

Copywriting – a beginner's guide

(Exercise One – think of a better title)

To Emma Woodhall and the late Patrick Quinn. Because the former stood me up one morning in 1989 I went and bought a book by the latter entitled 'The Secrets Of Successful Copywriting'. I'm forever in their debt.

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Introduction

There's a tradition in American politics that every outgoing president leaves a letter in the Oval Office desk for their successor.

The letter isn't about policy or what should be done about this or that problem. Instead it's about the nature of the office, what it feels like to hold the loneliest job in politics and how to handle situations that are sure to arise.

This document is written in the same spirit. Although it contains technical advice it's not primarily a 'How to' guide as plenty of good examples of these already exist. Instead it's intended to give a feel for the nature of the job and the advertising industry in general. It's the stuff that I wish I'd known when I started and which is not taught in books and on college courses.

I hope this document will give you a sense of whether the industry's right for you.

Paul Slamin

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What Would Bill Say?

There's a story in 'Think Small' – a great little book published in 2011 about the 1959 ad for the VW Beetle that's regarded to this day as the most important in the industry's history – about why the creatives at DDB (Doyle Dane Bernbach) never worried about awards.

Quite simply, they knew that their boss, Bill Bernbach, was far superior to any of the other creative directors in New York and therefore getting him to approve an ad was much tougher than impressing the jurors at awards ceremonies.

And they were right. DDB's creative department cleaned up at award shows throughout the fifties and sixties not only for its work on VW but across all its accounts whether big (Avis, El Al airline) or small (Ohrbach's clothing stores, Levy's bakery). Moreover, many of the creatives who worked there such as Helmut Krone (the greatest art director of his era), Mary Wells (the most successful woman in the history of the advertising industry) and Bob Levenson (who is regarded by many as the greatest copywriter of all time) went on to be legendary industry figures.

You'd be forgiven for imagining at this point that Bill Bernbach was an uber-cool, lady killing Mad Man whose creative genius was allied to a chaotic private life.

In reality, Mrs Bernbach always ensured that her husband's tie was properly done up and his handkerchief straight in his breast pocket before he left each morning. And she never had to worry about his eye wandering. Born in 1911 in the Bronx to a respectable Jewish family, Bill Bernbach was a solid family man who returned straight home to his wife and children after work each evening rather than hang around the bars and restaurants surrounding Madison Avenue like so many others. And he was no looker; few women would've given this short, middle-aged man a second glance unless they knew him by reputation.

Yet he was to the history of advertising what Mark Zuckerberg is to social media. Of course the industry existed before him but he was the guy who changed it irreversibly.

Although it now seems inconceivable that the role of humour in advertising could ever have been doubted, the industry's attitude throughout the 1950's was encapsulated by David Ogilvy (the founder of Ogilvy & Mather) who insisted, "Nobody buys from a clown." In fairness to Ogilvy, he later recognised how wrong he'd been but it nevertheless remains true that he probably wouldn't have changed his attitude if it hadn't been for the Creative Revolution* that Bernbach pioneered.

The work DDB did in the 60's was characterised by humanity and wit, always crediting the public with intelligence. Perhaps the greatest example of these principles is 'Lemon'. This was the one word headline underneath a picture of a Beetle for the ad that followed 'Think Small'. Unless the reader was curious enough to read the body copy (the term for the words in an ad excluding the headline and legal copy) they could turn the page thinking that VW didn't think much of their own product. But Bernbach calculated correctly and people not only read it but talked and wrote about it. Most importantly, Beetle sales started to sharply rise with the car going on to become the biggest selling vehicle of all time.

It wasn't just the work that Bernbach revolutionised either. He also fundamentally changed how the industry works by putting copywriters and art directors together in teams. In the fifties, the floor that you worked on reflected your status in the big agencies on Madison Avenue. Art directors, as the lowest of the low, were on the ground floor. Copywriters, by dint of being more literary and therefore regarded as more educated were on the first floor with the upper floors occupied by account men, social scientists and admin staff and senior management at the summit on the top floor. Copywriters would come up with the concepts and copy and then slide them under the door of the art department to be worked up. Bernbach recognised the absurdity of this way of working and, when he set up his own agency with account men Ned Doyle and Maxwell Dane, hired the most talented writers and art directors and put them together. To this day it remains how creative departments around the world are organised.

