

# Finding and using reliable “grey literature”: A commentary

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## Abstract

If a health and safety practitioner aspires to be regarded as a professional, they need to be or become “critical consumers” of research, including grey literature that can inform a risk assessment or decision. However, some free-to-access grey literature may be of variable reliability. As part of a continuing research project, some sources of grey literature believed to be reliable are identified and criteria are suggested to enable judgement of reliability of grey literature. A downloadable set of bibliographic records of some grey literature is described that will help search for potentially relevant, reliable documents.

**Keywords:** grey literature; best available information; weight of evidence.

## Introduction

### *Problem*

Societal expectations of occupational health and safety (OHS) have been increasing, requiring risk and health and safety practitioners to be both better informed and better able to give reliable advice to employers. Whether assessing risk or designing a management system, practitioners, therefore, need to use the “best available information” (ISO, 2018a) or report the “weight of evidence” (Weed, 2005) for a decision or proposed course of action. However, research suggests that some, maybe many, practitioners may rely on “professional judgement” to inform decisions or solve problems (Peace, 2019), without necessarily being fully informed. For example, failure to use reliable evidence to inform risk assessments and decisions might contribute to adverse consequences, including deaths or serious injuries, e.g. the Pike River Mine Disaster (Macfie, 2013), major property damage (BMIIB, 2008), and failure to apply good practice (Tyers & Hicks, 2012).

The International Network of Safety and Health Practitioner Organisations established *A Global Framework for Practice* (INSHPO, 2017) that distinguishes between practitioners and professionals in

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terms of skills, ethics and professional practice requirements. The framework sets out a skills matrix for practitioners and professionals for evidence-based practice. It sets the level of knowledge for practitioners as levels 1-2, and for professionals as 3-4. A professional is expected to achieve the following:

- Accesses OHS research papers and reports for evidence to inform OHS professional practice.
- Systematically implements workplace-based research studies.
- Analyzes and evaluates OHS research papers, reports, and workplace studies for evidence to inform OHS professional practice.
- Synthesizes OHS research information and outcomes to inform [level] 3-4 OHS practice (p. 38).

The framework requires that a senior OHS professional “Demonstrates advanced and integrated understanding of a complex body of OHS knowledge, including an extended understanding of recent developments as a basis for critical thinking” (INSHPO, 2017, p. 20). A professional should “use technical, human factors and other theoretical knowledge, to research, review and interpret information on hazards to identify causation, consequences, possible risk controls, including critical controls, and potential failure in controls related to all relevant hazards in all lifecycle phases” (p. 24). OHS professionals are also expected to be capable of applying “Research methodologies relating to OHS and work-based research” (p. 34).

The UK Institution for Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) has also established professional standards for safety and health at work, requiring that the “OSH professional uses a range of resources to justify mitigation recommendations and overall business improvements to eradicate or reduce risk” (IOSH, 2019, p. 7).

If a risk or OHS advisor aspires to be considered a “professional”, then they need to be or become “critical consumers” of research (Zardo & Pryor, 2012). This includes the ability to search for, and carry out, a critical review of literature or documents to find and link ideas, background information or guidance (Saunders et al., 2019), and so help inform a risk assessment or decision. Finding relevant documents may lead to further information gathering or suggest cost-effective ways to manage risk that are both practicable and reasonable.

The principles for effective risk management in ISO (2018a) include the following description of “best available information”:

- The inputs to risk management are based on historical and current information, as well as on future expectations. Risk management explicitly takes into account any limitations and uncertainties associated with such information and expectations. Information should be timely, clear and available to relevant stakeholders.

This implies the need to use reliable information that is accessible to relevant stakeholders. Such information can then be used as the “weight of evidence” for a decision or intervention (Weed, 2005). This has at least three meanings but, here, is used as a description of a “summary interpretation of the evidence” or “synthesis of the evidence”.

Clause 7.2 ISO45001 requires an organisation to “...determine the necessary competence of workers that affects or can affect its OHS performance” and to “ensure that workers are competent (including the ability to identify hazards) on the basis of education, training or experience” (ISO, 2018b). Being capable of locating the best available information and providing summary interpretation of the evidence will be evidence of such competence.

