

APA Guide to Preparing Manuscripts for Journal Publication

By

Robert C. Calfee
Richard R. Valencia

American Psychological Association
Washington, DC

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Introduction

This guide offers scholars and researchers suggestions for preparing manuscripts for publication in journals of the American Psychological Association. We think that the advice given here will enhance your chances of getting a manuscript published, although we cannot guarantee that outcome.

Preparing and submitting manuscripts for publication—and waiting for editorial decisions—can be time-consuming. Given the high rejection rates of APA journals, the process can also be stressful.

In this guide, we describe the review process with the purpose of demystifying it and clarifying what transpires once a manuscript reaches the editorial office. Our major objective is to offer suggestions for preparing a manuscript to improve its chances for publication. We draw on our experiences as authors of scholarly writings, peer reviewers, and editors.

This guide is divided into four parts. We first present a brief overview of the review process, followed by a discussion of some characteristics of a good manuscript. Next comes a section on effective use of the *Publication Manual* of the American Psychological Association. We then offer some suggestions on turning a dissertation into a journal article.

Overview of the Review Process

Reviewers

Peer review is the backbone of the review process. Most APA journals, like the majority of other professional publications, practice anonymous, or masked, reviews. Authors and reviewers are unaware of each other's identities in most instances, an arrangement designed to make the process more impartial.

APA journal reviewers are experts in their fields. They make a significant contribution to the profession by committing their time and knowledge. Authors can expect their manuscripts to be reviewed fairly, in a skilled, conscientious manner. Reviewers are held to demanding standards: They must (a) present a clear decision regarding publication; (b) support the recommendation with a detailed, comprehensive analysis of the quality and coherence of the study's conceptual basis, methods, results, and interpretations; and (c) offer specific, constructive suggestions to authors. Rejection must be handled firmly, but with courtesy. Manuscripts are confidential material, not to be discussed or used for personal purposes without permission from the author, generally arranged through the editor.

Receipt

Once a submission is received, an editorial assistant assigns a manuscript number and advises the author by postcard of the number and date of receipt. The review process may be lengthy, but generally authors are informed of their paper's status within 60 days.

The editorial assistant gives manuscripts a preliminary appraisal for content, substance, and appropriateness to the journal. Essays, letters to the editor, and research that does not appear to fall within the journal's purview are assessed by the editor. If the manuscript is clearly inappropriate, the editor so

informs the author. If there is doubt, occasionally a single review will be arranged in addition to the editor's reading. The goal is to provide the researcher with prompt feedback.

Assuming that a manuscript is considered appropriate to the journal and potentially acceptable, the usual procedure is to choose two reviewers for each paper. Manuscripts and reviewers are matched according to content.

"Quick Read"

After reviews are in hand, but before considering the reviews in detail, the decision editor (either the editor or associate editor) scans the paper to gain an independent view of the work. This "quick read" provides a foundation for the more thorough reading that follows—it by no means determines the final decision. On the other hand, it probably parallels how authors can expect many reviewers (and readers) to approach their papers.

First, the editor scans the paper from beginning to end for obvious flaws in the research substance and writing style. If problems show on the surface, a deeper reading is likely to uncover other matters needing attention. The quick-read process is relatively simple. In the initial examination of your manuscript, the editor or associate will follow these general guidelines:

- Read the abstract. The editor thinks about the following questions: What is the sense of the research question, methodology, findings, and interpretations? Major problems in the abstract often reflect internal flaws. The major goal in reading the abstract is to understand the research question. Is it clearly defined, relevant, and supported by the methodology? APA publication policy emphasizes *conclusion-oriented* abstracts: What did the research find, and what do the findings mean?
- Examine the full manuscript. If it is more than 35 typed, double-spaced pages (including references, tables, and figures), this poses a problem. How long are the introduction and discussion sections relative to other sections of the paper?
- Scan the paper's headings. Are they well-organized? Does a clear structure emerge? If not, the author has not achieved coherence.
- Scan the references. Are they in APA style? If not, the author is not using APA publication format.
- Scan the tables and figures. Do they portray the information clearly? Can they stand alone without captions? Are they well-constructed and in APA style? A "no" to any of these questions suggests problems in the author's presentation of findings. If the text contains a large number of statistics, could they be more appropriately put into tables or figures?
- Finish the quick read by reading a page or two from each section of the paper. How often does the red pen jump into the mental fingers? Do problems result from sloppiness or something deeper? Are there long paragraphs (more than a page) and sentences (more than three lines)? Does the author communicate skillfully? Writing problems can signal more serious shortcomings.

