



RESETTLING IN AMERICA

A thesis exploration to improve
how refugees adjust to life in the United States

A NEW LOOK AT RESETTLED REFUGEES

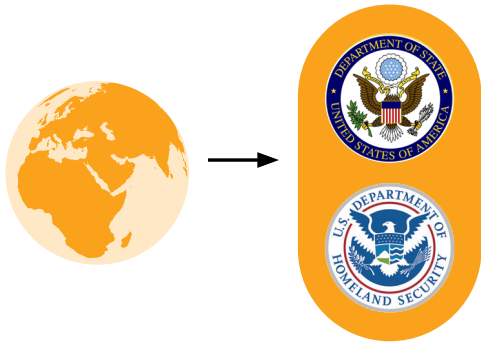
When one thinks about refugees, one usually thinks of how unfortunate they are. It is true that this diverse group of people is connected under the umbrella of being one of the most vulnerable populations of the world. Yet a focus should also be placed on their capabilities, because refugees are also incredible survivors who are looking for opportunities to restart their lives.

Refugees that are resettled into the United States enter into a complicated and fast-paced system. They have the ability to be self-sufficient, but they often are not provided the resources to succeed.

If provided with the right resources, refugees become more involved in their own resettlement and can claim ownership of their new lives. When embraced, the diversity and resilience brought by refugees can only strengthen a society's ability for acceptance, adaptability, and even collective intelligence.

U.S. RESETTLEMENT PROCESS

BEFORE RESETTLEMENT



1 OVERSEAS PROCESSING

Refugees are approved and processed by the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security.



2 VOLUNTARY AGENCY (volag) ASSIGNMENT

Refugees are matched to one of 10 national-level volags that have multiple local affiliates.

DURING RESETTLEMENT



3 ARRIVAL AND PLACEMENT

Representatives from volags greet refugees upon arrival. Volags provide housing and other basic needs for 30-90 days with funding from State.

Office of Refugee Resettlement assistance programs

Matching Grant programs

Other public assistance for government agencies

4 PROGRAM PLACEMENT

Volags help refugees apply for the assistance they are likely eligible to receive.



5 AFTER SERVICES END

Employment, language, and all other assistance services often end based on funds and policies, not because the needs were met.



This is Mae La, a refugee camp in Thailand that currently houses about 50,000 refugees from Burma with more arriving each week. Some residents have been here for over two decades.



BEFORE RESETTLEMENT

Of the approximately 15.4 million refugees around the world less than 1% get resettled. Though the gap is closing, the United States resettles more refugees each year than all other countries combined. But with that comes a lot of responsibility.

Most refugees come from places that are that are very different from the United States, such as residents of Mae La pictured above.

Adjusting to American life is a difficult process that requires a lot of support.

SO WHAT HAPPENS TO FEW
REFUGEES THAT HAVE THE
OPPORTUNITY TO BE RESETTLED
IN THE UNITED STATES?



IMMEDIATE SERVICES FOR RESETTLED REFUGEES

Depending on the State

- Apply for social security cards
- Register for temporary social service benefits (Medicaid, Food Stamps, Cash Assistance)
- Enroll children in school
- Enroll in ESL programs
- Attend cultural orientation class(es)
- Employment assistance
- Get connected to churches and community groups
- Furnished apartment, first 3 months paid

YET THE SERVICES GIVEN TO REFUGEES ARE ALL WITHIN A FOREIGN AMERICAN CONTEXT.

Refugees are immediately placed in some services when they arrive in the United States, depending on the state in which they are resettled. This itself is great and much needed to jump-start their lives here.

But offering services is not enough for self-sustainability. They need to understand the culture and dimensions in which they will be living. Without understanding the context of their new surroundings, these new services in which they have to participate can be confusing, especially those coming from rural areas or spending years in refugee camps.

So there are many follow up questions such as how to get to these new places and how to communicate with Americans. If the services result in more questions, imagine the amount of confusion in daily American life, which Americans take for granted but refugees are expected to understand rather quickly.

