

Design Principles of the Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric

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From The Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric

Introduction

The [Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric](#) is a curated compendium of Arabic rhetorical devices. It is designed primarily as a structured resource to assist in the identification of Arabic rhetorical devices in a way that is:

- **Accurate** - a rhetorical device should be correctly identified (a separate document specifies the [Principles for Identifying Arabic Rhetorical Devices](#)),
- **Consistent** - the same rhetorical device should be identified in the same way each time, and
- **Reproducible** - different analysts should agree on their identification of the same rhetorical device.

Because the [Encyclopedia](#) departs in certain ways from the organisation of classical pedagogical manuals, this page explains the seven overarching principles that govern its design. Each of these principles interacts to form a methodological pipeline that transforms classical Arabic rhetorical science into an operational analytical framework for Arabic rhetoric.

Principle 1: The Encyclopedia's Epistemological Foundation is the Model for Rhetorical Action

The [Encyclopedia](#) is founded upon the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#), which distinguishes four analytically distinct steps of a rhetorical action:

1. **Step 1: Communicator Intent** - the [communicative purpose](#) that the [communicator](#) seeks to realise in the [addressee](#), where such an intention exists.
2. **Step 2: Linguistic Operation** – an identifiable linguistic action which results in the establishment or activation of the Cognitive Relationship.
3. **Step 3: Cognitive Relationship** – one or more shared understandings established or activated between the [communicator](#) and the [addressee](#) when the [addressee](#) perceives the Linguistic Operation that has been performed, and which is capable of producing Communicative Enhancement.
4. **Step 3: Cognitive Relationship** – one or more communicatively relevant relationships established or activated for the [addressee](#) between concepts, meanings, expressions, sounds, structures, assumptions, or other elements of the discourse through perception of the Linguistic Operation, and which are capable of producing Communicative Enhancement.

Step 1 may initiate the process but is not always present or identifiable. Steps 2–4 form an ordered analytical sequence in which the Linguistic Operation establishes or activates a Cognitive Relationship, through which a Communicative Enhancement may arise.

The distinction between these four steps is fundamental to the design of the [Encyclopedia](#). A [rhetorical device](#) belongs to the Linguistic Operation Step and is analytically distinct from the Communicator Intent that may motivate its use, the Cognitive Relationship it establishes or activates, and the Communicative Enhancement that may arise from it. The [Encyclopedia](#) therefore treats these components as distinct analytical objects rather than conflating a rhetorical device with its possible intentions, cognitive relationships, or communicative effects.

The consequences of this distinction for the classification of rhetorical devices are described in [Principle 2: The Encyclopedia Uses a Linguistic Operation-First Approach to Rhetorical Analysis](#). The [Principles for Identifying Arabic Rhetorical Devices](#) operationalise the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#) for practical rhetorical analysis.

Principle 2: The Encyclopedia Uses a Linguistic Operation-First Approach to Rhetorical Analysis

The [Encyclopedia](#) classifies rhetorical devices according to the linguistic operation by which they operate, rather than according to the downstream communicative effects that may arise. This is because a communicative effect – such as intensification, glorification, lamentation, amazement, rebuke, or emotional emphasis – is often open to interpretation and disagreement amongst analysts. For this reason, identifying the effect alone is not sufficient for consistent and reproducible analysis.

Instead, the analyst identifies the linguistic operation through which the communicative effect may arise, such as:

- Deletion
- Substitution
- Repetition
- Contrast

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- Contrast
- Projection

Once the linguistic operation is identified, the rhetorical device can be classified consistently and reproducibly.

For example, rather than listing "Glorification" (*ta'zīm*) as a standalone device, the [Encyclopedia](#) identifies the specific syntactic, lexical, or semantic operation through which the effect of glorification may arise. The emphasis is therefore placed on the linguistic operation involved, not merely on the fact that a particular effect is perceived.

Consider the sentence: "He is a lion in battle." (*huwa asadun fī al-ma'raka*). The effect may be glorification or intensification. However, the linguistic operation itself can be identified independently of those effects: the human is presented through direct comparison with a lion. The rhetorical device is therefore classified as [Simile](#), specifically an [effective simile](#) (*tashbīh baliḡh*), because the classification is based on the linguistic operation of comparison rather than on the particular communicative effects that may arise through it.

