Introduction to Key Uses[1]

In 2012, the WIDA Consortium has begun reconceptualizing the view of academic language by moving from language functions to larger purposes or *uses* of academic language. The term *Key Uses of Academic Language* (*Key Uses*) is used to identify important ways students are expected to develop and use language in academic contexts. This reading is to provide more detailed information about the *Key Uses* for the purpose of the Can Do Descriptors development.

Background

What does KEY USES mean?

WIDA defines *Key Uses* as overarching 'big idea' academic purposes, often involving more than one language function. *Key Uses* typify ways in which students are expected to use language recurrently in and across academic contexts. This academic discourse, connected language beyond the sentence level, is both spoken and written. The term *Key Uses* is purposely atheoretical (it is not a term adopted from any particular linguistic or pedagogical theory or approach) because the focus is on how students use language in context. Furthermore, *Key Uses* reflect current views of language use in academic contexts yet it is not equivalent to any term used in policy documents such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). For example, CCSS uses the terms *text type* to describe types of writing in the writing standards and *genre* to describe types of texts in the reading standards, but without providing definitions that distinguish those terms from each other. Thus, it would be difficult to adopt a term already in use without having a clear foundation from which to build. While the term *Key Uses* is unique, in practice, the *Key Uses* bear resemblance to notions in linguistics such as language function, text type, and genre. This relationship is further described below.

How do Key Uses relate to other linguistic terms?

The concepts of *language function*, *text type*, and *genre* have all been used in studies on academic language to describe aspects of language use at the discourse level. There is considerable overlap among the aspects of language use that these terms address. For example, the term *explain* appears on some lists of language functions and some lists of genres. While these theoretical constructs overlap, they arise from different theoretical perspectives and histories, and therefore are used to examine slightly different aspects of discourse.

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[1] Based on Wright, L. & Musser, S. (2014). *Operationalizing Key Uses of Academic Language for Test Development.* Unpublished White Paper. Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C.

Language function

The term *function* has a varied history within linguistics and language teaching. Within research on academic language, *language function* typically derives its meaning from *Communicative Language Teaching* (CLT). *Function,* from this perspective, refers to what a language user *does* with and through language. It is a broad term used to describe the language that a language user needs in order to communicate and fulfill a purpose. CLT is an approach to language teaching that focused on language use rather than language form (grammar). There are many types of language functions, social and academic. These different types formed the basis of the *Notional Functional Syllabus* (Brown, 1994). Because *language functions* were initially intended to be used as a teaching tool to support students' communicative development, the focus was not on form and it was generally accepted that multiple forms could achieve the same communicative end.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) uses the term *function* to typify the relationship between language function and social processes, so there is a "systematic relationship between the social environment on the one hand, and the functional organization of language on the other" (Halliday & Hassan, 1985, p. 11). In other words, SFL sees language as a resource for making meaning that reflects different purposes and contexts. Halliday proposes three types of metafunctions which account for the broad set of purposes for which people use language and which occur simultaneously: an experience or content, (ideational), the relationship between participants using the language (interpersonal), and the organization of the language to create coherent messages (textual). Language function is dependent upon the subject-matter, the participants, and the channel of communication (written or spoken).

Genre vs. Text Type

The terms *text type* and *genre* are somewhat confounding for several reasons. First, some use the terms interchangeably as though they are equivalent, while others use *genre* and *text type* in relationship to one another, placing them in a hierarchical relationship. In addition, *text type* is often used to define what a *genre* is and vice versa.

The study of *genre* (French meaning "*kind*") has roots in many different fields including literary criticism, folklore, anthropology, rhetoric, linguistics, and English for specific purposes / English for academic purposes (ESP/ EAP). Historically, genre analysis has been used in literary studies to categorize types of literary texts. This practice can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, who categorized texts into three main genres: dramatic, lyric, and epic forms. Broadly speaking, a genre can be defined as a "text type" associated with a recurrent purpose or activity. Members of a shared linguistic community have little difficulty recognizing the purpose of a text type and are able to draw upon their experiences and language awareness to recognize language features and organizational patterns to facilitate their understand of the messages (Martin & Rose, 2008).

