

An Introduction to Bayesian Statistics

PSYC 757 - Section 002

Patrick E. McKnight

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Welcome

Course Location & Time

George Mason University

Fairfax campus

Planetary Hall, Room 127

Tues/Thurs 9-10:15am

Thank you for your interest in quantitative methods. We hope you enjoy the course.

Sincerely,

Patrick E. McKnight, Ph.D.

Professor

Patrick E. McKnight Office: DK2064/65

Email: pmcknigh@gmu.edu

Office Hours: Tues/Thurs 10-noon (online)



Overview

Psychology 643 is the second course of a two-course sequence that serves to introduce psychology graduate students to statistics, research methodology, research design, and measurement from the vantage point of the general linear model. This course will further student knowledge in the General Linear Model to allow students to evaluate assumptions, deal with group comparisons, work with repeated measures, and address moderation and mediation. The class meetings will consist mostly of lectures and discussions. The lab assignments will focus on providing you with hands-on experience analyzing data and interpreting results.

Objectives

The purpose of the class remains focused on Bayesian statistics, however, unlike many Bayesian devotees, I consider Bayesian statistics a tool. Just like other tools, Bayesian methods have suitable and unsuitable applications. Students enrolled in my course may find my approach more challenging than standard graduate lectures because I emphasize mastery (i.e., learning) over achievement (i.e., grades). I demand more from you (and me) so that we all learn together. If this format is more difficult, why would I implement it? Simple. I want students to learn, not just get grades for taking a class. The more my students learn, the more future professional opportunities await them.

Learning Objectives

Let me...

1. **Gain** the ability to choose the appropriate analytic approach for a specific question
2. **Understand** the limitations of inference
3. **Interpret** results accurately
4. **Develop** a vocabulary that allows you to read and interpret the literature
5. **Express** uncertainty as a probability distribution
6. **Understand** the role of prior information in inference

Get it?

1 Workflow

1.1 Initial Setup

Follow each of the steps below when you begin the course OR when you want to either setup another computer or you replace the one you began the course using. Either way, these steps are universal. Follow them in order to avoid any issues.

i STEP 1: Install the Tools

We will use R, RStudio, Python, Quarto, Git, and GitHub (Desktop if desired). You need all six entities installed and configured to be functionally enrolled in this course. Thus, we need to get you all setup before I can start distributing things like...this syllabus and my weekly notes. So, let's get started.

First, get R (aka our engine for this course). Go to [CRAN](#) and download the latest version of R for your operating system. Install R. Then install RStudio. Go to [RStudio](#) and download the latest version of RStudio for your operating system. Then, install RStudio. Once you have a functional RStudio environment, go to the [Quarto](#) website and follow the instructions to install Quarto. Finally, install Git. Go to [Git](#) and download the latest version of Git for your operating system. Install Git. If you want to use GitHub Desktop, go to [GitHub Desktop](#) and download the latest version of GitHub Desktop for your operating system. Install GitHub Desktop - again, optional.

i STEP 2: Get a GitHub account (and send to me)

We will use GitHub to store all of our files, including the project reports. Thus, you will need to get comfortable with GitHub. I will help you with this process.

Sign yourself up for a github account. Once you get your username, please send it to me via email. I will add you to the course organization and you will be able to access the course repository (a set of files stored on the cloud). Once you have access to the course repository, you will be able to clone (copy) the repository to your computer. You can even edit these files! Thus, the addition of you to the group repository enables you to participate in the course. Don't worry about using the tool right now, we will build in a routine for each day, week, and quarter(ish) to help you easily get into the flow of things. GitHub allows us to work together in a more efficient manner - compared to Google docs,

for example. We will use GitHub to store all of our files, including the project reports. Thus, you will need to get comfortable with GitHub. Again, I will help you with this process. - Get your PAT setup. See [this page](#) for more details. - Add your PAT to your credential manager. See [this page](#) for more details. - Test your setup.

i STEP 3: Open RStudio and set up Git

Once you have RStudio installed, open it. Then, go to Tools > Global Options > Git/SVN. Click on the box next to “Enable version control interface for RStudio projects”. **Windows Users** (Then, click on the box next to “Use Git from the Windows Command Prompt”, click on the box next to “Use a custom Git executable” and navigate to the Git executable on your computer). **Mac/Linux Users** select the git executable that RStudio found in your path. If there is no executable, go back and install git. Finally, for all users, click on the box next to “View project status in the RStudio project”. Click “OK”. You are now ready to use Git with RStudio.

