

What Wants to be Said (Out Loud)?: Octalogs as Alter/native to Hegemonic Discourse Practices

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Introduction

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

- Kenneth Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*

Written discourses . . . certainly ought not to be called real speeches, but they are as wraiths, semblances, and imitations . . . but the semblances of corporeal bodies, giving pleasure to the eye alone, and are of no practical value . . . The written speech, which employs one hard and fast form and arrangement, if privately read, makes an impression, but in crises, because of its rigidity, confers no aid on its possessor.

- Alcidamas, *On the Sophists*

There is no outside-text.

- Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

If one were to alter the academic paper in terms of form and content, in what ways might the format and framework be adjusted, modified, and even transformed, altogether, by and through the scholarly community's very conceptions surrounding such endeavors, all of which would be done in order to adapt (to) the conversations surrounding it? As the famous Burkean Parlor demonstrates, you are never fully beginning an intellectual discussion nor ending one indefinitely but, at best, diving head-first into a booming dialogue in hopes of keeping up, engaging with, and possibly adding a bit to a discursive consideration that extends far beyond an individual or single meeting. With this monumental yet always inviting nature of discussion even if those currently in the

'Burkean parlor' act as though they have been awarded the roles as gatekeepers (in fact, *especially if* that is the case)—in what ways may we better serve and open up the established parameters currently isolating academic discourse, ones which continue to exist even among those making a career out of (and into) these efforts?

The academic paper has the ability to meld an assortment of scholars and texts in order to create new knowledge, and yet, as with any established genre, the constraints embedded within such conventions could be seen as inadvertently hampering otherwise productive and complementary avenues of scholarly exploration, despite the best of intentions. This project is not a call for the dissolution of the academic paper, nor is it even meant as a harsh critique thereof. At the risk of sounding reductive: there are inherent benefits and drawbacks of any single mode and/or medium of discourse—a principle that has become a defining element within the blossoming discipline of Rhetoric and Composition. It wouldn't require a particularly rigorous meta-analysis to see the irony of the selected medium currently being utilized if the author were to be contending that the academic paper is inherently flawed. Such an approach would also be presumptive, at best, coming from an aspiring scholar that is greatly indebted to the knowledge transmitted from works structured within that format. Rather, this essay is humbly illustrating some possible alternatives that could run parallel to contemporary conventions in order to widen the discussion and offer more affordances for scholarly discourse. By illustrating some notable critiques against the status quo penned by recognized post-structuralist and feminist writers throughout the last century along with a positive alternative framework established by the *Conference of Composition and Communication's* Octalog panels, as well as some contemporary manifestations within a transdisciplinary doctoral program at Clemson University, we may demonstrate the shortcomings of traditional exercises in scholarly conversations while providing blueprints to build from in order to—not precisely emulate but rather—extend and strengthen the paradigms that constitute our discipline of Rhetoric and Composition, including all (cross- and trans-) disciplines for that matter.

Silenced within the Confines of an Academic Paper

To commence our discussions of *discussions*, it would be useful to illustrate some of the insights afforded by post-structural and feminist scholars regarding the shortcomings inherent within the organizing principles from which Western language is situated. As a result, these concerns return to, and grow embedded within, the discourse(s) of academic communication, making a brief synopsis of particular mentions from such theorists significantly useful for our purposes.

Within her survey article of poststructural feminism, "Writing against Writing: The Predicament of *Écriture Féminine* in Composition Studies," noteworthy composition scholar Lynn Worsham brings up a few of these shortcomings and constraints that may provide a foundation (albeit, one that is inherently anti-

foundational), of sorts, to situate us in relation to this current hegemonic model of discourse within the academy. As she notes: “Since academic language immobilizes thought through the limits imposed by concepts, models, and methods, *écriture féminine* is a spreading-overflowing. It spills out, it is limitless, it has nothing to do with limits,” adding that “*Écriture féminine* gives. It allows departures, breaks, partings, separations in meaning, the effect of which is to make meaning infinite and, like desire, nontotalizable” (74, 90).