The quick read leads to an initial impression of the care with which a manuscript has been prepared. Weaknesses do not necessarily speak to the quality of the research, but they do reflect barriers to understanding the work and give a sense of the paper's quality and suitability for publication. Our experience is that impressions from the quick read are often confirmed in reviewers' comments and by the more comprehensive reading of the decision editor.

Authors preparing their own papers should ask themselves questions like those listed above. It can be difficult to distance yourself from your own work, but this is a mark of the professional. Learning how to think like a reviewer or editor will help authors gain a fresh and useful perspective on their work.

Manuscript Actions

After the quick read, the decision editor scrutinizes the manuscript and the reviews. In making a final decision, the editor weighs four possibilities, arranged below in order from outright rejection to acceptance "as is."

- **Rejection—outright.** The flaws that lead to this decision generally center around substantive or methodological issues. Substantive concerns include lack of theoretical grounding, confusing or unclear conceptualization or rationale of the research problem, unspecified relationships between variables, and insignificant contribution to the literature. Serious methodological problems include nonrandom samples, confounded independent variables, invalid or unreliable measures, inappropriate statistical analysis, lack of statistical power, and lack of external validity.
- **Rejection with encouragement to revise and resubmit.** In some cases, a manuscript may contain one or more major problems, but the reviewers and the editor may see potential for the paper. The study as presented may not warrant acceptance as is, but may warrant consideration after major revision (e.g., rewriting the conceptual structure or reworking the data). The editor will give the author an invitation to revise and resubmit for another round of reviews (usually with the same reviewers). An editor cannot promise acceptance in this case, but if he or she saw no hope for a manuscript it would have been rejected outright.
- **Acceptance—conditional.** Most manuscripts, if accepted, require revision in substantive, methodological, or mechanical matters. The new version is usually sent for further review by one or both of the original readers. Acceptance is not automatic, and a second or third revision may be required.
- **Acceptance outright.** In a very few cases, a manuscript may be accepted for publication on first reading, with only minor revisions required.

Although the standards for publication in APA journals are stringent, we urge researchers, particularly junior scholars with limited experience in writing and publishing, not to be discouraged about submitting manuscripts. The fact that most APA journals turn down the preponderance of submissions can seem like a bleak prospect to authors new to the field. But the picture is not actually that dismal. Perhaps almost a third of all rejections reflect inappropriate content. As noted, we do not publish essays, evaluation reports, or pieces on test validation unless such work illuminates issues in the discipline. Another third are turned down because of weaknesses in either conceptualization or methodology. Not much can be done to "rescue" such manuscripts, but in most instances, the authors do receive detailed feedback from the reviewers and editors.

The remaining rejections are perhaps most disappointing for the researcher—the topic is appropriate, the conceptualization is adequate, the methods are appropriate, but marginal shortcomings lead the reviewers to recommend against publication, and the editors concur. But looking on the bright side, for authors in this category, the prospects that their work will be accepted are quite good, certainly far greater than the rejection rate would suggest. **A significant proportion of submissions in this category show up later with additional data or analyses and eventually are published.**

Characteristics of a Good Manuscript

Before moving to a discussion of the characteristics of a good manuscript, we turn briefly to problems associated with a poor one. Bartol (1983; see also Eichorn & VandenBos, 1985) gives an excellent overview of 13 flaws that commonly lead to a "revise and resubmit" recommendation or to outright rejection:

1. inadequate literature review, which covers too much or too little
2. inappropriate citations that are irrelevant to topic
3. unclear introductory section that obscures presentation of issues
4. ambiguous research question or unclear description of the topic of investigation
5. inadequate sample description
6. inadequate description of methodology, which is not sufficiently detailed for replication
7. inadequate account of measures, with unknown instruments
8. questionable statistical analysis (e.g., lack of descriptive measures or unclear order of entry of variables in a regression analysis)
9. inappropriate statistical techniques
10. poorly crafted or conceived discussion, which is little more than repetition of results
11. discussion that goes beyond the data and offers unwarranted conclusions
12. flaws in writing style
13. excessive length

We will now consider three features of special significance in judging the quality of a research article: substance, methodology, and style. Throughout we will refer to pertinent sections of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.