If you want a more, in depth, tutorial on how to use Git with RStudio, go to [Happy Git and GitHub for the useR](#) and follow the instructions. I highly recommend this outstanding resource for learning how to use Git with RStudio.

i STEP 4: Clone the course repository

This is the easiest part. Once your system is setup and configured to use all the tools, you can now issue the following commands:

```
# Clone the course repository
install.packages("usethis")
library(usethis)
usethis::use_course("pem725/BayesianSyllabus_S2024")
```

i STEP 5: Render the syllabus & read (often)

Open ANY of the qmd files - probably index.qmd is the most logical choice. Then, click on the “Render” button that will create a wonderful document to your right. If you click on the button that says “Show in new window”, you will have a lovely full-screen version of this beauty. Throughout the semester, I will update this book. Simply do a fresh pull with the same code in the same directory and you will have the most up-to-date version of the syllabus and notes. The *usethis* (Wickham et al. 2023) package is quite handy.

1.2 Daily (or every other day)

❗ **MUST DO:** Pull the latest changes from GitHub (5 mins max)

Open RStudio and open the course syllabus repository (STEP 4 above). Then, click on the “Pull” button in the Git tab; doing so will refresh your local files and enable you to render the full set of notes. You will need to do this **before** you start working on the weekly assignment.

💡 **PLEASE:** Read the assigned readings (before Tuesday each week; 4 hours max/week)

Yep, read the assigned readings **BEFORE** class. Remember, you get to choose. I have two books. One is a light read with great examples (Kurt 2019); the other is a bit dense with tons of code (McElreath 2020). Either one suffices for the course. If you have a keen interest in applying these tools to your own work, I strongly recommend the latter. You choose. But please read.

📖 **NOTE:** Write down your questions from the assigned readings

As you read, note any questions you have regarding terminology, concepts, or applications. These questions will be used for discussion during our Tuesday sessions. Your questions will also help me address any issues you may have with the material. I will do my best to answer your questions in a timely manner. If I cannot answer your question, I will find someone who can. I will also use your questions to help me improve the course. Thus, your questions are important. Please write them down and ask them during class.

📖 **NOTE:** Work on the weekly assignment (before Thursday each week; 4 hours max/week)

Open up RStudio every day and get accustomed to the workflow. There is a lot you learn simply by repetition. So, lather, rinse, repeat. You can do it. These initial workflow steps are ones that translate to every area of your life. Break things down into repeatable chunks, commit them to a memorable sequence, and stick to it. You will be amazed at what you can accomplish.

1.3 Every 5 Weeks (Once per Project)

i Check your assignments for the project

Via GitHub, each of you will receive a set of tasks to accomplish so that we - together - address the project aims and objectives. You will be assigned a task and a deadline. Please do your best to meet the deadline. If you cannot, please let the team know as soon as possible. The team is all of us. I will do my best to accommodate reasonable needs. But, please, do not wait until the last minute to let me know you cannot meet the deadline. The team will suffer and I will not be happy. And, you will not be happy. So, let's be happy. Communicate early and often.

i Submit all contributions to GitHub

Once you have completed your assigned task, submit your work to GitHub. In fact, once you finish every update to the project, submit the work via a push on GitHub. Don't worry. If you make a mistake, we can easily fix it. Think of this as a "track changes" edit to the group project file. I will review your work, accept as necessary, and provide feedback. If you have questions, please ask. If you have concerns, please voice. If you have suggestions, please suggest. Thank you.

i Review GitHub project and compile **on your computer**

Once you have submitted your work, review the GitHub project and compile the document on your computer. Doing this final step ensures that every member of the team can render the document. Rendering the document also means that everyone has their respective computer setup and configured appropriately, can use these tools, and has the wherewithall to navigate the text and code for a group project on Bayesian statistics.

i Ensure project lead can render the final report

Check with the project lead. Report any problems right away. The team's success depends upon each of us. Do your part. Be ready to help. Be ready to learn. Be ready to teach. Be ready to lead. Be ready to follow.

i Submit and celebrate!

