



# HOW TO ENGAGE WITH POLITICIANS

Level 3: Advanced activist skills

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Caption. © Amnesty International

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## BEFORE WE BEGIN

If you haven't completed our modules on [fundamental activist skills](#), we recommend reading these first. In particular our module on Effective Communications.

If you have any questions please get in touch with us at [communityorganising@amnesty.org.au](mailto:communityorganising@amnesty.org.au).



Activists and staff gather for climate protest © Amnesty International

## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our module on how to engage with politicians. In this module we'll be looking at the many ways you can interact with elected officials at all levels. How to build sustainable relationships with them. Also, how you can create a strategy to influence them over time to better support human rights.

## Why it's important to engage with politicians

Holding the powerful to account is a vital part of what Amnesty International does. We have a role to remind those in power to live up to their human rights obligations. We need regular engagement with them to keep human rights on their agenda. The more that politicians hear from us, the more pressure there is for them to act.

Amnesty leaders and staff are in regular contact with politicians for these reasons. But what makes this more powerful is when it is in tandem with broader pressure from the whole movement. When politicians hear from many people all over the nation it gets their attention. It certainly makes it harder for them to claim we're a small niche interest group not speaking on behalf of the people. It also means we are able to develop stronger and mutually beneficial relationships with politicians. These relationships take time to build and we need more capacity to do this work. That's where you can help.

Politicians have a responsibility and duty to listen and respond to your concerns. Particularly if you are in their electorate or your concern relates to their portfolio. You can contact them at any time to tell them your thoughts on what the government should be doing. We're very fortunate to live in a country where we can do this without much risk. But a lot of people don't exercise these rights. There are a lot of reasons for this, some of which you may have experienced.

For starters, some people don't know that they can do it. They may have never learned their rights or have become disconnected from politics. Coming out to vote each election may be the extent of their involvement in our democracy. Others are cynical of the system and don't see the point of contacting politicians. They don't feel like the government ever listens to the public, so it's a waste of time to try. They may feel that regardless of who is in charge, politicians are all the same, they are all terrible.

Many of us are angry at the government for their lack of action on certain issues. Some people's anger dissuades them from engaging with politicians whom they dislike. They may prefer to take action without this kind of engagement being part of their strategy. That they will achieve change without the government's involvement at all. Then there are people that want to do it but don't feel knowledgeable or well-spoken enough. People who may worry they don't have anything important to say, that's it's best left to the experts.

Of course we also have to mention those of you that don't currently have the right to vote. You might be under 18, not a citizen or part of various other groups without that right. Not being able to vote doesn't mean that you can't engage with politicians though. You still have that power and we encourage you to use it, if you feel safe to do so.

By reading this you at least have a curiosity or interest in getting more involved. We'll assume you're participating in the democratic process in some way. So we'll address the other concerns people have. Although we do recommend everyone learn more about their rights. It's normal to have some level of cynicism or frustration towards politics. It's difficult not to feel discouraged sometimes by the inaction of the government. Their inaction causes suffering and oppression. But there is power in people holding politicians to account and reason to have hope.



Stunt outside MP office in 2019. © Amnesty International

Politicians often get the credit for bringing about change. After all they are the ones in the end that change laws and policy. But their involvement in this change usually only comes at the end of the process. Change begins and ends in the community.

It's the result of hard work from dedicated and passionate advocates. Activists that grow a movement around an idea and inspire others to become allies. People that identify the barriers towards change and take those down one by one. They find ways to amplify their voice so it drowns out the opposition. They increase pressure on the government until they have no choice but to act.

It does work, even if it can take a long time to achieve. This is how most change happens. But convincing those in power to run with the idea is a critical part of the process. It is possible to run a campaign without engaging MPs and win, but you're making things a lot harder for yourself. Not engaging MPs can be the difference between failure and success or winning a lot sooner.

In relation to whether you're knowledgeable enough, it's not how much you know that's important. If we left all lobbying to experts then the government would only ever hear from a tiny section of the public. A group of people that politicians will feel empowered to ignore if the public outrage isn't also there.

We can't stress enough how important it is that politicians hear from people from all walks of life and en masse. A large group of people contacting their local MP will have more impact than any single expert. That is the value that you bring and the impact you can achieve regardless of how much you know about an issue.

