



How To Teach Instrumental Lessons Online



Thoughts and recommendations will be presented...as Doc would say, “This is what works for me. Please don’t blame me if it doesn’t work for you”

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Introduction:

I have been teaching online lessons for over 10 years and while I do not consider myself the expert in online teaching, I have had a lot of success with students online. There are some in the teaching industry that are very skeptical of online teaching, especially within the applied lesson setting. If online teaching in the applied lesson area is inadequate, why have I had so much success? My online students have made All-State, have been awarded graduate assistantships, won various auditions, or simply become better musicians. It's been extremely rewarding to have an impact on students all over the globe. I have had students across the nation, in Canada, and Europe. The most difficult task has been to remember what time zone they are in! I hope that some of my experiences and thoughts will help those educators that have been forced into online instruction.

A Few Things To Keep In Mind:

1. Do not panic! Embrace the change and stay positive.
2. Become familiar with online platforms before working with your students. I would suggest that you are familiar with a variety of online platforms. What may work for one student, may not work for another. Consider the immediate change for the student. Meet them halfway with technology they are already familiar with! Facetime, Skype, Facebook Messenger Video, Gmail Video, Google HangOuts, Zoom, etc. are all possibilities. You don't have to know every online platform but be familiar with a few of them to give students options.
3. There are countless resources available to you! There are several online forums on Facebook, advice on Music Education websites, and YouTube videos that will walk you through the various functions. How many of us that own a car or home and have watched a YouTube video to "fix" something ourselves? Reach out to colleagues if needed. Use your resources!
4. When meeting a student online, remember rules of etiquette. If you are working with a younger student, I always permit a parent or guardian to be present during the lesson. Remember to dress professionally. This doesn't mean you have to put on a tux to teach an online lesson, but I'd argue that you should not teach in an old T-Shirt. You can still maintain a professional environment in an online setting. This is especially important considering the one-to-one ratio in teaching. Also, please keep your camera angle in mind while teaching.
5. It will take some time to get into the "groove" of teaching online instrumental lessons. Be patient and try to learn from each lesson. Possibly keep a notepad by the computer so that you can make notes in between lessons and then reflect on what you can do better at the end of the day.
6. Go into your first lesson, and possibly second lesson, online with the goal of sorting out logistics and connection issues. If you teach anything beyond that, it's icing on the cake. Don't worry, you and your student will figure things out and will be well on your way!
7. If you are teaching several applied lessons back to back, I'd recommend that you give yourself a break in between lessons. I typically teach 50-minute lessons, with a 10-minute break between so that I can review notes on the next student or just take a mental break!
8. At the end of each lesson, I would advise typing up expectations for the next lesson. This can be done in a chat window or an email to a student. If you have a lot of students, this is

well worth it! It helps keep the student organized and it helps remind you of what your student was assigned.

Setting Up For Online Instruction

In a perfect world, both student and instructor would have high speed Internet, high end microphones with audio interfaces, and possibly multiple screens. However, most of us will not have that luxury considering the circumstances we are all in. I have recently seen some awesome home set ups, but again most of us will not have this luxury. Everyone can teach on a basic level using the microphone input on your laptop, desktop computer, or their phone! Yes, as a gigging musician I have taught lessons over my iPhone while on the road. You can work on basic fundamentals, basic concepts, notes, and rhythms.

Sound on the Internet is compressed. Be patient and flexible. If you need to get into the “weeds” of sound (perhaps one of the most important fundamentals), I would suggest that students record themselves with their phone. If they are fortunate to have a H4N Zoom product or other recording device, they could record themselves and send it through shared Google Drive or Drop Box. Regardless, recording yourself is an extremely useful tool in teaching! You can also use earbuds with a microphone to make things a bit clearer. I bought a home movie surround sound system and have speakers set up around the office. I feel like they are in the room with me! I have seen some colleagues that state they are not comfortable teaching online lessons, so they will simply ask students to only submit recordings for feedback. Written feedback is great, but I would urge that social interaction will become even more important in the days ahead. Have your students submit recordings but meet with your students online so that you can mentor their development on a more personal level!