The final project will be a group effort. We will collectively review the final project and rate our product. Our ratings will NOT be relevant to the course grades. The product may be limited for reasons beyond our control. What we can control is our effort. We

will do our best. We will learn. We will grow. We will celebrate. We will be happy.

2 Instructional Resources

The 2024 academic year brings some change to my previous format. Instead of focusing on the text and abiding by the author’s train of thought, I opted for a more efficient course that focuses on projects and “just in time” learning. You will need to read and if you are efficient, you may be able to read two texts in one semester. The requirement, however, is to read one of the following books:

2.1 OPTION 1: Gentler introduction to Bayesian statistics

Kurt, W. (2019). *Bayesian statistics the fun way: Understanding statistics and probability with Star Wars, Lego, and Rubber Ducks*. No Starch Press.

Kurt (2018) provides a thorough and accurate rundown of most Bayesian principles in an engaging style. I chose this book as one to replace my next and favorite book to enable students to better grasp the big picture rather than get bogged down in details. The reviews of Kurt’s book are quite favorable (see (Perezgonzalez 2020)). From my angle, there are pros and cons of relying on Kurt’s book as an introduction to Bayesian statistics.

i PROS and CONS of Kurt’s book

PROS 1. Gentle introduction to Bayesian statistics 2. Shorter weekly reading assignments 3. Engaging style 4. Covers most of the material in the course 5. Provides a good foundation for the more technical book

CONS 1. Does not delve into the technical details much 2. Longer weekly requirements for the assignments 3. Avoids the math that may be essential to your understanding 4. Lack of coding examples may be a problem for some

There are resources available for the book, including [code](#) and [notes from others](#). Please consult the [book’s website](#) for more information.

2.2 OPTION 2: A more technical introductory test

McElreath, R.M. (2020). **Statistical rethinking: A Bayesian course with examples in R and Stan, 2nd Ed.** Chapman & Hall/CRC Press. Boca Raton, FL. (ISBN: 978-0-429-02960-8)

McElreath (2020) gives us one of the most accessible, technical books on applied Bayesian analysis - all from a social scientist's perspective. He wrote an engaging book that digs deep enough into the material to give you some real insights but also pushes you to learn the code. For the mathematically oriented reader, you will be disappointed; the coders among us will enjoy his blend of conceptual and computational material. McElreath does not delve into the math, but he does provide a good foundation for the more technical books. The reviews of McElreath's book are beyond favorable (see (Kelter 2020)) and many of us have used his book for the past few years. So, if all the positive press and favorable reviews, why am I suggesting this book as my second of two? There are several reasons but to give you the bottom line, I think the book is too ambitious for a single semester course. Instead, I think Bayesian statistics ought to be a two-semester course that divides probability theory and programming into a first-semester course followed by this book. More on that later.

2.3 Course website

The [course website](#) contains tons of videos, links, and resources for the course. Slowly, I am transitioning away from Google Sites and towards this website and GitHub in general. Most of the links will be ported over here to the syllabus. The course website will remain active for the foreseeable future. Do use it.

3 Grading and Evaluation

3.1 COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Bayesian statistics requires you to learn many things but not all of you begin the course at the same stage of learning. Thus, I plan to create a collaborative learning environment that mimics the real world. We will all be part of a team and our job is to complete three projects. You will be assigned tasks to complete each week. Everyone will have a different task. The projects will be graded and the grades will be based on the quality of the work and the timeliness of the work.

3.1.1 Attendance (50%)

Yes, attend. You cannot learn if you do not attend the class sessions. Woody Allen once famously said “80% of success is showing up.” So why not make success your goal and show up. I offer you half of your grade is predicated on your attendance. Each day, I intend to take a picture of the participants at 9:10a. Please make every effort to attend and attend on time. Thank you.

