SAGE Research Methods: Doing Research Online

How to Use Creative and Embodied Methods

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─── **Learning Outcomes** ───

By the end of this guide, readers should be able to:

- Understand what "embodied" means in relationship to digital social science and humanities research
- Assess when creative and embodied methods are appropriate for research
- Design research questions for embodied social science research
- Identify and address the ethics of creative and embodied digital research methods
- Evaluate how the politics of digital media affect the use of embodied methods

Introduction

For the last three decades, social science researchers have been invested in what [Chadwick (2016)](#) calls the "turn to bodies" (p. 54). Indeed, the relationship between materiality, bodies and sensory and affective experiences has been the topic of many interdisciplinary debates and theoretical investigations, yielding important insights about the necessity of broadening the predominantly discursive focus of much social science research (see, e.g., [Brown et al., 2011](#); [Frank, 1990](#)). However, despite these embodied explorations, there has been little work that articulates how we might render theory into the concrete methodological steps required

to undertake such explorations, particularly within a digital context. Given that the last decade has seen a significant increase in digital media use worldwide ([Sandvine, 2020](#)), these expanded areas of play, work, and leisure deserve scholarly pursuit. This guide thus aims to distill conceptual work on embodiment in the social sciences and current research on digital data into sets of tools that scholars can engage with to implement digital embodied methods.

The goals of this guide are threefold. First, this guide aims to contextualize and encourage a greater understanding of embodiment within the social sciences and humanities. Second, it offers readers insights into how to design research questions that support embodied research. Third, this guide seeks to make clear the ethical implications of embodied methods, including the need to situate the role of the researcher, who is neither objective nor devoid of personal meaning-making during the research design and implementation stages, and the impacts of digital media affordances on this process. Throughout, this guide uses *Feminists Do Media* (by the Feminist Think Tank at the University of Waterloo)*,* as an example of an embodied methodological process that accesses the creative openings offered by this approach to research.

Embodiment and Creativity in the Social Sciences and Humanities

Critical perspectives in embodiment research suggest that all research, whether qualitative, quantitative, critical or rhetorical, digital or not, begins with the body. Embodied knowing, through sensorial and affective responses, offers alternative forms of research and researcher–participant relationality that function outside of language alone, challenging traditional ideas of an objective or disinterested

scholar. From a feminist perspective (e.g., Butler, 1990; Young, 1980), embodied research demonstrates how the bodies of researchers and research participants are deeply connected with and invested in the work that is pursued, necessarily paying attention to the ways that methodological processes are always situated and power-laden (Harding, 1993; Luka & Millette, 2018). Embodied methods do not simply consider the lived, bodily experiences of researchers and participants, but rather privilege those experiences. In part, this is because, as technofeminists have argued, human beings, even when invested in the virtual, are first and foremost embodied, and, especially in this digital moment, embodiment and its consequences are located and specific, intertwined materially and affectively with technology and peoples' varying degrees of technological access (Braidotti, 2019; Haraway, 1988). Certainly, despite arguments that the move to the virtual is a move toward disembodiment and disconnect, as researchers and research participants, we continue to feel our reactions to digital content and data. Our bodies are always emotionally, temporally, spatially, historically, contextually, *and* technologically enmeshed with our environments. In other words, even when we are online, we still very much have and feel bodily responses.

Taking this account of embodiment seriously, we can understand online embodied research as seeking to better understand, employ, analyze, or create awareness of embodied experiences for (1) researchers and/or (2) research participants. In her early work on embodiment, Hayles (2002) made the case that because we cannot, and should not attempt to, separate our mind from our body—a long debate on Cartesian mind–body dualisms that preceded Hayles' work. Researchers will always be embodied in physical ways despite immersing themselves in virtual

worlds. The key here is that researchers can begin to focus on the various relationships between ideas, people, feelings, and contexts that exist and that emerge in digitally mediated environments (Hayles, 2002). This moves us away from the philosophical question of where embodiment starts and where it comes from to instead consider the effects and implications of a greater focus on the body in research methods. To these points, queer and feminist conceptualizations of embodiment (e.g., Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 1990) offer the understanding that not only do we embody our situated relationship to the world, but our material realities (of ourselves and of objects around us) embody social, cultural, and political realities. Embodied research in online contexts, whether on social media, email, video calls, video games, or other virtual settings, thus requires expanding ontological and epistemological expectations about the role and nature of bodies and subjectivity to include an enmeshed understanding of language, embodiment, context, and history.