To clarify, at its most basic level, the term *écriture féminine* may be translated from French as “women’s writing,” although as Worsham points out, any process “which turns *écriture féminine* into an object of knowledge, is in effect a process of commodification,” and “once objectified, it can be systematized, theorized, codified, and ultimately taught. By such means, it passes into fashion, a commodity generally available for consumption” (97). Keep in mind, such a commodification is particularly ironic considering that *écriture féminine*, being an alternative to traditional forms of writing, does not want to be consumed by any all-consuming force and, therefore, rejects any form of automatism that is attempting to subjugate its essence through meaning. Worsham adds that it “does not want to be brought, from its position on the margin of official culture, into the university. It is more likely to decimate, not invent or reinvent, the university and its discourses” (93).

As a result, it becomes exceedingly difficult to merely deposit *écriture féminine* into academic modes of communication and expect surrounding structures to automatically conform in compliance, which is why this project has chosen these specific examples in composition studies to illustrate the difficulties of incorporating any new or parallel method into the contemporary system. “There is, after all, a difference between really attempting to think differently and thinking the Same through the manipulation of difference,” contends Alice Jardine in *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (17). This essay, therefore, is in no way attempting to decimate, or even necessarily combat, the university, but rather highlights some notable alternatives to conventional discourse practices which may provide a complementary form of learning and communication in order supplement traditional educational models.

Since the purpose of this project is to examine alternatives to the academic paper, it would be fruitful to consider Derrida’s notion of logocentrism (often also referred to as “phallogentrism”) as indicative of the many shortcomings built into traditional, hegemonic discourse—illustrating the status quo of language outside of which *écriture féminine* seeks to operate. In “The Object of Post-Criticism,” Gregory Ulmer breaks down this concept, while alluding to the larger umbrella theory of grammatology Derrida is working within in order to deconstruct these rigid structures: “The tendency of Western philosophy throughout its history (‘logocentrism’) to try to pin down and fix a specific signified to a given signifier violates, according to grammatology, the nature of language.” Derrida and Ulmer, by extension, are insightful enough to realize that these very attempts to “pin

down and fix” language actually go against its very nature, a process “which functions not in terms of matched *pairs* (signifier/signified) but of *couplers* or *couplings*—‘a person or thing that couples or links together’” (88-89). In other words, all efforts to contain discourse within any particular system is futile, since the essence of language wants to be free. More than just a reaction against the restrictive nature of subscribing to a single mode of knowledge transmission (e.g. the academic paper), these briefly mentioned post-structuralists—and a scraping of their works’ surfaces—highlight the usefulness of embracing alternative avenues of communicative style and form in order to provide opportunities for scholarship beyond (and alongside of) the genre conventions of a traditional academic paper.

It should be clarified that although viewing *écriture féminine* as a reaction against logo- and phallogentrism may provide an initial sense of clarity and topos for one interested in learning more about these viewpoints, the motivations behind this alternative mode of writing and analysis stem from far more than a singular and exclusive act of rebellion. Lynn Worsham interprets Luce Irigaray's philosophy as disregarding and avoiding any “direct feminine challenge” to logo- and phallogentrism, since doing so would cause one to fall victim to the very process they are striving to avoid, one which Worsham notes “demands that women speak as masculine subject and hence maintain the sexual indifference of political discourse” (87). If one acknowledges—and, as a result, further embraces—this distinction, then “a practice of self-exile, mimicry repeats and parodies phallogentric modes of argument to exaggerate their effects and expose their arbitrary privilege” (87). In order to truly avoid the far-reaching destructive effects of logo- and phallogentrism, according to Worsham's take on Irigaray, one must go beyond merely just attempting to avoid it. “To the extent that literacy is aligned with the ideology of the clear and distinct, the transparency of communication, the overriding need for consensus and communication,” a simple act of rebellion within this clearly defined binary would paradoxically strengthen this exact system that it is earnestly attempting to avoid. So, before being backed into a corner, “*écriture féminine* laughs in defiance of this narrowly political project for improving the human condition” (93).