Because of the reasons noted above with terminology, these particular terms were not adopted as the primary way to view recurrent types of academic language use. However, these perspectives inform the research base on *Key Uses* and, as such, these terms may be used throughout this document to describe *Key Uses*.

WIDA Key Uses

Four *Key Uses* have been identified as important uses of academic language in school contexts: *explain*, *argue*, *recount*, and *discuss*. The chart below briefly defines each and provides an example in an academic context.

Figure 1: WIDA Key Uses Chart

KEY USES OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE	
Overarching 'big idea' academic purposes, often involving more than one language function; tend to have distinctive linguistic patterns	
Explain	Purpose is to clarify order or relationships between ideas, actions or phenomena. • *Explain why Congress was compelled to accept the Missouri Compromise.*
Argue	Purpose is to make a claim supported by evidence, to persuade. • *Choose and defend a position on the potential impact of mining in northern Wisconsin.*
Recount	Purpose is to display knowledge, to narrate or relate a series of events or experiences • *Tell the events that led to Joe's betrayal by Frank in Chapter 3.* • *How did Congress respond to the invasion of Poland?*
Discuss	Purpose is to engage in the discussion and exploration of a topic and/or various other points of view and implications, often for the purpose of co-constructing knowledge. Oral discussion often takes place through classroom interaction where linguistic patterns are more social and less predictable. Written discussion reflects more formal, structured language. The prompt below supports both oral and written discussion, yet the language of each is quite unique. • *Discuss the Confederacy's response to the Emancipation Proclamation.*

Key Uses

Recount

Description & Characteristic Linguistic Features

Broadly speaking, a *recount* may be described as a way that language users retell what happened in events. This includes the recounting of facts, and information. As such, a *recount* is a way of displaying knowledge about a topic. Recounts can be co-constructed where two or more participants are providing details, creating stories, or providing steps to a procedure.

The term *recount* is intended to be broad and encompass common types of language use such as *narratives* and *stories*. *Recount* was selected as the *Key Uses* term because the terms *narratives* and *stories* have stronger colloquial connotations. For example, a narrative is often associated with personal experience and a story is often considered fictitious. The term *recount* is intended to convey the broad range of ways this *Key Use* may be used in academic contexts; it extends to the ways students may be expected make meaning with language in academic contexts that are not necessarily personal or fictitious. For example, students may be expected to construct an historical recount (not personal) or a scientific recount (not fictitious). Thus, the term *recount* encompasses the way language may be used in academic contexts to convey how personal, fictional, and real-life events occurred over time. Types of recounts include: narratives of personal experience, small stories, stories (folk tales, fables, etc), interviews, procedural recounts, and accounts. Accounts can be defined as narrative comments in response to a 'why' or 'how' question, or a well-formed account that summarizes an event or text.

Linguistically, recounts follow an organizational pattern that provides the listener/reader with the background needed to understand the context (who, where, when). Time markers are important as recounts often include events presented in chronological order. Often, problems and solutions are presented as part of the story chronology. In storytelling and personal recounts, opinions and feelings are appropriate to include, and information may be more descriptive and less precise. Other common features of recounts is the use of action and feeling verbs to convey information, and past and present tense to increase interest. In historical and scientific recounts however, personal statements are not appropriate and details of time, description, process, place, and manner are expected to be precise and factual. Explanations and justifications may be incorporated into recounts.

Developmental and Cultural Considerations

Recount, and specifically narrative, has often been the focus of language development research in early childhood education. From a developmental perspective, studies have examined how children sequence events, how topics are introduced or changed, and whether children's narratives contain evaluation. Some studies have also looked at cultural differences in narratives among young children, showing that children's cultural norms for narratives affect their

interpretation in the classroom (Heath, 1982). For example, Cazden (1988) shows that African American children use episodic topical shifts, which are less recognized by mainstream teachers. Consequently, their narratives are interrupted or cut off as teachers try to make sense of them. This line of research dovetails with research on cultural aspects of narratives which shows that there are differences in the way children from different cultural backgrounds approach aspects of narrative such as truth, identity of main characters, and the themes they select for stories.

Another line of research has examined narrative interaction between children and their caretakers, approaching story-telling as an interactional event. These studies have examined differences between children's and adults' stories, as well as how adults shape children's stories in interaction (McCabe, 1996; Minami & Ovando, 1995). That is to say, children often rely on adults as more knowledgeable others to scaffold their story-telling abilities.

