



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority

# **GCSE French**

*Review of standards 1996-2001*

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## Introduction

This review followed an earlier study into GCSE and GCE O level French examinations between 1976 and 1996.

Changes in GCSE French examinations between 1996 and 2001 were influenced above all by the introduction of the modern foreign languages National Curriculum Order in 1995, which meant that revised GCSE syllabuses were introduced for first examination in 1998. The revised GCSE criteria based on the Order required that responses to listening and reading tasks, and rubrics and instructions for all tasks, should be in French instead of English as they were in 1996. Other changes included:

- revised tiering arrangements
- permitted use of dictionaries in examinations
- introduction of coursework for assessing writing.

Between them, the syllabuses in this study attracted about 54 per cent of the 350,227 candidates who took GCSE French in 2001.

## Syllabus and examination demand

### Materials available

Reviewers considered syllabus booklets and assessment and support documentation relating to one syllabus per awarding body. AQA modular syllabus was included within the review, to provide a comparison of modular with linear syllabus provision. The syllabuses used are in Appendix A.

### Assessment objectives

The revised subject criteria meant that there was a change in the way the assessment objectives were realised through assessment. In both 1996 and 2001, there were four equally weighted assessment objectives: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The revised subject criteria meant that there was a change in the way the assessment objectives were realised through assessment. However, there was no fundamental change to the assessment objectives themselves, with four equally weighted assessment objectives equating to the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

### Target language rubrics and use of dictionaries

Different rules existed in 1996 and 2001 regarding the target language of questions and responses. The table below gives details of these differences.

<b>Use of dictionaries and target language questions and responses</b>		
	<b>1996</b>	<b>2001</b>
<b>Listening and reading</b>		
Question rubrics	English	French
Question responses	English	French and non-verbal responses (with up to 10 per cent allowance for responses in English)
Use of dictionaries	Not allowed	Allowed in reading papers. Use varied between awarding bodies for listening papers.
<b>Writing and speaking</b>		
Question rubrics	English	French with some English permitted in speaking
Question responses	French	French
Use of dictionaries	Not allowed	Allowed in writing papers and during the preparation for the speaking tests.

In 2001, most awarding bodies allowed the use of dictionaries at the beginning of listening papers and in some cases at the end, but not while the tape was playing. Edexcel did not permit dictionaries at all for listening.

While it may be argued that access to a dictionary makes examination tasks less demanding, reviewers felt the use of rubrics, instructions and questions and responses in French increased the difficulty of the examination in 2001.

### Scheme of assessment

Candidates took different papers and different numbers of papers in 1996 and 2001, as outlined in the table below.

<b>Available papers and their targeted grades</b>	
<b>1996</b>	<b>2001</b>

Papers	Targeted grades	Papers	Targeted grades
Four basic-level papers	G to D 4 points	Four foundation-tier papers	G to C 5 points
The above four basic-level papers, plus four higher-level papers	C to A 3 additional points	Four higher-tier papers	D to A* 3–8 points

OCR offered a slightly different structure in 1996, with the higher level split into two sections.

In 1996, candidates wishing to take a higher-level paper in a skill had to take the basic-level paper as well. In 2001, candidates chose between the higher- and foundation-tier papers for each skill. For candidates sitting foundation-tier papers in 2001, the changes meant that they were dealing with more demanding material than in 1996; for higher-tier candidates in 2001, there was material specifically targeted at A\*.

In addition to different schemes of assessment in 1996 and 2001, there were different rules for combining papers to give access to grades. In 2001, the grade outcome depended solely on the total number of points achieved, but candidates had to take papers in all four skills. In 1996 to obtain grades up to an E, candidates did not have to take a writing paper at all. To obtain a C they had to take all four skills and at least one higher tier paper. In practice, candidates aiming for the higher grades normally sat all eight papers, which was demanding in terms of overall assessment time.

### Coursework

Internally assessed coursework was not offered as an option for writing in 1996, although for most awarding bodies teachers could choose to assess their own candidates' speaking tests.

For the 2001 syllabus, coursework was permitted for up to 30 per cent of the examination and most awarding bodies offered writing coursework as an option against the writing examination. Edexcel also offered speaking coursework as an option against the speaking test. Some awarding bodies continued to allow the option of teacher-assessed speaking examinations.