Section Summary

- There is a history of embodiment theory and literature that (re)integrates the body's physical and mental capacities in order to transcend the mind–body split that sought to distinguish between the mind and the body.

- Embodied methods privilege the lived, bodily experiences of researchers and participants through a focus on self-reflexivity and sensorial awareness.

- Embodiment encourages researchers and participants to explore

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> how our bodies are emotionally, temporally, spatially, historically, contextually, and technologically enmeshed with our environments.

Tapping Into the Body: Designing Embodied Research Questions

Embodiment enhances our connection to ourselves, our communities, our research, and the world around us at large. To make meaning (i.e., to understand, employ, analyze, assess, or create new knowledge) from embodied experiences asks that we become as self-aware as possible of our body and its reactions within the combined digital *and* physical environments that we find ourselves enmeshed with. This includes our thoughts, emotions, feelings, and senses as they arise. In designing questions and objectives for embodied research, there are two routes we might take: first, the research question might be situated in the researcher's personal embodied reaction to a research scene, and second, the question might be situated in examinations of the lived experience of research participants. In framing online research projects, the objectives will revolve around embodied roles, practices, and techniques, including (but not limited to) aspects like identity, language, voice, movement, sensation, and gesture and, importantly, their meanings, contexts, and implications. Researchers might be interested in the unique embodied customs that participants engage with, including their routines, habits, and interactions. To this point, Performance Studies scholar Ben Spatz (2017) suggests that the three requirements for doing embodied research are peo-

ple, space, and time, noting that how these factors are organized and weighted depends upon each unique project (p. 14). Here, again, we see how the focus is on the relationship between people and their experiences within a particular time and space. Embodied research methods deliberately bring together a consideration of these phenomena.

Applying feminist and queer conceptualizations of embodiment, consider the following example of *Feminists Do Media* (@aesthetic.resistance on Instagram), a research-creation project by Feminist Think Tank (FTT). FTT is a lab that explores and participates in feminist digital media cultures. As a co-director of the FTT alongside Dr Shana MacDonald (University of Waterloo), the research I engage in is committed to creating accessible repositories of digital content from a wide variety of feminist cultural spaces online. FTT brings together feminist researchers at various stages of their postsecondary career, from undergraduate to professor, to consider the field of digital media studies from intersectional, Black, Indigenous, trans, and queer feminist perspectives. We explore how different feminisms enact activist practices online and we utilize embodied feminist approaches in our analysis of digital cultures.

Because our focus is on articulating our emotional, affective, sensory, and bodily responses to these digital communities and the digital artifacts we produce, we conceptualize this as embodied and creative online research. There are three main questions that we pursue, all of which center on the role of the body as we explore spatially- and time-specific feminist strategies. Because this project examines feminist media practices that employ "the personal is political," we question the use of three specific embodied feminist strategies: first, the self-reflexive ad-

dress of the viewer, second, the emphasis on everyday life and, third, the comparative links between personal experience and larger structures of gender inequality. The research project is interested in identifying which embodied strategies have remained consistent and relevant from the early decades of the women's movement, exploring the continued appeal and value of these embodied strategies for their renewed use in the present. As researchers, we tap into our bodily responses to highlight our personal connections and embodied reactions to these spaces and the artifacts that we produce in order to support conversations about feminism and the various media tactics that feminist activists employ. Simultaneously, we explore how participants (in this case, through digital texts and films) have employed their own embodied strategies for feminist causes, reflecting the design of the research objectives.

Section Summary

- Research questions that employ embodied research can emerge from (1) the researcher's lived bodily experience on the research scene and/or (2) an interest in how research participants react to digital phenomena on the research scene, including their lived bodily experiences in relation to the digital.
- Research questions often explore embodied roles, practices, and techniques, including identity, language, voice, movement, sensation, and gesture and their meanings, contexts, and implications.

