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How To Make A Living Overseas As A Content Writer

By Misael Lizarraga

As many Live and Invest Overseas readers can attest, living abroad is one of the most enlightening, fascinating, and memorable experiences you can have in life. A common objection to making the leap abroad is money. "I can't afford it," I often hear from hopeful nomads. "I don't have enough saved."

The good news is that in today's interconnected world, it's possible to work just about anywhere as long as you have a stable internet connection and a laptop.

Teaching English Online And Its Downsides

Like many Live and Invest Overseas readers and contributors, I went the teaching-English-online route to support myself abroad. Given the high

demand for English teachers in China, Russia, Japan, and other countries, it's relatively easy for a native English speaker to get a job as a teacher online.

While living in Mazatlán, Mexico, I worked for a school in Beijing, China. And while that job offered more than enough money, the time difference between the two cities was so great that my working hours were brutal.

I worked from 3 a.m. to 10 a.m., Monday to Saturday. Each class was 45 minutes long with a 15-minute break in between. I was 27 at the time and not quite ready to give up my social life, so in order to have at least some waking hours in common with my friends, family, and girlfriend, I had two sleeping cycles: four hours of sleep before my shift and four more hours after it.

As you may imagine, that lifestyle caught up with me. I was burned out and depressed and never had any energy. Days were blending into each other, and I felt like a zombie. What was the point of living in a beautiful, tropical Mexico if my life only revolved around work? I needed a change.

Writing To Make A Living

After spending countless hours researching alternate ways to finance my life abroad, I came across a travel blog from a digital nomad who writes exclusively about her travel experiences.

Her articles were good. In fact, her entire blog was a labor of love, and it was obvious she enjoyed every moment of her nomad lifestyle. But the article that really caught my attention was the one where she talked about how she financed her life: by writing for her own blog and contributing to technology blogs.

Her story inspired me. Not only did she and her husband get to fulfill their lifelong goal of traveling, but she also financed the lifestyle by writing. Even better? They had human schedules and enough time to enjoy their travels. It was at that point that I decided to learn everything I could about content writing and slowly phase myself out of my English-teaching job.

Today, I'm happy to say that my plan worked. I currently work full-time as a real estate content writer. And yes, I have a human schedule, too.

I'm not writing this article to diminish online-English-teaching jobs—I have nothing but gratitude for my former employers. But many English-teaching jobs require you to teach in high-demand time slots, which often fall in the wee hours of the morning.

I want my fellow nomads to enjoy their time abroad and show them they have more options than just teaching English to support themselves. That's why I'm sharing the nine steps that will help you get started as a content writer and overcome the first and most difficult milestone: making your first US\$1,000.

1. Find Your Niche

The most important step to get your content-creation business going is deciding what to write about. Back in the early days of blogging, it was possible to have a successful blog that covered a wide variety of subjects. But in today's world, where there are an estimated 505 million blogs, countless content-marketing firms, and a legion of "influencers" on social media, it's foolish to try to be a jack-of-all-trades.

But don't let those statistics scare you. Content creation is a crowded field, but our collective hunger for online content is insatiable and only continues to grow. That said, you need to find a niche you want to serve and specialize in it to become a successful content creator.

The good news is your specialization options are unlimited. There's nothing stopping you from creating a blog about the socioeconomic effects of sea monkeys, if that's your cup of tea. But if you want to sustain yourself from your writing niche, I suggest you choose your topic by answering these three questions:

What Are You Interested In?

As wonderful as it is to make a living writing, you'll inevitably have days when you'll struggle to write. Sometimes your mind will simply draw a blank, and you won't feel motivated. It's easy to explain that mental state away as writer's block, but I think that feeling isn't exclusive to writing. The truth is that no matter what you do, work is work.

Unlike a soul-draining office job in which you can occasionally coast on minimal effort and still get paid, as a freelance content writer, you only make money when you finish a project. There will be times when you have to force yourself to write, even if you don't feel like it. In times like that, it's less painful to power through an article about a subject you enjoy than one you simply tolerate.

To begin, make a list of topics you'd to love to write about, even if no one gave you a penny. Are you interested in cooking, gaming, traveling, programming, real estate, music, economics, movies, etc.? Make a list of those topics. The longer the it is, the better.