### Summary of differences in assessment structure

Candidates aiming for the higher grades sat fewer examinations than in 1996. Examining time was reduced from about four hours in 1996 to about two and three quarter hours in 2001. However, all candidates still covered a range of questions targeted over a wide grade range. The introduction of compulsory writing made the overall examination more demanding for candidates aiming at the lower grades. The new points system in 2001 also meant that candidates had to score more points to achieve equivalent grades. For example, in 1996 a candidate could achieve a grade G with one point, ie scoring sufficient marks in one skill; whereas in 2001 a grade G required two points, ie scoring sufficient marks for one point in two skills or gaining two points from one skill.

### Modular assessment

AQA offered a modular syllabus which provided a different assessment pattern from the linear syllabuses. In 2001, the AQA modular syllabus offered four modules of assessment over two years. The modules offered a mixture of coursework and examination tasks across the assessment objectives. The module four examination was normally taken at the end of year 11, covering all four assessment objectives and counting for 50 per cent of the overall marks. The lack of time restraints in module 1, the opportunity to attempt more than one task, the lack of controlled conditions for the speaking and writing assessments in modules 1 and 3 and the overall structure of short-term assessments covering identified topics in modules 1, 2 and 3 were considered to make the structure of this syllabus less demanding.

## Subject content

In both 1996 and 2001, the subject content of the syllabuses comprised a list of grammar and structures, a closely defined list of topics and a related vocabulary list. Awarding bodies drew up their own content in both years but, as this was based closely on the criteria of the time, there was little difference across the syllabuses reviewed. The grammar and structures lists across years were very similar with no significant differences and all awarding bodies made it clear which structures were required at each level.

In 1996, the criteria required that some topics be designated for all levels and that higher-level papers cover additional topics. In 2001, the topics were linked to the national curriculum areas of experience: five broad topic areas with defined sub-topics. These areas of experience applied to both tiers. Most awarding bodies indicated tasks or areas within topics that would only be required at higher tier, but there was less difference between the tiers than between the previous basic and higher levels. National curriculum requirements introduced new topics such as the environment, world events and issues, and language in the workplace. The inclusion of topics such as these meant that there was sometimes a wider range of language in the texts and tasks in listening and reading papers than in texts presented in the 1996 papers, including more abstract language.

Although the length and scope of the vocabulary lists were similar in both years, the status of the lists changed between 1996 and 2001. In 1996, awarding bodies had to adhere closely to the lists when setting papers at both levels, and only a certain percentage of words outside the list was allowed in the papers. In 2001, awarding bodies produced a minimum core vocabulary list to guide teaching for the foundation tier. No list was required for the higher tier. Although in 2001 candidates at grade D and above were required to deal with some unfamiliar language, effectively most words used in the foundation-tier papers were in the list. Candidates also had access to a dictionary, which meant that unfamiliar words could be looked up, particularly in reading papers.

## Paper structure and level of difficulty

In 1996, most candidates sat eight separate papers. In 2001, the revised tiering arrangements meant that there were common tasks for candidates at grades C and D on all the papers, to ensure comparability of routes to a grade. The structure of the papers varied across awarding bodies with some, such as OCR, structuring the papers to have an incline of difficulty with a clearly separated overlap section. Others, such as Edexcel, preferred a 'peaks and troughs' approach with regard to difficulty, usually beginning and ending the paper with a relatively accessible task. Higher-tier papers from 2001 for reading and writing tended to be longer to allow more extended tasks. For the AQA modular syllabus, module 4 consisted of four foundation-tier papers and four higher-tier papers following the structure of the linear examinations with a wider variety of tasks than in the earlier modules 1 to 3.

## Changes in test type resulting from the introduction of questions in target language

The main difference in the examination tasks between 1996 and 2001 stemmed from the change to assessment through the target language and, in particular, the move away from assessing listening and reading comprehension in English.