So the next time you come up with an idea for an ad or campaign ask yourself one question. How would I feel about showing it to Bill Bernbach?

** This is the term given to the period stretching from 1959 when the VW campaign broke to the early 70's before the oil crisis tipped the American economy into recession. It was during this time that the ad industry in both New York and London underwent irreversible change, with staid large agencies being challenged by young agencies (such as DDB, Wells Rich Greene and Jerry Della Femina & Partners in New York and the legendary CDP in London) that had no interest in doing work that patronised consumers but instead credited them with intelligence and a sense of humour.*

Exercise Two – write the story of Little Red Riding Hood for *The Sun* and *Good Housekeeping*. * (Tip: *The Sun* report should be written as if the events happened yesterday. For the *Good Housekeeping* article you can assume readers are familiar with the facts and your piece should be about putting it into the context of their lives) *The credit for this exercise goes to Tony Cullingham, Course Director of West Herts. College Creative Advertising Course, whom the author studied under.

The Idea, The Idea, The Idea

A bloke in a gorilla suit plays the drums to 'In the air tonight'.

Lots of brightly coloured balls bounce down a street in San Francisco.

Car parts laid across a room strike each other until a ramp is tipped and a car slides off.

Can you see those commercials in your mind's eye? Do you know what they were for?

I'm guessing the answer to both questions is a resounding yes in one or more cases. Yet they haven't been on air for years.

No wonder that the phrase 'The Idea, The Idea, The Idea' can be heard every day in creative departments around the world. The central truth of the advertising industry is that every ad, whether a big budget TVC or a quarter page local press ad, ultimately stands and falls on the quality of the idea. It's the idea that determines whether people connect with it, whether they

remember it and whether ultimately, they respond to it. Of course the execution's important and many a great idea has been killed by lousy copy and art direction but no member of the public ever sat in a pub and said, "Have you seen that ad with the great layout?"

Now take another look at those descriptions. Notice how each fits on to one line. In each case, the idea is inspired without being tricky (clever, clever). And each is memorable and relevant in equal measure.

The other thing they have in common is that they are all rooted in truth. Both Balls and Cog are, in their different ways, product demonstrations whereas Gorilla is purely about the emotion that using the product evokes (joy). In all three cases though the idea is rooted in a truth that the creative team have then stretched and had fun with.

In spite of the popular image of the adman as being somebody who cunningly pulls psychological levers to sell the unnecessary to the undisciplined, the reality is that advertising is no different from any other form of communication. People instinctively know when something is true and when it isn't. You can't fool any of the people any of the time.

"The truth well told" as Harrison King McCann, founder of McCann-Erickson, elegantly put it a century ago. And those words will be equally true in another century's time.

The Execution

“Ever wondered what the snowplough driver drives to work?”
(Voiceover at end of 1969 TVC for Volkswagen Beetle)

You can, like, so tell who's not an Economist reader. (Poster)

Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success. (ad in The Times by Sir Ernest Shackleton for South Pole expedition)

Avis is only No.2. We Try Harder.

Simples.

It's a truism that although a great idea can be killed by poor execution, great execution can never save a poor idea.

All the above examples show the magic that results on those rare and happy occasions when a great idea is done justice by great execution. Were you to try and improve any of them you'd find it a fruitless exercise. Every word is there for a reason and, in the last example, every letter. And it's not just the words that are right.

Watch the VW Beetle TVC on You Tube a few times (type in VW Beetle snowplough commercial) and you'll realise that great care was taken with every element of it, from the choice of location to the voiceover artist.

It's impossible to read the Economist poster without imagining a teenage girl saying it, creating a funny visual in the reader's mind and thereby being truly interactive.

Sir Ernest Shackleton's recruitment ad is striking for its honesty and worked brilliantly, rubbing the theory that ads should never be negative (Marmite. You either love it or hate it.) that regrettably still persists.

Avis's strapline combines honesty with underdog tenacity to make you instinctively on their side and provided the foundation for many brilliant ads (within a few years Hertz felt compelled to run a double page spread headlined 'There's a reason why Avis are No.2').

And the Compare the Market strapline is complemented brilliantly by the noise that Aleksandr makes after he says it.

