

# Guided reflective writing as a teaching strategy to develop nursing student clinical judgment

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## Abstract

**Background:** Nurse educators need strategies to help develop nursing students' clinical judgment skills to practice safely. Guided reflective writing is an active learning strategy that can increase learning and promote clinical judgment in patient care.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study, guided by Tanner's Evidence Based Clinical Judgment Model, was to examine nursing student and faculty perspectives of the benefits and challenges of guided reflective writing for clinical judgment development following clinical experiences.

**Method:** Junior- and senior-level students participated in an open-ended survey regarding their experience of the guided reflective writing assignment postclinical. A focus group gained faculty perspectives of the assignment.

**Results:** A final theme for each student group was developed: (1) organizes basic nursing care (Junior One students) and (2) sense of wholeness (Senior Two students). Progression in clinical judgment from Junior One to Senior Two students was noted. Faculty concurred with students' perspectives with their final theme, encourages deep thinking.

**Conclusion:** The results supported guided written reflection and clinical judgment development as key components to enhancing students' knowledge and preparation for complex nursing care. Guided reflective writing can be used as a reflection activity for clinical judgment development in a variety of settings including hospital, simulation, case studies, or virtual simulation.

## KEYWORDS

clinical judgment, nursing education, reflective writing, teaching strategies

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Nursing students are expected to have high academic and professional performance upon graduation. This expectation is needed to pass the state board examination and assume new nurse roles in complex health care environments. The National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) recommended nurse educators teach clinical judgment skills and evaluate students' ability to make decisions.<sup>1</sup> As content knowledge

does not translate to clinical judgment ability, it is recommended that key strategies to promote clinical judgment are included in nursing education.<sup>2</sup> As nurse educators are limited in available clinical experiences and individualized student time, active learning strategies after clinical experiences play an important role in the students' nursing education preparation. Nurse educators need strategies to help develop nursing students' clinical judgment skills to practice safely. With restrictions of nursing students in hospitals due to decreased patient

opportunities including pandemic restrictions, nurse educators are seeking alternative clinical activities such as laboratory simulation, virtual simulation, and case studies. Reflective writing has been utilized with alternative clinical experiences to allow the students to develop their understanding of the clinical.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the clinical activity, guided reflective writing is an active learning strategy that can increase learning and promote clinical judgment in patient care.

Learning to write effectively, through guided reflective writing assignments, promotes communication skills for professional patient care documentation. Reflective writing exercises provide opportunities for students to synthesize data and evaluate evidence related to their experiences. Guided reflective writing prompts students to develop questions for further reflection and investigation. Utilization of prompts and encouraging students to ask questions, based on their assessment of the patient environment, helps the student develop clinical judgment to promote patient safety.<sup>4</sup> Reflective writing as an assessment, provides faculty with an inside look at students' thought processes and clinical judgment development. With frequent reflective writing submission and review, faculty can provide feedback regarding the student's thought process to guide their experience interpretation. Using reflective writing with close student guidance, reflection review, and detailed feedback provides faculty an in-depth view of the student's clinical judgment development.

## 2 | BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Clinical judgment development in undergraduate nursing programs is key for safe, competent nursing practice. Reflective writing, a main concept in this study, first begins with the concept of reflection. Reflection, as an active learning strategy, has been promoted for decades. Reflection is linked to the cognitive behavioral skill of self-monitoring and purposefully involves paying attention to thoughts, feelings, and judgments.<sup>5</sup>

Utilization of reflective strategies including journaling, discussion, and debriefing in undergraduate nursing courses have been documented to enhance the students' development of clinical judgment.<sup>6-8</sup> Clinical judgment, as the ability to gather patient data, make sense of the data, provide appropriate care based on the data, and then evaluate both the patient's and one's own actions, is a critical component of today's professional nurse.<sup>9</sup> As clinical judgment requires higher level thinking, it is essential for nurses to continue their reflective processes in their professional practice. Reflective practice in nursing provides nurses the benefit of improving patient care, developing their own higher-level thinking, and contributing to their own sense of professional satisfaction.