Finally, other lines of research have examined the relationship between narrative development in children and educational outcomes. Some research has indicated that narrative development in pre-school children may be related to their reading ability and comprehension later at school. In addition, they have also shown that the culturally-bound narrative models and styles that have been socialized into in their family and peer-group affect children's performance at school.

Implications for Can Do Descriptors development

- Recount is an important *Key Use* for young children prior to entering school and continues to be important over their academic careers.
- Recount is relevant to all content areas.
- Recount includes fictional and non-fictional as well as personal and non-personal retellings.
- Time is a major component of recounts.
- It is important to consider differing cultural approaches to recounts and how children's different cultural backgrounds may relate to their retellings.

Explain

Description & Characteristic Linguistic Features

The *Key Use* of *explain* may be described as using language to give an account on how something works or why something is happening. The aim of an explanation is to help readers/listeners comprehend a phenomenon. Explanations are most often causal or procedural. CCSS writing standards state that explanations serve "to increase readers' knowledge of a subject, to help readers better understand a procedure or process, or to provide readers with an enhanced comprehension of a concept." There are two basic types of explanations: the *how* element of an explanation and the *why* element. *How* explanations discuss the mechanics or technology of how an object works, the system structure of an entity (such as a business, a

school district), or provide an explanation of a natural force i.e., how animals protect themselves. *Why* explanations discuss why phenomenon happen – e.g. why oxidation occurs, why leaves change color, or why WWII started (Derewianka, 1990).

Early work by Piaget (1923) on explanations focused on examining causality, or *why* something happened. This research sought to use children's verbal explanations as a window for examining their logical ability and reasoning skills. Of particular importance were causal linguistic markers such as *because* and *so*. Piaget asserted that children's incorrect use of causal language reflected incorrect causal reasoning. In subsequent studies, other scholars have argued that causal understanding can exist without the linguistic capacity to communicate the relations (Donaldson, 1986). That is to say, the ability to explain something through language is not necessarily equivalent to one's ability to reason cognitively.

Linguistically, explanations most often provide a process focus, so there is a logical sequence associated with the text. Initially, the listener/reader is provided an orientation to the phenomenon under discussion. *Time* markers are most common in how explanations and *cause/effect* signals are most common in why explanations. There is a tendency for explanations, particularly written explanations, to be lexically dense; meaning a great deal of information is contained within each clause. This type of writing often makes use of nominalization, expressing a process as a noun (the *expansion,* our *understanding,* this *assumption*). Explanations require that language users express coherence through controlling and focusing on a given topic. In English, this often means old information (given) is presented in the first clause and new or expanded information is in the second clause. Explanations are often supported by selecting and incorporating relevant examples, facts and details (new information). Language functions that may be central to explanations include naming (*identifying)*, defining (*categorizing and classifying)*, describing, and comparing and contrasting.

Developmental and Cultural Considerations

A great deal of research has focused specifically on children's abilities to provide explanations, showing that the ability to explain is developed quite early in life. Preschool children have the ability to provide pragmatically relevant explanations, however their explanations may not be recognized as fully developed. Blum-Kulka writes that a "young child's explanations do not always meet adult expectations of semantic coherence, [yet] are interactionally and pragmatically coherent and multifunctional" (p. 457). Research that has examined explanations across age ranges has shown that younger children's explanations tend to focus on things in their immediate environment whereas older children focus on things that are more distant. Further, as students advance through the grades, they expand their repertoire of informational/explanatory genres and use them effectively in a variety of disciplines and domains.

Implications for Can Do Descriptors development purposes

- Explanations are a *Key Use* that young children are expected to come to school with, but children's explanations do not always match adult expectations.
- Explanations are relevant to all content areas.
- Research has shown that the ability to reason is not equivalent to the ability to explain.

Argue

Description & Characteristic Linguistic Features

The *Key Use* of *argue* may be described as 'to take a position and justify' – a process of making a *claim* and using *evidence* to support or refute that claim. There are two basic types of arguments: persuading to justify a position or interpretation, e.g., letters to the editor, political speeches; persuading to argue that some sort of action be taken, e.g., convincing parents to let you borrow the car, or convincing people to boycott a certain company.