Everyday people in the community taking the time to communicate to their MP is powerful. Reminding that MP of what is important to the community.

Amnesty International has built a reputation of being experts on human rights. This has taken many decades to develop, but we now have a lot of public trust in this regard. This includes many of those in power. They may not always like what we have to say, but they know it comes from a place of knowledge and expertise. We are able to use this to act as human rights advisors to politicians. This is a relationship that you too can develop with your local representatives.

Knowing how to engage with politicians is what this module is all about, so we can help you in that regard. But first you have to accept that you can do this work, we know you can because anyone can. We want you to become confident and even excited about doing it. Engaging with your local MP can then be an easy and effective part of your activism. It can also be fun and rewarding as well. It's an opportunity to represent the wider community and the Amnesty movement. You'll be helping to ensure that politicians are keeping human rights on their agenda.



*Petition handover to QLD Government in 2019 © Amnesty International*

## Getting to know your representatives

We hope you're now excited about the idea about getting in touch with your local MPs. But before you hit the send button on that email there's a few things to do first. It's worth learning more about the politician you want to engage with. Knowing more about them as a person will help you to find a more strategic way of communicating with them. What type of person they are. What their values are. How they might respond to you.

So it's time to do some research and to assist you we've come up with some questions to get you started.

### Politician profile questions

- 1 What electorates do you live in? Which politicians represent you at the Council / State / Federal levels?  
*(Keep in mind that council, state and federal governments all have different powers and responsibilities.)*
- 2 Which party are they a member of? What are the policies of that party?
- 3 Are they part of the government currently in power? Are they in opposition or on the cross-bench?
- 4 Are they on the front or back bench of their party? What is their portfolio? *(If they have one.)*
- 5 Do they have the power to influence / create change within their party? Are they part of a faction within the party?
- 6 Are they a respected long term member, an up and coming new face or a lone wolf?
- 7 Do they have the ability to influence / create change on the issue you are working on?
- 8 How long have they been a politician? What did they do before they entered politics?
- 9 What is their cultural background? Do they have a family?

## Politician profile questions

- 10** What is their vision for their electorate or the wider community? What issues are most important to them? What are they aiming to achieve?
- 11** Who are their allies? Who has influence over them? Which other MPs are they close to? What Parliamentary Groups - such as the Amnesty International Parliamentary Group - are they members of? What community groups and organisations are they involved with?
- 12** What have they achieved as a politician so far? What are their proudest accomplishments?
- 13** What is their stance on issues that are important to you? Are they a champion for human rights in any way? *(Keep in mind that their public and private views may be different. Party members usually vote in line with party policy even if they don't completely agree with it.)*
- 14** Who works for them in either their electorate or ministerial office? Is it possible to influence them as well?

This information will help you create a profile of the politicians representing you. It's a fantastic foundation for any relationship you want to build with them. If you find they are an ally already then you can let them know to keep up the good work. If their views don't align with yours then you can tell them what you think. But you can do that in a way that is more likely to be effective now you know more about them.

If you're wondering where you can find this information, here are some suggestions.

- Personal websites and social media accounts for those politicians.
- Parliamentary websites have profiles on all members. This is where you can find out about their portfolio, committee listings, etc.
- Political party websites contain their current policy platforms.
- Read a copy of their inaugural speech after winning their first election. It's a personal statement filled with useful information about their values and goals.
- Media articles, videos & interviews are useful as well.
- Try a search using keywords like "politician name" + "human rights issue".



**Activity:** Create a profile of one politician who represents an electorate you live in. That could be council, state or federal. Think about what would be the most effective way to communicate with them.

## Developing an engagement strategy

As with everything we do, having a well thought out strategy is essential. It's the road map we use to get from a problem to a solution in the best possible way. When taking part in an Amnesty campaign a lot of the strategy has come together before it reaches you. In most campaigns engaging with politicians will be one of the tactics we ask activists to do.

One strategy may involve asking everyone to focus on engaging a particular politician. Someone with the power to make a decision on the issue themselves. For example, with refugee rights our target may be the Minister for Immigration or Minister for Home Affairs. If it's an international case we may focus on the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Other regular key targets include the Prime Minister, State Premiers and Attorneys General. It depends on what the campaign is and who has power.

