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Can education insure a safer and more humane world? Is it possible for educators to arouse conscience and compassion in their students? These questions invariably present themselves to Holocaust educators at some point in their teaching, and there are probably as many answers to the questions as there are educators. These are certainly questions with which I have struggled, sharing that deep longing of which Stephen Haynes speaks, but also fearing decisions that might be inappropriate for this difficult and sensitive subject. While attending the *Transformative Learning through Holocaust Education* program sponsored by Seton Hill University and Sisters of Our Lady of Sion, I found that these questions deeply connected to the reflections that we experienced in both the preparation for and attendance in the Transformative Learning sessions led by Sr. Audrey Doetzel, NDS.

As the participants in the Transformative Learning sessions began to share the results of their year-long guided reflections, commonalities among them quickly emerged. One of the strongest commonalities, expressed in some way by all of the participants, was the moment of recognition at some point in their teaching, that the subject of the Holocaust required more than just knowledge—that there was a connection between that knowledge and the deep expressions of our shared humanity—or as some might say between the head and the heart—that began to occur. This connection, we believed, was the beginning of transformative learning. Although one might expect this connection in a group of educators who were all practicing Catholics with a deep sense of spirituality, I have found this same recognition among most serious Holocaust educators regardless of their backgrounds.

The value of the *Transformative Learning through Holocaust Education* program for me was the affirmation that what I had already experienced was valid. My moment of recognition that there was an imbalance in my teaching had come several years earlier, and that recognition and the resulting changes in the focus of my teaching about the Holocaust, was transformative for me and my students. I was not fully aware that what we were experiencing was transformation, but I knew that something had changed dramatically, both in the work the students were producing and the relationship among the students as well as their relationship with me. We were bonded in a way that I had never experienced before with students and this continued for the remaining years that I taught a unit on the Holocaust.

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## A Delicate Balance: Integrating the Head and the Heart in Holocaust Education

By [Jeanna R. Collins](#)  
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*Of what value was their faith, their education, their social position, if it aroused neither conscience nor compassion?*

**-Elie Wiesel**  
*All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*

*I don't know why others become interested in teaching the Holocaust, but for me the answer is tied up with a deep longing for a safer and more humane world, and with the hope that education is one way of insuring it.*

**-Stephen Haynes**  
"University Holocaust Education: Toward a Distinctive Pedagogy"





As a public school teacher, the challenge for achieving this balance was quite different than that of a Holocaust educator in a Catholic school since I was prohibited from using religious or spiritual discussions. Further, the small, rural community in which I lived and taught was quite conservative and reactionary in both religion and politics and tended towards fundamentalism. Discussing Judaism and the Jewishness of Jesus had to be done very carefully since the majority of my students' families were literalists concerning scripture, and, in many cases believed that Christianity had superseded Judaism. It was totally impossible to discuss Christian antisemitism for the same reasons. We did, however, address examples of subtle antisemitism that we might hear and the ease with which racist remarks slide by without our recognition. Therefore, I had to search for ways into areas that would open my students to that heart/humanity side of the subject without offending parents or jeopardizing my unit. As a language arts teacher, I knew that I could do it through the humanities, particularly through stories and poetry. Stories and poems abound in the curriculum and could touch my students and open their hearts. Even personal stories, offered with no agenda, could be effective. I used my trip to Israel with the March of the Living to show how our Jewish guide shared that the stones in the tunnel on which we were standing were quite possibly the same stones on which Jesus walked and that we should take a moment to dwell spiritually with that knowledge. I also shared my feelings as I prayed at the Western Wall. As long as I shared what I had done and the feelings that accompanied that action for me without any hidden messages, no one was threatened and seemed to be able to feel that connection to what was really a bit of Jewish/Christian dialogue.