When teaching, try to find an area that is free from distractions. If you have kids or other family members in the house, make them aware of your teaching schedule. I’ve been teaching for so long that our three kids know they are not to disturb dad while he is in the practice studio! This goes without saying, but don’t have other online windows open while teaching. I would recommend only working within the one window unless you need to find a resource for the lesson. Be respectful and focus on the student!

Make sure your camera angle is set for teaching. If you are using your phone or iPad to teach, make sure your camera is not looking up at you (no one wants to look up your nose). If you are using a phone or iPad, make sure it is propped up so that you are facing the student. I would recommend that you plug in your phone or iPad into an outlet so that you never lose power during a lesson. Most camera angles from a computer are great. If you are using an external camera, make sure it is set up the way you want it prior to starting the lesson call.

In terms of setting up a schedule for teaching, I would recommend that you assign a regular meeting time each week for each student so that the volume of students does not overwhelm you. Advise students to log on prior to their assigned lesson time so that you do not lose any time. The instructor should initiate the call when they are ready to begin the lesson.

Instrumental Applied Lesson Pedagogy

If you have never taught an applied lesson online, it is different! Over the years of teaching online lessons, I have discovered some good practices and I am happy to share them here. Given that many of us will be forced to teach in this environment, I will also offer some thoughts and suggestions.

1. Encourage your students that things will be okay! Use this time as a ‘gift’ to improve your craft. Look on the positive side, the commute is awesome!
2. Have your student warm up before the lesson, unless you want to cover a warm-up routine.
3. Have the student log on before the assigned lesson time and the instructor will initiate the call when they are ready. Instructor’s monitor your time while teaching so that you are on time for the next lesson. Also, I would recommend a 10-minute break between lessons so that you can review lesson notes or take a mental break.
4. If you are using your phone to teach, make sure your do not disturb is set so that your lesson is not interrupted.
5. I would recommend that the instructor has some water and a perhaps a notepad to take notes available before the lesson begins.
6. Have the student set up the phone/computer in a way that you can monitor posture and physical technique. If a horn player is playing, I would advise that they face away from the computer when playing. If a horn player plays directly into the computer screen the student can get load sound reflections from the screen, it is difficult to evaluate the embouchure, and there are times (especially in the extreme upper register) where the mic can short out. The video will remain intact, but the sound will fade to nothing. The sound will return in a moment, but just be aware this can happen. Most of the time my students are playing in the mid register and I never have a problem. If you need to teach someone in the upper register, I would advise changing the mic settings or simply backing away from the microphone as you would in performance!
7. Online teaching is a lot of stop/start. I play, you play! I’m okay with that. Modeling is a great way to teach! You may want to teach in smaller sections to give quicker feedback, but there are times when I will have a student play the whole tune, so I give an overall impression of the larger work. Feel free to take notes while the student in performing.
8. Be creative in your assignments. I have had a few conversations with Branford Marsalis on the pedagogy of “listening”. Every one of my students are required to listen to YouTube videos or CD’s each week. The first time we initiate the listening assignment, I just have them listen to five recordings and write a paragraph describing what they hear. The next lesson I read over their reflections and I can tell “how” they are listening. At that point, we talk about best practices in “active listening” and we assign five more artists to listen to for the next lesson. Through this continued process we improve listening skills and we help put direction into their desired development. The results are incredible! When a student has studied with me for a long period of time, they are familiar with a large list of artists and they have been exposed to a lot of music! Note: I would have students write out a short paragraph for each recording. During the lesson they can summarize while they look at their notes.

9. You can use play-alongs during the lesson. Have the student pull up a separate window with a YouTube backing track and have them turn up the volume. If they are working on a transcription, you can have them play along with the original recording. I have done this for years and it works great! Note: Make sure any backing track that is played is on their side! Otherwise, there could be a delay.
10. Students can have a metronome playing in background while they are performing an exercise or solo. I have had students use metronomes on their phone while they are on their computer or they can pull up a separate window to google metronome applications. Again, make sure the sound is originating on their side. Otherwise, there could be a delay.
11. Have your students record themselves! This is a great way to monitor progress and I find that I listen in greater detail to their sound away from the live lesson. Recordings can be submitted via Dropbox, Google Drive, etc.
12. Before you log off the lesson, summarize what was covered in the lesson and go over expectations for the next one.
13. When you log off the lesson, type out a summary of expectations for the lesson in a chat window or email. This is a record for both you and the student!
14. Be patient with your students. This is a new platform for many and remember humor can be a long way. Be personable!
15. There are countless artists that are putting out free online warm-ups online or instructional videos. There are Facebook groups that are encouraging collaboration. Share ideas of what you are working on in the “woodshed”. Contribute to online groups such as “Jam of the Week”. Social collaboration online can be a positive thing! Perhaps create a private Facebook group where students in a studio can share performing videos of the week, etc. There are countless possibilities!
16. Encourage composition for your more advanced students. Encourage readings for your students. There are great books and articles out there that are fantastic for developing a musician. Read about pedagogy or history! This would be a great time to learn about the people behind the music! Be creative in your assignments. Students will have time on their hands. Let’s be productive!
17. Have students move back to see breathing and posture. Have students move closer to camera if you need to get a closer look at their embouchure. Sometimes you can get closer than you might in person!