Tanner's Evidence Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing emphasizes the role of the nurses' background, the context of the situation, and the nurses' relationship with their patients.<sup>10</sup> These factors are central to what nurses notice and how they interpret findings, respond, and reflect on their response. Although Tanner's

Evidence Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing was designed based on the actions of experienced nurses, there is evidence that nurse educators can use the model to guide clinical judgment development in nursing students.<sup>11</sup> Tanner's Evidence Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing is routinely used in debriefing post-simulation and is beginning to become a model for reflective practice in the classroom.<sup>6,12</sup> Tanner's Evidence Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing emphasizes engagement with patients and development of concern and caring for the patients' well-being. Teaching clinical judgment has become an essential task of nurse educators as prompted by the NCSBN.<sup>2</sup>

Reflective writing has been researched in higher education including teacher education, psychology, and the sciences.<sup>13</sup> Although some research on reflective writing has been completed in nursing, earlier studies relate reflective writing to critical thinking, not clinical judgment.<sup>14</sup> Clinical judgment differs from critical thinking in that it includes a reflective component and considers the nurse's own values, biases, and experiences in the clinical setting and how these will affect the patient situation and outcomes.<sup>15</sup> The reflection step or self-analysis piece of clinical judgment is critical to nurses and students to identify their own strengths and weakness with plans for further development. As clinical judgment emphasizes the nurses' reflection and own potential bias in clinical situations, clinical judgment is the focus of the study.

Only one case-study publication connected guided reflective writing and clinical judgment using Tanner's Evidence Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing postclinical experience.<sup>16</sup> The limited amount of research regarding these two topics prompted the purpose of the study. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to examine nursing student and faculty perspectives of the benefits and challenges of guided reflective writing for clinical judgment development following clinical experiences. Students and faculty were asked their perceptions of guided reflective writing assignments and clinical judgment development.

## 3 | METHOD

### 3.1 | Design

Using a qualitative descriptive approach, information related to reflective writing with undergraduate nursing students was explored. Perspectives of the students who completed the assignments and the clinical faculty who guided the clinical were recorded and analyzed. This study approach was selected because there is little research on guided reflective writing and clinical judgment based on Tanner's Evidence Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing. Qualitative descriptive research design allows for a comprehensive summary of events in everyday terms of those events.<sup>17</sup> An inductive approach was utilized due to limited research of students' experiences with reflective writing based on Tanner's Evidence Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.2 | Researcher characteristics

While the researcher in this study was faculty at the sample site, the researcher did not work directly with the clinical students once their clinical activity began. She did not grade clinical assignments for these students. The researcher in this study has had experiences with student nurse clinical activity including guidance of an internship course. The researcher was familiar with reflective writing as journaling postclinical activity. However, most reflective writing the researcher had been subject to had been a superficial report of clinical activity. The researcher had not assessed deeper written reflection activities.

### 3.3 | Sample

The study received full-committee review through the university IRB (Reference no.: 19-0065) based on the applicable federal regulation. The study occurred at a small Midwestern University. At the time of the study, the BSN program had approximately 100 nursing students in all (four) cohorts. Students in the Junior One (beginning) and Senior two (final) cohorts, who completed writing assignments as part of their clinical course curriculum, were invited to participate in the study after all guided reflective writing assignments were completed and graded. There were a total of 30 students in Junior One and 25 students in Senior Two cohorts. All 30 Junior One and 25 Senior Two students were invited to participate. Consent was implied and not recorded to maintain anonymity. Overall response rate for participating students was 85% (Junior One  $n = 28/30$ ; Senior Two  $n = 19/25$ ). All faculty (four) who guided these assignments for the Junior One and Senior Two nursing students participated in a focus group. The faculty were full-time clinical instructors with experience in assessing written assignments postclinical.

### 3.4 | Assignment

The researcher, using clinical judgment literature as a guide, developed the guided reflective writing assignment and rubric. The researcher adapted questions from Nielsen, Stragnell, and Jester's guide for clinical reflection using the Tanner's Evidence Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing<sup>16</sup> (see Figure 1). The rubric associated with the assignment was created by the researcher using the Lasater Clinical Judgment rubric associated with postsimulation.<sup>8</sup> The guided reflective writing rubric, as adapted by the researcher, focused on clinical expectations instead of simulation responses. With these changes, the guided reflective writing rubric is appropriate for postclinical use. The assignment rubric guided students in their reflection about their clinical experience (see Figure 2).