Substantive Aspects

One feature that strongly influences a decision of acceptance or rejection is the substantive core of the paper (i.e., the research issue studied). Given the wide range of topics published in APA journals, we will not attempt to make generalizations about substantive relevance, importance, and quality of the manuscripts submitted, but will restrict our advice to "how to get the message across." In general, our main point is the importance of introducing the substance of the research question as quickly as possible and of following the main theme through the remainder of the paper in a coherent and explicit fashion.

The *Publication Manual* (chapter I) lays out the following strategies:

- Present the research problem early in the manuscript.
- Show how the problem is grounded, shaped, and directed by theory.
- Connect the problem to previous work in a literature review that is pertinent and informative but not exhaustive.
- State explicitly the hypotheses under investigation.
- Keep the conclusions within the boundaries of the findings.
- Demonstrate how the study has helped to resolve the original problem.

- Identify and discuss what theoretical or practical implications can be drawn from the study.

The research question should be highlighted from the outset. Calfee (1985) offers the following thoughts about the initial laying out of the research problem:

In a well-written paper the first paragraph sets the stage for exposition of the problem and gives the motivation for conducting the research: an extension of previous work, an examination of a theoretical question, or perhaps an investigation of a practical matter. The remainder of the Introduction can vary somewhat. There is likely to be at least a brief review of pertinent literature. Sometimes there is a theoretical analysis of the issues, with a presentation of one or more theoretical models. At the conclusion of this section, the author often provides an overview of the plan of study, including a brief sketch of the major factors, a statement of the hypotheses and rationale for the design, and a presentation of the expected results. (pp. 248–249)

The Discussion section of the manuscript should reinforce the same theme in light of the empirical findings:

The [Discussion] section generally begins with an overview of the findings, put in more or less plain English and placed within the context of the original problem statement and the expected findings. Next is likely to come a consideration of the fine points: puzzling features in the data, inconsistent or unexpected findings, and occasionally mulling about what might have happened if the study had been slightly different. The Discussion section usually ends with an interpretation of the results in light of the existing literature and with some notion of the broader implications of the findings. (Calfee, 1985, p. 250)

Methodological Aspects

The second feature on which the acceptance or rejection of a manuscript hinges is the methodology. Good methodology can be described by the "two Cs": *clear* and *clean*. The ideal Method section is written in such a manner that another researcher can duplicate the study. This requires a sharply defined and full description of the method (i.e., one that is "clear"). Sheer duplication, however, is not enough. In research, it is critical to have appropriate, valid, and unflawed methods of sampling, use of instruments and/or materials, procedures, and analysis (i.e., methods that are "clean").

Now, allow us to be even more specific with the metaphor of the "two Cs." The author of a good manuscript describes clearly and fully (a) the design or strategic plan for making the research question operational; (b) the sample and sampling method; (c) the instruments and/or materials, as appropriate, (d) the procedures for data collection; and (e) the statistical analysis. In a clean study, the researcher ensures that (a) there is no confounding in the sample variables (e.g., controlling for socioeconomic status), (b) the sampling technique is appropriate, (c) the instruments and/or materials (if applicable) are reliable and valid, and (d) the statistical procedures are sophisticated enough to examine the data and are appropriately applied.

Style

Two features stand out here. First is *editorial* style, the mechanics of convention laid out in the *Publication Manual*—the final arbiter for abbreviations, preparation of tables and figures, references, and so forth. Second is *writing* style, the general principles of expository writing that technical writers must master. Both dimensions of style have bearing on the preparation of a research manuscript.

Abstract. The author usually waits until the last to write this section, yet it is typically the first section the reader sees. The abstract can be difficult to write, because the author must summarize an entire document in a maximum of 120 words. A good abstract is accurate, self-contained, nonevaluative, coherent, and readable. In addition, it is designed to serve two important functions. First, once the article is published, it may be the only part of the study actually read by many researchers. Many scan the abstract to decide whether to read the entire article. Second, with the growth of electronic search systems, journal readers rely more and more on abstracting services to identify relevant material. As stated in the *Publication Manual*, "a well-prepared abstract can be the single most important paragraph in the article." (See section 1.07, *Publication Manual*.)