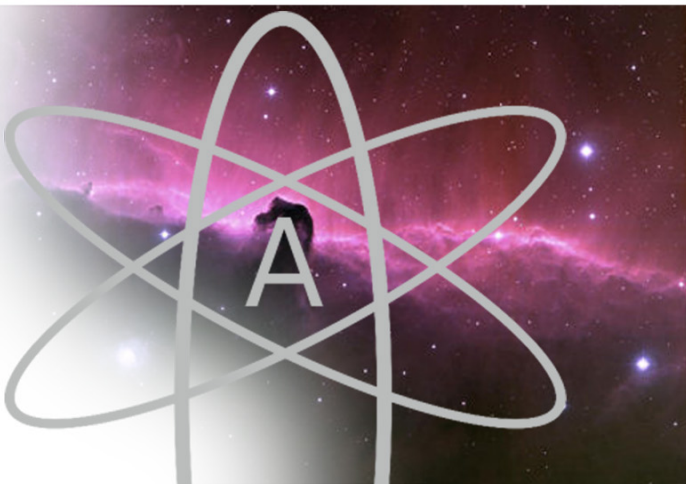
Once that recognition of the need for a greater balance in teaching the Shoah comes, one is forced into action for this is when passion becomes a part of the work.. I knew that I had to make immediate changes, and although my ideas evolved over the years, the first time that I taught the unit with a conscious effort to change the focus, I was overwhelmed by the changes in the productivity of the students, the changes in atmosphere and relationship, and the energy that flowed as we worked. The first year was especially overwhelming, resulting in a permanent tile Memorial for the Children of the Holocaust placed on a wall in the front entrance of the school, but in each year that followed, the thoughtful work of my students continued to amaze me. In the remainder of the paper, I would like to share some of the methods that I used to bring about what I believe was transformative in the teaching and learning my students and I experienced in the Holocaust unit.

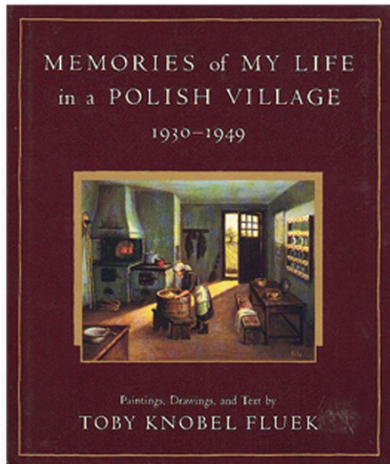
*The educational challenge was and still remains, the ability to probe the human element behind the facts.*

**-Yad Vashem, Jerusalem Magazine**

One of the first realizations was that my students, in the current unit, did not have the opportunity to see the rich Jewish culture that existed before the Holocaust, and thus did not have an appreciation for what was lost. Because of the way I had been presenting the material, they saw the victims only as victims, as skeletons in a pile or dehumanized individuals in a photograph. I knew that this was one of the first things I had to address.

Time constraints did not allow me to do a lot in this area, but I made three commitments.. The first was to change the types of visuals that I used in the classroom. From that time forward, I no longer placed any posters or photos with graphic pictures of victims. I replaced them with posters and photos of Jewish people from before the war, particularly photos of children. I copied and laminated many pictures from *And I Still See Their Faces: Images of Polish Jews* and placed them around the room. I also used posters of children from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem, and the Anti-Defamation League. I began to feel that the sensitive and disturbing nature of studying the Holocaust required that I make the classroom a safe place in which to discuss the subject.





The students would see the graphic pictures and read of the atrocities when they worked on their research paper, but I wanted the classroom to be centered as much as possible on presenting the victims as real human beings before they became victims.

The second commitment was to make a conscious effort when presenting the chronology or viewing maps, to discuss and show photographs and/or relate a story from places where Jewish cultures had thrived such as Lithuania, Poland, Russia, etc. I found the book *Memories of My Life in a Polish Village 1930-1949* by Toby Knobel Fluek to be very useful in introducing many aspects of Jewish life to middle school students.

The third commitment in this area was to use the film *Camera of My Family* in my instruction. This film fit very well with my idea of using images in writing responses since the photographer, Catherine Hanf Noren (through the narrator), discussed the images of her family that she had discovered and asked the questions that all of us ask. Questions such as Who am I?, Where do I come from?, To whom do I belong? The film is especially pertinent for 8th graders who are reaching the age when they begin to look at their own family history a little more deeply than in the past. This change in the atmosphere of the classroom created a space in which the second major change in the unit could flourish.