MAKE APPOINTMENTS WITH DOCTORS • NAVIGATE
THE LOCAL PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION • SIGN UP FOR
PUBLIC SERVICES AND GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE • USE A
DEBIT CARD • UNDERSTAND WHICH ORGANIZATIONS OFFER
YOU WHAT SERVICES • OPEN A BANK ACCOUNT • WRITE
CHECKS • UNDERSTAND FOREIGN APPLIANCES (OVEN, TOILET,
REFRIGERATOR, AIR CONDITIONING, ETC) • NAVIGATE GROCERY
STORES AND DEPARTMENT STORES • LOCATE THE HOSPITAL •
BUY CLEANING SUPPLIES • COMMUNICATE WITH AMERICANS
• PAY THE BILLS • PAY YOUR RENT • UNDERSTAND THE U.S.
CURRENCY • MAYBE BUY A CAR • KNOW WHAT DOCUMENTS
YOU SHOULD HAVE WITH YOU AND WHICH YOU SHOULD KEEP
SAFE • LEARN WHAT NUTRITION IN AMERICA MEANS • ABIDE
BY AMERICAN LAWS • UNDERSTAND THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE
AND CULTURE • PAY TAXES • DEVELOP GOOD CREDIT • STAY
SAFE • GET A PHONE PLAN • LEARN TRAFFIC SIGNS AND
SIGNALS • FIGURE OUT WHO AND WHAT YOU CAN TRUST...

The items on the left are some tasks that people living in the United States are expected to understand, and therefore by living in the U.S., refugees are expected to understand as well. They are important for daily American life. Fortunately, refugees are provided with cultural orientation classes that explain these things.

And yet cultural orientation only lasts

1 – 5 DAYS

It is difficult to retain as much new information as they are given in the short span of time in the cultural orientation classes. So if they have follow-up questions or questions beyond the orientation, they would ask their case worker at the volunteer agency that is responsible for their resettlement.

But resettlement only lasts

30 – 90 DAYS

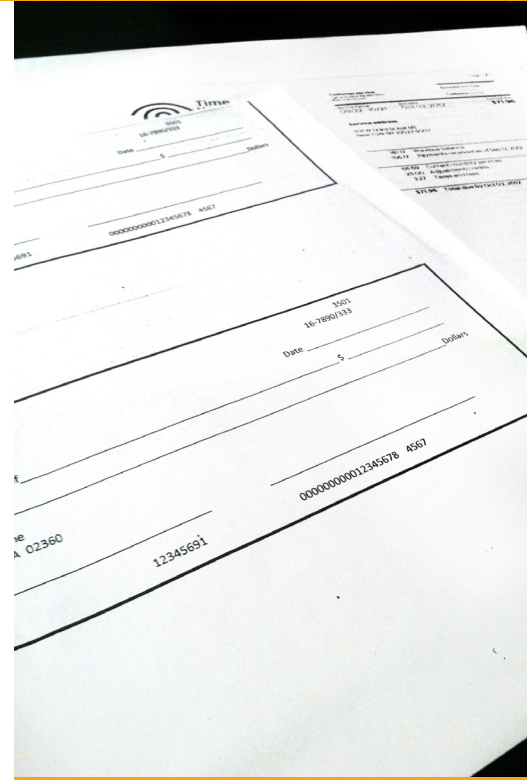
A DAY IN CULTURAL ORIENTATION

In one of the cultural orientation classes I attended at the International Rescue Committee, a major volunteer agency, two hours were devoted to learning all about cash, checks, bills, money orders, debit cards, and credit cards. American currency is new but still comprehensible. It was a different story for the other American forms of payment. Most of the students had never owned a bank account which meant that they had never written a check or owned a debit card, never mind being able to understand the difference between a credit card and a debit card. So this was a lot to cover in just two hours.

Though this classroom had a projector screen which isn't always the case with cultural orientation classrooms, the slides mostly contained bullet points of information in English, which they were still learning. The teachers were also improvising as they went through the material that was not always even clear to them. There was an overall lack of structure that was needed for these new residents to feel comfortable in their new home.

It became very apparent as outsider that most students were not understanding the information when only those who are more familiar with American culture were the ones asking questions.

In the four days of orientation, teachers share information about housing, money, health, employment, getting around, safety, and education just to name a few. But basically in an effort to cram as much information as possible in a short amount of time, so much information is lost.