Length. The journal editor works within a limited number of assigned pages, a figure determined early in the publication year. Space is valuable, and a manuscript typically should be no longer than 30 to 35 typed, double-spaced pages, including tables, figures, and references. Editors and reviewers routinely scrutinize the length of various sections, particularly the Introduction and Discussion. As an author, you should be sensitive to balance in length among the different sections. Be alert to wordiness—make every word count. (See section 2.03, *Publication Manual*.)

Tables and Figures. The reader often "gets the picture" of a study through tables and figures. The heart of the study is often found in these compact sources, so the author should give them special care. Good tables and figures are those that (a) are structured according to APA style, (b) are clear and stand alone with captions, and (c) supplement rather than duplicate information in the text. (See sections 3.62–3.86, *Publication Manual*.)

References. Here we offer three points of advice. First, because space is at a premium, be as economical as possible. Second, list the best, most current, and most relevant sources. Reviewers will take issue with manuscripts that fail to cite pertinent studies and call too often on unpublished work. Third, make sure the references conform to APA editorial style. (See chapter 4, *Publication Manual*.)

Fine Details. In addition to the style requirements discussed above, a well-crafted manuscript also conforms to the minor, technical aspects of APA editorial style (e.g., punctuation, abbreviations, capitalization, typing—see chapter 3, *Publication Manual*). Authors should be sure to proofread their manuscripts carefully for typographical errors and spelling before submitting it for publication. Reviewers and editors have to read a lot of material and are not sympathetic about carelessness. Minor distractions can cloud an otherwise valid piece of research.

Expression of Ideas. We close our discussion of style with a few points about writing technique. As stated earlier, journal reviewers are asked to evaluate writing quality. A good manuscript is easily understood. Sometimes the main reason for rejection of an article is that the reviewers find it barely comprehensible. We cannot emphasize too much the importance of clear communication in scholarly writing. Writing is difficult work. However, there are some basic guidelines that can be followed to facilitate good writing: (a) orderly expression of ideas, (b) smoothness of expression, (c) economy of expression, (d) precision and clarity in word choice, and (e) correct grammar. (See chapter 2, *Publication Manual*.)

Final Touches

Here are two useful bits of advice to consider before submitting a manuscript for publication. Although these points are likely to be useful for all levels of scholars, they are particularly pertinent to the junior researcher.

First, an author should be prepared to revise. On this, Calfee (1985) shares his experiences:

It is the rare writer who produces readable prose on the first try, and seldom is a single revision sufficient. Even the most experienced people turn out a finished paper only after considerable editing and revision. Until you have gained some experience at technical writing, you should plan on several trips through the manuscript. I find it most efficient to focus on a different task during each pass. In the first revision I concentrate on overall organization by preparing a new outline based on what I have actually written; in the second I challenge each paragraph for style and coherence; in the third I work at the word level, cleaning up imprecise usage and checking spelling; and finally I make a last broad reading. (p. 271)

During the review process, it is a good idea for authors to set aside their manuscript for one or two days. It is amazing how the passage of time can provide one with a fresh perspective on the writing and help one to spot problems that may not have been apparent previously. In addition to taking a "time out," we also recommend that authors have someone skilled in expository writing look over the final draft of the manuscript and give suggestions for polishing. A good source, for example, would be the campus manuscript editor, if an author's institution provides such services.

A related suggestion entails a "prereview." We highly recommend that authors "give a polished copy to a colleague—preferably a person who has published, but who has not been close to their work—for a critical review. Even better, get critiques from two colleagues, and have a trial run of a journal's review process" (*Publication Manual*, section 2.05).

The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association

By far, the most useful guide to scholarly writing in psychology and the other social sciences is *the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. Contrary to what many scholars believe (particularly beginning ones), the *Publication Manual* is useful for much more than knowing how to list your references. In this brief section, we offer you our views on the importance of the *Publication Manual*, a description of its structure, and some ideas about using it.