Another strategy might involve trying to change a party's policy platform. This would mean engaging as many politicians from that party as we have capacity for. In which case we would ask you to contact your local MP and put your focus there. Once we know what our main goal is for the campaign we are able to work out who the target/s are. We tend to go through the following steps each time:

- What is the problem / issue we want addressed?
- Who has the responsibility for the laws / policies / processes related to the issue? E.g. Who has the power to create the change? Is it a local, state or federal issue? What is something proactive that they can do?
- What is the solution to the problem - how do you want to change the problem?

Representatives can deliver something different depending on their role, experience and interests. We do research so that we know what to expect from them and what the best way to engage with them is

Once we've answered these questions and put the strategy together we launch the campaign. At that point it's where you'll need to come up with your own strategy for engaging that politician. If it's a one off email, phone call or letter then it's pretty straight forward. You only have to work out what the right message is to send and you're done.

A step up from there might be around trying to get a one off meeting with them to discuss an issue. Finally, you might get a politician to shift their views and make a public commitment to an issue. This is something that can take a long time and involve lots of meetings, emails, phone calls, etc.

For each of these options you'll need to work out what you need to do to make your goal happen. This is where you can make a SMART goal for what you want to achieve. If you're not familiar with SMART goals [check out our module on Strategic Thinking](#) and then come back.



Let's look at some ideas for what you could do in a long term strategy to get a public commitment from a politician. You can scale these ideas down to fit short term goals like a one off meeting.

It's really important to give the politician the opportunity to respond behind the scenes first. This means before going for public pressure you request a meeting or a response to a letter. There's a few possible outcomes here.

**1.** The politician agrees to meet with you or respond to your letter. They agree with everything and make the commitment. This is excellent and all you have to do is follow up with them to make sure they do it.

**2.** The politician agrees to meet with you or respond to your letter. But they don't agree to making the commitment. This is going to mean that you have to find other ways to add pressure. But at least you know where they stand.

**3.** The politician ignores your request to meet or to respond. Again, this will mean finding ways to add pressure. It likely means this politician will be hard to shift.

You don't have to wait for any of these events to take place before working out what your next steps would be. You can be ready ahead of time in case one of the less favourable options happens. That way you can immediately get into the next phase of your strategy. Next steps can involve the following options at different times. Again it comes down to what will be more effective with that politician based on what you know about them.

Get your message out there, particularly in places that the politician may see. Talk to local media and publications. Speak at public events. Hold your own community events or stalls. Stick posters up. There's all sorts of ways you can reach people in your community.

Build public support for the issue. Encourage members of the community to get involved in your activism for example through signing petitions. Ask community leaders and organisations to commit themselves to the issue. Particularly people that have influence over the politician. See if they will contact the politician themselves in some form.

Find ways to keep regular engagement with the politician going. Attend events they will be attending, keep asking them questions. Hold regular vigils outside their offices. Keep making requests for meetings or a change to their response. Make sure that they don't forget you are around and what you want from them.

If you want to get that commitment from them you've got to prepare for the long haul. You won't know the end date for this, it could be weeks, months or years of work. Putting together a timeline with all these tactics will help a lot. How can you make sure you have regular activities lined up to achieve all these things? Look for key dates in your community. Work out when peak moments or opportunities are and schedule activities around them.

Again we'll refer to our module on Strategic Thinking. Make sure you have the capacity and resources to make it happen. If you don't then reduce the scope of what you're trying to achieve and aim for something more attainable. Or you can spread the activities out longer so there is more of a gap between them. This means it'll take longer, but at least it'll reduce some of the stress of always being active.



**Activity:** Put together a messaging strategy for a short term goal, like writing or phoning an MP about an issue. You could also write a mock strategy for a long term goal. Try and make it as realistic as possible, as if you were going to do it for real. If you currently have a real goal for a long term strategy then use that instead.



## The different methods of effective engagement

Now that we've covered strategy, let's go through the different tactics. These are all the different ways that you can engage with an MP and how to do them in an effective way. We'll start with the various options you can do while you build up to a meeting with them. Ways to build a relationship with them and to get your concerns on their radar.