## *Assessment of listening and reading*

In 1996, listening and reading papers consisted of short passages at basic level and longer passages at higher level, followed by a single question or series of questions in English requiring short or one-word answers in English. Very rarely were other test types used and even when they were they were still in English. Each text had a context printed on the paper and in some cases also recorded on the tape for listening, which often provided candidates with support and guidance to help them answer the questions. Questions on the basic-level papers were usually straightforward, but questions on the higher-level papers required candidates to use inference, draw conclusions and identify attitudes and opinions to answer the questions.

In 2001, awarding bodies used a range of test types in order to make listening and reading tasks in French accessible to all candidates and to minimise, particularly at the lower grade range, the requirement to write in French. The kinds of test types used were matching text to visuals, matching text to text, true/false exercises, multiple-choice tasks, note-taking and questions in French. At the higher tier, candidates were still required to use inference, draw conclusions and identify attitudes and opinions to respond to questions. In many papers, particularly at foundation tier, there were examples given in order to avoid the problem of candidates not understanding the rubric in French. While candidates had access to dictionaries, time constraints limited the use they could make of these, and they no longer had the support of contexts or carefully worded English questions to support them. Although the use of visuals, particularly at foundation tier, supported candidates' responses, overall in both listening and reading candidates had more French to read to deal with, beyond the texts themselves, in order to access the tasks.

However, although the tasks and questions in the target language seemed to be more demanding in 2001 than questions in English, there was a general increase in the use of objective test type questions. This increased the possibility of gaining correct marks randomly. The balance of objective test types (eg multiple-choice questions and true/false questions) and written answers in French varied across awarding bodies. All awarding bodies used the full allowance of questions in English permitted in the criteria (up to 20 per cent of the marks in listening and reading), but there were differences in where they were placed in the papers and what level of difficulty they were targeting.

### ***Assessment of writing***

In writing, the task outcomes in the examinations in 1996 and 2001 were similar at basic level and foundation tier across awarding bodies. However, the instructions for the tasks were in English in 1996 and in French in 2001. Candidates in both years usually had to write single words, short messages and a longer task, often a letter. The majority of marks in both years were for communication with a smaller proportion for the quality and accuracy of the language. The detail of the English instructions provided support for candidates, whereas, despite having access to a dictionary, candidates in 2001 had the added hurdle of working out exactly what they had to do from instructions in French. The last task on the foundation-tier papers in 2001 had to address the requirements for a grade C, and so required candidates to write in the past, present and future and to give an opinion. This meant that, for weaker candidates, this last task was more daunting than the longer task at the end of the basic-level papers in 1996. At higher tier in 2001, the writing paper started with the question targeted at grades C and D, usually the last task on the foundation-tier paper, and then required a second longer task in which candidates had to express points of view and opinions. The tasks in 1996 were often very structured, with some awarding bodies still using the picture essay, whereas the tasks in 2001 were often more open-ended. In both years, the higher papers awarded a higher proportion of marks for quality of language and accuracy. OCR alone gave more marks for accuracy and quality of language than communication or content.

### ***Assessment of speaking***

In speaking, the structure of the examination across awarding bodies was very similar in 1996 and 2001. All speaking examinations, including the examination for module 4 in the AQA modular syllabus, required one or two role-plays, followed by a more open-ended conversation task or tasks. In 1996, the role-play tasks were entirely in English; in 2001, except for CCEA, the stimuli for the tasks had become a mixture of French, English and visuals, with the higher-tier role-play almost entirely in French. The higher-tier role-plays in 2001, again except for CCEA, also required candidates to deal with unpredictable questions and were often less structured. Conversation tasks were very similar across the years, although the specific requirements at grades C and A for a range of time-frames and opinions meant that candidates were required to use a wide range of language, even at foundation tier. In 2001 there was more opportunity for candidate choice in topics for the conversation tasks, and in some cases candidates had the opportunity to make a presentation on a topic of their choice. Role-plays were usually marked for communication only,



although some higher-tier role-plays had additional marks for quality of language in 2001. For conversation tasks, the marks were usually equally balanced across the two criteria of communication/content and quality of language, including accuracy and range.

In the AQA modular syllabus in 2001, candidates produced two tapes with presentations about specific topics as part of the oral component. These tapes could be made in the examination centre or at home, and there was no limit to the amount of preparation or support in advance of making the tape for submission, nor was supervision required when the tapes were being recorded. Although a more traditional oral was required for module 4, these presentations counted for 10 per cent of the examination.