The researcher developed reflective writing assignment was piloted with Senior Two students one semester before the study. Positive student experiences and outcomes were noted by faculty during the pilot semester. During the data collection semester, the guided reflective writing assignment was part of the coursework for postclinical activity in the Junior One and Senior Two cohorts within the pre-licensure BSN program. Students completed the assignment as homework after their clinical experience. Faculty read the submission and provided feedback regarding the students' account of the clinical experience.

### 3.5 | Data generation and collection

The researcher developed the student qualitative survey questions and faculty focus interview guide, guided by the literature regarding Tanner's Evidence Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing, faculty colleague review, and professional educator experience. The student survey contained 13 open-ended questions pertaining to the student's experience of guided reflective writing. Examples of questions are as follows.

#### Guided Reflective Writing Assignment

1. Introduction: Briefly describe your clinical experience.
2. Noticing: Describe what you noticed about your patient immediately. Describe what you noticed as you spent more time with the patient and possibly their family.
3. Interpreting: What did your observations during the clinical experience lead you to believe about your patients? What was the priority of care? What additional information was needed to provide patient care? What resources supported your interpretation?
4. Responding: After consideration of your clinical experience, what were the goals for your patient? What interventions did you complete during the clinical experience to support these goals? How did you support therapeutic communication with your patient?
5. Reflection: What are other possibilities for supporting this patient? What ways did Noticing, Interpreting, Responding, and Reflecting help improve your patient care?
6. Identify 2 questions to further explore regarding this clinical experience to develop clinical judgment.

**FIGURE 1** Guided reflective writing assignment questions

<b>Guided Reflective Writing Assignment rubric based on the Clinical Judgment Model</b>				
<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Exemplary</b>	<b>Accomplished</b>	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Beginning</b>
Noticing	Explained subtle pattern and deviations from normal data. Reported gathering of additional relevant data.	Explained most obvious pattern and deviations in data. Reported retrieval of obvious information.	Explained obvious patterns and deviations but missed some important information. Limited effort to seek additional information.	Explained normal assessment. Missed deviations from expectations. Did not report seeking information. Reported on objective data only.
Interpreting	Appropriately prioritized data to explain patient condition. Made sense of complex patient data with supporting resources.	Generally prioritized data but includes some less pertinent data. Mostly made sense of patient data except for rare or complicated situations.	Effort emerging to prioritize data. Includes less important data. Mostly made sense of data in simple or common situations.	Difficulty organizing and prioritizing data. Cannot distinguish important data to the diagnosis. Difficulty making sense of data in common situations.
Responding	Reported detailed communication strategies to establish rapport. Reported goals are tailored individually for the patient. Interventions are well explained with supporting rationale relevant to the patient.	Reported generalized communication strategies but could be more effective in establishing rapport. Reported goals and interventions based on general patient data. Explanation of interventions not detailed.	Reported communication strategies that display caring but not competence. Reported goals and interventions based on the most obvious data. Explanations of interventions vague and lack understanding.	Reported communication strategies are confusing and unclear. Reported goals and interventions address vague situations and are confusing based on the patient data.
Reflecting	Critically evaluates experience considering other realistic alternatives. Appropriately generates questions to stimulate further thought.	Evaluates experience but unable to identify appropriate alternatives. Information seeking questions could be more systematic to promote further growth.	States the obvious when evaluating the experience and asking questions.	Statements show disinterest in improving performance and unable to see need for improvement.

**FIGURE 2** Guided reflective writing assignment rubric

- How has reflective writing affected your clinical judgment when caring for patients?
- What are the benefits to this clinical writing assignment compared to other clinical course writing assignments?
- What are the challenges of completing this assignment?
- What example can you provide to show how this assignment helped you with your clinical judgment development?

The faculty interview guide contained ten questions. The questions become more specific throughout by detailing the benefits and challenges of guided reflective writing and concluded by seeking further thoughts about guided reflective writing. Participants

reflected upon their experiences grading the assignments and the students' clinical judgment development. Examples of questions are as follows.