CCSS places an emphasis on argumentation as a college and career readiness skill. CCSS defines argument as a "reasoned, logical way of demonstrating that the [language user's] position, belief, or conclusion is valid." The standards go on to state that arguments may be used for a variety of communicative purposes. For example, they can be used to change a reader's perspective, cause a reader to act, or persuade the reader of the writer's perspective.

CCSS distinguishes between arguments and explanations, asserting that the two types of text have different aims. "Arguments seek to make people believe that something is true or to persuade people to change their beliefs or behavior. Explanations, on the other hand, start with the assumption of truthfulness and answer questions about why or how. Their aim is to make the reader understand rather than to persuade him or her to accept a certain point of view." Arguments focus on persuasion whereas explanations focus on clarification.

While a great deal of research has focused on argumentation in science classroom settings, argumentation is central to all content areas. All students are expected to learn how to construct arguments and critique others' arguments in different school subjects. In science, students might be expected to engage in argumentation about results of a laboratory experiment. In mathematics, students might engage in argumentation about why a mathematical theorem is indicative of a particular mathematical property. In English language arts, students might engage in argumentation about an author's intent when writing a piece of literature, and in history, they might be expected to engage in argumentation about the outcome of a legal case from history. Argumentation is a linguistic practice that cuts across all disciplinary areas.

In spite of this, argumentation may be manifest in slightly different ways in different subject areas because the way in which data is used as evidence varies by content area. For example,

measurements (e.g., weight, time, size, temperature) may be used as evidence in science contexts whereas historical events or outcomes may be used as evidence in history classes.

Linguistically, arguments provide a major focus on an issue, so there is frequently a logical sequence of argument associated with the organization of the text. To begin, there is usually a statement of position with some background information about the issue in question. The remainder of the text provides the argument (point of view), evidence and possibly some examples to strengthen the claim. An argument ends by summing up the position.

Claims are often realized as propositions of information in the form of declarative statements. This helps a language user convey meaning as factual. The audience is very important in an argument as it guides the style and voice of the writer/speaker. In more advanced arguments, the author demonstrates the ability to "hide the self" making the persuasion more universal than personal. Epistemic markers are also important to indicate an author's stance toward the truthfulness and certainty of the propositions. For example, a marker such as *I think* conveys less certainty than *I know*. Emotive words are used to strengthen an argument and cohesive devices (logical connectors) such as *thus*, *therefore*, *because,* are also important ways for language users to demonstrate the relationships between claims, evidence, and examples. Disjunctions such as *but* and *however*, are ways that language users can anticipate and respond to possible rebuttals.

Developmental and Cultural Considerations

Research on argumentation in science classroom settings has tended to focus on the incomplete structure and weaknesses of students' argumentation skills. CCSS addresses this by asserting that early forms of argumentation may be manifest as *opinion*. CCSS states, "although young children are not able to produce fully developed logical arguments, they develop a variety of methods to extend and elaborate their work by providing examples, offering reasons for their assertions, and explaining cause and effect. These kinds of expository structures are steps on the road to argument. In grades K–5, the term "opinion" is used to refer to this developing form of argument." Within CCSS, argumentation becomes more important as students' language abilities develop with age.

Argumentation across languages and cultures may be especially divergent from US American culture and standard English pragmatic patterns, making the structure of argument particularly unfamiliar, even aggressive (Tannen, 1998). The NRC (2007) states,

> it may be particularly difficult for students who have had less experience with the forms of reasoning and talk that are privileged in American middle-class schools. Mainstream students (those who are white, middle- or upper-class, and native speakers of standard English) are more likely than culturally or linguistically diverse students to encounter ways of talking, thinking, and interacting in schools that are continuous with the practices

> (including knowledge, language, skills, and reasoning) and the expectations that they bring from home (p. 190).

Thus, it is important to consider both developmental and cultural aspects of argumentation as a linguistic practice.

Implications for Can Do Descriptors development

- The *Key Use* of argument is relevant to all content areas.
- Young children and grade-school children may not have fully developed arguments; arguments may take the form of an opinion.
- The *Key Use* of *argue* is expected to be more developed in middle-school grades.
- Argumentation may present "face threats" of varying degrees in different cultures (i.e., disagreeing with someone of a different social status may not be culturally acceptable).

