

11.2: Pressure- The Result of Particle Collisions

Learning Objectives

- Define the property of pressure
- Define and convert among the units of pressure measurements
- Describe the operation of common tools for measuring gas pressure
- Calculate pressure from manometer data

The earth's atmosphere exerts a pressure, as does any other gas. Although we do not normally notice atmospheric pressure, we are sensitive to pressure changes—for example, when your ears “pop” during take-off and landing while flying, or when you dive underwater. Gas pressure is caused by the force exerted by gas molecules colliding with the surfaces of objects (Figure 11.2.1). Although the force of each collision is very small, any surface of appreciable area experiences a large number of collisions in a short time, which can result in a high pressure. In fact, normal air pressure is strong enough to crush a metal container when not balanced by equal pressure from inside the container.

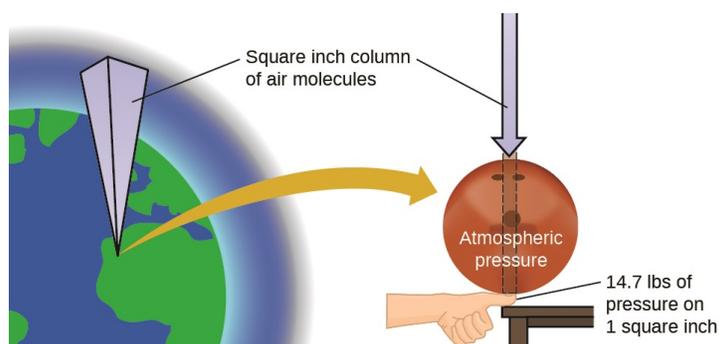


Figure 11.2.1: The atmosphere above us exerts a large pressure on objects at the surface of the earth, roughly equal to the weight of a bowling ball pressing on an area the size of a human thumbnail.

Diagram of Earth with a square inch column of air molecules extending to the atmosphere. This column points to an arrow pointing down on a bowling ball resting on a human thumbnail placed on top of a table.

Atmospheric pressure is caused by the weight of the column of air molecules in the atmosphere above an object, such as the tanker car. At sea level, this pressure is roughly the same as that exerted by a full-grown African elephant standing on a doormat, or a typical bowling ball resting on your thumbnail. These may seem like huge amounts, and they are, but life on earth has evolved under such atmospheric pressure. If you actually perch a bowling ball on your thumbnail, the pressure experienced is twice the usual pressure, and the sensation is unpleasant.



A dramatic illustration of atmospheric pressure is provided in this brief video, which shows a railway tanker car imploding when its internal pressure is decreased.

Pressure is defined as the force exerted on a given area:

$$P = \frac{F}{A} \quad (11.2.1)$$

Since pressure is directly proportional to force and inversely proportional to area (Equation 11.2.1), pressure can be increased either by either **increasing** the amount of force or by **decreasing** the area over which it is applied. Correspondingly, pressure can be decreased by either **decreasing** the force or **increasing** the area.

Let's apply the definition of pressure (Equation 11.2.1) to determine which would be more likely to fall through thin ice in Figure 11.2.2—the elephant or the figure skater?



(a)



(b)

Figure 11.2.2: Although (a) an elephant's weight is large, creating a very large force on the ground, (b) the figure skater exerts a much higher pressure on the ice due to the small surface area of her skates. (credit a: modification of work by Guido da Rozze; credit b: modification of work by Ryosuke Yagi).

Figure a is a photo of a large gray elephant on grassy, beige terrain. Figure b is a photo of a figure skater with her right skate on the ice, upper torso lowered, arms extended upward behind her chest, and left leg extended upward behind her.

A large African elephant can weigh 7 tons, supported on four feet, each with a diameter of about 1.5 ft (footprint area of 250 in²), so the pressure exerted by each foot is about 14 lb/in²:

$$\text{pressure per elephant foot} = 14,000 \frac{\text{lb}}{\text{elephant}} \times \frac{1 \text{ elephant}}{4 \text{ feet}} \times \frac{1 \text{ foot}}{250 \text{ in}^2} = 14 \text{ lb/in}^2 \quad (11.2.2)$$