The framework by which contemporary scholarship is presented—and, in turn, measured by—ends up creating an environment where aspiring academics are often pressured to conform within the established *written* constraints of forged exchanges—all of which is contained most often within the genre of an academic article. Yet, this is entirely understandable. After all, these are the conventions their accomplished predecessors have abided by. And within the genre, there have been significant strides by editors to widen the parameters within the system—for example, *Pre/Text*, a journal that has from its inception in 1981 been dedicated to publishing material deemed “inappropriate” by other publications in the field. *Pre/Text* was founded by, and continues to be edited and published through the hard work of Victor Vitanza, Director of the Rhetorics, Communication, and Information Design doctoral program discussed later on,

and who also served a primary role as a member of the ‘Octalogs’ to be discussed in the following section. Again, to reiterate, this current project will not be diving into the problematic nature of an academic paper, as it is currently conceived and manifested, although that is certainly an enterprise worthy of fruitful deconstruction. Rather, this venture is focused around a somewhat structured yet inherently open example of an alternative to the practice, one which may be widely modeled after and expanded upon indefinitely with countless variations. So, before diving into our main object of study, it’s important to keep in mind that any medium, mode, or structure has inherent positives and negatives. After all, if the academic paper was void of any merit, the most educated people in the land would probably not continue to utilize it. Yet, nevertheless, as Thomas Paine opined in his famed pamphlet, *Common Sense*, “Time makes more converts than reason” (8).

Altering the Narrative or Narrating the Alternative

In 1988, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) scheduled a panel for academics to speak off the cuff, amongst one another, in person—with available transcriptions published thereafter. Although it was a group of scholars selected in advance with predetermined questions and discussion prompts—a setting that, ironically, certainly mirrors many ‘conventional’ formats of scholarly discourse—this *Octalog*, as it came to be known, served as an alternative genre to the traditional academic paper by offering an organic and unconstrained (dis)placement of rhetorical theorists. The name is derived from *octa* for the eight participating scholars, and *log* as a shortened version for “dialogue.” As Lois Agnew summarizes in “Rhetorical Historiography and the Octalogs,” this “phenomenon...came into being” when noteworthy scholars “proposed and chaired a roundtable composed of eight distinguished historians of rhetoric who gathered to discuss the methods, subjects, and purposes of scholarship in rhetorical history. The members of this panel,” which included “James Berlin . . . Sharon Crowley, Susan Jarratt” and others, “presented short opening statements, followed by a lively conversation that was recorded and published in *Rhetoric Review* the same year” (237). While the parameters establishing and following this setting were certainly motivated by traditional factors, the Octalogs did offer unique affordances that are otherwise unavailable through single-authored scholarship. Let us examine this discussion, and more significantly, the *processes* surrounding the activity that was conducted by (and through/out) rhetorical historiographers by extending outward to illustrate and analyze how such a procedure may benefit Rhetoric and Composition, Technical Communication, and related fields.

As James Berlin uttered in the initial Octalog of ‘88, “The historian often has more control of history than the events of the past that actually transpired” (17). In this case, a number of competing (or rather complementary) rhetorical historiographers were given the opportunity to take part in this process or shape the past as well as current conceptions thereof. Berlin adds, “To understand a rhetoric, it is thus necessary to examine its position in the play of power in its own

time,” making the written transcript of the event, now widely available, such a valuable resource for offering insight into that specific period in which these contending histories of the field were being explored. And this process, as is evidenced throughout that discussion, continues to repeat itself, ad infinitum, in matters of representing and reclaiming past occurrences. Therefore, highlighting a conversation that is having a direct impact on this construction is extremely beneficial and offers deep academic merit. As Berlin acknowledges, “We then must have histories of rhetoric, multiple versions of the past, each version acting as a check, a corrective to the others” (17).