Discuss

Description & Characteristic Linguistic Features

The *Key Use* of *discuss* focuses specifically on spoken discourse in both productive and receptive forms (i.e., speaking and listening), with the aim of developing the skills needed to meaningfully engage in interactional classroom discourse. *Talk* is a common phenomenon in classrooms, and essential for supporting content knowledge side by side with academic language development (Zwiers, 2008). CCSS turns all educators' attention to the importance of oral language with a focus on speaking and listening standards in English language arts and technical subjects.

From a sociocultural perspective, *talk* is a key way for teachers and students to construct knowledge together (Gibbons, 2002) – it is a joint product. Furthermore, Swain (1995) proposes that oral language is especially important for students learning an additional language because it allows them the opportunity to process language more deeply. Opportunities to engage in oral language provide students with occasions to produce extended discourse so that they may attend to what they say as well as how to say it. Gee (2013) maintains these opportunities can support the formation of affinity groups which support not only language development but sociocultural membership needs as well.

Discuss, while typically viewed as oral language is often found in writing prompts to encourage a deeper treatise of a topic. The challenge for learners and teachers is that typical oral language develops differently than typical written language because the purpose and context of language use are often quite different.

Figure 2: Characteristics of Oral and Written Language

Oral Language	Written Language
• Every culture develops oral language. • Every child learns in the language of his/her community. • Oral language is learned with little explicit instruction. • Oral language is the primary vehicle for meeting basic needs. • People often learn more than one oral language. • Oral language is often spontaneous (and can be planned). • Oral language takes place face to face with two or more people and happens within a social context which provides background information. • Confusion and ambiguity are more easily resolved through questioning, rephrasing, and requesting clarification. • The oral message is enhanced with the use of paralinguistic features such as gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions and other body language.	• Not every culture develops written language. • Not every child learns the written language of his/her community (or home environment). • For most children, written language must be learned with a lot of explicit instruction. • Written language is not the primary vehicle for meeting basic needs. • Literacy in multiple languages is less common. • Written language is most often planned. • Written language relies on shared experiences to activate prior knowledge relevant to the text which results in ambiguity when the assumed background experiences are not shared. • Confusion and ambiguity are not as easily resolvable in written language. • Written language relies on punctuation, vocabulary and grammatical forms to enhance the message.

Beyond characteristics that typify oral and written language use, classroom oral language also has been shown to have unique interactional characteristics that have implications for the way language is used. Foundational work by Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou (1989) proposed that classrooms are cultural institutions with their own set of patterned events, not unlike other cultural events such as religious services and family dinners. That is, "classrooms define, structure, give meaning to, and place value upon a set of everyday activities" (1989: 270).

Bunch (2009) proposes the notion of *speech events* to identify the ways in which oral language is routinely used in classroom contexts. Speech events are defined as "the overall interactional demands of 'bounded' classroom events and episodes such as teacher-fronted lessons, groupwork sessions, and oral presentations" (p. 82). Both students and teachers observe ritualized sets of interactional norms in the classroom which carry implications for meaning making. For instance, power asymmetries are reflected in unequal rights to "the floor", where teachers control which students may speak, when, and how long their turns last (e.g., Initiation-Response-Evaluation). However, there are other speech events in which teachers exert control over the interactional structure of the classroom and how rights to the floor are distributed – for instance, when teachers divide students into groups, they provide students with the opportunity to collaboratively manage the floor, while retaining the power to interject in order to guide interactions. These speech situations have important implications for oral language.

Throughout the content areas, the *Key Use* of *discuss* manifests itself differently largely in terms of what students *do* with oral language. Indeed, Lee, Quinn, and Valdés (2013) have argued for redirecting emphasis from linguistic form toward what ELs can do with language in science classrooms. They argue that both science learning *and* language learning are more productive when students are adequately supported to *do* specific things with language, such as ask questions and define problems, plan and carry out investigations, and analyze and interpret data. Similarly, Reyes (2008) found that ESL students in science classrooms collaboratively accomplished work using discourse strategies including requesting clarification, requesting assistance, requesting action, challenging others, and directing others. These language functions are all central to ability to engage meaningfully in classroom learning.