*Our only hope will lie in the frail web of understanding of one person for the pain of another*

—John Dos Passos

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The second shift in focus was the decision to use poetry and poetic images to help students move beyond knowledge to the affective domain and allow them better to internalize what they were learning. I knew that 8th grade students would not respond well to an assignment to write a poem without a lot of preparation, without creating a fertile ground for poetic images to emerge relating to what they had learned in their research and readings throughout the unit. I struggled a bit on what techniques or methods I could use to help them create this fertile ground. Finally, I decided to use a variety of poem patterns to begin the process. I had a hunch that the restrictive nature of using patterns would force the students to delve much more deeply for meaningful images and increase their ability to express more by saying less. I did not expect that the poems produced by the patterns would be the students' best work, but that they would serve to begin the process and lead the students into their own individual style of poetic writing. I had no idea if this method would work, and I worried a bit about ensuring that this process did not become trivial and remained appropriate for the topic. I must say that I was very encouraged by the results. As you might expect, the restrictions of the patterns brought many complaints from the students, as well as a lot of intense support from me, but slowly the students began to recognize the rich images that were creeping into their work, and it was heart warming to see how they began to share their images with me and each other. When the time came to begin work on their individual poems using free verse, rhyming, narrative, or whatever form they chose, I was amazed at how quickly they went to work, how deeply they were delving, and how seriously they were taking their own work. I was overwhelmed by their results.

The primary objective in all of the poetic writing assignments was to create a poetic response to a written or visual image. Although coming up with a poem that was correctly written was a part of the exercises, the main emphasis was on creating an honest and meaningful connection between the student and the image to which they were responding. Sometimes just a simple poetic image that touched the student who was writing as well as the other members of the class became more important than the overall work. I read once that every true poem has that "aha" moment when a word or image takes the reader into a different realm—a mysterious realm that connects the writer and the reader to something beyond. You may notice in some of the poems, therefore, that there may be a problem in such areas as structure or rhythm.

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Because of the intense nature of their work and the topic, I chose not to be as strict as I would have with another subject. If their poem expressed that “aha” moment that both the student and I recognized and did not have distracting problems, I considered their poem complete.

Another consideration in planning the unit was to decide what was and was not appropriate for the content of their poems as well as mechanical hints. I decided on the following list of guidelines: (1. Poems could not be about perpetrators or Nazi symbols, (2. Graphic or gory images could not be used (3. Students could not write as a victim. They could respond to a victim or write as a personification of an artifact. 4) And, of course, mechanics issues such as not trying to rhyme, not repeating words except for special effects, had to be considered. During each lesson, an example of a poem for the pattern being used was modeled based on a topic other than the Holocaust so as not to influence their images.

Since I wanted the main emphasis of the poetry to be responding to a person or an image, I used both fictional and non-fictional writings as well as visual images to generate ideas. The first few lessons involved the play version of Anne Frank which is in our literature anthology and is required reading in our system as well as selections from the complete *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. I wanted to stress two things in responding to these works. First I wanted the students to respond to one of the characters to demonstrate that they had really connected with and internalized some of the characteristics of that person as much as possible by reading about them. For this I used a prepositional phrase pattern. This pattern consisted of eight lines, each of which had to be a prepositional phrase. The title did not have to be a phrase. This was one of the most constrictive patterns. They were not allowed to repeat a preposition (get those English books out!), and it was also difficult to avoid rambling. The students had to learn that each line had to lead to the next line in a meaningful way and that there had to be a turn in about the fifth or sixth line to get the “aha” moment. This is, of course, very subtle and the students struggled with understanding how to accomplish this in the beginning.

The following student responded to Peter van Daan:

Peter van Daan

*Because of his yearning  
For solitude,  
In the gloomy attic  
with Mouschi  
Without Anne's annoying behavior,  
During his transformation  
From child  
To adult.*

I think you can sense that poetic “moment” at the end.