How Do I Become "Embodied"? Self-Reflexivity and Embodied Methods

Because we experience the world through our bodies, we are, simply put, always already embodied. In practice, however, to acknowledge and articulate our embodiment means self-reflexivity engaging with questions that interrogate our own internalized assumptions and judgments and physical bodily reactions. Questions that we might ask ourselves include:

- Where and when am I holding tension while engaging in the research process?
- How is my body language changing? When, for example, am I folding my arms across my chest or leaning back in seats?
- When do I feel (or not feel) completely immersed in my digital setting? Why do I feel (or not feel) completely immersed? When do I want (or not want) to feel immersed? How does this affect my experience?
- What feelings arise for me? What sparks of discomfort, anxiety, fear, excitement, joy, or relief emerge?
- Where and when does my heart rate pick up or slow down? What is happening with my breathing?
- What research phenomena (i.e., digital artifacts, interview questions or props, memories, experiences, etc.) am I drawn to? Which do I shy away from? Why am I having this reaction to this research phenomenon?

Ultimately, each of these self-reflexive questions asks that as a researcher or a participant you are attempting to place where your body or your participants' bodies are in the research process. While it is outside the scope of this guide to launch into full explanations, possible methods for embodied research include: body mapping (de Jager et al., 2016) or visual memoing (Ludlow, 2019), digital or virtual dwelling (Wiens, 2021), embodied ethnography (Inckle, 2010) and social me-

dia ethnography ([Postill & Pink, 2012](#)), embodied reflexivity ([Turner & Norwood, 2013](#)), materializing the digital ([Wiens et al., 2020](#)), memory work ([Gillies et al., 2004](#)), and sensory interviewing, including viewing photographs, drawing, painting, and writing ([Harris & Guillemin, 2012](#); [Sutton, 2011](#)). In thinking through the relationship between mind, body, experience, and context, we might consider how data analyses with an embodiment, even when claiming an embodied approach, tend to rely on discursive and linguistic explanations. Embodiment tends to be, in some way, a translation; it is difficult to measure, transcribe, or quantify embodiment, and there is no objective, unified, or verifiable approach. While many of these embodied methods inevitably return to a reliance on language to describe and interpret the body's sensorial, emotional, and affective reactions, this does not necessarily negate researchers' embodied desires to "go beyond" language or the discursive. Indeed, representation is still an embodied act as researchers "discover new meanings even as we move across the page, stage, canvas, or screen" ([Ellingson, 2017, p. 1](#)). Taking these possible questions and methods together, we can see how online embodied social inquiry enables researchers and participants to take seriously the relationship between our minds and bodies, even within the virtual, and to honor and hone our practices of self-reflexivity.

Returning to FTT's *Feminists Do Media*, one central way FTT does this is by virtually dwelling ([Wiens, 2021](#)) within online spaces. As an integral part of creative online research methods, dwelling asks that we "pay attention to the specificities of the space that are overwritten by dominant perceptions and uses of it" ([MacDonald, 2018, p. 279](#)). Dwelling within virtual spaces is a way to encourage embodied awareness and includes lingering with online stories (social media posts, emails,

video game narratives, etc.) as digital data to reconceptualize research as layered "scenes" ([MacDonald & Wiens, 2019](#)). Research scenes can be understood as "collections of material objects for researchers to study" that "also acknowledge[s] researchers' bodies, voices, and gestures as essential forms of material data" ([Wiens et al., 2020, p. 22](#)). We dwell within virtual research scenes to gather digital data and map online feminist discourse in real-time as participant–observer researchers who actively document and engage with content within these digital spaces. This data consists principally of our own bodies, movements, and experiences, as these repositories of tacit knowledge had the potential, when remediated into the @aesthetic.resistance repository, to help conceptualize these mediated research scenes as embodied environments that recognize people and their experiences as data, and employs collaborative dwelling as ways to intervene into prevailing normative academic and social cultures.

Section Summary

- We come to understand our embodied relationships by being in the world and through interrogating our own assumptions, judgments, biases, and bodily reactions.