### **Assessment of coursework**

Apart from the option for teachers to assess their own candidates' speaking examinations, there was no coursework option in 1996. The introduction by 2001 of coursework, which most awarding bodies made available as an option for writing, brought French into line with most other GCSE subjects. CCEA, however, did not offer a coursework option. Most awarding bodies required candidates to produce three pieces of work from different topics with one-third of the work produced under controlled conditions. WJEC required all coursework to be produced under controlled conditions. Access to resources permitted under controlled conditions varied quite widely. For OCR, candidates could have access to a wide range of resources, including a textbook as well as a dictionary; for Edexcel, candidates could have access to brief notes and a dictionary; for WJEC, candidates could only have access to a dictionary. Rules regarding redrafting also varied, as did the requirement to submit any stimulus material with the finished coursework. In most cases, coursework tasks were set by the teacher, following guidance from the awarding body.

For the AQA modular syllabus, the 30 per cent allowance for coursework was spread across the skills. The reading and listening tasks in module 1 were carried out under controlled conditions in the classroom. Speaking was carried out via individual presentations as outlined above. The written coursework for module 3 was not required to be completed under controlled conditions and was limited in topic coverage.

### **Summary**

- The main reason for the changes made between 1996 and 2001 was the introduction of the national curriculum, which resulted in revised GCSE criteria and syllabuses for first examination in 1998.
- The assessment objectives and their weighting were unchanged and the demands of the content and grammatical structures remained similar.
- There were some variations in the interpretation of the criteria but the presentation and difficulty of papers across awarding bodies was similar overall.
- The length and structure of the OCR higher papers in both years appeared to make the examination somewhat more demanding than those of awarding bodies.
- The structure and conditions of assessment for the AQA modular syllabus made it less demanding than other syllabuses in 2001.
- Instructions and responses in French for all four skills increased the demand of examinations, particularly for candidates at foundation tier. This was partly balanced by allowing candidates use dictionaries in 2001.
- The changed tiering arrangements meant that higher-tier candidates in 2001 had a shorter overall examining time, but this did not reduce the demand of the examination.



- Writing was compulsory for foundation-tier candidates in 2001 and the papers contained material targeted at up to grade C, which made the examination more demanding, particularly for candidates aiming at the lower grades.
- The introduction by 2001 of written coursework for most awarding bodies provided centres with a wider range of options, and gave opportunities for candidates to write at length on a range of topics. Overall the demands and the general requirements of coursework, including the requirement for controlled conditions, did not make this a less demanding option in 2001, although there was some variation across awarding bodies.

Overall the reviewers felt that the changes to syllabuses between 1996 and 2001 had made little difference to the demands of the subject. This was less true of the foundation tier, where both the use of French in question papers and the inclusion of more demanding material had increased the difficulty. There remained some differences between the awarding bodies, with the OCR higher-tier question papers judged the most demanding and the AQA modular syllabus judged the least demanding.

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## Standards of performance at grades A, C and F

### Materials available

In this part of the review, the performance of a sample of candidates at each of the key boundaries A/B, C/D and F/G was analysed for both 1996 and 2001. Details of the materials used are given in Appendix B.

Candidate evidence was considered for listening, reading and writing responses. Speaking test evidence was not always available and was only considered where it existed in both groups being compared. There was time for only one candidate tape to be heard for each comparison, affecting the confidence with which these judgements were made. The inclusion or otherwise of coursework in some samples of work also made the comparisons difficult.

Descriptors for grades A, C and F were developed based on the published grade descriptions for 1996 and 2001, adapted to reflect the borderline nature of the candidate evidence. Details of the descriptors can be found in Appendix C.

### Analysis of performance at grade A

In listening and reading, the standard of performance at grade A was very similar across the two years. In 1996 and 2001 candidates were able to respond to relatively long and complex texts, although in 2001 the range of topics was wider and candidates often had to deal with quite complex tasks. In both years candidates were able to identify attitudes and points of view and to draw conclusions. There were more unanswered questions in 2001, which may be explained by the targeting of some questions at A\*.