Fifteen minutes total was given to the students to write a fake check for a fake bill. If one is not familiar with either of these, which was virtually everyone in the class, the concept is difficult to grasp. And in a class of about 10, only one person had written a check before. Even after the teachers explained, the students were still how to write a check.

This is Naw Khine, a farmer in Burma before she became a refugee.

It was her fourth week in the U.S. and her fourth and final class at the cultural orientation at IRC.

I showed her my prototype with material she was already taught, but she was grateful to get extra help since it was still unclear information to her..

PROBLEMS WITH THE CURRENT CULTURAL ORIENTATION

1. 1-5 days is not enough time to understand a new culture
2. Limited structure that varies even in different branches of one organization
3. Need for more context to retain information
4. General lack of funding in resettlement

IMPROVEMENTS TO THE CURRENT CULTURAL ORIENTATION

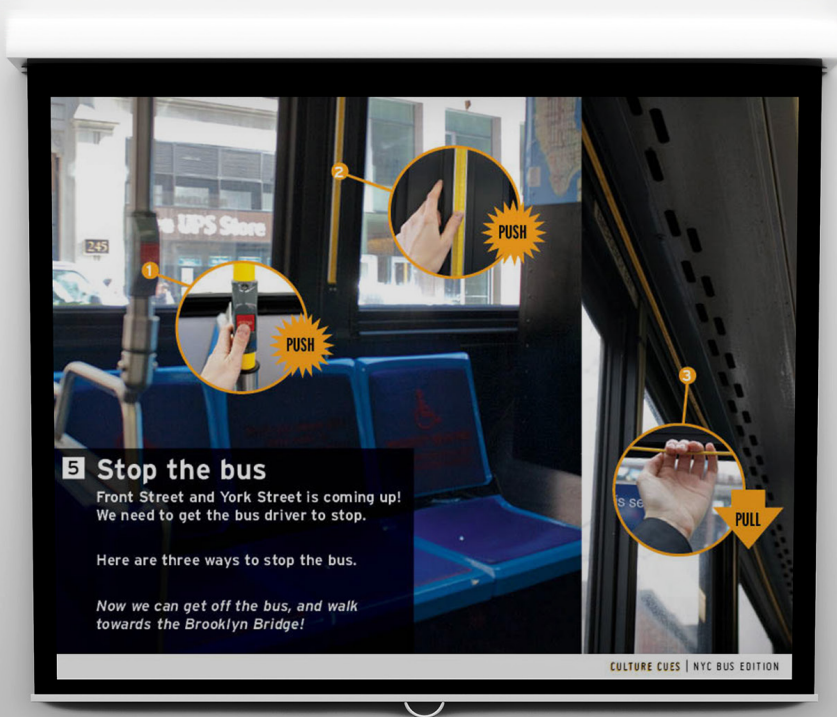
- 1. Refugees are given the tools to refer to later
- 2. Sharing best practices could help create structure to maximize time limited time
- 3. Visuals should be prioritized as a way of contextualizing
- 4. Inexpensive solutions are more accessible as more tools are online

CULTURE CUES

From the insights gathered from experts, research, and reflection about the problems and what improvements could look like, I developed my intervention, Culture Cues. Culture Cues breaks down American culture and daily life into small digestible parts. The collateral is mostly visual for those that are unfamiliar with the language or even illiterate, as well as for memory retention. It consists of three parts, a website, presentation slides, and print-outs.



The collateral is available online for anyone to use and share to create a community beyond the individual classes.



There are slides for cultural orientation teachers to guide students and answer questions.



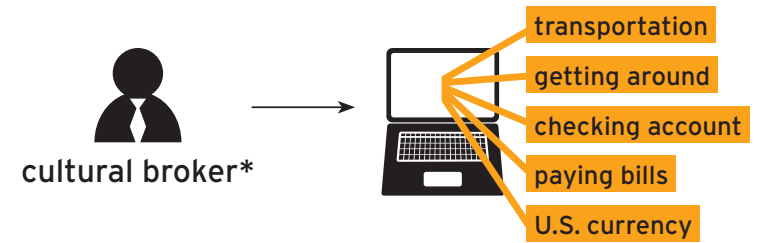
Each series has print-outs that correspond with the slides for refugees to refer to later.