- To make meaning using embodied methods requires honing practices of self-awareness and self-reflexivity through asking ourselves questions about our reactions as we interact with the digital and physical settings that we are entangled with.

- Methods for exploring embodied experiences include body mapping, visual memoing, digital or virtual dwelling, embodied ethnog-

raphy and social media ethnography, embodied reflexivity, materializing the digital, memory work, and sensory interviewing, including viewing photographs, drawing, painting, and writing.

Centering Ethics Within Creative and Embodied Methods

As with any research, there is always the need to consider the impacts of the research process on others, especially with embodied methods where participants are asked to be highly introspective or to re-live sensitive memories. Whether your project is solo research or participant-centered research, situating yourself as the researcher is important for beginning the process of recognizing what assumptions you might hold. Identity is a reflection of our social locations, which means that our identities illustrate a relationship between people and society, people and history, people and their cultures and communities, all of which are topics that embodied research explores. From an intersectional feminist perspective ([Crenshaw, 1989](#)), we can consider how "race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age [operate as] reciprocally constructing phenomena" ([Collins, 2015, p. 3](#)), affecting the impacts of how differently socially located people will experience power and oppression. These social locations refer to the groups that people belong to because of their place, role, or position in history and society. All people have a social location that is defined by their gender, race, socioeconomic class, age, sexuality, and ability, and our social locations tell a story that can change across space and time. As such, taking the opportunity to situate yourself as the

researcher begins the self-reflexive work necessary for crafting more ethical research agendas that are attuned to power.

At the same time, we should take care that as the researcher we do not center ourselves, which can unintentionally sideline the experiences of research participants. This can be achieved, in part, by thoughtfully selecting the questions, artifacts, or movements that you will ask your participants to work with to elicit embodied responses. Here, researchers must be aware of the potential for pain, injury, and/or trauma, as well as everyday accommodations for participants, and need to carefully curate artifacts, questions, and activities accordingly. This includes being aware of any participant-declared accessibility needs, whether physical or mental, and accommodating appropriately—for example, using closed-captioning on your online meeting platform or having a sign language interpreter available. To this point, making an embodied research experience as accessible as possible and protecting participants includes not only an awareness of power dynamics (between participants, between researchers, between participants and researchers, and between researchers, participants, and institutions), but active steps put in place to prevent exploitation from taking place, especially in online settings where there should be a consideration of how access to technology, digital literacies, and comfortability online will affect participants' ability to contribute. When curating artifacts, designing questions, or creating movement exercises for embodied research, consider:

- Who is engaging in this research or proposing this idea, and who are they doing this for?
- Why are these questions, artifacts, or movements being raised now? Why

is this research being framed in this way?

- Who does this question, research, or movement benefit?
- Who does this question, research, or movement harm?

These questions can help researchers to draw back from the research questions and methods and re-evaluate how they might impact both participants and the greater research community at large, modifying any questions or artifacts if necessary. Notably for online research, power dynamics exceed these physical relations because of the enmeshed nature of the virtual setting. Technologies, including the digital spaces of social media, reflect historic and socially ingrained biases, and as such the contexts in which technologies are created contribute to their effects. As the internet has grown in popularity and use for a wide variety of sectors, the known racism and sexism of the tech industry have followed (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018). As a result, especially as online work has ramped up during the COVID-19 pandemic, occurrences of "zoom bombing," doxing, and trolling have simultaneously increased. Because of this, it is imperative to ensure that precautions are taken for the safety of your research participants and outlined within your institutional ethics protocol while continuing to proactively work with your participants to help inform the unique embodied conditions of your research area. Practically speaking, you might create password-protected online meetings, clear caches after dwelling in online spaces, password protect any meeting recordings and data that is stored online, especially if any data identifies yourself or your participants, and ensure that participants feel safe in their own physical settings as you meet online in order to ethically pursue the research.