However, many highly reliable sources and documents are often behind paywalls, while some that are “free-to-access” may be of low reliability. These may range from open access academic literature to a vendor’s webpage or an uninformed opinion, even misinformation. Meeting requirements, such as those outlined above, may be relatively easy for those with access to academic databases (e.g. a university library or similar), but others will have to depend on grey literature and will then need to distinguish the reliable from the unreliable. This article suggests a partial solution for access to academic literature and a structured solution for reliability of grey literature.

### *Solution*

As part of a continuing research project, the solution suggested here is aimed at improving the capabilities of health and safety practitioners, who are not academics, by enabling them to find relevant grey literature and judge its reliability. Firstly, grey literature is defined and interpreted in relation to OHS. A searching strategy for such grey literature is then outlined before summarising some sources of applied OHS research literature. The reliability of such sources is explored and two qualitative methods for rating such documents suggested.

Criteria that aid analysis of the characteristics of the generic types of grey literature are expanded and used to suggest which might be regarded as reliable sources of information (Adams et al., 2017; Booth et al., 2016; Hassall & Karacaoglu, 2021). Some free-to-access sources of “grey literature” relevant to risk and OHS practitioners are identified and discussed. While these are predominantly from Aotearoa-New Zealand and Australia, other sources are also identified with the intention that practitioners elsewhere search for comparable local resources. Ways of legally accessing some academic articles are then described before touching on the use of bibliographic software and a downloadable set of more than 3,300 bibliographic records of grey literature. These may enable a professional to search for keywords and follow links to websites holding documents that seem relevant and reliable. Documents of high relevance can then be cited as the best available information that helps a practitioner provide the weight of evidence supporting their opinion.

## **OHS grey literature: Definitions, searching and sources**

### *Definitions*

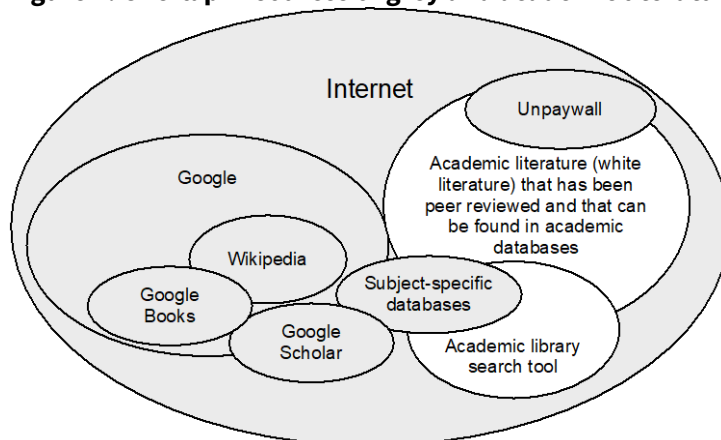
The term grey literature “refers not to the physical appearance of a document but to the uncertain status of it” (Auger, 2017). Although there is no generally accepted definition or description of grey literature, Saunders et al. (2019) suggested “Grey (or primary) literature sources [are] items produced

by all levels of government, academics, business and industry in print and electronic formats, but which are not controlled by commercial publishers; including materials such as reports and conference proceedings” (pp. 83-86). A shorter definition is “everything but peer reviewed journals and academically or commercially published books” (Bonato, 2018). Such literature may be published by professional associations, research institutes, or regulatory agencies but may be unpublished or otherwise hard to find.

In contrast with documents found in academic databases (white literature), grey literature, typically, is not peer reviewed, systematically organised or indexed (Adams et al., 2017; Paez, 2017) making it hard to find. It may be highly topical, in the “here and now”, running ahead of academic research and so not the subject of formal research, or it may be published on a website that is not archived or systematically preserved. As a result, it may be ephemeral unless preserved elsewhere. Even if a document is preserved elsewhere the original file names may be changed or pre-print versions presented. For example, articles posted on a university or organisation website, or the ResearchGate website (<https://www.researchgate.net/>) may be preprints of articles subsequently subject to anonymous review and revision before publication in a journal. Such work may not be held or catalogued by university libraries. As a result, grey literature is often ignored in academic management or organisational studies, being seen as unreliable even though some has been thoroughly researched by credible authors and is published by a reputable organisation.