Moschkovich's (2012) research on mathematics discourse has shown discourse practices, such as describing patterns, making generalizations, and using representations to support claims, are central to the language of mathematics. For ELs, Moschkovich points out that "instruction should provide opportunities for students to actively use mathematical language to communicate about and negotiate meaning for mathematical situations" (p. 19).

Larson (2000) has emphasized the role of discussion in social studies in particular, given the content area's connection to social interaction and civil participation. Bunch's (2009) research in mainstream 7th-grade social studies classrooms including ELs has shown that within the speech

event of presentations, historical role play presents opportunities for students to learn how to manage different audiences and to produce persuasive language. Finally, as Zwiers (2008) has pointed out, it is especially important for social studies students to develop language that effectively allows them to interpret, convey cause and effect, and take different perspectives.

Developmental and Cultural Considerations

Children develop oral language skills very early in life, beginning in infancy. First language acquisition research has articulated a number of key stages in oral language development: cooing, babbling, one word, two word, telegraphic speech, and the multi-word when grammatical and functional structures emerge. Young children have the ability to engage interactionally before they have the ability to construct complete syntactic utterances, and these interactional skills are foundational to syntactic abilities (Scollon, 1976). For example, children manage interactional aspects of discourse such as turn taking before speaking in "full sentences." Children learn different ways of using oral language throughout childhood, beginning with their home and community environments, often encountering new ways of using oral language when entering school. For some students, entry to school may present communicative challenges as they try to understand and be understood by others.

These new ways of using oral language may be treated as new sociocultural ways of using language in school settings. Thus, cross-cultural differences should remain at the forefront of awareness when conceptualizing the Key Use of *discuss*. As Bunch (2009: 82) has aptly stated, "It is not only [language minority] students' ability to control discrete features of English that is important, but also the ways in which they engage in classroom participation structures and routines, some of which involve cultural gaps between home discourse practices and those required in school." Larson (2000) and Zwiers (2008) have highlighted how diverse cultural backgrounds may have far-reaching implications for social studies classrooms in particular, where ELs may feel uncomfortable participating in discussion due to lack of familiarity with U.S.-centric concepts, which their monolingual peers, by contrast, gain through enculturation. Additionally, as Philips (1983) has shown in her work with Warm Springs Indian children in Oregon, incompatibility with systems for regulating talk in typical mainstream classrooms may contribute to educational inequities. For instance, the Indian children Philips observed withdrew from situations that required them to draw attention to themselves and regulate others' turns at talk, but participated more actively in one-on-one encounters with teachers and in egalitarian group settings.

Implications for Can Do Descriptors development

- The *Key Use* of *discuss* is relevant to all content areas; it is dialogic in nature, involving more than one participant.

- Language users engaging in oral and/or written language modalities may adopt different linguistic strategies to achieve different styles depending upon the sociocultural contexts and communicative purposes (for example, a formal spoken style in a presentation and an informal spoken style for a conversation with a friend).
- Young children develop oral language repertoires in their home environments. Their ways of using oral language may potentially expand when they enter school; developmental and cultural factors may both play a role.
- Classrooms are cultural institutions with their own set of patterned events that set expectations for the ways in which oral language is used.

Conclusion

To summarize, each of the *Key Uses* is widely recognized as an important way for students to use language in academic settings and the four components are relevant across all social and academic content areas. The review has sought to illustrate basic ways in which the *Key Uses* may be manifest or approached differently by students at different stages of development and from varying cultural backgrounds. While the *Key Uses* are important ways of using language academically in U.S. classrooms, it is equally important to recognize that linguistically diverse students may not approach language use from the same perspectives and that this may, in turn, affect their ability to use language in these academically expected ways. That is to say, linguistically diverse students' language use may have as much to do with their sociolinguistic competence as with their knowledge of linguistic forms and conventions. While linguistic features characteristic of the *Key Uses* have been described, it is important to understand the contexts in which they are used, as well as how and why they are used.

As you prepare for the Can Do Descriptors event, think about the following questions:

1. How does this information impact your view of academic language use and instruction? Can you see your student population described within the Key Uses?
2. Does the integration of discrete language functions to the larger Key Uses make sense to you with respect to your language learners? Can you see the overlap of how language is being used within the Key Uses?
3. How might these Key Uses best be reflected in Can Do Descriptor statements?

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