The figure skater weighs about 120 lbs, supported on two skate blades, each with an area of about 2 in², so the pressure exerted by each blade is about 30 lb/in²:

$$\text{pressure per skate blade} = 120 \frac{\text{lb}}{\text{skater}} \times \frac{1 \text{ skater}}{2 \text{ blades}} \times \frac{1 \text{ blade}}{2 \text{ in}^2} = 30 \text{ lb/in}^2 \quad (11.2.3)$$

Even though the elephant is more than one hundred times heavier than the skater, it exerts less than one-half of the pressure and would therefore be less likely to fall through thin ice. On the other hand, if the skater removes her skates and stands with bare feet (or regular footwear) on the ice, the larger area over which her weight is applied greatly reduces the pressure exerted:

$$\text{pressure per human foot} = 120 \frac{\text{lb}}{\text{skater}} \times \frac{1 \text{ skater}}{2 \text{ feet}} \times \frac{1 \text{ foot}}{30 \text{ in}^2} = 2 \text{ lb/in}^2 \quad (11.2.4)$$

The SI unit of pressure is the pascal (Pa), with 1 Pa = 1 N/m², where N is the newton, a unit of force defined as 1 kg m/s². One pascal is a small pressure; in many cases, it is more convenient to use units of kilopascal (1 kPa = 1000 Pa) or bar (1 bar = 100,000 Pa). In the United States, pressure is often measured in pounds of force on an area of one square inch—pounds per square inch (psi)—for example, in car tires. Pressure can also be measured using the unit atmosphere (atm), which originally represented the average sea level air pressure at the approximate latitude of Paris (45°). Table 11.2.1 provides some information on these and a few other common units for pressure measurements

Table 11.2.1: Pressure Units

Unit Name and Abbreviation	Definition or Relation to Other Unit	Comment
pascal (Pa)	1 Pa = 1 N/m ²	recommended IUPAC unit
kilopascal (kPa)	1 kPa = 1000 Pa	
pounds per square inch (psi)	air pressure at sea level is ~14.7 psi	
atmosphere (atm)	1 atm = 101,325 Pa	air pressure at sea level is ~1 atm

Unit Name and Abbreviation	Definition or Relation to Other Unit	Comment
bar (bar, or b)	1 bar = 100,000 Pa (exactly)	commonly used in meteorology
millibar (mbar, or mb)	1000 mbar = 1 bar	
inches of mercury (in. Hg)	1 in. Hg = 3386 Pa	used by aviation industry, also some weather reports
torr	1 torr = $\frac{1}{760}$ atm	named after Evangelista Torricelli, inventor of the barometer
millimeters of mercury (mm Hg)	1 mm Hg ~1 torr	

✓ Example 11.2.1: Conversion of Pressure Units

The United States National Weather Service reports pressure in both inches of Hg and millibars. Convert a pressure of 29.2 in. Hg into:

- torr
- atm
- kPa
- mbar

Solution

This is a unit conversion problem. The relationships between the various pressure units are given in Table 9.2.1.

$$a. 29.2 \text{ in Hg} \times \frac{25.4 \text{ mm}}{1 \text{ in}} \times \frac{1 \text{ torr}}{1 \text{ mm Hg}} = 742 \text{ torr}$$

$$b. 742 \text{ torr} \times \frac{1 \text{ atm}}{760 \text{ torr}} = 0.976 \text{ atm}$$

$$c. 742 \text{ torr} \times \frac{101.325 \text{ kPa}}{760 \text{ torr}} = 98.9 \text{ kPa}$$

$$d. 98.9 \text{ kPa} \times \frac{1000 \text{ Pa}}{1 \text{ kPa}} \times \frac{1 \text{ bar}}{100,000 \text{ Pa}} \times \frac{1000 \text{ mbar}}{1 \text{ bar}} = 989 \text{ mbar}$$

? Exercise 11.2.1

A typical barometric pressure in Kansas City is 740 torr. What is this pressure in atmospheres, in millimeters of mercury, in kilopascals, and in bar?

Answer

0.974 atm; 740 mm Hg; 98.7 kPa; 0.987 bar

We can measure atmospheric pressure, the force exerted by the atmosphere on the earth's surface, with a barometer (Figure 11.2.3). A barometer is a glass tube that is closed at one end, filled with a nonvolatile liquid such as mercury, and then inverted and immersed in a container of that liquid. The atmosphere exerts pressure on the liquid outside the tube, the column of liquid exerts pressure inside the tube, and the pressure at the liquid surface is the same inside and outside the tube. The height of the liquid in the tube is therefore proportional to the pressure exerted by the atmosphere.