The [Encyclopedia](#) distinguishes between rhetorical devices at the Linguistic Operation Step and the communicative effects that may be enhanced downstream. Only rhetorical phenomena involving a recognisable and reproducibly identifiable linguistic operation are classified as rhetorical devices. Effects such as praise, blame, intensification, sarcasm, or irony, which may arise through linguistic operations already accounted for elsewhere, are not treated as independent rhetorical devices.

The [Encyclopedia's](#) linguistic operation-first approach enhances clarity, precision, and reproducibility in rhetorical analysis. The operation-first approach has direct consequences for rhetorical device identification. The corresponding [Principle 2: Linguistic Operation-First Identification](#) operationalises this design principle by requiring analysts to classify rhetorical devices according to their underlying linguistic operations rather than their downstream communicative effects.

Source Example

يُحْسِرَةٌ عَلَى الْعِبَادِ

Ah! Alas for my servants
Quran 36:30

Explanation

This Quranic verse illustrates why the [Encyclopedia](#) adopts a linguistic operation-first approach. Classical sources themselves differ regarding the rhetorical effect attributed to the vocative particle *yā*, variously describing it as astonishment, lamentation, grief, or emotional intensification.^{[1][2][3]} An effect-first analytical approach would result in this single rhetorical action being classified by different annotators according to a multitude of possible communicative effects. This would reduce the reproducibility of annotation.

The [Encyclopedia](#) addresses this by foregrounding comparatively observable and reproducible linguistic operations over more interpretive judgements about communicative effect. It distinguishes (a) the comparatively observable linguistic action performed by the [communicator](#), from (b) the context-dependent communicative effects that may arise for [addressees](#) through it. The [Encyclopedia](#) describes possible communicative effects as part of the analysis of rhetorical action, but these effects themselves are not treated as independently annotatable rhetorical actions.

In this verse, the underlying linguistic operation is consistent across interpretations: the vocative particle *yā* is used non-literally and departs from its primary function of calling. Within the [Encyclopedia's](#) [linguistic operation-first approach](#), the linguistic operation is consistently identified as [VOCATIV: The Vocative](#), regardless of interpretive variation in possible communicative effects.

Source Example

أَتَلْهَوْ وَأَيَّامُنَا تَذْهَبُ
وَنَلْعَبُ وَالْمَوْتُ لَا يَلْعَبُ؟

Shall we amuse ourselves while our days pass away,
and play while death does not play?

Explanation

Hashimi identifies the rhetorical effect of this interrogative statement as Prohibition (النهي, *nahy*) — prohibiting such play — but explicitly adds that it may also be interpreted as Mockery (التهكم, *tahakkum*).^[4] The example therefore illustrates the distinction between a comparatively identifiable linguistic operation and its more interpretive rhetorical effects: the linguistic operation remains [The Interrogative](#), while the same utterance allows more than one analysis of its communicative effects.

Constructed Example

أَبْعَدَ كُلِّ هَذَا تَقُولُ إِنَّكَ لَمْ تُخْطِئْ؟

Explanation

In this example, the [communicator](#) is not genuinely seeking information about whether the [addressee](#) maintains their innocence. The identifiable linguistic operation is [The Interrogative](#): an interrogative construction is used for a purpose other than genuinely seeking unknown information. Analysts may nevertheless disagree, depending on context and interpretation, over whether its communicative effect is primarily Rebuke (*tawbīkh*), Denial (*inkār*), Mockery (*tahakkum / sukhriyya*), Astonishment (*ta'ajjub*), or some combination of these. The operation can therefore be identified consistently without requiring analysts to agree on the precise communicative effect.

These examples demonstrate that the relationship between Linguistic Operations and communicative effects is not one-to-one. A single Linguistic Operation may establish or activate one or more Cognitive Relationships and may contribute to the enhancement of multiple context-dependent communicative effects; conversely, similar communicative effects may arise through different Linguistic Operations. Because effects require a greater degree of interpretive judgement, using them as the primary unit of classification would increase disagreement between analysts. The [Encyclopedia](#) therefore classifies rhetorical devices primarily by their comparatively stable and identifiable Linguistic Operations, while recording possible communicative effects separately as context-dependent downstream consequences of rhetorical action.