Despite such difficulties, grey literature that is reliable may be the only source available to OHS professionals (especially if it very closely answers a research question). Well-researched grey literature may be an entry point to academic literature for practitioner studies, leading to further applied research and so forming part of an overall evidence base. For systematic reviews it may provide pragmatic evidence to counter biases in peer reviewed, published information. There is also a wide range of sources of grey literature, with some overlaps with white literature (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Overlap in sources of grey and academic literature**



Overlap in academic sources.graf file

Source: adapted from figure 15.3 in Hassall & Karacaoglu (2021)

## *Searching for OHS grey literature*

### **Web search engines**

Finding reliable grey literature requires the use of an effective search strategy (Booth et al., 2016; Hassall & Karacaoglu, 2021). As shown in Figure 1, there is range of places that can be searched. If there is a known start point (e.g. a report of interest with citations of other work), then it may be possible to search for referenced titles using Google or Google Scholar, a technique known as “pearling”. Google, Google Books and Google Scholar are commonly used search engines. However, searches may give variable results – even if subsequently repeated using the same search terms. One pragmatic search strategy for the Google search engine is to limit results that are reviewed to the first five pages or the first 500 results. Similar limits may also need to be applied to Google Scholar.

Google Scholar provides descriptions of academic articles, and some abstracts can be read openly, sometimes providing enough information to inform a risk assessment or decision. Some articles may be open access (i.e. not behind a paywall) or final drafts of academic articles and so free access. For example, Google Scholar may provide a link to the final draft of an academic article that has been published on ResearchGate or similar. Google Books also carries a similar advantage, and it may be possible to read enough of a book to answer a question. In addition, Wikipedia may provide a useful start point to start a search. Articles may be well-referenced, often with links to online sources, and any shortcomings in the articles are stated.

Searching a government website may offer a range of documents that can be downloaded (a technique known as “foraging”). Searching known government websites for OHS-related information may be obvious in your own country but more difficult in other countries. This can be simplified by entering ‘site’ before a web address followed by the search term of interest. For example: site.govt.nz musculo will find a range of sources for musculo-skeletal disorders. Government websites in other countries can be similarly searched by using gov.au, gov.uk or (for the USA) gov.

### **Sources of information**

In Australia, grey literature users were reported to use “reports, journal articles, discussion papers, ‘briefings, guides and research reviews’, news reports, conference papers books and data regularly or occasionally” to inform development of policy (Lawrence et al., 2014). Professional bodies may offer suggested reading for continuing professional development as well as webinars presented by qualified people.

Members of online forums can help identify grey literature and gaps in knowledge. Discussions on the New Zealand Safeguard forum (<https://forum.safeguard.co.nz/>) identified a gap in knowledge about new legislation. This led to preparation of an article (Peace et al., 2017) showing a flow of information from practice to research. A more recent enquiry asked users which non-traditional sources they used. Responses included interactions with others, relevant sources on social anthropology and organisational psychology, and searching the Ako Aotearoa website (<https://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/>) for resources on health and safety in education.

If some academic sources have been identified but appear to be behind a paywall, the research function in the Unpaywall (<https://unpaywall.org/>) may help find articles using their DOI (digital object identifier). Unpaywall is a database of nearly 20 million freely available articles in 50,000 journals and repositories. Moreover, many university libraries allow access to book collections and, sometimes, use of their computers to search for white literature. Some local libraries may be able to borrow books via interlibrary loan from another library or university, and librarians may be able to help with searches. Some businesses publish information that can be regarded as reliable grey literature. Examples include *The Economist* weekly newspaper (<https://www.economist.com/>), the *Economist Intelligence Unit* research reports (<https://www.eiu.com/>), and McKinsey reports (<https://www.mckinsey.com/>).

Table 1 lists and describes some sources of grey literature. Those of relevance to OHS are in the top half of the table while more general sources are in the lower half.