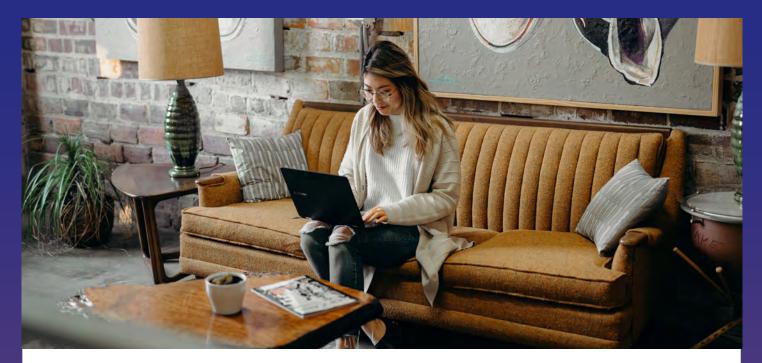
It isn't essential that you pick topics you already know lots about, as a huge part of your writing time will be spent on research anyway. But don't discount the old adage about writing what you know. It's easier to begin writing about a topic you're already familiar and comfortable with.

Which Of Those Topics Have Demand?

Now that you know which topics you want to write about, it's time to investigate to see which of them are in demand. Unfortunately, there isn't a magical app that can give you an immediate answer. You need to do due diligence and spend some time researching the writing market.

All-mighty Google is your friend here. Take your list of topics, google each of them, and see how many blogs you can find that cover that topic. Your search could look something like "top 100 foodie blogs," or "best gardening blogs," or "recommended tech blogs."

Go through the results and pay special attention to blogs that have high reader engagement. You can easily identify them by the number of comments their articles have. If one of your topics has only a few blogs dedicated to it and yet its audience is highly engaged, circle that topic on your list. You may've found yourself a gold mine.



Although this step could take a while, it's far better to do it at the beginning than months down the line. Changing your blogging focus early on is less painful than after you've spent thousands of hours writing and researching.

Which Of Those Topics Will People Pay You To Write About?

You may've found a topic you absolutely love with plenty of demand and not enough writers creating content about it. But if no one is willing to pay you to write about it, then you don't have a business, you have a hobby.

A good way to find out if there are people willing to pay you is to visit freelance writing job boards, such as ProBlogger, BloggingPro, FlexJobs, Mediabistro, and Upwork. Browse the job listings or do keyword searches to get an idea of which topics are in demand. Technical topics, such as technology, programming, economics, taxes, and engineering are always in demand.

As you continue your market research, you should narrow your search to customers living in affluent countries, such as the States, Canada, the U.K., Australia, France, Finland, Sweden, etc. It isn't impossible to find well-paying jobs elsewhere... but the cold reality is that professionals in affluent countries are more likely to have larger marketing budgets and thus the ability to afford your writing fees.

Once you have identified a writing niche that you enjoy, has demand, and people willing to pay you to write about it, congratulations. You've just completed your first step towards becoming a freelance content writer.

2. Break Down Your Workload

Now that you know what you're going to write about, it's time to create a plan of action. Your immediate goal is to make your first US\$1,000 within a reasonable amount of time... But what's a reasonable amount of time? Take out a notebook and write down today's date. Now add 12 weeks to it. That's your deadline.

I'm being guite generous with a three-month deadline... It's possible to meet that goal in less than a month if you know what you're doing. In fact, as you gain more writing experience, US\$1,000 will seem like child's play. But just like mastering a new language, there's a learning curve involved in becoming a successful content creator.

One thing you can't avoid is hard work. It takes lots of work and determination to set up a successful business, and your writing business is no different. You need to hustle.

But at the same time, there's no need to drop everything else in your life and neglect your friends and family to make it happen. It's all about finding the balance between working hard and working smart. Remember that the whole point of becoming a content creator is to be able to support yourself abroad and still be able the enjoy your time there.

Freelance content writers typically charge a per-word fee or a per-project fee. Some clients prefer to pay by the hour, although that isn't common. Regardless of the billing method, how much a writer can charge depends on a multitude of factors, such as experience, writing niche, negotiation skills, geographical location, and, most importantly, reputation.

Writers living in poor, developing countries can afford to charge less than writers living in affluent countries, as dollars go further there.