Considering ethics and power, one strength of an embodied approach to research lies in its ability to deliberately situate researchers and participants in the research scene within a web of various phenomena, as participants and researchers with particular histories and way of seeing the world based on social location (Wiens, 2021). This is inevitably small, messy, and unpredictable work since it is invested in the details of individual lived experiences, but it opens researchers and participants to the difficult and necessary collective conversations that arise from the embodied difference (Wiens et al., 2020). With *Feminists Do Media*, our embodied approach to data collection offers an orientation to data that supports a multi-generational, gender, and racially diverse group of researchers to explore data in the context of a research mandate oriented towards social justice. In this example, these mediated spaces not only document artifacts and stories from specific moments of time but also come to embody researchers' relationships to dwelling with the intersecting factors of time, place, space, self-history, and self-reflexivity, both at the time of dwelling and at the time of analysis and content creation.

In this example of embodied research, dwelling as a process of reflexivity is used to highlight different relational networks that currently exist and that are actively coming into being, in order to better understand experiences through affective and embodied time in a scene. This reflexive process helps to situate the researcher within the scene, identifying the personal relationship to the research to highlight the importance of each story. What this points to is a conceptualization of embodiment that challenges what scholars think of as data and knowledge production. While we can collage, create films, create participatory art, or materialize digital data through creation, when reported on, these processes are still interpretations

of embodiment, making it difficult to extrapolate commonalities or generalizability across these approaches because of their differences. And yet, as articulated above, this emphasizes the beauty of embodied research: as researchers, we open ourselves up to alternative ways of knowing, which can lead to more inclusive futures rooted in more expansive ways of seeing the world through being in touch with the feelings, senses, and emotions of our bodies.

Section Summary

- Engaging fully with embodied research necessitates acknowledging how your body is situated within the world. Situating yourself as the researcher and your social locations helps recognize what subconscious assumptions you might hold and can kick-start self-reflexivity, which contributes to more ethical research questions and methods that are attuned to power dynamics.
- Social locations refer to the groups that people belong to because of their place, role, or position in history and society, defined by gender, race, nationality, socioeconomic class, age, sexuality, ability, and more.
- Embodied online research still recognizes how bodies move within and occupy physical space, which means that our research processes need to include accessible and socially aware questions and artifacts.

The Politics of Digital Media and Embodied Research

In this last section, we turn to the relationship between embodiment and the pol-

itics of digital media. Here, the "politics" of space refers to the impacts or consequences of digital media on certain groups of people, communities, and social structures. Considering the enmeshed nature of mediated spaces as researchers and participants entangle themselves with the virtual, we need to consider the politics of digital media, keeping in mind that, just as no research is neutral, no digital media platform is neutral. Arola (2010) suggests that the design and rhetoric of the space shape a certain degree of understanding of the space itself based on a split between the content (i.e., the post) and the template (i.e., the design of the site). Within embodied digital research, we might look at how and why ideologies of sexism and racism continue to dominate within technological domains. The ways that technologies are designed contribute to their inherent biases that work to reinforce whiteness and misogyny. From a robot-judged beauty contest that chose all white finalists except for one woman with darker skin, to a risk algorithm that incorrectly predicted that previously arrested Black defendants were more likely to reoffend (Benjamin, 2019), and the association of the search "Black girls" with porn websites as the top search results on Google (Noble, 2018), the perpetuation of racial inequality persists in mediated spaces. In contemporary Western society, hegemonic forms of (toxic) masculinity and whiteness are still very much associated with technical proficiency and power. In other words, this is about who has power and who does not in a technocultural society that has historically privileged whiteness and masculinity. From an embodied perspective, as we have seen, understandings of "technology" are necessarily broadened to include not only the artifact, the technical object itself, but "also the cultures and practices associated with technologies" (Wajcman, 2010, p. 143). Embodied research should consider how the affordances of digital artifacts and spaces enable and constrain the actions,

thoughts, and feelings of participants and researchers based on the design of the space.

Choosing to design research questions and follow an embodied method demands that we as researchers pay attention to these digital media affordances, including the sociopolitical and economic power relations that technological systems represent since they are inseparable from the technical objects we might be studying. Reflecting on FTT's *Feminists Do Media* project mandate, part of this work is to address a critical and long-standing question of how researchers can engage the platform affordances of social media in their work (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Postill & Pink, 2012). This, the project demonstrates, can be done through advocating for embodied, researcher-driven practices for collecting data that are located within the community-specific media contexts and practices as they are developed and circulated. Carefully considering these reciprocal relationships between technological objects, digital spaces, researchers, participants, and contexts is thus key for ethically and holistically engaging with embodied methods online.