Importance and Structure

Topics in the *Publication Manual* range from the smallest detail to the presentation of ideas on the quality of research. To some, the highly detailed style conventions may appear to be picky, but such rules are necessary. When the first *Publication Manual* appeared in 1929, only a trickle of manuscripts were submitted to the APA's four journals. Today, however, 27 peer-reviewed journals consider 6,000 manuscripts yearly (about 1,400 are published). APA, and the publishers of the several hundred other journals that use the *Publication Manual*, need style guidelines to keep down the high costs of reviewing and editing and to minimize communication problems.

There is a richness of information in the *Publication Manual* not always noticed by the novice researcher. Our recommendation for getting the most out of the *Publication Manual* and discovering its overall importance is to take time to read the entire piece. Its structure takes the reader through the full manuscript preparation process, from discussion of the initial conceptualization of the research problem to what transpires during publication. To use the *Manual* most effectively, an author should be familiar with the contents of all the chapters before beginning to write.

Using the Publication Manual

In this section we will describe briefly each chapter's content and then provide a highlight or two about what we find most useful.

Chapter 1, "Content and Organization of a Manuscript," describes a number of considerations authors should think about before beginning to write. Pay particular attention to the kinds of design defects editors often note in manuscripts. Next, there is an excellent overview of the various parts of a manuscript. Finally, the chapter provides a list of questions that will be invaluable in helping authors assess the quality of their papers.

Chapter 2, "Expression of Ideas," emphasizes the significance of good writing. Earlier, in our discussion of style, we referred to this chapter—study it! The chapter also provides an overview of the usage of correct grammar, as well as guidelines for usage of unbiased language.

Chapter 3, "APA Editorial Style," is the longest chapter. It describes in great detail numerous mechanical features of APA editorial style. Points on spelling, punctuation, abbreviations, table construction, and so on are provided. Study the chapter carefully, as familiarity with its content will save authors trouble and time later. Keep in mind, however, that this chapter is intended not to determine all points of style but rather to resolve the questions that occur most frequently in manuscripts written for psychological journals.

Chapter 4, "Reference List," describes the APA style for references and how to construct an accurate and complete reference list. In addition to general formats for journals, books, and electronic resources, there are numerous examples to guide the author.

Chapter 5, "Manuscript Preparation and Sample Papers to be Submitted for Publication," provides detailed mechanical instructions for the preparation of a manuscript. This is a highly readable chapter with excellent examples. We recommend that authors alert the person keying their manuscript (or yourself, if you do your own keying) to this chapter.

Chapter 6, "Material Other than Journal Articles," acknowledges that sometimes APA style is used in the preparation of theses, dissertations, and student papers, as well as for papers for oral presentations. There are, however, differences between such papers and manuscripts submitted for journal publication and this chapter explains some of those differences and how they are handled.

Chapter 7, "Manuscript Acceptance and Production," outlines the procedures for submitting a manuscript and, if accepted, the subsequent handling of edited manuscripts and the typeset article. Familiarity with this chapter will greatly assist the new author in weathering the publication process.

Chapter 8, "Journals Program of the American Psychological Association," discusses the policies that govern APA journals and how editors work. There is also an excellent graphic presentation of the publication process. This section provides a good supplement to our overview of the review process.

Chapter 9, "Bibliography," gives historical background, sources cited, and an annotated list of suggested readings.

A series of appendices provides the following:

- checklist for manuscript submission
- checklist for transmitting accepted manuscripts for electronic production
- ethical standards for reporting and publishing scientific information

- references to legal materials (*Bluebook* rules)
- sample cover letter for submitting a manuscript

Finally, to keep up to date with changes in APA style between new editions of the *Publication Manual*, the authors can consult the following Web page:

<http://www.apastyle.org>

Converting the Dissertation Into a Journal Article

A logical place for the beginning scholar to commence the task of publishing is with the dissertation. In this section, we offer a few suggestions for turning a thesis into a publishable manuscript. We will touch on the following features: length, selectivity, writing style (editorial and expository), and interpretation of data. (For more guidance, consult chapter 6 in the *Publication Manual*.)

We preface the discussion with two points. First, by giving attention to the above features, authors will increase the chance of having their manuscripts accepted for publication. Second, reviewers and editors easily recognize a dissertation conversion. On the one hand, the distinctive features can mean a headache—lots of work for the reviewer. On the other hand, most reviewers are generous with their contribution of time and patience in guiding a new colleague through the publication maze. The harder a new member of the profession works to alleviate some of the more obvious and fixable problems separating a thesis from a publishable article, the easier the path will be. In the following discussion, we will work from the negative to the positive to identify problems and present suggestions for improvement.