Brand-new writers also tend to charge lower fees, as they don't have an established track records and are looking to get a foot in the door.

On the other hand, experienced, specialized, and well-known writers command higher writing fees. In my time as a writer, I've seen writing fees ranging from 1 cent per word to US\$2 dollars per word. For an idea of how much money you could be making, top-tier freelance writers make over six figures a year, with some writers earning the equivalent of US\$250 an hour.

For first-time writers living abroad, I suggest charging 5 cents per word, which is the equivalent of earning US\$50 for a 1,000-word article. This might seem low at first, especially when you consider how much professionals make. But if you're willing to hustle and take the time to polish your writing skills, it won't be long before you have the track record and experience needed to justify a higher writing fee.

And the more writing experience you accumulate, the faster you'll get at producing content. An experienced writer can finish a 1,000-word article in less than an hour. So even if it takes you two hours to finish a 1,000-word article, you'd still be making the equivalent of US\$25 dollars an hour.

At 5 cents per word, you'd need to create 20 1,000-word articles in order to meet your US\$1,000 goal. That may seem like a lot, but if you were to write an article a day, five days a week, you'd meet your goal in a month.

3. Identifying Your Clients

Now that we have a niche, a deadline, and a breakdown of how much writing you need to do to earn your first US\$1,000, let's identify your customers. An excellent tool to help you do that is a client persona.

If you've ever seen a cop show, a client persona is like an artist's rendition of a suspect. In your case, it's what your perfect client looks like. Just like a detective builds a sketch of the suspect by asking witnesses, checking camera footage, and running forensic tests, you'll build a client persona by making a list of your client's identifying features.

Details to add to your client persona include the client's age, gender, location, goals, values, job roles, challenges, pain points, and their role in making hiring and purchasing decisions. HubSpot offers several clientpersona templates you can use, and you can google "client persona templates" to find additional examples.

For example, as a real estate content writer, one of my client personas looks like this:

Name: Content Director Chris

Age: 30 to 50 years old

- Gender: Male
- Company size: 100 to 500 employees
- Location: Cities with a population over 1 million in the States and Canada
- Client's goals: To set themselves up as local real estate experts by means of inbound marketing
- Challenges: Not enough time nor expertise to consistently create valuable content weekly
- Job roles: CEO, COO, CFO, content director, editor, marketing director, social media content manager
- Pain points: My competition is successfully implementing a robust content marketing strategy, and I'm missing out

Thanks to the effort I put into building my client persona, I know that my ideal customers live in the States or Canada, work as content directors in mid-sized companies related to real estate, and live in cities over 1 million people. I wouldn't waste my time targeting real estate agents living in Crystal City Texas, which has a population of 7,138 people, nor Fresno California, even though it has a much larger population of 500,000.

Remember that a client persona is a just a marketing tool. It's a fictional generalization of the kind of customer you want to attract, not a real person. Don't worry if your first client persona doesn't feel 100% complete. It doesn't need to be perfect, it just needs to be functional.

It's too easy to get trapped by perfectionism and refuse to take action until your client persona is perfect. Avoid that mentality like the plague. If you make a couple of mistakes, it isn't the end of the world. You can always amend your client persona.

4. Build Your Social Proof

The key to your long-term success as a content writer is building up your reputation. You must establish yourself as a credible, knowledgeable expert, with the social proof to back your work.

Social proof theory states that people in unfamiliar environments will adapt their behavior by observing what others are doing. That's why when we travel to a new country, we're more likely to eat at restaurants with lots of local people standing in line than those with only a few patrons. The subconscious reasoning is that if so many locals like the place so much, then it must be good.

There's a reason why movie trailers include positive comments from famous reviewers and why companies are willing to pay celebrities millions of dollars to advertise their products on TV... Social proof works.

When you first start your writing career, it's unlikely that you'll have a crowd of influential people vouching for your writing skills. And unless you're well-connected, you won't have industry experts raving about your writing services either. That's not because you're bad writer but because you're new (just look at the many famous authors whose writing skills leave much to be desired if you don't believe me).

The ultimate social proof for a writer is being published by an industry leader of your niche. For example, if your niche is finance, you'd get a gigantic boost in credibility if you were to be published by Yahoo Finance, CNNMoney, or The Motley Fool.