The [Encyclopedia](#) therefore documents the possible Communicative Enhancements that may arise through a Linguistic Operation rather than asserting that every such enhancement is realised whenever that operation occurs. A Linguistic Operation may provide the conditions through which particular Communicative Enhancements can arise, but whether those possibilities are realised in a particular instance depends upon the discourse, context, communicator, and addressee. The analyst may therefore identify and annotate the rhetorical device independently of any further judgement as to which of its possible Communicative Enhancements are realised in that particular occurrence.

Language Varieties and the Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric

The linguistic operation-first approach also has consequences for the range of Arabic varieties that can be analysed using the [Encyclopedia](#). Classical Arabic rhetorical theory commonly treats *al-faṣāḥa* as a prerequisite for *al-balāgha*, and classical sources therefore devote substantial attention to the conditions of *al-faṣāḥa* and to defects that may compromise it. While the [Encyclopedia](#) recognises this classical relationship, it also recognises that contemporary rhetorical operations may occur in Modern Standard Arabic, dialectal Arabic, mixed varieties, code-switching, Arabizi, and other forms of contemporary Arabic communication.

When analysing rhetoric in classical Arabic texts, traditional norms of *al-faṣāḥa* provide an important part of the linguistic background against which rhetorical operations may be identified. When analysing rhetoric in other forms of Arabic, the relevant linguistic norms are those of the variety or communicative context being used. The identification of a rhetorical linguistic operation therefore depends on recognising how an expression operates relative to the norms of that form of Arabic, rather than assuming conformity to traditional *fushā* norms in every case.

In other words, the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#), and the linguistic operation-first approach to rhetorical analysis derived from it, do not treat conformity to traditional norms of *al-faṣāḥa* as a prerequisite for identifying rhetorical action in contemporary Arabic. The relevant analytical question is whether the communicator performs an identifiable Linguistic Operation relative to the norms of the Arabic variety being used, which establishes or activates a Cognitive Relationship through which a Communicative Enhancement may arise. The identification of that rhetorical action therefore remains possible even where the surrounding expression would not satisfy traditional criteria of *al-faṣāḥa*.

This allows the [Encyclopedia](#) to retain the classical Arabic rhetorical tradition as its primary source of rhetorical operations while remaining applicable to the linguistic diversity of contemporary Arabic. Traditional discussions of linguistic defects (*ʿuyūb al-faṣāḥa*) remain important to the historical theory of Arabic rhetoric, but their systematic classification falls outside the present scope of the [Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric](#) and the [Arabic Rhetorical Device Taxonomy](#).

Principle 3: The Encyclopedia Views Rhetorical Devices As Atomic Units

Each rhetorical device in the [Encyclopedia](#) corresponds to a single underlying linguistic operation such as deletion, substitution, repetition, contrast, or projection.

Some classical works describe [compound devices](#) that combine multiple linguistic operations. For example, [Parallel Antithesis](#) (*muqābalah*) combines semantic contrast ([Antithesis](#)) and structural parallelism ([Parallelism](#)).

From an analytical perspective, this presents a difficulty. Both [Antithesis](#) and [Parallelism](#) must also exist independently as devices in cases where they occur separately. Treating a compound as a single device can obscure the fact that multiple distinct linguistic transformations are taking place.

The [Encyclopedia](#) therefore defines devices as atomic units: one principal linguistic operation per device. If distinct, independently identifiable Linguistic Operations occur simultaneously in the same phrase or sentence, they are treated as separate rhetorical devices and therefore as separate co-occurring rhetorical actions. If an analyst encounters [Parallel Antithesis](#) (*muqābalah*), the [Encyclopedia](#) requires them to tag both the [Antithesis](#) and [Parallelism](#) separately, allowing for more precise analysis and clearer understanding of which linguistic operations are actually present. This reflects the [Encyclopedia's](#) objective of presenting rhetorical devices as discrete atomic units.