In writing, in both years, although some of the scripts reviewed did not match the performance descriptor for grade A, particularly in terms of accuracy and security in using different tenses, most did and candidates were able to use a range of language and to express and justify opinions. Access to dictionaries in the writing examination did not affect performance. The coursework submitted by OCR candidates in 2001 included more complex language and a much wider range of vocabulary and structures than seen in the examination performance of other candidates. The writing was also less formulaic and more personal than the language produced under examination conditions.

In speaking, the grade A candidates in 2001 were stronger than those in 1996, using a wider range of language more fluently. In general, 2001 candidates were able to take part in role-plays, including unpredictable elements, with some confidence. In conversation tasks, they were able to give a lot of information and to express and justify points of view. Overall candidates matched the performance descriptor at grade A.

### Analysis of performance at grade C

In listening and reading, standards of performance achieved in 1996 and 2001 were very similar. Candidates were able to identify and extract details from language covering a range of topics. Candidates were able to identify some opinions where questions, in English or French, solicited such a response. However, in 2001 candidates were able to respond to a wider range of language and topics than in 1996. Candidates achieving a C on the foundation-tier papers often achieved a lower standard in these questions than candidates at the higher tier who also obtained marks in questions targeted above grade C.

In writing, the standards over the two years were very similar. Candidates were able to produce substantial sequences of language across different topics and sometimes gave simple opinions. Although there was more evidence of tense usage in 2001, this was not always secure and accuracy was very variable. There was some evidence that 2001 candidates did not always fulfil

the task set through misunderstanding the instructions or stimulus in French. In 2001, candidates from OCR who submitted coursework in writing produced a wider range of language with a higher level of accuracy, and reached the performance descriptions more consistently, than the candidates who sat an examination.

In speaking, the comparison over time for Edexcel candidates suggested that those in 2001 were more responsive and able to give more unprompted information than those in 1996. Across the awarding bodies for which tapes were reviewed at grade C, candidates in both years were able to take part in role-plays and to give quite a lot of information about themselves in the conversation tasks. They were not always able to deal with unpredictable elements. They were sometimes able to use different tenses, although not always accurately, and to give simple opinions.

Overall, reviewers found that the standard of performance across the skills to achieve a foundation-tier grade C was lower than that for a grade C at higher tier.

Access to dictionaries in the examination in 2001 did not affect performance.

### **Analysis of performance at grade F**

Performance in listening and reading was very similar across the two years. Candidates in both years were able to extract detail and identify simple language across a range of topics. The support of the English contexts and closely focused English questions in 1996 helped candidates in identifying a wider range of language. There was occasional evidence in 2001 that candidates at this level misunderstood the rubrics in French. There was no evidence to suggest that access to dictionaries made the papers more accessible. It was noted that candidates left fewer gaps on the papers in 1996, but those papers were only targeted up to grade D and not up to grade C as in 2001. However, in 2001 it also appeared that some candidates picked up random marks on the multiple choice questions targeted at higher grades.

In writing, the standard of performance was similar in both years with candidates producing mostly single words with some phrases and sentences. There was also some evidence of poor dictionary use. OCR candidates in 2001 who submitted coursework showed more control over language and produced longer sequences than candidates taking external examinations.

There was little difference in standards of performance in speaking over time. Candidates mostly coped with simple role-plays and were able to give information about themselves in the conversation tasks, although this often required support and prompting from the teacher examiner.

### **Summary**

- At grade A, performance in listening and reading across the two years was similar, and in speaking the candidates in 2001 clearly met the performance descriptions. Performance in writing was more variable, with some candidates not meeting the descriptions in 1996 or 2001, although most were able to write accurately using a range of language.
- At grade C, the standard of performance in listening, reading and writing was similar overall in 1996 and 2001, but from the limited evidence available the standard of performance in speaking appeared higher in 2001.
- At grade F, the standard of performance between 1996 and 2001 was largely comparable and in both years met the performance descriptors.
- At grade C in 2001, there was a higher standard of performance from candidates at higher tier than at foundation tier.