**Table 1. A sample of useful websites**

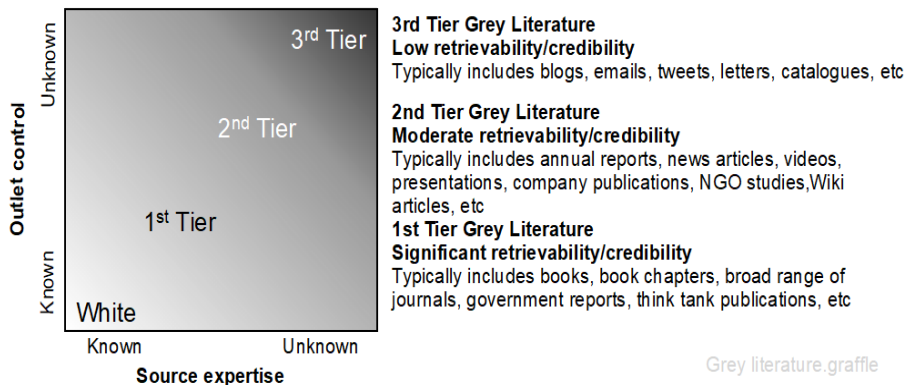
Source	Topics covered
WorkSafe New Zealand <a href="https://worksafe.govt.nz/">https://worksafe.govt.nz/</a>	WorkSafe is the New Zealand OHS regulatory agency and publishes guidance material on its website
Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) <a href="https://www.fireandemergency.nz/research-and-reports/research-reports/">https://www.fireandemergency.nz/research-and-reports/research-reports/</a>	FENZ commissions and publishes research related to fire prevention, suppression, safety, and harm
New Zealand Transport Accident Investigation Commission <a href="https://www.taic.org.nz/">https://www.taic.org.nz/</a>	TAIC investigates selected aviation, marine, and rail accidents and incidents in New Zealand with a view to avoiding similar events rather than to ascribe blame to anyone
New Zealand District Court <a href="https://www.districtcourts.govt.nz/search/SearchForm">https://www.districtcourts.govt.nz/search/SearchForm</a>	The New Zealand District Court publishes selected judgements from OHS prosecutions by WorkSafe NZ, Civil Aviation Authority, and Maritime New Zealand
UK Health and Safety Executive <a href="https://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/index.htm">https://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/index.htm</a>	The HSE has published more than 1,125 research reports on work which has been supported by funds provided by the Executive. The link is to the entry point of the database. The Health and Safety Laboratory is part of the HSE and used to publish reports under its own name. These are now available on the HSE website
UK Institution for Occupational Safety and Health <a href="https://iosh.com/resources-and-research/our-research-programme/access-our-research/">https://iosh.com/resources-and-research/our-research-programme/access-our-research/</a>	IOSH is the largest OHS professional organisation in the world and funds some applied research of relevance to practitioners
Occupational Health and Safety Body of Knowledge <a href="https://www.ohsbok.org.au/">https://www.ohsbok.org.au/</a>	The OHS BoK is the collective knowledge that should be shared by generalist OHS professionals to provide a sound basis for understanding the causation and control of work-related fatality, injury, disease and, ill health
nzresearch.org <a href="https://nzresearch.org.nz/">https://nzresearch.org.nz/</a>	This site includes peer-reviewed and other research from universities, polytechnics, and research organisations from throughout New Zealand
Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka <a href="https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/about/governance/copyright/open-source">https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/about/governance/copyright/open-source</a>	Lists sources of open access books, articles, and other resources
Victoria University of Wellington Library <a href="https://libguides.victoria.ac.nz/health/topics/health-and-safety">https://libguides.victoria.ac.nz/health/topics/health-and-safety</a>	The National Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee (NOHSAC) was established in 2003 to provide independent advice directly to the Minister of Labour on major OHS issues in New Zealand. The NOHSAC reports are a valuable resource that has been preserved on the Victoria University of Wellington website