- What were your initial thoughts about the benefits or challenges regarding the assignment/rubric?
- Which questions seemed most beneficial in prompting further thought and growth in the students' writing/thinking?
- What ways was the rubric useful (or not) in evaluating students' progress in developing clinical judgment?
- What overall growth/improvement (or lack of growth/improvement) did you note in the students' writing regarding clinical judgment?

## 4 | QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Data in this descriptive qualitative study was analyzed using Graneheim and Lundman's content analysis method.<sup>18</sup> Junior One and Senior Two responses were analyzed separately. A faculty mentor, with expertise in qualitative research, served as peer reviewer. Coding by participant group allowed for comparison and contrast of codes by group and final theme development per group. Grouping similar codes served as the basis for descriptors within each group and led to overall subtheme development. These four overall sub-themes, served as a frame to help organize each group's concepts regarding the assignment with a final theme for each group developed. Faculty focus group data was analyzed separately.

### 4.1 | Trustworthiness

Triangulation in this study included using multiple sources and data collection methods including student survey responses, faculty focus group, student and faculty interviews, and artifact analysis for validation of findings. Artifact analysis in this study, examination of a sample of student assignments, provided the researcher with a front-line examination of the completed assignment and provided the researcher's perception of clinical judgment development with their reflective writing. Methodological rigor was enhanced by utilization of peer debriefing, member checks, thick descriptions, reflexive journals, and audit trails. Gaining the perspectives of both beginning and ending nursing program students provided richer context.

## 5 | RESULTS

The participants' perceptions of the guided reflective writing assignment were overall positive. Analysis of the data produced four overall sub-themes and a final theme for each group. The subthemes served as an organizational frame for each group's descriptors leading to theme development. The overall subthemes across all groups were: (1) approach to thinking; (2) application to clinical care; (3) assignment guidance; and (4) assignment value. The final student themes were: (1) organizes basic nursing care (Junior One students) and (2) sense of wholeness (Senior Two students). The table included compares the results of the beginning and final semester students. (Table 1)

### 5.1 | Junior One students' perceptions

The Junior One theme "organizes basic nursing care" emphasized that the clinical judgment reflective writing assignment helped organize the students' reflection about basic nursing care to allow deep thinking and further growth in future patient care activities. As the Junior One students are beginning level nursing students, the participants emphasized the importance of the assignment organization to help guide patient care. Using the assignment helped the Junior One students reflect upon their clinical experiences and prepare for future patient encounters. Participants stated:

- *Having the rubric (helped) to see what each category/question was divided up into. Without this I wouldn't have reflected or remembered some of the important long term benefits and knowledge from the class.*

**TABLE 1** Student subthemes and final themes

Junior One: Subthemes and Student perspective descriptors	Senior Two: Subthemes and student perspective descriptors
Approach to thinking <i>Assignment was simple but detailed to allow deep thought and reflection about the individual clinical experience</i>	Approach to thinking <i>Assignment is a tool to help with correlation and connection of overall patient care</i>
Application to clinical care <i>Assignment encouraged us to become more observant in clinical care. Assignment emphasized patient communication and further thought about how to support the patient</i>	Application to clinical care <i>Assignment helped us examine patient care and encourage further thinking. Reflection helped answer clinical questions and focus on priorities for more efficient future patient care</i>
Assignment guidance <i>Faculty feedback and student reflection helped organize goals and prioritization of patient care</i>	Assignment guidance <i>Assignment allowed for free writing with a clinical focus to create a sense of wholeness regarding patient care</i>
Assignment value <i>We experienced growth and improvement through building reflections</i>	Assignment value <i>Assignment was purposeful and structured to allow us to analyze their own clinical judgment for further growth</i>
Junior One: Final theme and supporting summary	Senior Two: Final theme and supporting summary
Organizes basic nursing care The assignment helped organize reflection about basic nursing care to allow deep thinking and further growth in future patient care activities	Sense of wholeness The assignment provides a purposeful, guided clinical tool to aid with connections and priorities across patients and in future care. The assignment provides a sense of wholeness and encourages deep thinking through reflection for further clinical growth