Section Summary

- Just as we would consider the possibilities and limitations of a specific space for physical embodied practice, online settings are also not neutral, and the affordances of each platform will differ based on its format and function.
- Embodied research should consider the affordances and politics of the digital platforms and artifacts they are working with so that

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> researchers can acknowledge how the actions, thoughts, and feelings of participants and researchers alike are enabled and constrained by the platform.

Conclusion

Even with the turn to the digital, embodiment continues to play a significant role in scholarly pursuits. This guide has offered an overview of how to identify when embodied methods can be used for online research and has presented a series of considerations for how to design research questions for embodied online research that are attuned to power dynamics and the politics of digital media. This guide has covered: (1) how to gauge when embodied methods are a good fit for the research the researcher is undertaking; (2) how to effectively design research questions for embodied research; and (3) how to situate your role as a researcher to account for power, positionality, and the politics of the digital space.

✓ ── **Multiple Choice Quiz Questions** ──

1. Embodied research online demonstrates:

   ◯ **a.** How our bodies are emotionally, temporally, spatially, historically, contextually, *and* technologically enmeshed with our (digital

and physical) environments

✓

Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer.

○ **b.** How the mind and the body can be separated during the research process

✗

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

○ **c.** How researchers' experiences and social locations should be isolated from the design of embodied research questions

✗

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

2. The three fundamentals of embodied research include:

○ **a.** Digital media, emotions, and contexts

✖

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

○ **b.** Time, space, and people

✔

Correct Answer

> **Feedback:** Well done, correct answer.

○ **c.** Technology, time, and place.

❌

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

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3. Which of the following scenarios would be most likely to benefit from an embodied approach?

○ **a.** An analysis of the social media tactics used by science communicators to debunk COVID-19 fertility myths

❌

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

○ **b.** A study of the virality of disinformation memes across social media platforms during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic
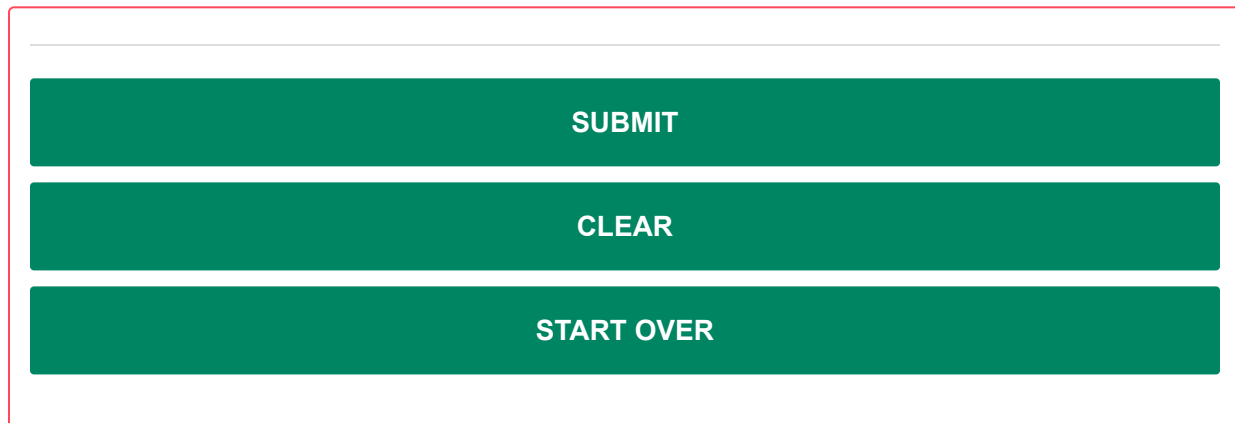
✕

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

○ **c.** An exploration of parents' lived experiences during the shift to online work while caretaking amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

✓

Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer.

SUBMIT

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START OVER

Further Reading

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Web Resources

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGX6FbXPtdk

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