To the casual reader or viewer they all just appear right. And yet you can be sure that in each case talent and a lot of hard thinking went into their creation. The idea will always be more important than the execution but that doesn't mean every part of the execution, no matter how small, isn't important.

Exercise Three – Write a strapline for your favourite product or service (a strapline is the line that normally sits under the logo and encapsulates the product or service e.g. McDonalds – I'm lovin' it; Mercedes-Benz – The Best Or Nothing; Nike – Just Do It)

The Graph

Sometimes I crack a brief within a short while of getting it. Not often though. More usually what I find is that, regardless of the nature of the brief, I tend to go through set stages.

The first of these is feeling excited about the opportunities the brief gives to do great work. I then think about concepts and my enthusiasm starts to be tempered with frustration that I'm not coming up with anything except first thought clichés.* Then it gets worse as time drags on and I still haven't got anything. Having started with high hopes I'm now sinking into despair, convinced that I've lost whatever talent I may once have possessed so soon after being given this dream brief.

Finally an idea emerges which isn't the worst I've ever had. I'm pleased and relieved, happy that I've got something decent to present. But not very deep down I know it isn't right. So I put it to one side and continue but with renewed confidence. Suddenly ideas start to come more easily, each better than the last until finally an idea pops into my head unbidden that I know is strong creatively and strategically.

I then take care to get every part of the presentation right, not just the visuals (this term encompasses everything on the boards including the headline and any other copy), but how I'm going to present it.

This will typically include writing a creative rationale, thinking about the points I want to make and the one overall message I want the client to take out, any objections that the client might make and how I'll overcome them, what my opening line will be and even what to wear to the presentation. Only by doing so can I give myself the best chance of success.

Finally, when I'm about to walk into the presentation I'm confident that what I'm about to show is good and that if it were my money I'd run it, the true test of whether you believe in your work. And I'm as excited as I was the moment I first started working on the brief.

**It's for this reason many young creatives like to switch on their Macs and look for inspiration on You Tube or play table football (many agency creative departments have them) rather than face the blank sheet of A3. And if you want to be mediocre (most people do) there's nothing wrong with that. But if you want to do great work you need to be prepared to spend much more time staring into space and thinking hard. Not pretend hard. Not look how hard I've worked with my pages full of words hard. But really hard, continuously rejecting your own ideas until you get to something good. It's what I call 'The Power Of Negative Thinking' and, even if you're a genius, it's the only way that you'll progress. In fact, it's the way that geniuses become geniuses.*

I copywriter, take thee art director

Given that creative teams spend more waking hours together during the working week than with their partners, it's often referred to as 'the other marriage'.

There's another important similarity as well. Just as it's off-putting to see a couple that wear identical outfits, so your art director shouldn't be a magic marker version of yourself. You should share the same creative standards (high), understand each other's perspectives and like each other, but no more than that.

Ideally you should team up with someone talented who thinks differently to you and has complementary skills. I worked successfully for six years with an art director who wasn't strong conceptually but was great at taking my ideas and making them sing. By each of us doing what the other couldn't we consistently produced good work and learnt a lot from each other.

Sure, we had our moments when we disagreed about the work but these were always in the context of a relationship based on mutual respect. And it wouldn't have been much of a marriage if it hadn't had its moments.

Exercise Four – Write a strapline for your least favourite product or service

Media Schmedia

Do you do the John Lewis/Meerkat/Specsaver/ ads then?

Whenever I've been asked this by somebody who doesn't work in advertising, I've imagined a small room in which myself and a few others write all the popular TV commercials. We have a laugh, write scripts when we can be bothered to and knock off at three to the pub.

The interesting thing to me is that it's only ever TV commercials that people ask if I've written. Never radio, posters or print. And no, not digital either.

TV is still king and probably will be for a long time to come. But don't be fooled into thinking that it's the best media creatively to work on.

That honour will always go to posters for the simple reason that they have to work more quickly than any other media and, as such, are the truest test of your ability. Eight words and one visual is the old rule of thumb and ideally you want to aim for no more than five words.

To come up with an idea that fulfils those strict criteria and does so in a way that's relevant, memorable and effective is hard. And if you do a poster that isn't good (and 99% aren't), their size and the fact they're generally positioned where the greatest number of people will see them will result in you keeping your head down as you walk past.