Those brands carry a lot of weight because they're perceived as leaders in finance news. If you were to approach a new client and tell them that you got published by Yahoo Finance, your chances of getting hired would increase exponentially.

Of course, getting published by industry leaders isn't easy, but you can work your way up. Start building your social proof by pitching your services to smaller players in the industry. Each time you land a writing gig, use that client as social proof for the next one. And as you accumulate more and more happy customers willing to vouch for your services, you'll increase your chances of being hired by industry leaders.

Once you're at the top of your niche, being associated with your name will become social proof in and of itself.

5. Create A Website And Blog

The first step towards building your credibility as a professional writer is to create a website and a blog. You'll have get yourself some hosting space, but don't worry, hosting space is affordable, and the return on your investment of building a website will be huge.

Setting Up A Website Or Blog

You don't need to hire someone to create and set up your website. It's easier than ever to build it yourself and surprisingly straightforward, too. Many hosting companies offer packages to make easy for new bloggers to create their own WordPress sites, such as HostGator, Wix, and Bluehost. They also offer getting-started guides you can use.

I won't go into detail about how to build your own website and blog here: That merits an article of its own. Check out YouTube tutorials about the steps needed to create a WordPress site and get you blogging as soon as possible.

Having your own website is absolutely necessary. First of all, it allows you to have your own email domain (such as "Max@expertwriter.com"). This tells your clients that you care about your professional image.

Second, a personal website lets you advertise your services and explain in detail how they will benefit your clients. Once you start making a name for yourself as a writer and create a large enough audience, people in need of your services will start looking for you. If you set up an online store, clients will be able to hire your services directly from your site.

Third, your website gives you a place to display your social proof in the form of testimonials from happy customers, names and logos of companies you have worked for, and links to articles published by industry leaders.

Finally, you'll be able to host a personal blog on your website that covers topics relevant to your writing niche. Your blog serves several purposes: When you first start your content-writing career, you won't have any published articles. Any prospective client you contact will expect you to provide samples of your work, especially published articles.

You could always write a few articles in Word and use them as samples to send to prospective client, but it will look much more professional if you have those articles published somewhere online. If you don't have any published articles, why not upload them to your own blog?

Your blog is the perfect place to showcase your writing skills. If you regularly publish valuable articles about your writing niche in your blog, your website's value will increase over time, and it will start to draw more and more readers.

It takes time to build an audience, and your website and blog articles won't do much on their own at first. But you can take proactive steps towards increasing your blog's viewership, such as joining discussions about your niche in forums and social media, doing credited guest writing for other blogs (more on that later), and purchasing ads from Google or Facebook.

As you continue to create valuable content for your niche, eventually your blog will gain more and more traction, and it'll be easier to get more writing jobs from other companies.

6. Create A Social Media Presence

Whether you love or hate social media, you can't deny that it's ubiquitous and powerful. In its most basic implementation, social media makes it easy to engage your audience and stay up to date with the newest developments in your writing niche.

With over 1 billion users and 890 million daily active users, Facebook provides you with one of the biggest potential audiences on the internet. This social media giant gives you the option to you create free business pages where you can advertise your services, publish blog posts, and engage followers, customers, and readers.

If you have a budget, you can target potential clients with Facebook ads. This tool lets you create and direct ads at potential clients via filters such as age, gender, interests, location, etc. You can go through all your client persona details and create ads that target them specifically.

LinkedIn is the most serious of social media platforms, as it focuses on professional marketing. Just like Facebook, LinkedIn offers free accounts with features to help you reach out to new clients.

Not just that, but a carefully crafted LinkedIn profile makes it easy for clients looking for your services to find you. It also makes it easy to find content managers, CEOs, editors, and other decision makers that may need your services. Because of its focus on business, LinkedIn can help you stay up to date with the latest industry news.

Other social media platforms to consider include Twitter and Instagram. If you have the technical knowhow to create and edit videos, you can even create a YouTube channel.

If you built your website using WordPress, you can use free plugins that let you synchronize your blog to your social media, so that every time you create a new blog post on your site, it'll appear on your social networks as well.