Sample Lesson Structure

** Let's say the lesson starts at 2pm via Facetime, Skype, Facebook Video, or another online platform. Make sure you are logged on and everything is working properly. Have water, notepad, pen/pencil, music stand (if needed), and any other materials needed. Make sure you as the instructor are warmed up, dressed properly, and are in an area that is free from distraction. Make sure your household knows your schedule and put your phone on do not disturb (especially if you are using your phone to teach).

1:50 PM: Review student notes and possibly take a pic or write down expectations that were created for the lesson to serve as an outline.

2:00 PM: Call the student via the online platform function.

2:01 PM: After an initial greeting (again be personable, we are all going to need social interaction during this time period), I ask about their listening assignment. I have the student explain who they are listening to and what they notice in the recordings. We can discuss “active listening” concepts or have meaningful conversations about artists or their desired development. Sometimes I will assign specific artists for them check out for the next week or I will leave it open for them to choose. You could also use this time to discuss any readings assigned.

2:15 PM: I ask the students perform any technical exercises assigned. Be specific in expectations from one lesson to another. Assign specific page numbers in books and metronome markings with concrete goals. Work on scales or any patterns assigned. Listen, then demonstrate! Remember, modeling is a great teaching tool. Assign work for the next week. Sometimes I recycle the expectations from the prior week if needed or I have students refine this week's exercises while assigning new material. I have found students really like seeing progress in a book. Some students (especially younger students) will not want to work on fundamentals. As we all know, fundamentals are extremely important in facilitating growth and development in our students. If they are not into the exercises you are assigning, be creative and find another resource to cover the fundamental that needs to be addressed. For example, I have found that a lot of my students really enjoy Scott Belk's lip flexibility books in that they sound “cool” in the “woodshed”. There are lots of resources out there!

2:30 PM: Repertoire. I will divide this section with etudes and any transcriptions assigned. Sometimes I will work on certain sections. Other times I will have the student perform the whole work for a broader perspective. Remember modeling is a great teaching tool! Give specific feedback and possibly assign recording assignments. If they were assigned to record, I will discuss feedback in between the fundamental session and the repertoire section to give their chops a break. Manage your time wisely by keeping an eye on the clock every so often. It is easy to lose track of time while teaching Online, but you will get into the rhythm of things.

2:45 PM: Summarize what was covered in the lesson and be specific in what is assigned for next week. Be positive, personable, and encouraging.

2:50 PM: Log off with the student. Type up a quick summary of expectations for the next lesson in a chat window or email. Then, get ready for the next lesson.

General Thoughts

- Be empathic during this time. This is a new environment for both students and teachers. Be patient and understand that things may go wrong. You don't have to be perfect to make an online lesson work.
- Be reasonable with your expectations when assigning work! This will be a difficult time and you do not to add any additional stress. Small battles in the “woodshed” can have profound effects to the overall development in a student.
- Be flexible with your students, but also make sure that they are aware they need to adhere to specific lesson times. If a student is late logging in and your lesson goes over the assigned time, you will run into issues.
- Be prepared and have a plan for the online lesson. Structure is important.

Final Thoughts

Like most technology, it is constantly changing! I would recommend joining the various Facebook Online Groups that are consistently adding resources. One for example includes “Higher Ed Music Lessons in the Time of COVID-19”.