Print (the generic term for newspapers, magazines and direct mail) isn't as tough because, you've guessed it, you've got more time with people. However, it does present a different problem in that nobody (apart from ad folk, clients and their relatives) buys a paper or magazine for the ads. Likewise, direct mail is generally unwelcome in most homes. This is illustrated by research that shows people read print ads with a lower level of concentration than editorial content in paid for publications and less concentration still in free media (free papers and direct mail). So once yourself and your art director have cracked the idea for a print ad it will be your responsibility to make sure that every sentence of the body copy is interesting and every word is there for a reason. With regards to DM, one pitfall to avoid is ending up with lots of elements (elements are such things as envelope, letter, leaflet/brochure, vouchers, order form, competition entry form etc.) that bear little or no relation to each other. DM, no less than a poster, should say one thing well with the reader left in no doubt as to what the message is. Too often this test is failed due to the greater number of elements making for a greater number of internal meetings with more people having a say in the final sign off.

Radio, as the saying goes, has the best pictures. If only this were true. Most radio commercials are awful for two reasons.

Firstly, because writing a great radio ad is almost as difficult as creating a great poster. Hence why people tend to fall back on cliched conventions such as phone conversations and jingles. Secondly, and most importantly, there is much less money in making radio commercials than TVCs. As such, agencies can't justify charging a senior copywriter's hourly rate for a radio script when they could be using them to write TV. Therefore, the work gets given to junior writers who lack the experience necessary to consistently produce great work in such a difficult media. Of course, the flip side of this is that if you can write a great radio script it will stand a good chance of winning an award and help to establish your reputation.

With regards to television, it's only glamorous if the script is good. By this I mean that if you've written a mediocre script (or the client and/or research has made your good script mediocre) then it's impossible to find the shoot exciting, particularly as TV shoots tend to involve a lot of time standing around waiting for not very much to happen. However, if you and your art director have got a great script approved by the client the shoot will be fun, particularly as the cast and crew will sense that what they're doing is good and try that little bit harder and make suggestions, which in itself is always a good sign. One useful tip for writing TVC scripts is to always include things that the viewer will only pick up on repeat viewings and, in this regard, a good director is invaluable. In fact, the director will be central to the success of the commercial and should always be chosen with care.

As for the new kid on the block, the internet and social media are in creative terms at the same stage that TV commercials were in the mid-fifties and early sixties, i.e. infancy. Just as the earliest TVCs were essentially visual versions of radio commercials, so even the best current online work is obviously the product of minds that were shaped before the internet was invented. It will probably take the generation born in the noughties to get into the industry before digital work grows up.

However, it is worth bearing in mind that the architecture of the internet is based on servers sharing information. As such, it is as feminine a media as posters are masculine with the most effective work giving a truly personalised experience. Hence the rapid rise of augmented reality apps.

Whatever media you find yourself working on though, don't attach too much importance to it. A great ad for a small company in a local paper will always be better to have in your book than a DFS commercial that's first in centre break of Coronation Street, the most expensive UK advertising spot. And no. I've never done a John Lewis/Meerkat/Specsaver ad.

Exercise Five – Spend a working day without once interrupting anybody. While listening, concentrate on what's being said and don't think of what you're going to say after.

The Good, The Sad And The Ugly (these things will happen)

The Good

The moment you crack a brief (you always know when it happens)

The one or two occasions a year that you get good work through

The one or two occasions in your career that you hear a member of the public telling a friend how much they love an ad you've done

Learning about so many different industries that you would otherwise never know about

Working late nights and weekends on pitches

Account managers who will fight for good work

Finding out that a campaign has out-performed all client expectations

Winning awards

The feeling when you know during a presentation or shoot that it's going well

Research uncovering an invaluable insight

Photographers/directors who make good suggestions about how a shot/script can be improved

Briefing an artworker clearly about what you want and they then do a great job

Working with bright, optimistic people

A good idea popping into your head while making the bed

The Sad

Losing a good account because of a change of marketing director at the client company

People forgetting that brand guidelines are guidelines and not rules

Anal clients/account people saying, “You can’t start a sentence with And”

Finding out that a campaign hasn’t performed as well as you expected

Research findings not being analysed properly

Photographers who require detailed instructions

Briefing an artworker and when you get the work back thinking you either explained it badly or they didn’t listen

Working with people for whom advertising is just a job

Thinking of ideas in bed

The Ugly

Chairman's Wife syndrome - this refers to when the client insists on something awful appearing in an ad.