- *Before this assignment I did not realize I notice or interpret the patient. Now (with this information) when I first enter my patient's room I notice her behavior and form a baseline for it. As the clinical day goes on I compare the patient's behavior to the baseline to determine the status of my client.*
- *The reflective writing has gotten me to ask the right questions and interpret the right information. It allowed me time to think back critically and learn more about my experience.*
- *They (students) had to be detailed and they had to tell us exactly why they chose that patient's priorities and what they would do different in the future. That helped them to strive to be more detailed on what they were doing on the unit and portraying it in their writing. (faculty of Senior Two students)*
- *The students' thought process improved with each entry. Their goals became more specific and the important pieces of clinical care were emphasized. I enjoyed watching their clinical judgment develop over time. (faculty of Senior Two students)*

## 5.2 | Senior Two students' perceptions

The Senior Two theme “sense of wholeness” supported the guided reflective writing assignment as a purposeful, guided clinical tool to aid with connections and priorities across patients and in future nursing care. The assignment provided a sense of wholeness regarding patient care and encouraged deep thinking through reflection for further clinical growth. As compared with the Junior One students, the Senior Two students used the assignment for connections and correlations about patient care instead of an organizing guide. Similarly, the Senior Two students also appreciated the purpose and simplicity of the assignment. The Senior Two students emphasized the deep thinking process they experienced while using the assignment. Participants stated:

- *Making connections about the patient's meds to symptoms or the diagnosis helped reinforce what I learned in the classroom to the clinical experience and helped me better learn and understand.*
- *I learned more in depth about each of my patient's clinical picture due to looking up or researching the diagnoses to formulate goals and priorities. Each question was specific and helped guide my writing.*
- *It wasn't busy work and actually allowed you to enjoy your clinical, but also reflect and make goals for your patient.*
- *The reflective writing assignment helped by making me consider all observations, symptoms, and information to make clinical judgments.*

## 5.3 | Faculty support

“Encourages deep thinking,” as the overarching theme from the faculty responses for the guided reflective writing assignment, emphasized that the tool provided a detailed reflective writing guide postclinical to encourage thinking and feedback for clinical judgment development. The assignment encouraged faculty and student interaction. Faculty perspectives supported the students' perception of the guided reflective writing assignment and clinical judgment development. Faculty statements regarding the assignment are as follows.

- *A lot of the feedback to the students was based on the questions they asked. I would also follow up in person if they were not clear about what was happening at the clinical. At the Junior One level they are not always connecting everything. Some of them got better once you gave them feedback. They started making more connections based on the feedback I'd given. (faculty of Junior One students)*

## 5.4 | Learning from participant challenges

Interestingly, the challenges of guided reflective writing were addressed by participants as benefits and value. None of the participants indicated the assignment was overly difficult or complicated. Most indicated the assignment encouraged them to think deeper and consider other possibilities. In fact, many participants enjoyed the assignment noting that it was challenging and encouraged their developing thinking and clinical judgment. Responses about the challenges of the assignment indicated that the students were encouraged to explore other possibilities and to think more deeply when caring for their patients. Faculty did not report negative aspects of the assignment. Negative aspects of the assignment did not present in the data and were not included as an overall theme.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

The guided reflective writing assignment is an active learning strategy that helped students develop clinical judgment. As each student throughout the semester completed the assignment multiple times, students became more proficient with their ability to reflect upon their day and analyze alternate care approaches for their patients. The guided reflective writing assignment reminded students to be observant in clinical care and to organize their patient care by goals and priorities. As supported by this study, guided reflective writing is important because it helps students understand what they are learning; faculty can see how students are progressing with clinical judgment development.

### 6.1 | Student themes

Student themes in this study supported the benefits of guided reflective writing. The Junior One student theme “organizes basic nursing care” identified the guided reflective writing assignment as a tool to help the students organize their thinking and plan for future patient care activities. Students expressed how the assignment was detailed and structured to allow them to not only reflect upon their past clinical experiences but to encourage further thought about future nursing care. This is important information since Junior One students are in beginning stages of learning patient care.