3.1.2 Active Participation (25%)

Yes, participate. You cannot learn if you do not participate in the discussions and activities. So, given that you plan to attend, you might as well participate. I do intend to call on those who do not contribute often. We need to make this course more interactive. Please come prepared to talk about the material in the assigned readings.

3.1.3 Assignments (25%)

Each of you will have assigned duties for each project. The projects require you to work in one large group (entire class including me). Your responsibility is to complete the tasks you were assigned. If they are too burdensome at any point, it is **your** responsibility to communicate with the team. If you do not complete your tasks, you will not receive credit for the assignment and, as a result, the project will not be completed on time so the entire team suffers. Thus,

do your assigned task. All task assignments will be publicly made and recorded in the github repository.

3.2 GRADING

Final grades will be assigned according to the following percentages: $> 93\% = A$, $90 - 92\% = A-$, $87 - 89\% = B+$, $83 - 86\% = B$, $80 - 82\% = B-$, $70 - 79\% = C$, $60 - 69\% = D$, $< 60\% = F$ Note: A grade of C or lower denotes an unsatisfactory level of achievement for a graduate student.

4 Projects

Every year, I try to introduce something new into this course. Bayesian methods and tools change so rapidly that if I didn't change every semester, my students would never benefit. So, things change. Times change. And, I change. This semester, I am introducing a new approach to the course. I am going to ask you to do three projects as a single team (or multiple if the class size is sufficiently large). Each project will be a bit different but they will all have a common theme: **Bayesian Statistics**. I will provide some guidance and some resources but you will be responsible for the bulk of the work. My responsibility is to provide some structure and some scaffolding but you will be responsible for work product. Also, I intend to provide some feedback and suggestions to get the team unstuck.

4.1 The Three Projects Plan

I borrowed the idea of these projects from a published paper (Berg 2021) suggesting that a reasonable pedagogical approach to teaching Bayesian statistics is to use practical examples. We deviate a bit from his suggested topics but the idea remains.

4.2 The Projects

4.2.1 Project 1: Stein's Paradox

First, you must read. I suggest you begin with Bradley Efron and Carl Morris' (Efron and Morris 1977) excellent article in Scientific American. Another more detailed blog post (Antognini 2021) provides depth - perhaps more than you want or need. Second, you need to start thinking about the problem. Look at this resource: Keil et al. (2018) and Clark (2019) for some ideas about how to demonstrate the effect. We will tackle this problem with a variety of tools including (but not limited to) Python, R, Quarto, and Stan.

Project 1 Aims

Find, create, simulate, or imagine (and then simulate) a dataset that has repeated measures for at least three people. Compute the gain in accuracy and precision from using a shrunk estimator in predicting future scores.

4.2.2 Project 2: Measurement Error

Most of us think of measurement error as the result of a mistake (accident during data collection), omission (relevant variable, coherent model, range, etc.), or bias. Some of us know better. To capture the essence of what measurement error is (and is not), we shall undertake a deep dive into a simple measurement model. The actual data source will be revealed in time but the data represent a simple example of a common problem. We have XXX unique participant data who completed a measure that was administered across 8 or 16 vignettes.

But, in fact, measurement error is a fundamental part of the process of measurement. We will explore this idea in the context of a simple linear regression model. We will use the same tools as in Project 1.

Project 2 Aims

Analyze an existing data set to assess reliability and validity estimates. Our primary aim is to understand variance in all aspects of the measurement process. The tools required for this project are pretty advanced; I strongly encourage you to start using R/Python and Stan as soon as possible. I will provide some guidance but you will need to do some work on your own. Everyone will need to code something.

4.2.3 Project 3: Replicate a Published Study (or a portion of it)

The idea of replication is now embedded in our social science. My intent here is to involve you all in the reanalysis of an existing study. Instead, of simply replicating the published analyses, we will replicate the analysis using Bayesian methods. Furthermore, we will extend the analysis to include any and all relevant bits we learned throughout the semester. We will select the study to replicate as a class. Stay tuned for updates on the project details.