You/a colleague getting fired because somebody is frightened of your/their ability

Losing a pitch and later seeing the agency that won doing dull work for the client

Losing a pitch for a reason that you literally could never have thought of

Research being used as a substitute for judgement

People who fancy themselves creative and show it by doing tiresome things such as frame a photo with their hands

Briefing an artworker who you know is going to make a hash of the job and then does

Working for a coke head/megalomaniac

Thinking of ideas in bed with someone else

Do's

Hit every deadline

Think from the consumer's perspective

Think about why this product/service exists

Think about the emotions it evokes

Read the brief twice before you open your layout pad and again after working on concepts for a while

Read it again before you write body copy and afterwards

Think about every word

Ask questions

Write a creative rationale for every presentation

Diplomatically disagree with account handlers and clients

Learn about production and proofing symbols

Read the Economist

Study the history of Coke's advertising

Study awards annuals

Believe in yourself. And don't. Simultaneously.

Credit the public with intelligence

Expect to have a very interesting career.

Don'ts

Ever miss a deadline. Ever.

Think your first thoughts are great

Think that there are good briefs and bad briefs to work on

Listen to an MP3 player while working

Watch You Tube for 'inspiration'

Ever give up until you've cracked it

Ever argue with account handlers and clients

Ever, ever, ever nick somebody else's idea

Waste the reader's/listener's/viewer's time

Stop questioning

Be late for meetings

Go home without having done your timesheet and written everything to do tomorrow

Get involved in agency politics

Cast a model when you need an actor

Do coke

Obsess about winning awards

Fancy yourself any more talented than anyone else (and that includes the cleaner)

Think that the public failed to understand the genius at the heart of your campaign. They got it and just weren't impressed.

Expect it to be easy

If I Was Starting Out Now...

I'm not sure I would.

Advertising today is a less interesting and enjoyable industry to work in than when I began in the early nineties (and that was just after the glory days had ended). Generally speaking, agency people today are of a lower calibre, clients are less sophisticated and the work more risk averse.

These problems would all be manageable it wasn't for three related difficulties.

Firstly, the growth of globalisation means many campaigns nowadays for large companies aren't local (the confusing term for national) but regional (e.g. EMEA ((Europe Middle East Africa))) which, from a copywriting perspective, has two unfortunate consequences. Principally, the potential for having fun with language is limited to the point of being non-existent when working on a campaign that will run in multiple markets. Moreover, you will often find your carefully crafted copy gets taken apart by people who have English as a second language or who object on the grounds that what you've written (whether in English or translated into their language) doesn't apply in their country (sometimes they're right, sometimes they object because they don't like work being imposed from head office). Hence the rise of the visual metaphor as the advertising industry's favourite creative technique.

Secondly, the internet is now with us. With no barriers to entry online, everyone can participate and does. As democratising as this unquestionably is in terms of people being able to talk to each other like never before (think Tahir Square protesters organising on social media), it's a mixed blessing from a creative perspective. Whereas historically the creative industries have deliberately made entry very difficult in order to deter the mediocre, nowadays everyone can have an online presence. This in turn has led to problems ranging from third-rate clients asking for 'something that will go viral' to companies that have an illustrious advertising history suddenly wanting to be in every channel regardless of whether it's appropriate. The internet may indeed be the future but at the moment it's often uninteresting creatively, illustrated by the preponderance of brochure sites (the term for company websites that are no more than an electronic version of their printed brochure).

Thirdly, far more people are involved in the advertising process nowadays. 'Two Housewives In Croydon' syndrome (refers to a mythical focus group in which two housewives say something that results in a great campaign never running) has always been part of advertising life. However, it's exacerbated nowadays by the fact that clients employ many more people in their marketing departments than they did thirty years ago. Likewise, agencies employ more staff in their account management departments (the percentage employed in creative departments is correspondingly lower) to manage all the people on the client side. And to cap it all clients now work with more types of agencies (traditional advertising and direct marketing agencies have now been joined by digital agencies, data mining agencies, experiential agencies etc.).