The second thing that I wanted the students to do with Anne Frank was to take a deeper, more critical look, at some of Anne Frank's statements, particularly contrasting her comments that have labeled her as an optimist and those that show the opposite, not so optimistic, side of her personality. I also encouraged them to read and respond to Anne's comments about her own struggles as a teenager with which many of them could identify. I saved this assignment until we had finished the pattern work so that the students would be prepared to dig a little more deeply for these poems.





The following student shows a struggle with Anne’s optimism and an empathy with some of her teenage feelings:

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Wondering  
A Response to Anne Frank

*I know how you feel,  
I've felt the same.  
I know where you are,  
I've been there before.  
I know who you are,  
I hear what you say,  
But I don't see how you can  
Keep all your anger locked up.  
It seems you're always optimistic.  
If only you knew.  
Surely somewhere inside of you  
There's a place that hates,  
A place that cries,  
A place that screams,  
A place that dies.  
You say you're afraid of your other half,  
Is this why?  
Maybe you are right,  
Maybe there is good in everyone.  
But sometimes  
I wonder.*

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An excellent book that I also used to generate poetic images in response to Anne Frank was *Dear Anne Frank: Poems* by Margorie Agosin. The poems in this collection are very accessible to teenagers and offer unique slants on Anne and her writings. Agosin has a wonderful introduction to the book that is filled with statements conducive to creating images.

One of the areas that I wanted my students to look at more deeply was resistance, particularly spiritual resistance. To begin this part of the unit, I chose to use the picture book, *Rose Blanche*, by Roberto Innocenti which was written in memory of Sophie Scholl of the White Rose resistance group. Some Holocaust educators choose not to use fiction, but as an eighth grade language arts teacher, I find that well chosen fiction often makes some of the learning about the Holocaust very accessible to the students. When choosing a work of fiction, I ensure that information is accurate and that students are frequently reminded that the work is fictional. I also pair the book with a non-fiction work that complements it. Coupled with *Rose Blanche*, I used excerpts from *The White Rose* by Inge Scholl so that students would learn about the real Sophie Scholl, her brother Hans, and the other members of the group. One of the reasons that I like using Innocenti’s book is that it is filled with words and phrases that have both literal and symbolic meanings. Students can readily identify how often the author uses the image of winter, of being cold or frozen, or of everything being gray or dark. Another image of importance is that of the coming of spring at the end of the story. As we discuss why Innocenti might have wanted to end with the unsettling image of spring at the end, I read *Promise of a New Spring: the Holocaust and Renewal* by Gerda Weissmann Klein. *Rose Blanche* can also be useful for discussing types of human behavior since Rose can be seen as both a rescuer and a victim.

I often used the Parts of Speech Poem Pattern for *Rose Blanche*. An example of this pattern follows:

### Parts of Speech Poem Pattern

Noun  
Verb Prepositional Phrase  
Prepositional Phrase  
Conjunction Prepositional Phrase  
Like  
Adjective Noun Prepositional Phrase  
Adjective Noun Prepositional Phrase  
Conjunction Noun Prepositional Phrase  
Verb (ing endings often used here)  
Adverb Prepositional Phrase



An interesting feature of this pattern is the use of the word *like* in the middle which adds the dimension of creating phrases that act as similes for the first word of the poem. After modeling an example and, if deemed necessary since this pattern can be a bit difficult, writing an example together on a topic other than the Holocaust, the students begin working with this pattern using the images discussed in class or new ones that surface as they write.

The following poem was written by a student who chose to work with images of cold and the innocence of Rose:

**Rose Blanche**

*Rose Blanche  
Killed by the frost  
Of the night  
And by her innocence  
Like  
A small bird in a blizzard,  
An earthworm in a hen house,  
Or a blind hawk inside his nest  
Searching  
Desperately for a way out.*

Later, when working on a free verse poem for Rose Blanche, this same student continued with the images of winter.

**Rose Blanche**

*At first, her childlike seed did sprout  
Then did it start to grow,  
But as the bud began to swell  
The ground was touched with snow.  
The little Rose sat pale and thin,  
Laid cowed 'neath the trees,  
The white ice turned her petals brown  
And froze her dainty leaves.  
The blizzard howled a mournful cry,  
The Rose made not a sound,  
Until her life was all but lost,  
Beneath the icy ground.*

Continuing with the subject of resistance, I shared a list of various ways that the victims of the Holocaust resisted that I copied from the museum at the Ghetto Fighters' House in Israel to help students understand that armed resistance was not the only kind of resistance that occurred and that there were many examples of spiritual resistance. We also read the poems "They Had a System" by Yala Korwin and "There Were Those" by Susan Bambroff.