Contact

I'm happy to serve as a resource moving forward. I'm also happy to evolve this document with input from everyone reading. Please feel free to contact me at: matt@mattleder.com or mleder@gadsdenstate.edu, on Facebook Messenger (matt leder), or through my website (<http://mattleder.com>). As Clark Terry would say, “Keep on Keepin' On”!

Dr. Matt Leder is Music Director/Instructor at Gadsden State Community College. Dr. Leder has been a professional musician for over 20 years, serving as an active duty Navy & Air Force musician for a total of 12 years & performing in supporting ensembles with Bob Mintzer, Benny Green, Nicholas Payton, & Ellis Marsalis. Matt is an in-demand guest artist, clinician, & private instructor, including through his online studio. Matt holds a DA in Music Ed. from the University of Northern Colorado, a MM in Jazz Studies from the University of New Orleans, & a BM in Jazz Performance from East Carolina University. Dr. Leder's dissertation, “Towards An Informed Pedagogy of Modern New Orleans Style,” describes New Orleans style & offers possibilities of adding this syntax of jazz into the modern classroom. Dr. Leder has also served on the faculties of Northern New Mexico College, Brown University, University of Colorado at Denver, Community College of Rhode Island, & St. George's School & was a 2017 National Endowment of Humanities Summer Scholar at Tulane University.

Additional Resources

(Compiled by Dr. Justin Binek)

In addition to the resources I've listed earlier in this document (which I will list again here), there are a number of resources that are being constantly updated. Here's a VERY incomplete list of resources I'd recommend in a heartbeat, beginning with two lists that I love:

Resources for Teaching Music and Audio Production Online

https://docs.google.com/document/d/13fYFK-_qaeVnIGdobLWmtGJfZLutB5181ZTxN9dmD2Y/edit?fbclid=IwAR0_U1gea_2cGS5KgkOP0C7W0yoNjC0RjJ9dXHXVmWgBIE7_L5b8e5UGDfk#heading=h.mt2oyycj3ywx

This is a working document created by Dr. Eric Honour and Dr. Jeff Kaiser at the University of Central Missouri and Dr. Michael James Olson of Minnesota State University-Mankato. It's a lengthy document broken down into Online Instruction, Online Lessons/Academic Music Classes, Online Rehearsals/Collaboration, DAWs and Production, Plugins/Samplers/Synths, Notation, Visual Programming Environments, Telematic Performance, Online Textbooks and Curricula, and Audio Hardware. Absolutely worth bookmarking and refreshing on a daily basis.

The Big COVID-19 Survival Choral Doc

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1rPUGd19SMm-x0acbHdEUmEoXK-ElGPCWr_vpSDwTzH8/mobilebasic?fbclid=IwAR2mzVQes715d9hCatlMBMiy_EKiAlGheZ-uTcZ4DenVWaDrYSxc6lSkA_8

Curated by Lauren Peithmann and editable by anyone, this list/document is geared towards choral directors, but has resources applicable to a broad range of music educators. Subsections deal with Online Links and Resources, Hyperlinks to Lessons/Worksheets/Assignments, hints on Best Practices, Videos/Demos, Assessment Ideas, and links to other resources. Again, it's worth bookmarking and refreshing on a daily basis.

Amazing Educational Resources

http://www.amazingeducationalresources.com/?fbclid=IwAR2MPysrMavhrBsiPQBLKLCMiyH17WFM81PkOzAaRveyOTXqSBk_WCuT2ys

This is an absolutely MASSIVE list of education companies that are offering free subscriptions due to school closings. It is updated every few hours, and the organizer of the list intends to add more detailed filters for searching specific topics and/or courses.

Links to platforms and websites listed earlier in this document

Large-Scale Meeting Platforms:

- **Google Hangouts:** Google's group IM/Video chat service is available as a Chrome Extension, through the Apple and Android App Stores, and as an extension within Gmail and Google Classroom.
- **GoToMeeting:** <https://www.gotomeeting.com/> LogMeIn is offering educational institutions free use of many of its products, including GoToMeeting, for the next three months. I've been on a number of conference calls that use this system, and it's been reliable whenever I've done so.
- **Microsoft Teams:** <https://products.office.com/en-us/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software> If you (or your institution) have an Office365 Subscription, you already have access to Microsoft Teams. They are also currently offering a free trial. Though I haven't personally used it to any extensive degree, I have heard good things about the quality and adaptability of the interface.
- **Zoom:** <https://zoom.us/> Zoom is probably the most commonly used group meeting software platform, and it's got a very solid infrastructure and pretty decent audio quality, in my experience. Zoom's CEO, Eric Yuan, recently announced that Zoom will provide videoconferencing tools to all K-12 schools for free. Zoom is also embedded as a meeting tool in Blackboard classroom management software.