IDEAL USAGE OF CULTURE CUES

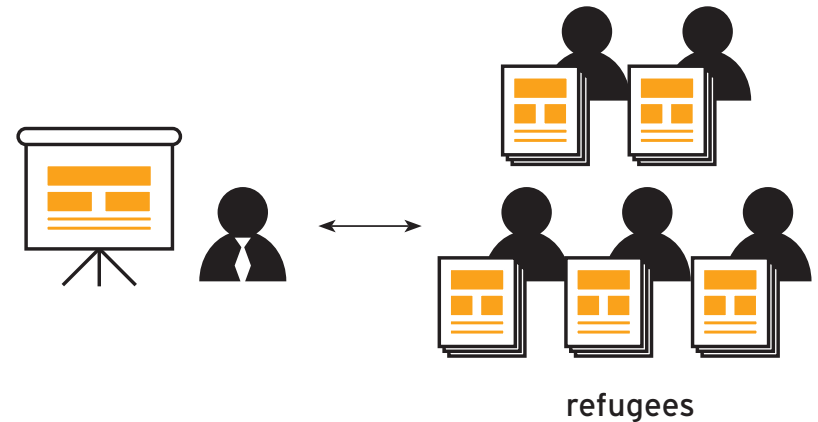
This is how the Culture Cue communication tools would ideally operate in resettlement. This system is very basic and may seem like an obvious teaching tool, but for some reason it is not done in the U.S. resettlement process. It allows the teacher time to cover more topics since refugees can review later.

- 1 A cultural broker, who is anyone helping refugees adjust to American life such as a cultural orientation teacher, would find topics on the Culture Cues site that apply to the needs of the refugees with whom they are helping.
- 2 Then the cultural broker would share the information with the refugees either on a screen or through print-outs. Refugees will also have corresponding print-outs at this point so that they are more capable of referring to them later after getting an intro in the subject from the cultural broker.
- 3 From there, the individual refugee can refer to the print-outs if he needs more time to understand the new information.

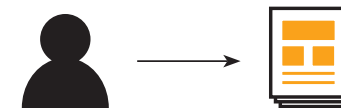
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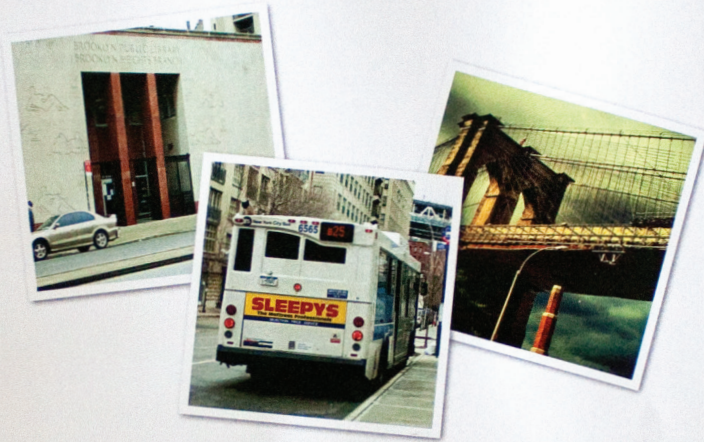
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3



* cultural orientation teacher or others involved in resettlement



So you want to ride a New York City bus?

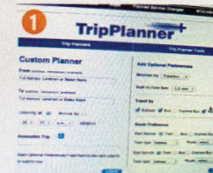
Let's plan a trip from the Brooklyn Heights Library to the Brooklyn Bridge Park.

Here is the Culture Cues prints for New York City bus. It is written like a story to make it more accessible. Each page includes small steps that lead into each other and rely on visuals when possible.



1 Getting directions

Do we know the bus we need to take?



If we internet, we could go to <http://tripplanner.mta.info/> to get directions.

2 We don't have internet, so you should call **511**.

1. Say **"MTA"**.
2. Say **"Subways and Buses"**.
3. Say **"Plan a trip"**
4. Say **"Operator"** to talk to a person, and then say **"Yes"** when asked if you want one.
5. Ask the operator how to get from where we are to where we want to go.



We ask how to get from the Brooklyn Heights Library to the Brooklyn Bridge Park.