The Cinquain Poem Pattern was used for writing about spiritual resistance, and the following student chose to write about the secret practice of Judaism:

*Sabbath  
Holy, peaceful  
Observed in secret  
To remember their past  
Resistance*

Another image for evoking poetic images evolved from our reading excerpts from *On Both Sides of the Wall* by Vladka Meed while we were discussing the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In her memoirs, Meed asked why the rest of the world was so silent, and we started talking about the word *silence* with all of its various meanings in the Holocaust. I shared the poem "1945, The Silence" by Burton D. Wasserman which is a powerful and painful expression of *silence*. Students also began to find other examples in other poems that expanded their ideas. Soon we were ready to begin writing. The poem pattern used for this lesson was Haiku which seemed to work very well for the abstractness of silence. The following examples demonstrate the variety of directions in which the students' thoughts took them:

*Children sit sadly  
Silent in their mother's arms  
Awaiting the night*

*Jews who want to pray  
But who have to sit silent  
Long for the Torah*

*Silent survivor  
Rocking every day and night  
Not saying a word*



There were many moving poems about silence. The following student expressed her thoughts about the camps today:

**Silence of the Camps**

*A Reflection on the Holocaust*

*The old gates creak with history,  
the grounds echo pain  
of brutality,  
killing,  
and loneliness.  
This place has a voice  
and to the yearning it will speak.*

*The walls will tell a traveler  
of how children grasped for them  
clinging,  
scratching,  
pulling,  
hoping to escape,  
but they never did.*

*Just ask the grounds about the visitors  
whom the Angels of Death led with a smile.  
There was no turning back for them,  
nowhere to run.  
Their patches had marked their destiny.*

*The gates speak of emptiness  
how it's so lonely here and  
how in the end,  
all that remains,  
is the silence of the past...*

My students also discovered a gold mine of images when listening to Alex Gross, a Czechoslovakian survivor who was liberated from Buchenwald at age 16 and later came to live in Atlanta. Mr. Gross came to our school and addressed the eighth graders. As soon as we returned to our classroom, we brainstormed all of the images that we had identified in his story. Images such as his raw and bleeding hands from throwing heavy, rough bricks, the loss of his blonde hair, his ride in the cattle car, his last vision of his mother and father, and the black American soldier who brought him back to consciousness at Buchenwald and whom he thought was an angel.

By this time, I knew that the poem patterns had done the job that I hoped for, and the students were able to tackle poems about Mr. Gross without using a pattern. In the first example below, the student used the image of the painful wounds caused by the bricks that were thrown and caught to relate to the pain that Mr. Gross has suffered since the Holocaust as well. He had told them about the tragic death of his only son in a farming accident and the rape and murder of his wife in Atlanta. The student expresses in her poem that his strength in surviving all of that, and his willingness to educate and make a difference, strengthens those whom he touches.

**A Destined Gift**

*You were thrown a brick.  
It was caught with your bare hands.  
They were worn,  
But the wounds healed.*

*Life tossed you a load of bricks  
And yet you caught them, too.  
You carried them on your back  
Until your time was up.  
You healed.  
You were strong  
And held on.*

*The scars are there  
And the pain remains,  
And so it shall,  
But for a purpose.  
You try to educate others  
To make a difference,  
And you have.*

*Your strength spreads,  
As a spilt bucket of water  
Dampens the thirsty earth.*



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When all of the topics had been completed and several drafts of both pattern and original poems had been written, the final assignment for the unit was to write one more poem on any image of their choosing. Some students chose to write another poem on one of the topics that we had covered which was interesting because they expressed their desire to complete the thoughts that had been awakened about that particular image, and went to work with a lot of energy. Others chose to use the visual images that covered the walls in the classroom: images of shoes, a cattle car, a suitcase, the Ringleblum milk can, and many others. Again I was amazed at the depth at which the students were writing. One student reflected on the guilt of all who stood by and/or helped to carry out the work of the Nazis by personifying the train that carried Jews to the death camps.