One-to-One Video Platforms:

- **Facebook Messenger:** One of the most reviled (in many corners of the internet) part of Facebook, Messenger's video chat function can be a very useful way to connect with students. I've rarely had issues with dropped connections, and the audio quality is okay – not great, but not terrible.
- **FaceTime:** Apple's proprietary video chat extension of iMessage. In my experience, it's the cleanest audio signal for teaching private lessons online, and the video quality is also quite good. The downside is that both parties need to be using Apple products (iPhones, iPads, or MacBooks) in order to use FaceTime to communicate.
- **Flipgrid:** <https://info.flipgrid.com/> As I wrote earlier, I have never used Flipgrid personally, but I know teachers who swear by it as an effective tool for private lessons, though only in asynchronous teaching formats. The main limitation of the app is its five-minute maximum video length, though that length does make uploading videos extremely reasonable, whether doing so via a computer or through a mobile device.
- **Skype:** <https://www.skype.com/en/> Skype is the granddaddy of video chat platforms, and it's the most commonly used one. In my experience, though, Skype has always been less-than-idea for online teaching. I've frequently encountered issues with dropped connections, poor audio, and video freezing, and I've personally given up on using it for online lessons (and most online video chats, unless requested by the other party).
- **WhatsApp:** A mobile phone, text, and video app that is extremely popular outside the United States. WhatsApp was purchased by Facebook in 2014, and its video chat interface is similar in quality to Facebook Messenger.

Music Theory and Aural Skills Resources I Highly Recommend:

- **The Ancillary Resource Center (ARC) for Kevin Holm-Hudson's *Music Theory Remixed*:** https://oup-arc.com/access/holm-hudson-student-resources#tag_all-chapters This is

the textbook that I use in my Music Theory classes at KCKCC, and I LOVE it, primarily because it's written in a way that aligns with NASM standards but isn't a never-ending series of musical examples solely from the Western European classical tradition – there's jazz, pop, theatre, film scores, and a lot more, which is why I'm particularly fond of it. The ARC for this textbook includes a number of interesting videos, special topic PDFs, Finale files to coincide with the chapters, and Spotify playlists.

- **8notes.com:** <https://www.8notes.com/theory/> This is actually a pretty great website for students in terms of reviewing the basics. Within the broader site, there are also some great resources for specific instruments and specific musical styles – again, largely geared towards beginners.
- **MusicTheory.net:** <https://www.musictheory.net/> I LOVE this site, and its related mobile apps (Theory Lessons and Tenuto). My favorite feature of this site is the Exercise Customizer function (located at the bottom of the “Exercises” section) that allows educators to customize quizzes for both identification and construction.
- **Sight Reading Factory:** <https://www.sightreadingfactory.com/> My wife, a middle school choir teacher, uses this website for her students, who record themselves and submit those recordings for grading, and the interface works on smartphones and tablets.
- **SmartMusic:** <https://www.smartmusic.com/> SmartMusic is pretty wonderful in terms of the number of sight reading exercises it offers, in addition to its giant library of repertoire accompaniments. And they are offering free use of their software through June 30th.
- **Teoria:** <https://www.teoria.com/> Teoria has been around for years, and it is loaded with tutorials, exercises, reference points, and articles to share with students. I'm particularly partial to several of the analysis articles and videos, but I'm nerdy that way. Virtually everything on the site relates to the Western Classical tradition, but that's fine – there's a lot of great stuff within the Western Classical tradition!