5 Academic Policies

5.1 EXAM & HOMEWORK POLICY

Without prior arrangement, there will be no extensions or make-ups without penalty except in instances such as the following:

- hospitalization or illness that has been documented and judged by your instructor as preventing you from a) preparing adequately for an exam or quiz or b) completing an assignment
- death or serious illness in your family
- court appearances
- religious observances

Documentation must be provided by health officials (e.g., a physician or member of the student health center staff) in the case of illness; an immediate family member in the case of death or serious illness in the family; and official paperwork in the case of court dates. Decisions regarding extensions and make-ups under these circumstances will be made on a case-by-case basis. In general, quizzes are not eligible for make-up work; instead, your two lowest quiz grades are automatically dropped. Lab homework is penalized at 5% per day for late submission (i.e., starting when lab time begins) and receives no credit if it is submitted over a week late. When possible, I encourage students to reach out as soon as you know that you may miss class and/or related work; it is much easier to develop a plan in advance than it is to do so later.

5.2 ACADEMIC INTEGRITY & HONOR CODE

All students in this course are to become familiar with and follow the University's honor code, which does not tolerate any form of cheating and attempted cheating, plagiarism, lying, and stealing. Exams and assignments are expected to be individual efforts unless otherwise noted by the instructor or teaching assistant. Violations of the GMU Honor Code can result in failure of an assignment or exam, depending on the severity of violation. All violations will be reported to the Honor Committee. The instructor for this course reserves the right to enter a failing grade to any student found guilty of an honor code violation. For more information on the Honor Code please [visit this webpage](#).

5.3 GENERATIVE-AI AND LARGE LANGUAGE MODELS

Use of Generative-AI tools should be used following the fundamental principles of the Honor Code. These principles include being honest about the use of these tools for submitted work. Cite your sources - including citations when using the work of others, whether individual people or Generative-AI tools. Students may use Generative AI tools whenever they believe it would be useful to their learning of course material. Students will be directed if and when citation or a statement-of-usage is required. All academic integrity violations will be reported to the office of Academic Integrity.

For many learning to program, the use of these tools can greatly speed up your learning; their use may also inhibit your growth. If you find “learning” easier with these tools, you may be missing out on the learning that comes from the struggle of learning to program. If you find yourself using these tools, you should consider whether you are using them to learn or to avoid learning. If you are using these tools to avoid learning, you should consider whether you are using them to avoid the struggle of learning. If you are using these tools to avoid the struggle of learning, you should consider the net effects of such avoidance.

Struggle to learn. Such struggles bear more fruit than merely accommodating me and my course requirements. The future you will thank me for keeping your focus.

5.4 ACCOMMODATION OF DISABILITIES

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. Note that this provision includes the range of disabilities, including physical, psychiatric, and learning disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first [visit here](#) for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with me. All academic accommodations must be arranged through Disability Services. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993 – 2474.

5.5 SEXUAL HARASSMENT, SEXUAL MISCONDUCT, AND INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE

As a faculty member and designated “Responsible Employee,” I am required to report all disclosures of sexual assault, interpersonal violence, and stalking to Mason’s Title IX Coordinator per university policy 1412. If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact the Student Support and Advocacy Center (703-380-1434) or Counseling and Psychological

Services (703-993-2380). You may also seek assistance from Mason's Title IX Coordinator (703-993-8730; titleix@gmu.edu).

5.6 STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

George Mason offers services to support students' academic and emotional development. Counseling and Psychological Services, located in SUB I room 3129 (caps.gmu.edu), offers workshops in academic skills, stress management training, and virtual counseling for students who would like some help with social, emotional, or educational concerns. Consider taking advantage of these resources if you need them. For additional information about other student support services offered, please visit the [Stearns Center Knowledge Center](#).

6 Technology Policies

6.1 Official Communications via GMU E-mail

Students must use their GMU email account to receive important University information, including communications related to this class. I will not respond to messages sent from or send messages to a non-Mason email address.

6.2 Class cancellation policy

Classes may be canceled by either the University or the Instructor (via email). In the event of a canceled class, the instructor will either switch to an online class modality, try to make up the material during other meetings of the class, or provide a supplementary assignment/video. If the instructor or university cancels class, the instructor will notify students via email.

6.3 Course Materials

Activities and assignments in this course will be made available to students through GitHub or other websites (e.g., Posit cloud). Students are required to have regular, reliable access to a computer with an updated operating system and a stable Internet connection suitable for online meetings, streaming videos, completing assignments, etc. Should your computing needs not be met during any portion of the course, please let me know.

