They do not write to fill space. They do not include a point because they know about it — they include it because it serves their argument. They do not use complex sentence structures because they sound sophisticated — they use them when complexity is the right tool for the idea they are communicating.

This discipline is harder than it sounds. The instinct under exam pressure is to write everything you know and hope the examiner finds what they are looking for. Top scorers resist this instinct. They choose, they shape, they prioritize — and the result is writing that feels purposeful and controlled, even when produced quickly.

7. Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

Even capable students fall into recurring patterns that cost them marks. Understanding these pitfalls — and having specific strategies to avoid them — is one of the most practical contributions any guide to IB writing can make.

7.1 Descriptive Writing Masquerading as Analysis

The most pervasive weakness in IB writing is description that looks like analysis. A student writes 'The Great Gatsby presents themes of the American Dream, wealth, and social class.' This is

descriptive — it tells us what the novel contains. Analysis would ask: how does Fitzgerald construct his critique of the American Dream? What specific techniques does he use? What is the significance of the way class is represented in the novel's structure?

The test is simple: if your sentence tells the examiner something they could find by reading a plot summary, it is description. If your sentence offers an interpretation, judgment, or explanation that requires genuine engagement with the material, it is beginning to be analysis. Aim for the second type in every sentence.

7.2 Evidence Without Explanation

A related pitfall is the habit of presenting evidence as if its relevance is self-evident. Students write: 'In 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated. This caused World War One.' The evidence is there; the analytical work is not. Why did this particular event have these particular consequences? What conditions made it trigger a war rather than a diplomatic crisis? What does this reveal about the structural vulnerabilities of the international system in 1914?

Every piece of evidence requires a bridge to the argument. That bridge is your analysis. Without it, evidence is just information — and IB examiners are not rewarding information. They are rewarding what you can do with it.

7.3 Ignoring Counterarguments

Many students avoid counterarguments because they fear that acknowledging the other side will weaken their position. This is precisely backwards. Engaging with counterarguments and then rebutting them, qualifying them, or incorporating them into a more nuanced position is a sign of intellectual confidence and analytical maturity. It tells the examiner that you understand the full complexity of the topic and that your argument can withstand scrutiny.

A simple structure for incorporating counterarguments is the 'concede and counter' move: 'While it could be argued that [counterargument], this view is complicated by [evidence/reasoning]. The more persuasive position is that [your thesis], because [reasons].' This move, practiced until it becomes natural, will significantly elevate the analytical quality of your writing.

7.4 Weak Conclusions That Merely Summarize

As noted earlier, conclusions that simply repeat the essay's main points fail to add intellectual value. They give the examiner nothing that the body of the essay has not already given, and they leave the essay feeling flat and unresolved. The solution is to ensure that your conclusion synthesizes — it brings the essay's threads together into a final, broader insight — and that it acknowledges the complexity that remains.

A strong conclusion might note that while your argument is well-supported, the question opens onto broader debates that your essay has only begun to explore. It might point to implications beyond the immediate question. It might acknowledge that under different conditions or from a different theoretical perspective, the answer might look different. This kind of intellectual generosity — the acknowledgment of what you have not fully resolved — is, paradoxically, a mark of confidence, not weakness.

8. Eclassopedia's Writing Framework for 2026

At Eclassopedia, we have developed a practical writing framework based on years of working with IB students across all subjects and score bands. This framework is not a rigid formula — it is a set of principles and habits that, when internalized, fundamentally transform how students approach academic writing.

THE ECLASSOPEDIA IB WRITING FRAMEWORK

- Decode before you write: Spend the first 5-10 minutes understanding the question, identifying the command term, and planning your argument.
- Thesis first: Draft your thesis before you write anything else. It is the foundation everything else builds on.
- Every paragraph earns its place: Before writing a paragraph, ask what argument it is advancing and what evidence it will use.
- Analyze, don't describe: After every sentence of evidence, ask what it proves, why it matters, and what its limitations are.

- Engage counterarguments: Include at least one substantial counterargument and show why your position is more persuasive.
- Synthesize in your conclusion: Your conclusion should arrive somewhere new — a final insight that only becomes visible once all the evidence is assembled.
- Review against the criteria: After writing, read your response against the assessment criteria and ask honestly whether it meets each one.

8.1 The Three-Stage Writing Process

IB toppers approach every significant writing task in three stages, even under time pressure. In Stage One — Planning — they invest time in decoding the question, formulating the thesis, identifying key evidence, and sketching the argument structure. This stage is non-negotiable. Students who skip it and begin writing immediately are almost always producing weaker work.

In Stage Two — Writing — they execute their plan with discipline, keeping the thesis in mind at all times and ensuring that every paragraph advances the argument. They do not write everything they know — they write what they have planned to write, in the order they have planned to write it, with the analytical depth their planning has prepared them to achieve.

In Stage Three — Review — they read what they have written against the question and the assessment criteria. They check that the thesis is clearly stated, that each paragraph is analytically substantive, that evidence is explained rather than merely cited, and that the conclusion synthesizes rather than repeats. Under exam conditions, this stage may be brief — but it should always exist.

8.2 How Eclassopedia Supports Your IB Journey

At Eclassopedia, we believe that every student has the capacity to write at the highest level of the IB — given the right guidance, the right practice, and the right feedback. Our expert tutors work with students across all IB subjects and all score bands, providing the kind of detailed, criterion-referenced feedback that develops genuine writing skill rather than just improving a single essay.

We offer specialized programs in Extended Essay guidance, Internal Assessment development, exam technique workshops, and ongoing one-to-one academic writing coaching. Our approach is

always evidence-based, criterion-focused, and tailored to the individual student's current level and target goals. Whether you are aiming for a 5 or pursuing a perfect 45, Eclassopedia has the expertise and the methodology to help you write at the level you are capable of.

Ready to Write Like an IB Topper?

Connect with Eclassopedia's IB specialists and start your journey to academic excellence.

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