Applied Teaching (with a focus on jazz and voice) and Jazz Improvisation:

- **Appcompanionist.com:** <https://www.appcompanionist.com/> If you teach classical and musical theatre as well as jazz, this app can be a bit of a life-saver. The beautiful thing about the free version of the Appcompanionist app is that there are hundreds of vocal exercises and warmups included; as I wrote earlier, in order to maximize efficiency, your students need to be taking care of warmups ahead of time, and this is a great way for them to do it (at least in part).
- **Jamey Aebersold Play-Alongs:** <http://www.jazzbooks.com/jazz/category/aeball> The entire Jamey Aebersold play-along library is available for digital download in mp3 format at JazzBooks.com (and many of the books themselves are available in PDF format).
- **iReal Pro:** <https://irealpro.com/> Yes, lots of jazz musicians bag on iReal Pro for having a stiff swing feel or for the piano feeling wonky or for lots of things. But to have a single app that can provide six choruses of “What Is This Thing Called Love” in Bb in a bossa nova groove with the flexibility to drop the volume of the drum set and boost the volume of the bass is a wonderful teaching tool, particularly when we can't be there to guide our students in person. I love it.

- **Learn Jazz Standards Play-Along Playlist:** https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLEk1V5QgcGrPLxInIV_NPFyh8mfAvPCF Mostly created with Band-in-a-Box, these are (admittedly) not the hippest recordings in the world. But there are a lot of them. And they are free. And they're in the standard keys.
- **MusicHabit:** <https://www.musichabit.com/> Michele's newest venture offers master classes from master teachers (available for purchase), and a free PracticeRoom section that contains PDFs of exercises, scat singing exercises, jazz piano exercises, backing tracks, and a jazz glossary.
- **PlayJazzNow.com:** <http://www.playjazznow.com/> A different take on the "jazz backing track" format, their tracks are available in a variety of backing piano/bass/drum configurations, and are quite decent.
- **ScatAbility:** Michele Weir's iOS app features demos by professional jazz singers, exercises, etudes, call-and-responses, and the ability to both record and export recordings with the backing track. And yes, I am one of the singers on the app, but I think it's awesome (and not just because I'm one of the singers on the app).

Keeping Yourself Informed

Given that the news is changing every single day in regard to information on the spread of COVID-19 (and yes, I've intentionally avoided discussing it until now), it's important to follow RELIABLE news sources for information. Domestically, the Associated Press (<https://apnews.com/>) and Reuters (<https://www.reuters.com/>) consistently rate as the most reliable, least biased news sources by nearly every study on media trustworthiness. It's also worth bookmarking the Centers for Disease Control's website (<https://www.cdc.gov/>) for the latest official news and updates from the CDC, as news rapidly changes. While I was working on this document on Sunday evening, the CDC's recommendation that in-person events consisting of fifth or more people throughout the U.S. be postponed or canceled for the next eight weeks came across my news feed, causing me to insert an extra sentence into the section on ensemble rehearsals.

From a music education perspective, the National Association for Music Education has a very good (and growing) page of COVID-19 Resources and News at <https://nafme.org/covid-19/>. Some of the links are more general in scope, but several are music-specific. The American Choral Directors Association also has a lengthy page dedicated to this at [https://acda.org/ACDA/Resources for Choral Professionals During a Pandemic.aspx](https://acda.org/ACDA/Resources%20for%20Choral%20Professionals%20During%20a%20Pandemic.aspx).

Finally, I'm happy to be a resource moving forward, and I'll happily continue to evolve and shape this document with input from everyone reading. Please feel free to contact me at justinbinek@gmail.com or jbinek@kckcc.edu, on Facebook/Messenger (justin.binek), via Instagram DM (justinbinek), or through the contact form on my website (<https://www.justinbinekjazz.com/>). Be well, friends.

Dr. Justin Binek is an internationally renowned jazz and classical singer, pianist, educator, clinician, and composer/arranger. He is a frequent presenter and performer at the Jazz Education Network's annual conferences, and has contributed significantly to the field of vocal jazz pedagogy, writing "The Art and Craft of Scat Singing and Melodic Alteration," "Vocal Pedagogy for the Jazz Singer," and his dissertation focusing on the evolution of Ella Fitzgerald's syllabic articulation in scat singing. He is also a featured in-app clinician on Michele Weir's ScatAbility app for iOS. Along with numerous credits as a sideman, Justin released one album ("Songbook") as a bandleader. Justin is an Assistant Professor of Music Theory and Jazz Improvisation at Kansas City Kansas Community College, and he also serves on the teaching faculties of the Jazz Harmony Retreat and the Halewynstichting Jazz Workshop.

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