Before we get into the details, we want to remind you what an important role you can play. You don't need to be an expert. You don't need to know all the policy details or every fact about the issue. But you will need to be confident in accessing and sharing information. Also being able to suggest potential solutions on the issues you're passionate about.

If it's part of an Amnesty campaign then we'll have all the information you'll need to sound confident. If not, you'll need to do a bit of research yourself, but it's important to check this with us first. If you're representing Amnesty in public then we need to make sure our positions align. We can let you know Amnesty's views on an issue and good sources to get information. We should also be able to let you know previous contact we've had with that MP. This is very important to know.

If a few people representing Amnesty are trying to meet with the same MP at the same time then it might look bad. It might look like we're not very coordinated or organised. By working together we can identify the best approach. How to best enable your local MP to influence policy and bring about the change we want to see.

So how do we do it? Here are some options for you to build a relationship with your MP.

### Take part in MP-led activities

Keep an eye out for information your MP is promoting. Subscribe to their mailing list, follow them on social media and watch their website. There will be times where they'll advertise opportunities to meet them or to ask for your opinion. Here are some examples.

- MPs often go to local events in their electorate, or make themselves available to the public. Use these opportunities to have a quick catch up with the MP. If you haven't spoken to them before it's a good opportunity to introduce yourself and describe what you care about. Let them know you'd like an opportunity to speak further in the future. Building the relationship can be more important than trying to get them to act on something. Talk about your mutual appreciation of the community and what's going on. Look for mutual ground where you can build a connection.
- Local representatives may hold or attend community forums. These are to engage with constituents on certain topics or in the lead up to elections. Go along and ask questions related to the issue you care about. You might also coordinate with a few other community members beforehand.
- From time to time local representatives may also survey their electorate. Work with others in your group or network to ensure you're heard. Encourage others in the electorate to respond as well with the same concerns.

## Engage with them on social media

Social media is a quick and informal way of connecting with your local MP. Be sure to follow them on social media and engage with their content. Particularly when it touches on any of the interests you're passionate about. If they see you commenting often, they'll start to remember you.

You can tweet your local MP or comment on their Facebook page and encourage others to do the same. Make sure you coordinate with each other so your messages are consistent. This will make your MP pay attention to the issue you're posting about. Keep the message short and to the point. Always remember to maintain Amnesty's independence and impartiality.

Also you can check whether your MP is following you on any of your social media platforms. This is important to take note of, as they must have an interest in the work that you're doing. If they're not following you invite them to like your Facebook page or follow you on twitter.

For more on this topic [check out our guide on using digital tools for activism](#).

## Write a letter or email

Politicians get a lot of letters from organisations wanting their attention and asking them to do something, but they really want to hear from their local voters. So be sure to include in the first sentence that you are a local constituent. You should also:

- 1 Use their correct title
- 2 Be concise with your concerns, include solutions.
- 3 Always have a clear ask - make this the important part of your letter. What do you want them to do? Meet with you? Contact another politician? Show public support for the issue?
- 4 Give background information on your current involvement with Amnesty. Also that you are representing Amnesty supporters within their electorate. You can ask staff to tell you how many Amnesty supporters are in your electorate. This makes the letter personal and more powerful.

## Make a phone call

Another way you can engage with a politician is by phoning their office. MPs rely on this as one way of knowing the level of concern or support an issue has in their electorate. It only takes a few phone calls for them to notice new trends. So if you can coordinate with others to phone their office with the same concern they will take note. They may even draft a short response for people calling about that issue. Keep in mind that through this method you most likely won't get to speak with the MP. You will most likely speak with a staff member or leave a voicemail.

- 1 Practice what you want to say before calling.
- 2 Identify yourself as a local constituent. Also as a supporter of Amnesty International Australia if you wish.
- 3 Ask to leave a message for your local MP if you reach a staff member.
- 4 Explain why you are calling: "I am calling to ask that the MP not support the legislation to ..." and outline your key concerns in a concise way.
- 5 Calling works best if you don't do it too often. If you haven't heard anything from them for a week or two, follow up with another call to ask for an update.



*Petition collecting © Amnesty International*

## TEMPLATE MP LETTER

You can tailor this letter based on whether you're in a group or an individual. If you're working on your own replace the references to group activities with your own concerns as a constituent. You can find blank letter templates and branding at <https://www.amnesty.org.au/branding-logos-for-activists/>.