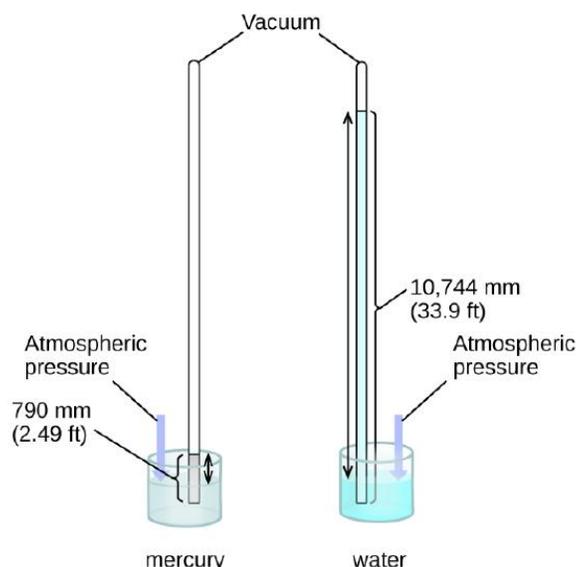


Figure 11.2.3: In a barometer, the height, h , of the column of liquid is used as a measurement of the air pressure. Using very dense liquid mercury (left) permits the construction of reasonably sized barometers, whereas using water (right) would require a barometer more than 30 feet tall.

Two barometers are in vacuum. One utilizes mercury while the other uses water in the capillary tube. Both barometers are exposed to atmospheric pressure. The barometer with mercury shows mercury levels of 2.49 feet. The barometer with water has a much greater level of 33.9 feet.

If the liquid is water, normal atmospheric pressure will support a column of water over 10 meters high, which is rather inconvenient for making (and reading) a barometer. Because mercury (Hg) is about 13.6-times denser than water, a mercury barometer only needs to be $\frac{1}{13.6}$ as tall as a water barometer—a more suitable size. Standard atmospheric pressure of 1 atm at sea level (101,325 Pa) corresponds to a column of mercury that is about 760 mm (29.92 in.) high. The torr was originally intended to be a unit equal to one millimeter of mercury, but it no longer corresponds exactly. The pressure exerted by a fluid due to gravity is known as hydrostatic pressure, p :

$$p = h\rho g \quad (11.2.5)$$

where

- h is the height of the fluid,
- ρ is the density of the fluid, and
- g is acceleration due to gravity.

✓ Example 11.2.2: Calculation of Barometric Pressure

Show the calculation supporting the claim that atmospheric pressure near sea level corresponds to the pressure exerted by a column of mercury that is about 760 mm high. The density of mercury = 13.6 g/cm^3 .

Solution

The hydrostatic pressure is given by Equation 11.2.5, with $h = 760 \text{ mm}$, $\rho = 13.6 \text{ g/cm}^3$, and $g = 9.81 \text{ m/s}^2$. Plugging these values into the Equation 11.2.5 and doing the necessary unit conversions will give us the value we seek. (Note: We are expecting to find a pressure of $\sim 101,325 \text{ Pa}$.)

$$\begin{aligned} 101,325 \text{ N/m}^2 &= 101,325 \frac{\text{kg} \cdot \text{m/s}^2}{\text{m}^2} = 101,325 \frac{\text{kg}}{\text{m} \cdot \text{s}^2} \\ p &= \left(760 \text{ mm} \times \frac{1 \text{ m}}{1000 \text{ mm}} \right) \times \left(\frac{13.6 \text{ g}}{1 \text{ cm}^3} \times \frac{1 \text{ kg}}{1000 \text{ g}} \times \frac{(100 \text{ cm})^3}{(1 \text{ m})^3} \right) \times \left(\frac{9.81 \text{ m}}{1 \text{ s}^2} \right) \\ &= (0.760 \text{ m})(13,600 \text{ kg/m}^3)(9.81 \text{ m/s}^2) = 1.01 \times 10^5 \text{ kg/ms}^2 = 1.01 \times 10^5 \text{ N/m}^2 \\ &= 1.01 \times 10^5 \text{ Pa} \end{aligned}$$

? Exercise 11.2.2

Calculate the height of a column of water at 25 °C that corresponds to normal atmospheric pressure. The density of water at this temperature is 1.0 g/cm³.