7. Start Building Your Client List

Now that we have the preliminary stuff out of the way, it's time to take your client persona from Step 2 and start finding prospects. There are countless ways to market your services, and you should spend some time researching marketing techniques. However, the strategy I show you here is one that has given me great results, even though it requires the simplest of all marketing tools: email.

Direct email marketing isn't as flashy as social media marketing, nor does it require you to buy targeted ads. It's as simple as it gets, and yet, it's extremely effective. Email marketing works because whether you're a high school student, a CEO, or a priest, everyone has an email account. And the people you'll be targeting check their emails several times a day.

Your first step in building your client list is obtaining 30 to 50 highquality email addresses, meaning the email addresses of people that fall under your client persona descriptions and decision makers about your writing services. A great place to start gathering those emails is blogs that cater to your niche.

If you remember Step 1, where you searched for writing niches with high demand and with people able to afford your writing fees, you can repeat the process here. For example, if your niche is personal finances, google the "top 100 personal finance blogs." Some of the search results will also include handy lists of leading blogs.

Spend some time visiting these pages and familiarize yourself with their content. Pay special attention to articles that have the most reader engagement and study their tone, level of formality, and length. Bookmark any that you actually enjoyed reading and write down a couple of reasons why you enjoyed them so much. Those bookmarked articles will serve as inspiration for future articles as well as a measuring stick of the kind of quality the market expects.

Next, explore the site and see if you can find email addresses belonging to the blogs' editors, the CEO, online marketing managers, or other potential decision makers in charge of content. If you don't find any, don't give up. There are a number of online tools, such as Clearbit Connect, FindThatLead, and Webdef, that can help you find email addresses associated with specific web domains. Most of those tools offer free versions that let you find a certain number for free each month as well as premium versions with additional features.

Keep up your search until you have 30 to 50 email addresses of blog content decision makers. As you accumulate more and more, create a contact spreadsheet where you keep all your prospects' contact info, the date in which you contacted them, as well as the status of any pending jobs you may have.

8. Start Prospecting

Now that you have a good number of decision makers' email addresses, it's time to contact them. Before you draft an email, though, establish your goals. As a new content writer, you want to achieve at least one of the following goals:

- To become a regular, credited contributor: The best-case scenario is that you establish a working relationship with a client and become a regular, credited contributor. Not only will you be getting paid for your work, but you'll receive credit as a contributor. Credited articles increase your social proof, which leads to more work and eventually higher writing fees.
- To become a regular ghostwriter: A ghostwriter is a writer that isn't credited. Ghostwriters usually charge more for their articles as they don't receive any credit for them. Although the extra money and chance to practice your writing skills from ghostwriting are great, the lack of credit means you won't get to improve your social proof.
- To become a one-time, credited contributor: Under this
 arrangement, you still get paid, you get credit, and you also get
 much-needed practice. If the quality of your work is high enough,
 it could lead to future work.
- To become a credited guest writer: Guest writers don't get paid in cash, they get paid in exposure. And before you run away

in horror from the idea of working for free, think about what the right kind of exposure can do for you.

If given the opportunity to write a 1,000-word blog for a respected, well-known industry leader, it can open the door to better-paid gigs with other industry leaders. Call it an investment.

On the other hand, don't undervalue your time. Always consider whether the blog you're guest writing for has enough readership and industry respect to justify working for free.

To become a one-time ghostwriter: The extra money is nice, and you get much-needed practice, but I wouldn't recommend accepting too many one-time ghostwriting jobs. It's OK to agree to a few when you're first starting out and need the cash. But in an industry where reputation and social proof are incredibly important, not getting credit for your hard work hurts.

Now that we have our list of desired outcomes from a client interaction, let's create your first contact email. I'm not a fan of automated emails because they always sound impersonal, cold, and fake. We receive automated emails all the time, and, yet, we rarely read them. So instead of creating a robotic email that you can send to 3,000 recipients at once, we're going to practice the ancient art sending an actual letter to an actual human being.

Drafting Your First Client Email

Your first email can be something like this, but feel free to modify as needed:

Subject: Hi [person's name here], do you need a content writer for [blog name here]?

Body: Hi [person's name here], how is it going?

My name is [your name here], and I'm a [your niche here] content writer. I wanted to know if you are currently looking for content writers for [prospect's blog name here]. Recently, I've contributed as a writer for [list a few clients you've contributed to], and I would love to write for [prospect's blog name here].