By offering a setting for live (and often *lively*) discussion, it allows them to clarify, inform, and build from one another. For instance, one scholar’s understanding of another’s work may be infinitely increased and clarified merely by having an in-person conversation whereby questions and concerns are answered—or, at the very least, responded to. This may be far more useful, not to mention infinitely more efficient, than scholars waiting (and readers waiting even longer) for any and all conversations that happen to be even remotely similar to what is under discussion. Agnew notes, in retrospect, this setting served as “a catalyst for further conversations about rhetorical historiography both during and after the event” (237). In contrast, the conventional written model is one that ends up taking place at much later dates in between every utterance—with each scholar having to submit their work, wait for a response, edit whatever modifications the editors happen to suggest, and sit on it until the article or book in which it is contained gets released. Then, even later, once the same process has commenced again to completion, another scholar is finally able to respond. To be fair, the process of writing for publication is certainly discursive—in ways similar to conferences discussions—one that is nearly always reliant upon, and strengthened by, the labor and insights disseminated among authors, reviewers, and editors involved in the production of the material. But whereas the extemporaneous nature of in-person discussions tends to make explicit these processes, the Burkean parlors involved in written publications tend to be isolated.

The fact that CCCC instituted a sequel demonstrates the successful impact the original colloquium had on the field and reflected a sustained interest in questions of historiography. If one were to expand on this process, these types of roundtable discussions could be revisited multiple times in any environment, regardless of topic, as often as possible (or rather, as frequently as interest in the subject matter permits), in order to have a diverse range of perspectives on a range of physical, political, and historical contexts. Such settings also offer great opportunities for scholars to ‘check in’ with one another. Granted, any active scholar who is properly carrying out their research duties should always remain up to date on all scholarship within their field(s) of study. Although, harkening back to mentions of the forced-waiting, and wasted time—elements which are inherent within the written publication process—even the most learned and ambitious academics inevitably have difficulties keeping up with everything, and

any attempt to do so quickly becomes futile. While the colloquia-style discussions are not a cure-all for the difficulties of remaining versed in one's field, they do offer some useful benefits that could save scholars invaluable time, energy, and invested resources. By offering an in-person debriefing of sorts, in a back-and-forth manner, such colloquies could be infinitely fruitful for both the participants and the audience, as well as any readers of the transcripts for years to come.

A built-in corrective mechanism inherent within the genre of the academic paper that would be counter-productive to throw out entirely is the ability for scholars to have an environment where they don't feel obligated to speak off the cuff—a place of refuge where they may retreat to their books and notes to develop, edit, and continually revisit before releasing their research out into the wild of the sometimes unforgiving scholarly community. With this, we might be able to have our cake and eat it too in the sense that if one were to take a step outside of this CCCC innovative genre, viewing it from a distance, we can discern that even the symposia, themselves, follow a similar trajectory. One of the main reasons involves the recorded, later transcribed, and finally published transcripts for the panel's undertakings. As Agnew attests, “[these transcripts] again ensured that this conversation would maintain a presence in the field's ongoing consideration of rhetorical historiography” (237). And, this same process could be applied to any group discussion. On a micro level, one receives nearly instant gratification along with the ability to clarify and expound upon one's research in a live conversation. On a macro level, one is able to see how each of these colloquia have developed over time, with changes in the field—as a result of new findings, inventions, etc.—serving as pieces in a larger puzzle that makes up a never-ending discussion, one that extends far beyond the walls of CCCC at any particular panel session. To refer back to the famous Burkean parlor, the ability to listen, engage, and partake in the discussion has grown far beyond the reach of those at the initial location. Any walls once built for containment have been lifted. The globe is now the parlor, and its hours of business are open indefinitely. Agnew adds, “Collectively, the Octalogs not only offer us a vision of the changing subjects and methods of rhetorical history but also illuminate the profound debates that emerge as scholars thoughtfully consider the values that inform the subjects and methods of their work” (238).

The fact that the subsequent Octalogs had different groups of scholars each time may be seen in both a positive and negative light. Some benefits, as one could intuitively expect, are the slightly different, sometimes fresh and unique, perspectives. The third Octalog, released twelve years after the sequel, followed the same general pattern of previous Octalogs as they discussed the issues of rhetorical historiography in much the same manner. Keep in mind, the similarities to the *form* did not necessarily extend to the *content*, considering the different issues related to each particular context, as Agnew indicates, each “constituted a unique occasion that illuminates varying perspectives concerning the construction of history, methods of researching and writing rhetorical histories, what counts as evidence, the ethics of historical scholarship, and the role of

history in the field.” Also, alluding to the multimodal, transmedia nature of this distinct genre of discourse: “The printed transcripts of these events have provided a valuable resource for those who have sought to understand the problems and possibilities inherent in historical inquiry and the ethical implications that surround that enterprise” (238).