#### **Reflections on Guilt**

*I carried the Jews to unknown places  
Where fear lay and ashes blew*

*I pulled cars made for cattle  
Instead there were humans  
Bewildered and afraid  
Arbeit macht frei was written on the gate  
Where one man stood deciding  
So many others' fate  
There were huge piles of gold and shoes  
Taken away from those they called Jews*

*Is this cruelty all my fault?  
Where did all the people go?  
Would it have happened anyway?  
Will I ever really know?*

*I carried the Jews to unknown places  
Where fear lay and ashes blew  
But I never brought any Jews back.*

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Another student chose to write as if he were the Emanuel Ringelblum milk can (a hidden archive from the Warsaw Ghetto) that has not been found. This student struggled a bit with language arts, but the simplicity of his poem is touching.

**We Had to Tell Them Everything**  
*In Memory of Emanuel Ringelblum*

*As I lie  
 Beneath the ground  
 Very lonely  
 Always a frown*

*My rusting body  
 When it rains  
 Filled with history  
 Of Jews on trains*

*The other two  
 Have been dug up  
 But I am still here  
 With moles and grubs*

*They haven't found me  
 I hope they will  
 I am a milk can  
 In the moonlight still*

The final example is one of the most poignant. This was one of those students who did well, but to whom her good grades did not come without a lot of work. Once she decided to write as if she were a shoe, she became very committed to her poem, constantly writing and rewriting—frequently checking with me to see if she was on the right track. I can still see her bent over her desk with such intent, a serious look on her face as she struggled to make her thoughts come together. I remember that she was the only student who had to take her poem home after two days of work in the classroom. She finally felt that she had done her best, and, although I could see some of those problems I mentioned at the beginning (for example, one of her verses has only three lines when all the others have four and there are rhythm problems) I was extremely moved by her poem. I knew that she had entered that mysterious connection through her work, and I had no intention of having her lose that moment by having to rework it once again. She certainly has that “moment” at the end.

**Cradled Journey**

*As the day ahead awaits me  
 I protect Eva's foot from the ground  
 The miles I travel  
 Mean nothing to the soldiers*

*I'm the only thing she has  
 To take with her on the Death Marches  
 Nothing protects Eva's foot  
 Better than I*

*When I cradle her foot  
 I know my job is complete  
 And I can rest*

*Knowing she has something  
 to stand on the next day  
 Eva sleeps peacefully  
 At night*

*Whatever kills her  
 Gas or guns  
 I'll be there for her  
 When death comes*

*When the day arrives  
 And Eva is gone,  
 I'll be of no importance  
 To anyone*

*I'll put my life to rest,  
 When I lay my life's journey  
 On the mound  
 Of shoes.*





These are just a few of the many touching poems that my students wrote over the years. Even after nine years of retirement, I am moved by them. I believe that the balance I struggled to achieve between knowledge and expressions of shared humanity—between the head and the heart—is responsible for the transformation in learning that we experienced.

*The more we know of the Holocaust, the more we change, the more we find ourselves circumscribed by the event we sought to transcend and from which we had hoped to pull free....The more we know, the more we shall remember.*

**-Terrence Des Pres**

As my retirement from teaching brings a part of my journey to a close, I find the questions with which I began this paper still pertinent. Has our work together in the classroom aroused conscience or compassion in my students? Will my students help to make the world a little safer or more humane? I will probably never know, but I hope, as teachers must, that vestiges of this journey will abide with the students for many years to come. I believe that 8th grade student Lona Smith, who wrote and delivered the dedication speech for the Memorial to the Children of the Holocaust that her class had created, encourages my hope of this in her final words:

*"We are the youth of today, and we, the class of 2000, dedicate this memorial to the children—not just to those who died, but to those who suffered and to those who will continue to suffer as a result of the Holocaust. We hope that wherever they may be, they know that we are the children, we are the future, and we remember."*



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