The operator says that we can take the **B25 bus** from the corner of **Cadman Plaza and Johnson Street** to the corner of **Front Street and York Street**.

Getting directions is confusing, so it was necessary to have images of the important steps- calling for directions or going online, and locating a street corner.



B25 Know when your bus will arrive here!

To: Downtown Brooklyn

Bus stop: CADMAN PLAZA W & JOHNSON ST

Scan the QR code below, or visit mta.info/bus/time

OR text: 307988 to 511123 (bus stop code)

*Standard text message rates may apply.

Weekday Hours of operation: All times (24-hours)

Downtown Brooklyn Local stop

| AM | PM |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 12: 21, 49 | 12: 00, 08, 15, 23, 31, 39, 47, 55 |
| 1: 24 | 1: 02, 10, 17, 25, 32, 40, 47, 55 |
| 2: 18 | 2: 02, 10, 17, 25, 32, 40, 47, 55 |
| 3: 32 | 3: 04 30, 38, 47, 55 |
| 4: 46 | 4: 17, 35, 43, 52 |
| 5: 24 | 5: 16, 35, 44, 53 |
| 6: 00, 17, 36, 48, 58 | 5: 33, 43, 55 |
| 7: 09, 21, 29, 41, 53 | |
| 8: 02, 15, 24, 33, 42, 50, 57 | |
| 9: 05, 14, 22, 31, 39, 48, 56 | |
| 10: 04, 12, 21, 28, 37, 45, 54 | |
| 11: 02, 11, 19, 26, 36, 45, 53 | |

When is the next bus coming?
It's 2:15pm, so the next bus is coming at 2:17pm

2 At the bus stop
We made it to the Cadman Plaza and Johnson Street bus stop!

Are we going in the right direction?
Yes! The arrows point to York Street.

CULTURE CUES | NYC BUS EDITION

Once you know where to start, this page shows how you know you are at the right stop, on the right side of the street, and when the next bus should arrive.



3 A bus is coming!
How do we know that it is the right bus?

The bus number is located in these three locations.

Good! It's a B25. Let's get on!



CULTURE CUES | NYC BUS EDITION

When a bus arrives at your stop, it might not be the one you need, so this page shows where to look for the bus number.



4 Paying for the bus

We can pay for the ride at the machine next to the bus driver.



MetroCard
We need a monthly pass, a weekly pass, or at least \$2.50 on our cards

OR

Use these coins...

25¢

10¢

5¢



...to make \$2.50

CULTURE CUES | NYC BUS EDITION

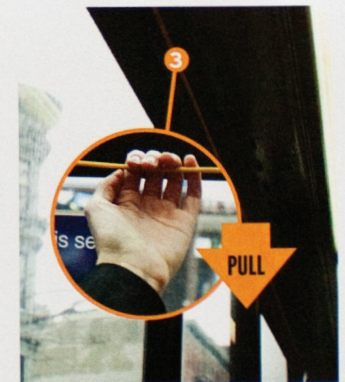


5 Stop the bus

Front Street and York Street is coming up! We need to get the bus driver to stop.

Here are three ways to stop the bus.

Now we can get off the bus, and walk towards the Brooklyn Bridge!



CULTURE CUES | NYC BUS EDITION

Paying for the bus can be confusing even for an American, so this demonstrates the two ways to pay for your trip for those that are unfamiliar with our currency and the MetroCard.

And finally, when arriving at the destination, there are a few ways to stop a New York City bus, so this demonstrates the ways.



This is Fatma, an Afghani who worked for the U.S. government in Kabul as a polygraph administrator. This was his second week in the United States and second day of cultural orientation at the IRC.

He was very excited to help me with my prototype since he said he didn't know how to use the bus and was eager to learn. Even though he said that he understood was able to answer my questions to prove that it was clear, the most validating this he said was.

“Can I keep this?”

He could have just been polite and agreeable, though he did give me some feedback on how to improve the series. But asking to keep the prints even before I got a chance to give them, tells me that he would find these useful.

“[T]hese are great- I only wish that we had something like this for every unit that we do!

Are we allowed to incorporate them into the CO slide show?”