Length

Articles derived from dissertations typically are longer than other manuscripts. This is understandable. To reduce a 200-plus page document to a compact, 25- to 30-page article is no easy task. Yet, this paring must be done, and done with extreme care. The substance must be preserved while cutting the extraneous detail that is important for the dissertation but irrelevant for the journal article. How does an author approach the chore of turning a lengthy thesis into an article of the appropriate size for a journal? It is not a matter of "cutting and pasting," but one of selecting and rewriting.

Selectivity

In dissertations there is a tendency to say everything about the research problem under investigation. Again, this is understandable in that a doctoral thesis serves as a rite of academic passage. The completion of the thesis signifies that the author has extensive knowledge about the topic under study and has the requisite skills to pursue research on the problem. The following approaches often help with selectivity and brevity:

- If the dissertation covers several distinct research dimensions, authors may want to narrow the focus to a specific topic—be selective in presenting the problem.
- Try to bring the results under control. Often the dissertation reports everything, including "almost significant" results.

- Try to avoid the common presentation pitfalls of many novice writers (e.g., reporting that the data were analyzed using a certain computer package or presenting significant findings in the Discussion section). For an excellent discussion on pitfalls and problems, see Carver (1984).
- There are certain conventions in dissertations that do not lend themselves to presentation format for journal articles. For example, as Carver (1984) advised, "do not include a 'Definitions' section ... this section is popular in doctoral dissertations but it is often a sign of naivete in research reports" (p. 23).
- Be selective in the references that are reported in the literature review. Dissertations often have an exhaustive number of citations—choose the most salient.

Writing Style

In earlier sections, we offered general advice on editorial and expository styles. Here we will confine our ideas to the special case of converting the dissertation into a journal article.

Many theses do not follow APA style (e.g., in tables, figures, references, and organization of sections). As noted previously, failure to attend to APA style often signals stylistic problems throughout the manuscript—we urge authors to take special care.

What about the quality of expository writing? Armstrong's (1972) treatise on "The Dissertation's Deadly Sins" is helpful in addressing this issue. Among other problems, Armstrong argues that most theses suffer from overuse of the passive voice, pedantry, artificiality (e.g., overuse of the conditional), and redundancy. Such writing "sins" often create obstacles in setting forth ideas effectively.

In a similar vein, Holmes (1974–1975) spoke to other problems associated with dissertation writing, focusing on the need for modification or excision of content. He advised, "cutting a manuscript is not simply a way of reducing length; it is also a way of strengthening communication.... By eliminating the unnecessary, communication may be improved" (p. 40). Holmes's point echoes our earlier statements on the need for selectivity. Specifically, the author should strive for clarity; get rid of extraneous words; avoid excessive reporting and repetition; be explicit, but not overly detailed; use the active voice; and, of course, use correct grammar.

Interpretation of Data

A common problem in a poorly prepared manuscript derived from a dissertation study is overinterpretation of the data. Inexperienced researchers tend to have unbridled faith in the strength of their results. Carver (1984) identified two examples of the overstatement of results, seen in the Discussion section:

"The results of this research *should generalize ...*" is used, but the correct wording should be, The results of this research are probably generalizable. "*Would be well advised ...*" is written, but the phrase should be, *might consider....* (p. 42)

Problems of overinterpretation in dissertations are not unexpected, given that the candidate has invested much time and energy into an academic undertaking. Thus, going beyond the results may come out of a sense of ownership and pride. Our recommendation is to show restraint in forming your conclusions.

We summarize this section by saying that a journal manuscript is a "lean machine." Compared with a dissertation, a journal paper requires a tighter theoretical framework, a more succinct review of the literature, a more controlled presentation of methodology, and a more restrained discussion of results.

Conclusion

As authors embark on the paths of research, manuscript preparation, and submission, they should prepare themselves for some very hard work and task commitment. Indeed, research and writing can be tedious, perhaps perfunctory at times, but in our experience they can also be intellectually stimulating and personally satisfying. Making theoretical breakthroughs, producing research with significant practical implications, and being cited by one's colleagues are quite rewarding. We wish all authors success in their scholarly endeavors!

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