- The introduction of coursework provided opportunities for candidates to undertake a wider range of writing tasks and to produce more varied and accurate language. The standard of writing in coursework was judged higher than that shown under examination conditions.
- Access to dictionaries did not noticeably raise the standard of performance and in fact affected it adversely in writing at grade F.
- The use of French instructions and responses was sometimes a barrier to candidates' performance, particularly at the lower grade range and in writing.
- Performance across the awarding bodies was broadly comparable although at all three grades the written coursework from OCR candidates was considered better than the written performance seen from the other awarding bodies.

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## Appendix A: Materials used in the syllabus review

Year	Awarding body and syllabus[surely just "Awarding body"?]				
1996	ULEAC	SEG	MEG	NISEAC	WJEC
2001	Edexcel	AQA	OCR	CCEA	WJEC

All syllabuses were linear in structure, apart from the SEG/AQA syllabus which provided an example of a modular structure.

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## Appendix B: Scripts used in the script review

Key boundaries analysed							
ULEAC/Edexcel		MEG/OCR		NISEAC/CCEA		WJEC	
1996	2001	1996	2001	1996	2001	1996	2001
A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
C	C(H)	C	C(H)	C	C(H)		
	C(F)		C(F)				
F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F

Candidate evidence for OCR in 2001 contained coursework evidence for writing as the larger option entry for this syllabus.

Speaking test evidence was only available for ULEAC for 1996 and Edexcel, OCR and WJEC for 2001.

C(H) represents work of grade C candidates completing all four higher-tier papers. C(F) represents grade C candidates completing all four foundation-tier papers.

## Appendix C: Performance descriptors used in the script review

Descriptors were developed for the review on the basis of a comparison of the published grade descriptors for 1996 and 2001, with adaptations to reflect the minimum performance required to achieve the grades. The following descriptors describe the minimum performance expected to achieve grades F, C and A in the four assessment objectives. These descriptors were used to judge performance across the two years.

### Grade A

In listening, candidates understand gist and identify most main points and details in a variety of types of authentic spoken language. They recognise points of view, attitudes and emotions and begin to draw conclusions.

In speaking, candidates initiate and carry through transactions, take part in conversations and narrate events. They begin to express and justify points of view and produce some longer sequences of speech using a variety of vocabulary, structures and verb tenses. They speak quite confidently with mostly good pronunciation and intonation. The message is clear, although there will still be some errors, especially when candidates use more complex structures.

In reading, candidates understand gist and identify most main points and details in a variety of types of authentic text. They recognise points of view, attitudes and emotions and begin to draw conclusions. They can extract some meaning from more complex language.

In writing, candidates give factual information, narrate events and begin to express and justify ideas and points of view. They produce longer sequences using a range of vocabulary, structure and verb tenses. Their spelling and grammar are generally accurate although there will still be some errors, especially when candidates use more complex structures. Their style is mostly appropriate to the purpose.

### Grade C

In listening, candidates identify and note main points and extract most details from language spoken at normal speed. They begin to identify points of view. The spoken texts with which they can cope will include some longer extracts, and may include past, present and future events drawn from a variety of topics.

In speaking, candidates undertake transactions and develop conversations which include past, present and future events, including some use of different tenses. They begin to express personal opinions and to deal with some unpredictable elements. Although there are some errors, the message conveyed is mostly clear. Pronunciation and intonation are generally accurate, with some inconsistencies.

In reading, candidates identify and extract details from a range of texts drawn from a variety of topics, which include past, present and future events. They begin to identify points of view and to deal with some unfamiliar language.

In writing, candidates write about a variety of topics, including past, present and future events and involving some use of different tenses. They begin to express personal opinions in letters or similar tasks. The style is basic but despite errors the message is mostly clear.

### Grade F

In listening, candidates identify and note some main points and extract some details from short extracts of simple language in a limited range of contexts spoken clearly at near-normal speed.

In speaking, candidates take part in simple transactions and conversations, beginning to show some ability to substitute words and phrases. Their pronunciation is mostly intelligible if not always consistent. Although there are grammatical inaccuracies, most points of the required messages are



communicated and candidates are able to respond, even if briefly, to straightforward questions in unprepared conversation.

In reading, candidates identify some main points and extract some information from short, simple texts from a limited range of contexts.

In writing, candidates write single words and short sentences. They may respond to written stimulus material by substituting words and set phrases. Although there will be mistakes in spelling and grammar some of the main points required in the task(s) will be communicated.

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