Claire Marx
Cultural Orientation teacher,
NYC branch

I also received validation from a few teachers and others involved in helping refugees resettle in the United States that not only was this something that was needed, but that my visuals were effective.

But it was most validating to hear that a cultural orientation teacher wanted Culture Cue versions for everything they teach and that she wanted to incorporate them in her slide show. I knew I was on the right track.

POTENTIAL FOR THE FUTURE: COLLATERAL

I would also like there to be versions for every category, like Claire, the cultural orientation teacher mentioned.

There would also be version in different languages such as Arabic and Spanish, so that those still learning English can have access.

There would also be categories that apply to only certain regions, such as the public transportation of individual cities.

ABOUT

BROWSE

▼ Category

- American Life
- Health
- Going Places
- Housing
- Money
- Nutrition
- Employment
- Education

▶ Language

▶ Location

JOIN CONVO

CONTACT

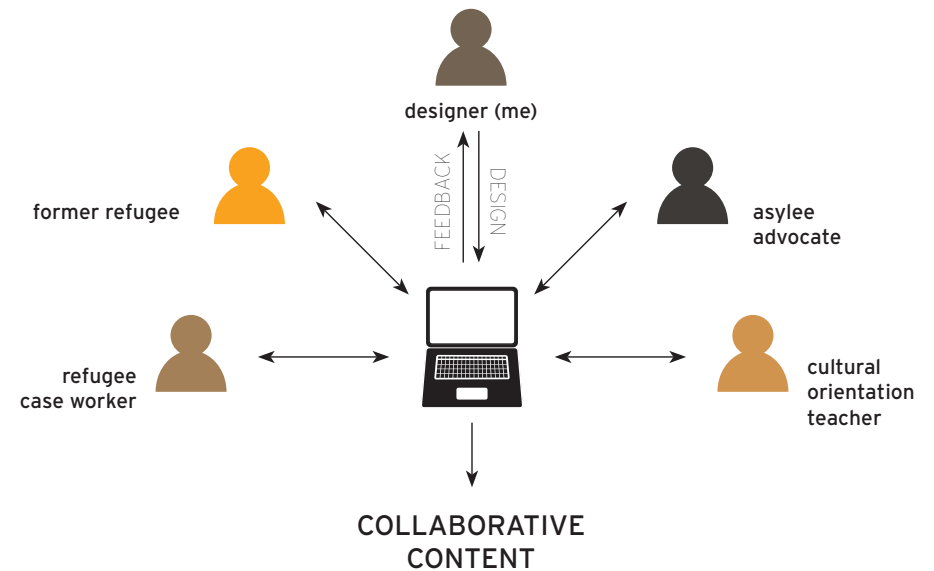


POTENTIAL FOR THE FUTURE: COLLABORATIVE

The “Join Convo” link in the potential website would lead to a page where those working with refugees or even asylum seekers, who also need access to these resources, would be able to create a dialogue about what works, what does not, and tips of the trade.

Ideally, those involved in the creation of the material would extend beyond me, the designer, to include experts such as former refugees, case workers, asylee advocates, and so on, so that we learn from each other and create best practices for preparing these new arrivals for a bright future in the States.

This would be my final step to bring a tighter structure to how American culture is shared with refugees and understood by refugees.





THESIS STATEMENT

Supplied with tools that simplify and clarify details of American life, resettled refugees are better equipped to start their new lives with confidence and capability.



SOURCES

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Agbényiga, DeBrenna, et al. "Expanding Our Community: Independent and Interdependent Factors Impacting Refugees' Successful Community Resettlement." *Advances in Social Work* Vol. 13 No. 2 (Summer 2012).

Dickerson, Aaron, et al. "Performance Measurement for Refugee Integration Programs." Goldman School of Public Policy, University of California, Berkeley. Prepared for Church World Service, Immigration and Refugee Program, New York, New York.

Art for Refugees in Transition

Carolina Refugee Resettlement Agency, Inc.

International Rescue Committee

Pro Bono Speaks

The Refugee and Immigrant Fund

Refugee Camp Trade School

Refugee Support Services of the Carolinas, Inc.

St. Rita's Center for Immigrants and Refugee Services

U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants

Welcoming America

RESETTLING IN AMERICA

A thesis exploration to improve how refugees adjust to life in the United States

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