Action Group name: *(if applicable)*

Best contact street address:

Day / Month / Year

To: *(Name of politician)*

Title

Electorate address:

You can find this information at [www.aph.gov.au](http://www.aph.gov.au).

[By fax: include fax no. here if applicable.]

Dear Mr / Ms / Mrs / Minister XX *(no need for Sir or Madam)*

**Subject** *[Short statement encompassing reason for writing]*

On behalf of the XX Amnesty International local group we write to... *[insert key reason for letter – to invite them to an event / call on them to support a campaign / draw their attention to the campaign etc. If you are going to call on them to do something – highlight it upfront here].*

The XX group meets in your electorate of XX every XX and recently we have done XX activities. *[If relevant, make reference to previous interaction e.g. – the group welcomed the opportunity to meet with you ahead of the election to discuss our work and your human rights priorities for this term of parliament / We were very glad you could make it to our XX event on XX or similar]*

*[Body of text should highlight in detail the reason for your letter. If campaign focused, give some background on the campaign and the reasons Amnesty International/your group believe it is important.]*

*[If there is a call to action, reiterate it here.]* **Suggested text:** As a member of federal parliament, you have a unique opportunity to promote human rights. As our local member, we ask you to take action by XX *(details of call to action)*.

**If requesting a meeting:** We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss our work on this campaign. We will follow up on this request with your office. Should you or your office wish to reach us please contact *(name)* on *(number)* or via *(email)*.

Yours sincerely,

## **Invite them to your event or local activity**

You can also invite your MPs to attend an event you're coordinating. Let them know what events you have coming up in the community. Give them a lot of notice, at least a month, to attend so they have time to add it to their schedule. If they have confirmed their attendance make sure you have someone assigned to greet and support them.

When they come along, use it as an opportunity to talk generally about your work and the issues you care about. Make sure that you highlight how your group is active in their community. Finally use it as an opportunity to get to know them also. Have some questions you want answered and share this among your event coordinators.

You can invite them to be a part of the event itself, for example as a panel member or speaker. But, please remember that we are an independent and impartial organisation. So if you invite them to speak then you must invite all sides of politics to be a speaker. This is particularly important in the lead up to elections. Otherwise it looks like we're supporting or promoting one party over others. This includes finding speakers for rallies / protests. You need to give all the local parties an opportunity to speak if you're going to invite any of the parties at all.

## **Collect petition signatures**

Most Amnesty campaigns have a petition connected to it. Although these tend to have a primary target whom we send all signatures from around the country. But you are welcome to use these petitions as a way to engage with your MP too. It can show them that a particular issue has resonance in their electorate. But if you're going to do this there are a few things to keep in mind.

If you're making a new petition you'll need to get it approved first. Use one of our current petitions as a template and then get in touch with us for approval. Once that is done feel free to use that petition as much as you like. You'll want to make sure that all the people that sign are people that live in your electorate.

You might get a lot of signatures from all over the place, but your MP wants to see postcodes from their area. That is what will put pressure on them to act. You'll also want to make sure that you get a large enough number of signatures from your area too. If there are 100,000 people in your electorate and you collect 100 signatures, the MP won't feel the pressure. Consider what number would have impact (e.g. perhaps 1000 signatures) and then decide whether that's achievable for your group.

You could arrange a series of activities to achieve this. Holding stalls in the community. Door knocking at people's homes. Coordinating events that have a large audience and inviting them to sign. Standing on busy streets and talking to people as they go past. You'll need to either go to where people are or invite them to come to you. You can also ask us to contact other Amnesty supporters in your electorate. For more on how to do this in an effective way check out our guide on how to have conversations about campaigns.

These signatures will provide evidence to the MP that their constituents want change. Take these petition signatures to meetings with the MP. Give them updates on how many people have signed. Keep collecting signatures as you go until the MP agrees to do something. If you're going to hand over the petition make sure to only give them the names and postcodes. Do not give them the section that shows email address and phone number.

If you aren't able to secure a meeting with your local MP, you could arrange a petition handover stunt. This is to capture media interest in your issue and put more pressure on your MP to listen to your concerns. You could invite the media to meet you out the front of that MP's office, explain what the community cares about and expose that the MP is refusing to listen to their constituents.