Answer

10.3 m

A manometer is a device similar to a barometer that can be used to measure the pressure of a gas trapped in a container. A closed-end manometer is a U-shaped tube with one closed arm, one arm that connects to the gas to be measured, and a nonvolatile liquid (usually mercury) in between. As with a barometer, the distance between the liquid levels in the two arms of the tube (h in the diagram) is proportional to the pressure of the gas in the container. An open-end manometer (Figure 11.2.3) is the same as a closed-end manometer, but one of its arms is open to the atmosphere. In this case, the distance between the liquid levels corresponds to the difference in pressure between the gas in the container and the atmosphere.

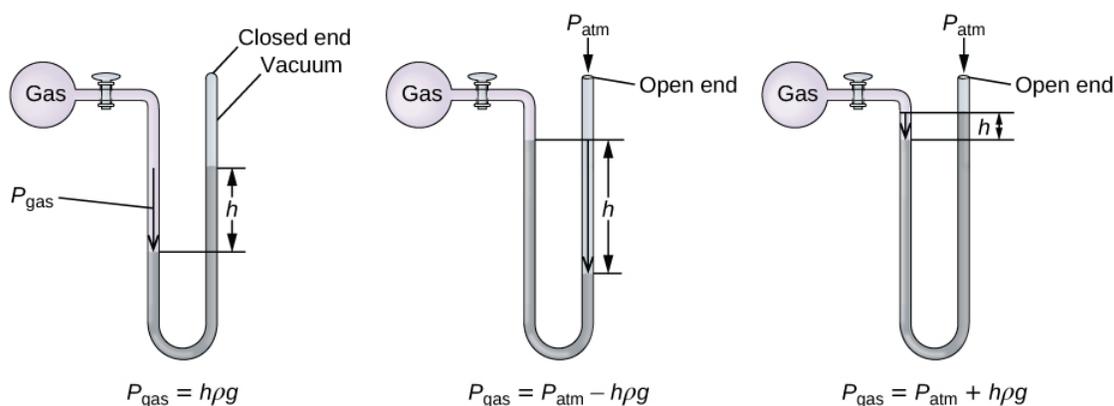


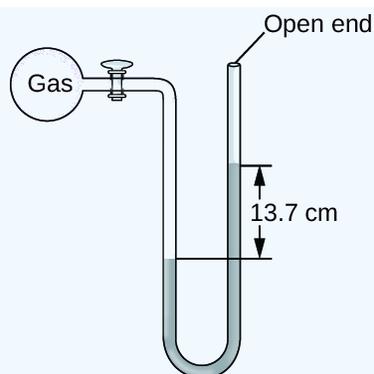
Figure 11.2.4: A manometer can be used to measure the pressure of a gas. The (difference in) height between the liquid levels (h) is a measure of the pressure. Mercury is usually used because of its large density.

The first manometer is closed end. The gas in the bulb exerts a certain pressure on the liquid in the tube so that the height, h , between the two levels of liquid on both sides of the U tube is proportional to the pressure. The equation is $P_{\text{gas}} = h\rho g$. The second manometer has an open end. The equation for P_{gas} is equals to $P_{\text{atm}} - h\rho g$. The final manometer is also open ended and has equation of P_{gas} equals to $P_{\text{atm}} + h\rho g$ for cases where pressure of the gas is greater than atmospheric pressure.

✓ Example 11.2.3: Calculation of Pressure Using an Open-End Manometer

The pressure of a sample of gas is measured at sea level with an open-end Hg (mercury) manometer, as shown below. Determine the pressure of the gas in:

- mm Hg
- atm
- kPa



The height is the difference between the two levels of mercury on each side of the U tube and has a value of 13.7 centimeters. The level on the right side is higher than the left.