The Senior Two theme “sense of wholeness” also supported guided reflective writing for learning clinical judgment as beneficial.

These students expressed that guided reflective writing provided a way for them to correlate and connect patient care activities giving them a sense of wholeness regarding patient care. Reflecting upon their experiences encouraged further thinking and also helped them with prioritization and goal setting for future patient care experiences. This is important information since Senior Two students are finishing their nursing education and preparing to begin their practice as professional nurses caring for patients.

A difference in perspective was noted between the Junior One and Senior Two nursing students' responses to the guided reflective writing assignment. Junior One participants were focused on the details of the assignment for basic learning and emphasized satisfaction with the guided questions and the detailed prompts. The Senior Two participants emphasized the assignment helped them connect and correlate their patient care. It is expected that beginning level nursing students would have a very basic or developing level of clinical judgment ability and that this ability would increase to accomplished or exemplary as the students progress in their nursing education. Beginning level nursing students were more task focused whereas students in their final semester were more comfortable with completing assignments and providing patient care. With the guided reflective writing experience, the Senior Two students were diving deeper in their thoughts and reflections to explore other possibilities in their patient care. Again, the difference in perspective demonstrated growth from Junior One to Senior Two students.

The study demonstrated the assignment was beneficial to both beginning and ending level nursing students. The beginning level nursing students benefited from the structure of the assignment. The prompts provided the students a guide for patient care. The Senior Two students, who were in their final semester of the nursing program, also benefited from the guided reflective writing assignment as the assignment deepened their thoughts regarding patient care for clinical judgment development.

## 6.2 | Implications for nursing

The results supported guided reflection and clinical judgment development as key components to enhance student knowledge and preparation for complex nursing care.

The guided reflective writing assignment can be a tool for nurse educators to assist students in developing clinical judgment. This study supported guided reflective writing, using the Tanner's Evidence Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing, to help students improve their perception of the patient and patient care; develop appropriate goals for their patient; prioritize patient care; increase interaction with faculty; and gain skills in clinical judgment.

Since the study concluded, faculty have expanded the use of the guided reflective writing assignment outside of the hospital setting. The assignment has been used postsimulation as an individualized follow-up activity after debriefing. Most recently, the assignment was used postvirtual simulation. Students were able to reflect upon their

virtual simulation patient similarly as they would an actual hospital patient. The guided reflective writing assignment has the potential to be effective in clinical judgment development across a multitude of clinical activity settings.

Relevant to self-directed and life-long learning, students indicated they are making the learning their own. Guided reflective writing may help guide future nurses with clinical and professional writing. New graduates will be prepared to experience, reflect, and learn from complex patient care situations in their role as registered nurses, ultimately enhancing their knowledge and patient care.

## 6.3 | Limitations

Limitations of the study included using one site to collect data, limiting generalizability. This limits the study findings to baccalaureate degree nursing programs from similar settings. Since participants volunteered to participate in the self-report survey, response bias may be present. In addition, the faculty focus group may have been subject to groupthink where those who realize that their viewpoint is a minority perspective may not speak up and risk negative reactions. In this study's focus group, all participants were collegial with each other and respected diversity of shared experiences.

This study was conducted from the perspective of beginning and final semester nursing students at one undergraduate nursing program. Further research regarding guided reflective writing and clinical judgment could include quantitative measures and utilizing all levels of nursing students.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Using Tanner's Evidence Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing as a guide for reflective writing by nursing students postclinical is a newer teaching strategy. This qualitative study described the benefits and value of reflective writing as an active learning strategy to promote clinical judgment development in prelicensure nursing students. The final group themes supported the value of the guided reflective writing assignment for undergraduate nursing students postclinical. This study adds to the science of reflective writing as a means of improving clinical judgment in nursing students. Using the guided reflective writing assignment, postclinical, as guided by Tanner's Evidence Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing, provided nursing students a structured tool to reflect upon their clinical experience and their performance. Preparing future baccalaureate-prepared nurses with clinical judgment skills is imperative for providing safe, quality patient care. Guided reflective writing as a strategy to develop clinical judgment can be further evaluated as nurse educators incorporate this tool in their nursing curriculum.

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