Some drawbacks of this construct of conversing involve the impossibility to retain an identical essence from the previous meeting. After all, even if you were to have the same people all meeting in the exact room again—which certainly wasn’t the case (as has been recounted)—time and experiences, along with an infinite number of other factors and variables, would prevent a perfect duplication of the original and/or specific, previous meeting. Granted, this could just as easily be viewed as a net-positive with the purely organic and unrestrained nature of a verbal discussion being one of the most interesting aspects of conversations in real-time.

Additionally, the unexpected nature of the discourse and the need to improvise create an aura of suspense that is often absent in scholarly endeavors. It is always fascinating to see if these scholars, in particular, have the ability to *perform* the very rhetoric they have dedicated their lives to studying (one might be tempted to think of Cicero’s canons of Memory and Delivery, in particular). This is highlighted in James Murphy’s reference to two young graduate students who were excited to see what the academics they had been studying looked and acted like in real-life, when he writes, “As they passed, one turned to the other and stage-whispered, ‘I don’t care anything about this subject—I just want to know what THEY look like’” (239). Although this published anecdote is humorous, it nevertheless demonstrates the human impulse to want to put a face to the figure, a person to the author.

It is useful now to resituate ourselves within our own particular historical context in order to briefly analyze the impact the Octalogs have had recently and currently, as well as those expected in the not-so-distant future. Richard Enos assigns graduate students the first two Octalogs as readings at the beginning of each semester. As he attests, these inevitably prompt a lively discussion in class with rigorous and passionate debate among the entering students. This illustrates the importance of having access to these recorded conversations, contained within a printed source text, for students in rhetoric classes—or anyone interested in these topics for that matter—as a means to continue and/or create new discourses on the material. “The underlying message,” Enos suggests, is that “there are a range of interests, approaches and topics in the history of rhetoric and an openness to explore them,” and, harkening back to the usefulness of such endeavors at both a micro and macro level, “[t]his is not only the message to my class, it is the message to all readers of the first two Octalogs and the third Octalog as well. Just as the expression and rationale of various positions make for an engaged class, so also do the views of prior panels provide a lively forum for our field.” Therefore, what took place at the initial Octalog

continues to impact the work of Enos and many others (the author of this essay included). One single conversation can span endless rhizomatic paths and trajectories for students and scholars. Enos adds, “That panel made me reflect on my work and has guided me ever since. I hope that it did the same for our listeners and those who participated in the subsequent Octalogs. Views expressed by both Octalog participants and audiences were taken seriously” (Agnew et al. 244). That is to say, the audience becomes a unique addition to the conversation—a group often overlooked or inaccessible in written scholarly discourse.

Going forward, Murphy wonders, “If the Octalogs continue to happen every eleven to twelve years as they have so far, what will be the concerns of the speakers in the 2022 session?” (Agnew et al. 240). This process is not reliant upon or victim to any particular period. It is one that can be applied in nearly any scope, as he explains: “The very fact that we keep having Octalogs is itself a sign that we have learned well the value of flexibility and self-assessment based on critical reflection,” adding that each manifestation has “embraced diversity, pushing back the uncharted and unexplored areas of our field while (at the same time) being inclusive. Our unwillingness to remain static is not a sign of a lack of stability but rather an index of our development” (Agnew et al. 245).

Walking the Walk by Talking the Talk: Alternative Manifestations within a Weekly Doctoral Colloquia

Within the doctoral program of Rhetorics, Communication, and Information Design (RCID) at Clemson University, a formula somewhat similar to the original Octalog and each subsequent re/manifestation transpires on a weekly basis. Each Monday morning for over two and a half hours, a variety of symposium-like gatherings occur in a single location with attendance that is mandatory—or, at least, highly encouraged—for all doctoral students of the program (both residential and online), but particularly the first and second year cohorts. The events that fill up this allotted time, with minor variations, include a research forum with a faculty member from different departments—demonstrating the usefulness of cross- and transdisciplinary interaction(s)—throughout the university, offering a half-hour presentation on current works in progress. The second half of their presentation is dedicated to Q & A from doctoral students, as well as any faculty members who may attend. The setting is relatively formal, considering the work and preparation going into the forum, although there is an air of familiarity with honest feedback, clarification, and dialogue, which is often absent at more large-scale conferences.