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Where subtypes share the same underlying linguistic operation and are mutually exclusive realisations of the same rhetorical action, they are grouped under a single device (for example, the various subtypes of [Metaphor](#), which all involve semantic transfer). Where similar phenomena involve distinct linguistic operations that can co-occur, they are treated as separate devices (for example, different structural forms of repetition). This approach allows layered rhetorical analysis without conceptual overlap.

The analytical consequences of this atomic approach are described in the [Principles for Identifying Arabic Rhetorical Devices](#), [Principle 4: Rhetorical Effects Can Be Multi-Layered](#), which explains how multiple atomic devices may be identified simultaneously when they contribute independent linguistic operations.

Principle 4: The Encyclopedia's Typological Foundation is the Classical Arabic Rhetorical Tradition

The [Encyclopedia](#) does not invent new rhetorical devices; it organises those already established in the classical Arabic rhetorical tradition. This provides an externally grounded basis for determining which rhetorical phenomena constitute devices and reduces the extent to which the taxonomy depends upon editorial judgement or the retrospective imposition of categories derived from other rhetorical traditions. The [Encyclopedia](#) is therefore grounded in published sources documenting classical Arabic rhetorical theory, with references provided for the devices and specifications that it records.

Further, no rhetorical device is included in the [Encyclopedia](#) merely on the authority of a single source. Every included device is attested in at least three sources, and inclusion is additionally subject to [structural and operational criteria](#). The classical source tradition grounds the underlying typological inventory and provides the starting point for establishing the linguistic operation and scope of each device.

This approach also preserves the internal conceptual structure of Arabic rhetorical theory. Arabic rhetorical phenomena are not subordinated to approximate categories inherited from Greek, Latin, or modern Western rhetorical traditions merely because superficially similar concepts exist within those traditions. Where comparison with other traditions is useful, it is treated as comparison rather than as the basis of classification.

The [Encyclopedia](#) therefore aims to organise, clarify, and structure the classical rhetorical tradition in a way that supports systematic contemporary analysis. The source tradition provides the typological foundation; the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#) and the Encyclopedia's other design principles provide the epistemological and operational framework through which those source-attested devices are analysed and organised.

Further reading

See the following blog post for a methodological reflection on why the [Encyclopedia](#) removed Greco-Roman labels for rhetorical devices: "[A Roman, a Hellene, and an Abbasid walk into a café...](#)" [↗](#) (3 February 2026)

Principle 5: The Encyclopedia Operationalises Specifications of Arabic Rhetoric Devices

Classical Arabic rhetorical theory is rooted in a decentralised, genre-specific, historically and geographically fragmented scholarship which commenced in late antiquity and the early Islamic period, and continued until the post-Abbasid period. Unlike other Islamic and Arabic sciences that underwent later phases of formal standardisation, Arabic rhetoric remained largely descriptive and interpretive, allowing multiple overlapping frameworks to coexist without consolidation. This presents several problems when used for reproducible analytical and computational applications:

1. Rhetorical device names are not always standardised. Some rhetorical phenomena appear under multiple names, while others are described functionally without a stable technical label. This makes it difficult to compare definitions across sources and determine whether two scholars are describing the same device.
2. Rhetorical device definitions are inconsistent. Different scholars use different terminology to describe the same linguistic operations and communicative effects. One scholar's taxonomy of linguistic operations and communicative effects does not match another scholar's.
3. Rhetorical device definitions overlap. One scholar may state that a rhetorical device includes linguistic operations A, B, C, and D, while another scholar may state that C is an independent device and D is a subtype of A.
4. Rhetorical device definitions are incomplete. Every scholar's taxonomy of rhetorical devices is influenced by the breadth and depth of their exposure and analysis.
5. Rhetorical device definitions lack a consistent hierarchy or taxonomy. The boundaries between devices are not well-defined.
6. Rhetorical device definitions conflate linguistic operations and communicative effects. Classical definitions often do not clearly distinguish between what the rhetorical device does structurally and the communicative effects that may arise through it.
7. Rhetorical device definitions lack operational criteria. Classical sources rarely provide step-by-step recognition criteria such as decision rules, boundary tests, or reproducibility criteria.
8. Rhetorical device definitions use inconsistent levels of abstraction. Some devices such as [Paronomasia](#) may involve the change of a single letter or vowel. Other devices such as *al-muqābala* (Parallel Antithesis) [combine multiple devices in one device](#).
9. Rhetorical device definitions sometimes use examples instead of rules.