Solution

The pressure of the gas equals the hydrostatic pressure due to a column of mercury of height 13.7 cm plus the pressure of the atmosphere at sea level. (The pressure at the bottom horizontal line is equal on both sides of the tube. The pressure on the left is due to the gas and the pressure on the right is due to 13.7 cm of Hg plus atmospheric pressure.)

a. In mm Hg, this is: 137 mm Hg + 760 mm Hg = 897 mm Hg

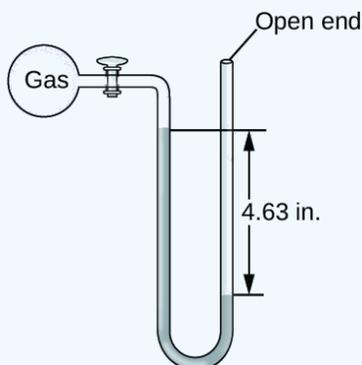
$$b. \cancel{897 \text{ mmHg}} \times \frac{1 \text{ atm}}{760 \text{ mmHg}} = 1.18 \text{ atm}$$

$$c. \cancel{1.18 \text{ atm}} \times \frac{101.325 \text{ kPa}}{1 \text{ atm}} = 1.20 \times 10^2 \text{ kPa}$$

? Exercise 11.2.3

The pressure of a sample of gas is measured at sea level with an open-end Hg manometer, as shown below. Determine the pressure of the gas in:

- mm Hg
- atm
- kPa



The height is the difference between the two levels of mercury on each side of the U tube and has a value of 4.63 inches. The level on the left side is higher than the right.

Answer a

642 mm Hg

Answer b

0.845 atm

Answer c

Application: Measuring Blood Pressure

Blood pressure is measured using a device called a sphygmomanometer (Greek *sphygmos* = “pulse”). It consists of an inflatable cuff to restrict blood flow, a manometer to measure the pressure, and a method of determining when blood flow begins and when it becomes impeded (Figure 11.2.5). Since its invention in 1881, it has been an essential medical device. There are many types of sphygmomanometers: manual ones that require a stethoscope and are used by medical professionals; mercury ones, used when the most accuracy is required; less accurate mechanical ones; and digital ones that can be used with little training but that have limitations. When using a sphygmomanometer, the cuff is placed around the upper arm and inflated until blood flow is completely blocked, then slowly released. As the heart beats, blood forced through the arteries causes a rise in pressure. This rise in pressure at which blood flow begins is the *systolic pressure*—the peak pressure in the cardiac cycle. When the cuff’s pressure equals the arterial systolic pressure, blood flows past the cuff, creating audible sounds that can be heard using a stethoscope. This is followed by a decrease in pressure as the heart’s ventricles prepare for another beat. As cuff pressure continues to decrease, eventually sound is no longer heard; this is the *diastolic pressure*—the lowest pressure (resting phase) in the cardiac cycle. Blood pressure units from a sphygmomanometer are in terms of millimeters of mercury (mm Hg).



(a)



(b)

Figure 11.2.5: (a) A medical technician prepares to measure a patient’s blood pressure with a sphygmomanometer. (b) A typical sphygmomanometer uses a valved rubber bulb to inflate the cuff and a diaphragm gauge to measure pressure. (credit a: modification of work by Master Sgt. Jeffrey Allen)

Meteorology, Climatology, and Atmospheric Science

Throughout the ages, people have observed clouds, winds, and precipitation, trying to discern patterns and make predictions: when it is best to plant and harvest; whether it is safe to set out on a sea voyage; and much more. We now face complex weather and atmosphere-related challenges that will have a major impact on our civilization and the ecosystem. Several different scientific disciplines use chemical principles to help us better understand weather, the atmosphere, and climate. These are meteorology, climatology, and atmospheric science. **Meteorology** is the study of the atmosphere, atmospheric phenomena, and atmospheric effects on earth’s weather. Meteorologists seek to understand and predict the weather in the short term, which can save lives and benefit the economy. Weather forecasts (Figure 11.2.5) are the result of thousands of measurements of air pressure, temperature, and the like, which are compiled, modeled, and analyzed in weather centers worldwide.