Index New Zealand <a href="https://natlib.govt.nz/collections/a-z/index-new-zealand-innz">https://natlib.govt.nz/collections/a-z/index-new-zealand-innz</a>	Index New Zealand is a searchable online database of records 1980s–now containing abstracts (summaries) and subject headings (names and subject keywords) for articles from New Zealand periodicals (journals and magazines) and newspapers
Analysis & Policy Observatory (APO) <a href="https://apo.org.au/">https://apo.org.au/</a>	New Zealand governance and policy collection that includes reports, working papers and journal articles published in or about New Zealand
US Chemical Safety Board (CSB) <a href="https://www.csb.gov/">https://www.csb.gov/</a>	The CSB is an independent federal agency that investigates industrial chemical accidents at fixed industrial facilities. Root causes are usually deficiencies in safety management systems but can be any factor that would have prevented the accident if that factor had not occurred. Investigations lead to reports and, sometimes, videos illustrating incidents
Dropped Objects Prevention Scheme <a href="https://www.dropsonline.org/">https://www.dropsonline.org/</a>	DROPS is an oil and gas industry initiative focused on preventing dropped objects, with the goal of delivering a second nature dropped objects prevention strategy across our industry
Dust Safety Science <a href="https://dustsafetyscience.com/">https://dustsafetyscience.com/</a>	Dust Safety Science provides information about combustible dust fires and explosions
OECD iLibrary <a href="https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/">https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/</a>	Includes all publications and statistical data produced by the OECD. Covers economics, employment, finance, governance, industry, science and technology, social issues, taxation, trade, transport and more

*Reliability of OHS grey literature*

How should the reliability of grey literature be judged? Based on the work of Kepes et al. (2012), Adams et al. (2017) has suggested a four-tier model of white and grey literature, adapted here in Figure 2. The left-hand axis allows qualitative judgement of the level of editorial control and persistence of the outlet while the right-hand axis allows judgement of the expertise of authors.

**Figure 2. Shades of grey literature**



Adapted from Adams et al (2017)

While the model helps visualise levels of reliability and so enables exclusion of some types of literature, it does not offer enough granularity for practitioners or professionals unused to making such judgements. However, Booth et al. (2016) and Hassall & Karacaoglu (2021) suggested applying some criteria to help judge the reliability of a source. These have been tabulated (Table 2) to enable scoring a report, article, or book for reliability. Using the table, it is tentatively suggested that five or more “yes”

responses suggest the source may be 1<sup>st</sup> Tier grey literature in Figure 2. If most of the answers are “no” or “don’t know”, the source may be 3<sup>rd</sup> Tier grey literature and not reliable. Used together, Figure 2 and Table 2 aid justification of inclusion or exclusion of grey literature in a report. Combining Figure 2 with a range of grey literature that may be found on websites listed in Table 1 and elsewhere contributes to Table 3, types and indicative reliability of such documents.

Overlaying these criteria is the Rauru Whakarare Evaluation framework. In Aotearoa-New Zealand, it is important to uphold the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. The Rauru Whakarare Evaluation framework represents interconnectedness and uses five criteria similar to those above: the connectedness of Whakapapa (background), Orokohanga (origins), Mana (authority), Māramatanga (content) and Aronga (lens) of information we are using (see <https://informationliteracyspaces.wordpress.com/rauru-whakarere-evaluation-framework/>).

**Table 2. Evaluating reliability of grey literature**

Q	Attribute	Yes	No	Unsure
1	If the source is an open access academic article, was it peer reviewed or subject to some other quality assurance?			
2	Do the authors have a good reputation as academics, researchers, or authors (e.g. place of employment, other work published)?			
3	Is the source published or posted online by a reputable press (e.g. university press, scholarly publisher, research institute, or intergovernmental agency)?			
4	If the source is only online, is it published by a reputable or professional organisation?			
5	Is the source current (e.g. published in the last five years)?			
6	If the source is a website, is it supported by bibliographical data?			
7	If the source is a website, does it approach its topic judiciously (e.g. does it avoid being commercial or “self-promotional” and is it balanced and well-justified)?			
8	If the source is a book, has it been published in two or more editions?			
9	If the source is a book, does it have notes and a bibliography?			
10	If the source is a book, has it been independently well reviewed?			
11	Has the source been frequently approvingly cited by others?			
12	Does the source have a “feel” of having been well-researched?			