6.4 Online Meetings

Although we are planning on having the class in person, things can change. In the event we need to pivot to an online class, then activities and assignments in this course will use Zoom. In addition to the requirements above, students are required to have a device with a functional microphone and camera to participate in these remote sessions. Please keep your camera on with your microphone muted (unless speaking, please).

6.5 Course Materials and Student Privacy

All course materials posted to Blackboard or other course site are private to this class; by federal law, any materials that identify specific students (via their name, voice, or image) must not be shared with anyone not enrolled in this class. Video recordings – whether made by instructors or students – of class meetings that include audio, visual, or textual information from other students are private and must not be shared outside the class. Live video conference meetings (e.g., Zoom) that include audio, textual, or visual information from other students must be viewed privately and not shared with others in your household or recorded and shared outside the class.

6.6 Programming Languages and Statistical Software

You will need to use both a programming language and statistical package of **your choice** to complete assignments in this course; most students use R but you may choose to use Python or any other language that can use Stan. The following are required for the course:

1. R (or Python) and RStudio (or Jupyter Notebook)
2. Stan
3. Git and GitHub

7 Tentative Schedule

Project	Wk	Date	Topic	Kurt (2019)	McElreath (2020)	Notes
1	1	1/15	Overview	c1-2	c1	Bring Computer Project 1 Intro
			Probability Theory			
1	2	1/22	Uncertainty	c3-4	c2	
1	3	1/29	Probability Distributions	c5-6	c3	
1	4	2/5	Bayes Theorem/Stan	c7-8	c4	
1	5	2/12	Priors & Causality	c9-10	c5-6	Big Week Project 2 Intro
2	6	2/19	Parameterization	c11-12	c7	
2	7	2/26	Estimation	c13-14	c8 & c15	or catch up
	8	3/4	SPRING BREAK!!	get ahead	get ahead	
2	9	3/11	Testing/MCMC	c15	c9	
2	10	3/18	Bayes Factor/Entropy	c16	c10	
3	11	3/25	Linear Models/Forecasting	c17	c11	Project 3 Intro
3	12	4/1	Inference	c18	c12	
3	13	4/8	Estimation to Inference	c19	c13	
3	14	4/15	Project Wrap-up			
3	15	4/22	Final touches			
		4/29	LAST DAY of Classes			

8 Week 1

Three points for this week

1. Course Overview
2. Learning Objectives (G.U.I.D.E. U.)
3. Probability theory

8.1 Course Overview

Review the syllabus.

- Antognini, Joe. 2021. “Understanding Stein’s Paradox.” <https://joe-antognini.github.io/machine-learning/steins-paradox>.
- Berg, Arthur. 2021. “Bayesian Modeling Competitions for the Classroom.” *Revista Colombiana de Estadística* 44 (2): 243252.
- Clark, Michael. 2019. “Michael Clark: Shrinkage in Mixed Effects Models,” May. <https://m-clark.github.io/posts/2019-05-14-shrinkage-in-mixed-models/>.
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- Keil, Alexander P., Eric J. Daza, Stephanie M. Engel, Jessie P. Buckley, and Jessie K. Edwards. 2018. “A Bayesian Approach to the g-Formula.” *Statistical Methods in Medical Research* 27 (10): 3183–3204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0962280217694665>.
- Kelter, Riko. 2020. “Statistical Rethinking: A Bayesian Course with Examples in r and STAN (2nd Ed.)” *Measurement: Interdisciplinary Research and Perspectives* 18 (4): 242–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15366367.2020.1742561>.
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- McElreath, Richard. 2020. *Statistical Rethinking: A Bayesian Course with Examples in R and STAN*. 2nd ed. Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Statistical-Rethinking-A-Bayesian-Course-with-Examples-in-R-and-STAN/McElreath/p/book/9780367139919>.
- Perezgonzalez, Jose D. 2020. “Book Review: Bayesian Statistics the Fun Way: Understanding Statistics and Probability with Star Wars, Lego, and Rubber Ducks.”
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