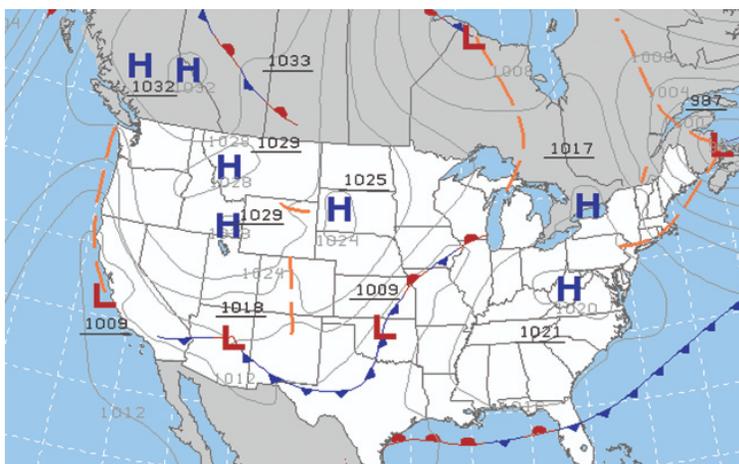


Figure 11.2.6: Meteorologists use weather maps to describe and predict weather. Regions of high (H) and low (L) pressure have large effects on weather conditions. The gray lines represent locations of constant pressure known as isobars. (credit: modification of work by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration)

A weather map of the United States is shown which points out areas of high and low pressure with the letters H in blue and L in red. There are curved grey lines throughout the United States region as well as beyond it around area of Canada and the oceans.

In terms of weather, low-pressure systems occur when the earth's surface atmospheric pressure is lower than the surrounding environment: Moist air rises and condenses, producing clouds. Movement of moisture and air within various weather fronts instigates most weather events.

The atmosphere is the gaseous layer that surrounds a planet. Earth's atmosphere, which is roughly 100–125 km thick, consists of roughly 78.1% nitrogen and 21.0% oxygen, and can be subdivided further into the regions shown in Figure 11.2.7: the exosphere (furthest from earth, > 700 km above sea level), the thermosphere (80–700 km), the mesosphere (50–80 km), the stratosphere (second lowest level of our atmosphere, 12–50 km above sea level), and the troposphere (up to 12 km above sea level, roughly 80% of the earth's atmosphere by mass and the layer where most weather events originate). As you go higher in the troposphere, air density and temperature both decrease.

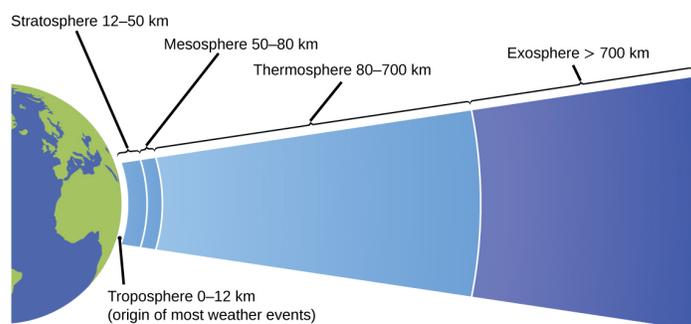


Figure 11.2.7: Earth's atmosphere has five layers: the troposphere, the stratosphere, the mesosphere, the thermosphere, and the exosphere.

The different layers of the atmosphere is illustrated as a cross sectional slice of the Earth's atmosphere. The different thickness of each layer is shown. The thermosphere has the largest portion, followed by the exosphere, stratosphere, mesosphere, and troposphere.

Climatology is the study of the climate, averaged weather conditions over long time periods, using atmospheric data. However, climatologists study patterns and effects that occur over decades, centuries, and millennia, rather than shorter time frames of hours, days, and weeks like meteorologists. Atmospheric science is an even broader field, combining meteorology, climatology, and other scientific disciplines that study the atmosphere.

Summary

Gases exert pressure, which is force per unit area. The pressure of a gas may be expressed in the SI unit of pascal or kilopascal, as well as in many other units including torr, atmosphere, and bar. Atmospheric pressure is measured using a barometer; other gas pressures can be measured using one of several types of manometers.

Key Equations

- $P = \frac{F}{A}$
- $p = h\rho g$

Glossary

atmosphere (atm)

unit of pressure; 1 atm = 101,325 Pa

bar

(bar or b) unit of pressure; 1 bar = 100,000 Pa

barometer

device used to measure atmospheric pressure

hydrostatic pressure

pressure exerted by a fluid due to gravity

manometer

device used to measure the pressure of a gas trapped in a container

pascal (Pa)

SI unit of pressure; 1 Pa = 1 N/m²

pounds per square inch (psi)

unit of pressure common in the US

pressure

force exerted per unit area

torr

unit of pressure; 1 torr = $\frac{1}{760}$ atm

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