Little wonder that most good work now fails to see the light of day.

However, while all of the above is true (any experienced advertising person would confirm it) it doesn't follow that advertising is now too dull to be worth going into. It's still interesting and enjoyable, just less so than it was. Therefore, if I was starting out I would look for a part of the world where the industry isn't mature and the economy is growing. The BRIC countries. Latin America. South Africa. The Middle East. Those are the kinds of places where you can get work (there's always a demand for British copywriters as English is the global business language and the UK is still regarded as the world leader in advertising). If your heart is set on working in London though, you will need to either have an exceptional book or do something that brings you to everyone's attention. And if you can't do one of those then you are either not trying hard enough or simply not suited to creative work.

As for me I think I'd be inclined to go into something less conservative, although quite what that would be I'm not sure.

Who am I kidding? I'd go into advertising every time.

Exercise Six – Create a poster concept for a retailer who has everything for the home. The headline must be no longer than eight words and the visual must not show any products or services nor any staff or customers.

What Bill Said:

“A principle isn’t a principle until it costs you money.”

“We are so busy measuring public opinion that we forget we can mould it.
We are so busy listening to statistics we can forget we can create them.”

“Be provocative. But be sure your provocativeness stems from your product. You are not right if in your ad you stand a man on his head just to get attention. You are right if you have him on his head to show how your product keeps things from falling out of his pockets.”

“The truth isn’t the truth until people believe you, and they can’t believe you if they don’t know what you’re saying, and they can’t know what you’re saying if they don’t listen to you, and they won’t listen to you if you’re not interesting, and you won’t be interesting unless you say things imaginatively, originally, freshly.”

“An idea can turn to dust or magic depending on the talent that rubs against it.”

“The great mistakes are made when we feel we are beyond questioning”

What Lesser Figures Said:

'In the factory, we make cosmetics. In the department store, we sell hope.' *Charles Revson, founder of Revlon cosmetics.*

'Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted. The trouble is I don't know which half.' *This is attributed to Lord Leverhulme in the UK, an American department store owner in the US, a French businessman in France etc.*

'The consumer isn't a moron. She's your wife.' *David Ogilvy*

"I used to think advertising people were shallow. Now I realise the truth is more subtle. You people think very deeply about the shallow stuff." *Anonymous client talking to an account manager*

Exercise Seven – Describe your favourite concept for Exercise Six out loud. If it sounds complicated bin it and repeat the process until you get something strong and simple.

Exercise Eight – Given that good is the enemy of great, is your idea merely good? If so, bin it and work until you get to great.

Recommended Reading

The Advertising Concept Book: Think Now, Design Later – Pete Barry (Thames & Hudson)

100 Ways To Create A Great Ad – Tim Collins (Laurence King)

From Those Wonderful Folks Who Gave You Pearl Harbor - Jerry Della Femina (Simon & Schuster)

How to do better creative work - Steve Harrison (Pearson)

Hey Whipple, Squeeze This – Luke Sullivan (Adweek)

Think Small - Dominik Imseng (Full Stop Press)

Creative Advertising: Ideas and techniques from the world's best campaigns – Mario Prickens (Thames & Hudson)

The Copy Book: How the world's best advertising writers write their advertising - D&AD (Taschen)

Advertising Magazines

Campaign - weekly

Creative Review - monthly

Archive - bi-monthly

Other

The Economist

The novels of Anne Tyler (if I could have one wish it would be to meet her)

Exercise Nine - You tell someone you're in advertising and they say it's unethical. What, if anything, do you say?

What Was Said About Bill

'He probably had a greater effect on American life and culture than any other writer or artist in the 130 year history of this magazine'.

Obituary - Harper's Bazaar magazine (1982)

Exercise Ten – Do you know why the most powerful force in the world is the following punctuation mark? If not, think about it.





Think big.

Will you marry me?
What if all life is related?
From the personal to the
world-changing, questions
are how we make progress.

More than money or power, they
are the greatest agents of change.
And they're at the heart of all
creative thinking.
As a copywriter, you'll get paid to

ask them. The more the merrier.
The more surprising, the better.
What if we...? How about...?
Is that the right word?
What a great job. Don't you think?

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