Also, with any petitions you do collect make sure to also send them to us. There may be people that weren't Amnesty supporters before they signed the petition. We can reach out to them to get more involved and grow the movement.

## How to have an effective meeting with a politician

Now we're going to cover in detail the most important method of engaging a politician. Meeting with your MP means direct face to face contact where you can respond to each other in real time. You have scheduled some time where you are each other's main focus. There's a lot to do in order to make these as effective as possible. So we've cut the process down into a few stages.

### How to get a meeting with your local MP:

It is good practice to phone their office to get a contact name before requesting a formal meeting. This will make sure that you're sending any correspondence to the right person. This will be a staff member that acts as adviser to the politician or arranges their schedule. Building a good relationship with staff may help you to get that meeting sooner.

You should also check the parliamentary / council sitting dates. This will help to make sure that your MP is in town and available to take a meeting when you want it. The next step is to send an email to your MP / the contact. Send them a detailed outline of who you are and what you would like to talk about. Follow this email up with a phone call but take note that you might have to do this more than once. Don't worry if you don't hear from them straight away or they decline your meeting request. Politicians receive a lot of requests, so you might have to keep trying.

### The meeting itself:

Meeting with an MP, particularly the first time, can feel intimidating. That's a very normal reaction and we've got some tips here to make it easier for you. Here's how you can prepare for the meeting.

When attending the meeting, make sure you have support with you. It would be great to have one or two fellow Amnesty supporters with you at the meeting. Try not to go into the meeting alone. Between 2-4 people at the meeting is ideal. Make sure you decide on one person as the main speaker to make sure you remain on message. You might also attend with another community group or organisation. Inviting someone affected by the issue can be a good idea as well. But make sure you keep the number of attendees down and that you all coordinate beforehand.

You will only have a limited time to chat to your MP, so make sure you prepare your talking points. Have a clear goal, 2-3 main asks and discuss the issues in a concise way. Remember that you are not expected to be an expert on everything. The MP may ask you a question that you don't know the answer to. Tell them you will find that out and get back to them. Make a note of this and follow through with your commitment to find out.



*Activists meeting with Tanya Plibersek in 2018 © Amnesty International*

It is also very important that you provide a few solutions to your MP. They need to hear that there is something practical that they can do to solve the issue. You can let them know what you think the broader government should do, but also what they as an individual can do. That gives them something to progress following the meeting.

At the end of the meeting thank them for their time and summarise what you are asking for again. Provide them with a one page summary of the talking points with the 2-3 asks. Ask them to follow up on any action taken as a result of the meeting. Make sure they have your contact details for their follow up. Let them know you will also be following up on any outstanding points raised in the meeting. Finally, take a photo with your MP so you can share this on social media and add this to your follow up. They may ask to take a photo to share with their followers as well.

### **Follow up:**

It is good practice to do an evaluation following the meeting. So take notes about the meeting and reflect. Was there something you can improve on next time? Was there an approach that worked well? Was there anything you can share with others in the movement?

After the meeting, write to your MP and thank them for their time again. In this email reiterate your key points, remind them of what you want and what they agreed to. Make sure you add in any information you said you would follow up on. Send them the group picture you took during your meeting. Let them know that you will keep them up to date about the issues that interest them and their constituents.

Finally, let the national organising team know that you met and how it went. We're very interested in hearing about your activism, it gives us a clearer picture of what is happening around the country. Also it enables us to pass this information on to colleagues who may be engaging with the same MP. So please let us know how you go when engaging with politicians.



*Eastern Suburbs action group in an MP meeting with Malcolm Turnbull in 2016 © Amnesty International*

## What's next?

That concludes our module on how to engage with politicians. We hope this module has explained why this type of activism is vital to creating change. That you feel more confident about creating your own strategy to engage with MPs. That you know how to do many tactics to achieve this. You should have everything you need to get in touch with your local MP now. Also make sure to check out our other activist development modules on our [Skill Up](#) page.

If you have any questions you can get in touch with us at [communityorganising@amnesty.org.au](mailto:communityorganising@amnesty.org.au). Thank you for your time!



Visit the Skill Up page for more activist development resources.

[www.amnesty.org.au/skill-up/](http://www.amnesty.org.au/skill-up/)

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