Adapted from Booth et al. (2016, pp. 77-79) and Hassall & Karacaoglu (2021, p. 245)



**Table 3. Types, examples, and reliability of grey literature**

<b>Types of grey literature and examples</b>	<b>Indicative reliability</b>
Academic journal articles and books	White literature
Book chapters in textbooks	1
Census data and data sets	1
Dissertations and theses (eg, Honours, Masters or Doctoral)	1
Patents	1
Pre-prints of journal articles	1
Standards (eg, ISO, IEC, BSI, Standards Australia, Standards New Zealand, joint standards)	1
Reports from Think Tanks	1-2
Reports, investigation reports, or publications from governmental and non-governmental organizations (e.g. UK HSE, WorkSafe New Zealand, ACC NZ, TAIC, US CSB)	1-2
Technical notes and reports	1-2
Annual reports of businesses or undertakings	2
Bibliographies	2
Committee reports	2
Company reports	2
Conference proceedings and abstracts	2
Court cases (decisions written by judges, legal reporters)	2
Discussion papers, "Green Papers", working papers, white papers	2
Newspapers (local or international)	2
Policy documents	2
Programme evaluation reports	2
Publications from NGOs and consulting firms	2
Rejected manuscripts	2
Reports to funding agencies	2
Webinars	2
PowerPoint presentations	2-3
Reports on websites, Wiki articles	2-3
Catalogues	3
Electronic communities (email listservs, forums, etc.)	3
Informal communications (conversations, emails, personal correspondence, letters, tweets)	3
Newsletters	3
Speeches	3
Still photographs	3
Unpublished reports, manuscripts	3
Videos	3
Blogs and social media	3

Source: adapted from Adams et al. (2017) and Booth et al. (2016)

## **Use of grey literature by OHS practitioners and professionals**

### *Records of grey literature*

Grey literature should always be recorded so that it can be found later. Bibliographic software to help catalogue grey literature includes Endnote (commercial, off the shelf software widely used by

academics), and Mendeley and Zotero (free browser extensions). Guidance on the use of such software can be read at <https://libguides.victoria.ac.nz/referencing-citing/software> and other university websites.

Whichever software an OHS professional chooses the record for a document should always include the name of the author, year of publication, document or website name and address, type of document (e.g. research report, investigation report) and relevant keywords. Recording the first few paragraphs of any executive summary or abstract may be helpful later (sometimes much later!) when searching for documents. A copy of a document should always be downloaded and kept because, as noted earlier, grey literature or the host website can disappear from its original source.

Developing a habit of adding new references (found by deliberate search or serendipitously) to a bibliographic database may yield benefits in the long term, thus making the setting up of the database tolerable (Shulman, 2005). While initially a daunting and potentially complex task, the development of a software catalogue of relevant grey literature and available white literature can help provide the best available information (ISO, 2018a) or the weight of evidence (Weed, 2005) for decisions about business and occupational health and safety objectives. This will enhance professional performance and reduce what Kahneman (2011) called “what you see is all there is” – WYSIATI.

#### *A prepared dataset*

Work by the author since 2003 has resulted in an Endnote database of more than 3,300 grey literature entries. It can be downloaded free of charge at <https://libguides.victoria.ac.nz/health/topics/health-and-safety> in a format that can be imported into Endnote, Mendeley or Zotero; it will be regularly updated and includes many documents from sources identified in Table 1. Using this database, many records of New Zealand District Court cases under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 and Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 have led to a preliminary article (Peace & Priestley-King, 2021) and as yet unpublished Masters project. The HSE and IOSH research reports and US CSB videos are also used in teaching at Victoria University of Wellington. This database complements other work on a repository of publications for basic occupational health services (van Dijk & Moti, 2023).

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

How can risk and OHS advisors be encouraged to use such resources? Respective professional organisations require members to undergo continuing professional development (CPD) and might encourage sharing and use of grey literature to inform practice. An economist approach of supply and demand would help encourage greater use of grey literature. For example, directors and management teams might ask about the evidence underpinning proposed actions (demand). Moreover, professional associations, such as the New Zealand Institute for Safety Management, offer CPD webinars where senior members present information at no cost to members. However, it is not clear as to what extent this is working.

Developing mechanisms for transfer of knowledge from research to practice should now be a key part of all academic research (Hemsley-Brown, 2004) to enable OHS professionals to become critical consumers of research. It is hoped this article will contribute to the improvement of risk and OHS practice and advice to decision makers.

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