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10. Rhetorical device definitions are sometimes evaluative rather than analytical. Some scholars described rhetorical devices in terms of effects on style, eloquence, impact, beauty, or linguistic efficiency, without defining reproducible tests for these effects.

The [Encyclopedia](#) does not seek to modify or "fix" classical Arabic rhetorical theory. Rather, it seeks to render it operational for systematic analysis, through a process described as "controlled abstraction".

Controlled Abstraction

Controlled abstraction distils classical rhetorical concepts into clearly bounded, operationally definable units, while preserving their core semantic identity. Where classical descriptions are implicit, overlapping, or insufficiently defined for consistent identification, controlled abstraction seeks to introduce the best approximation of explicit and standardised formulations grounded in attested usage. These interventions are minimal, transparent, and methodologically constrained, enabling reproducible analysis while preserving the underlying structure of the tradition. The process results in consistent and standardised operational definitions of Arabic rhetorical devices. This provides the necessary contemporary foundation for reproducible device annotation, computational analysis, and eventual automation of device identification.

Controlled abstraction also avoids imposing external rhetorical taxonomies onto Arabic rhetorical devices through approximate synonymy or inherited equivalence. Where non-Arabic rhetorical traditions contain partially overlapping concepts, these may be noted for comparative purposes, but they do not govern the operational definition of the device. The [Encyclopedia](#) defines Arabic rhetorical devices on their own structural and semantic terms, grounded in the Arabic rhetorical tradition itself.

As an example of this process, consider sources which include substantial grammatical or linguistic descriptions of the "normal" construction underlying a rhetorical device. This is often found in the area of [Sentence Construction & Syntactical Stylistics](#) (*'ilm al-ma'ānī*) where the rhetorical device involves a departure from what is syntactically or contextually expected (*ikhrāj al-kalām 'alā khilāf muqtaḍā al-zāhir*) through which communicative effects such as emphasis or nuance may arise. The principle of Controlled Abstraction is used to preserve this background material in a separate reference article, while the rhetorical device page retains only the linguistic information necessary to define and identify its rhetorical operation.

Similarly with illustrative material found in sources, examples are selected for their explanatory value in demonstrating the linguistic operation of a device. The [Encyclopedia](#) does not seek to catalogue every attested example found in the rhetorical tradition.

Principle 6: The Encyclopedia Uses Organisation To Aid Identification of Rhetorical Devices

The primary objective of the [Encyclopedia](#) is to support rhetorical analysis of Arabic [discourse](#), rather than offering training in the use of rhetorical devices when composing new texts. Classical books of Arabic rhetoric are structured for teaching; the [Encyclopedia](#) is structured for identification, measurement and analysis. This difference is reflected in the [Encyclopedia's](#) organisation.

For example, in classical manuals, *'ilm al-badī'* ([Linguistic Embellishments](#)) is typically divided into:

- Lexical embellishments (*al-muḥassināt al-lafẓiyya*)
- Semantic embellishments (*al-muḥassināt al-ma'nawiyya*)

While this subdivision may be suitable for teaching, it is not granular enough for analysis, considering that there are around 70 rhetorical devices in this field. The [Encyclopedia](#) therefore subdivides *'ilm al-badī'* into 11 thematic subcategories that group together devices which operate in similar ways, making them easier to locate and compare. If the analyst recognizes how a device operates (through sound, structure, or meaning transformation), a more granular classification helps to locate the device within the Encyclopedia faster.

In some cases, devices are arranged according to where an analyst might encounter them in discourse. For example, within the ["Paragraph Structure & Flow"](#) subcategory of *'ilm al-badī'*, devices are ordered from those typically found at the beginning of a text, to those in the middle, and finally to those occurring at the end.