Following this intellectually stimulating starting point of each school week is a theory-criticism colloquium in which an RCID-affiliated faculty member, one who is appointed for the position in that particular academic year, leads a discussion based on an assigned reading—usually an academic article with an accompanying piece of biographical information pertaining to the author as well

as background pertaining to the historical context surrounding the piece during its initial publication. There is relative freedom within this academic setting since there is not the added pressure of having to turn-in a written response or conduct an examination for a grade. Those types of standardized assessments usually promote *narrow*, nearly-prescriptive forms of hermeneutical investigations. Instead, the discussion includes questions posed throughout by the appointed faculty member, and then all students in attendance are granted nearly free rein to respond and discuss whatever matters happen to arise within the conversation, without the added weight of attempting to formulate the *correct* answer or response. A year of experience participating in these colloquia has already had a profound impact on my own scholarly training, and I have witnessed the stimulation and catalyzation for current and future academic undertakings for my colleagues. The reading lists offer a sampling of multiple perspectives and brilliant works that might otherwise be overlooked or that serve as extensions of the rigorous transdisciplinary RCID curriculum.

It should be noted that the inclusion of RCID's weekly colloquia is not intended to merely promote an individual institution or program, but rather to demonstrate a current manifestation of the Octalog process in action, carried out on a similar scale, yet with far more regularity, so that others may be inspired by this forum for their own institutional/scholarly purposes. The relatively formal setting of conversing with colleagues in a conference room offers an excellent venue for beginning and aspiring scholars to develop their academic voices through verbal modes. Additionally, there is a useful and welcomed oscillation between seriousness and play, as is explicitly evidenced with each alternating week assigned for a Games/Cinema Colloquium followed by a Student-Works-In-Progress, a companion piece of sorts to the faculty research forum, although what distinguishes this meeting time is its insistence on offering pragmatic insights, behind the curtain of the generally elusive maneuverings of academe, and refreshingly clear-cut advice for matters related to professionalization.

Similarly to previous mentions of the Octaglogs as a checkpoint for scholars to check-in with one another, I have managed to remain (relatively) up-to-date on what faculty members at the university as well my colleagues are working on, which would otherwise be nearly impossible (at least, to the *extent* in which it currently transpires). Admittedly, doctoral students cannot read each and every word professors and fellow students in differing stages of the program have composed. After all, there are only so many hours in each day. Nevertheless, the Q & A portions of presentations and open-ended discussions—along with the inevitable conversing before, after, and during the breaks of each segment—related to the research interests and academic goals of my peers have naturally contributed greatly toward my own outlook and development.

The significance of defending and perpetuating similar spaces and/or venues is reinforced by Janet M. Atwill: "Reflecting on more than two decades of these colloquies, I am impressed by two things: the importance of relationships and the

need to protect spaces where such colloquies and relationships can flourish” (Agnew et al. 249). Octalogs, colloquia, colloquies, symposia, verbal and contemporaneous discourse—regardless of what one labels the process—all offer an invaluable resource and tool for academic practices. Additionally, such activities provide insight into the embodiment of the discipline: “The Octalogs bear witness to the extent to which disciplines are embodied—handed off from mentors and shared among students and colleagues” (249). And this is especially applicable for any group seeking to transcend departmental boundaries.

Paradoxically, by extending and opening the parameters of the disciplines of historiography, rhetoric, composition, communication, and such, the Octalog helped to reinforce and define such alternative modes of study, whereby “these relationships were an open network, not a closed circle.” Rather, “they created connections that provided referees for journal articles, books, and tenure decisions. By being open to what is ‘outside,’ these relationships created a contingent ‘inside’--perhaps a discipline as Möbius strip” (Agnew et al. 250). Therefore, regardless of where one stands in relation to the current educational hegemony, as a traditionalist or progressive, there is endless merit for an opening up and letting be said what wants to be said—particularly in the kind of oral setting the Octalog provided.

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