I've recently read [name of article on prospect's blog you actually enjoyed] because [reasons why you enjoyed the article].

I would like to propose contributing the following article:

Title: [title of article you propose writing for your potential client]

Concept: [a short summary of what the article will be about]

I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

[your name here]

This email accomplishes a number of things. First of all, your subject includes the person's name, which immediately catches their attention. Then you get right to the point and explain why you're contacting them.

Second, it's a short email. Nobody likes long emails, especially if you need to get through a backlog of 50 emails on a Friday afternoon. By keeping the email focused, you're not taking more of your prospect's time than needed.

Third, it sounds like it came from a real human because it did. Though many marketers swear by auto-mailers and the many people they can reach with them, let's be honest... How often do you actually read an entire automated email?

You're more likely to get a response if you tailor your email to a specific client. Notice that my sample email urges you to include an article you enjoyed and explain why. This lets your prospect know you value their expertise and appreciate their content. It conveys that you're in the know and that you understand what their readers want because you're one of them.

Finally, by providing an article proposal, you demonstrate your ability to come up with valuable content and deliver it as soon as you're given the green light.

Of course, drafting a personalized email such as this one takes time and effort. You might feel tempted to create a generic email and send it to all your contacts in a single salvo. But you don't need to have hundreds of clients when you're first starting—you only need five or six good ones.

In fact, that's probably more than you can handle on your own at first. Start slow and on the right foot. Treat your prospects like the valuable clients they are instead of numbers in a database. I mean, isn't that how you'd want to be treated? As you gain more and more experience, you'll become more productive and be able to handle larger workloads.



Sending A Follow-Up Email

If you don't get an immediate response from your prospect, don't give up. Wait a couple of days and send a follow-up email. It could be something like this, but again, feel free to personalize it:

Subject: Hi [prospect's name here], this is [your name here] again from [your blog's name]

Body: Hi [prospect's name here], hope all is well.

I sent you an email a few days ago asking if you needed a contributing writer for [prospect's blog name here]. I've previously worked for [If you have already written articles for other clients, mention some of them here in order to provide social proof], and I would love to contribute for [prospect's blog name here].

I recently read [name of article on blog you actually enjoyed], and I really liked it because [reasons why you enjoyed the article].

In my last email, I proposed writing the following article:

Title: [title of article you propose writing for your potential client]

Concept: [a short summary of what the article will be about]

Is that an article your readers would enjoy?

I look forward to your reply.

Best regards,

[your name here]

Again, this email is short, sweet, and gets right to the point. Your prospect may've missed your first email, so send a follow up after a few days. Business owners and blog editors get tons of emails, and yours could have simply gotten lost in the crowd.

If you don't get any replies from your second email, again, don't give up. Wait a week or two, and try contacting them again. There's no need to stick to a template. Be direct, get to the point, and explain how your services will help your prospect. Don't make it about you, make it about them.

9. Repeat Steps 2 To 8

At this point, it's a just a matter of going back and refining your work loop. Repeat the previous steps and develop your client personas, update your personal blog, engage your readers on social media, gauge your social proof, adjust your workload, find more contacts, and offer your services.

As the quality of your writing improves and you begin to land more and better-paying writing jobs, you may need to invest in a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) program, so that you can keep track of all you interactions with your clients. You may even need to hire other writers to keep up with your writing demand and have enough time to enjoy living abroad.

If you follow these steps and put in the work needed to make it happen, you'll not only make your first US\$1,000 but also establish the foundations for a successful content-writing business.



Misael Lizarraga is a content writer specializing in real estate content. He writes about real estate developments all across North America and uses his content writing to finance his life as a nomad.



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- What it would cost you to live there, including detailed monthly budgets...
- Whether it's better to rent or to buy, given the local market right now...
- What to take with you, what to ship, and what to leave behind...
- Which visa options would make most sense for you and how you qualify...
- Who to contact for legal help, health insurance, banking, shipping, residency, taxes...

Read our correspondents' firsthand reports every month. Email them your questions (yes, they'll respond!). Search the archives, available to you free, for more information on the locations that interest you most.

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Kathleen Peddicord

Publisher, Live and Invest Overseas

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