The [Encyclopedia](#) is not the first attempt in the contemporary era to bring a modern analytical re-ordering to the tradition of Arabic rhetoric. For example, the [Encyclopedia](#) draws upon the scholarship of Cachia who took al-Nabulsi's eighteenth century primer on Arabic rhetoric and attempted to "sift [it].... condense it, order it, and present it in the form most readily usable by others."^[5] However, the theoretical basis of the [Encyclopedia's](#) reorganisation strategy, as described in this document, is novel.

Similarly, classical manuals often treat certain devices in paired form, such as:

- Conjunction and Disjunction (*al-waṣl wa al-faṣl*)
- Definiteness and Indefiniteness (*al-ta'rīf wa al-tankīr*)
- Brevity, Verbosity, and Moderation (*al-tjāz wa al-ṭnāb wa al-musāwāh*)
- Quotation and Poetic Incorporation (*al-iqtibās wa al-tadmīn*)

In pedagogical contexts, grouping these together may confer an advantage. For analytical purposes, however, the analyst must determine which specific linguistic operation is taking place in a given sentence. Annotating "Conjunction and Disjunction" as a single unit is not precise enough. The [Encyclopedia](#) therefore treats these as distinct devices, because meaningful analysis requires that they be identifiable separately.

At the same time, the [Encyclopedia](#) avoids both extremes of taxonomic design: an excessively flat hierarchy, where every device and subtype is exposed at the top level, and an excessively deep hierarchy, where users must navigate through

device and subtype is exposed at the top level, and an excessively deep hierarchy, where users must navigate through multiple layers of nested subcategories to reach individual devices. Instead, the [Encyclopedia](#) adopts a balanced organisational model: enough hierarchy to preserve conceptual relationships, but enough surface visibility to aid discovery and identification.

This means that some linguistic operations treated in classical sources as subtypes are elevated to independent entries where their distinctiveness or operational recognisability warrants it. For example, [Personification](#) is given independent treatment despite its close relationship to [Metaphor](#), and certain sound-based devices such as [Alliteration](#) and [Palindrome](#) are surfaced separately even though classical treatments often subsume them under broader categories such as [Paronomasia](#). This organisational choice reflects the [Encyclopedia](#)'s analytical aim: to make rhetorically salient and identifiable linguistic operations easier to find, compare, and annotate.

Principle 7: The Encyclopedia Is the Source of the Arabic Rhetorical Device Taxonomy

The [Encyclopedia](#) is a live and evolving compendium of Arabic rhetorical devices.

At defined intervals, snapshots of the [Encyclopedia](#) are published as the [Arabic Rhetorical Device Taxonomy](#) (ARDT) – a fixed, versioned, and citable taxonomy intended for use in Digital Humanities research and computational analysis.

To facilitate this, the [Encyclopedia](#) uses:

- Standardised formatting and layout
- Clear internal structure
- Version control
- Digital-first publication
- Persistent identifiers such as document object identifiers (DOIs)
- Predominantly English-language presentation.

The [Encyclopedia](#) is therefore both a scholarly reference resource and the foundational layer from which the [ARDT](#) is derived.

Summary

Together, these seven principles ensure that the [Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric](#) serves as a bridge between classical Arabic rhetorical tradition and modern analytical needs, maintaining scholarly rigor while enabling systematic, reproducible analysis. These seven principles are crystallised in the form of the [Criteria for Inclusion in the Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric](#), a document which operationalises the theoretical framework presented here in the form of a transparent set of rules by which to decide which Arabic rhetorical devices are included in the [Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric](#).

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Page History

- 2026-08-16 - Updated [Design Principles](#) with promotion of [Model for Rhetorical Action](#) and [Criteria for Inclusion in the Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric](#) as separate documents.
- 2026-08-08 - Updated [Design Principles](#) with addition of [The Model for Rhetorical Action](#)
- 2026-04-30 - Updated [Design Principles](#) with addition of [The Encyclopedia Recognises Four Consecutive Levels of Every Rhetorical Action](#)
- 2026-03-27 - Updated [Design Principles](#) with re-organisation and addition of [The Encyclopedia Operationalises Specifications of Arabic Rhetoric Devices](#)
- 2026-02-14 - Page created: [Design Principles of the Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric](#).

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