International Journal Research of Leading Publication (IJLRP)

E-ISSN: 2582-8010 ● Website: www.ijlrp.com ● Email: editor@ijlrp.com

Oracle APEX Development Best Practices: Ensuring Scalability and Maintainability

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Abstract

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, businesses increasingly rely on efficient and scalable solutions to manage their operations effectively [1]. Oracle APEX (Application Express), a low-code development platform, has become a go-to tool for organizations looking to streamline the application development process. With its ability to simplify the creation of sophisticated web applications, Oracle APEX enables rapid deployment and lowers development costs [2]. However, as organizations scale their applications, scalability, performance, and long-term maintainability challenges emerge. This article provides a comprehensive guide to best practices in Oracle APEX development, specifically ensuring scalability and maintainability for enterprise-grade applications. It covers critical topics such as application architecture, database optimization, performance tuning, modularization, security, and effective code reuse strategies. By following these best practices, developers can build applications that meet the performance demands of modern enterprise environments and ensure flexibility for future growth. This article intends to equip developers with the necessary insights and strategies to create robust, scalable, and maintainable Oracle APEX applications.

Keywords: Oracle APEX, low-code development, scalability, maintainability, database design, performance optimization, security, modular architecture, caching, asynchronous processing, and testing.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the current digital era, businesses manage increasingly complex operations while maintaining a competitive edge. Adopting technology that enables rapid development and easy scalability is crucial to achieving this. Oracle APEX (Application Express), a low-code platform, has emerged as a popular tool for businesses looking to accelerate their application development process while reducing the complexity of managing web-based applications[2]. Oracle APEX empowers developers to build web applications using minimal code. As per Oracle APEX website, it reduces 98% of hand coding, allowing them to deploy sophisticated and feature-rich applications rapidly [2]. Its visual development environment simplifies the creation of forms, reports, charts, and dashboards, enabling rapid iteration and deployment.

Despite its numerous advantages, one of the challenges faced by Oracle APEX developers is ensuring that the applications they create can scale effectively and remain maintainable as their organizations grow. Scalability refers to the application's ability to handle increased loads, whether from a greater volume of users, more complex datasets, or new business requirements [3]. Similarly, maintainability ensures that the application can evolve smoothly, accommodate new features, and address bugs or security vulnerabilities without causing disruptions [4].

As organizations grow, they often experience rising demands on their applications, making it essential for developers to adopt best practices to optimize performance, minimize technical debt, and future-proof their solutions. Enterprise-grade applications must be built with scalability and maintainability to handle large datasets and high user concurrency while remaining responsive. Without these considerations, systems will likely experience performance bottlenecks, security risks, and increased maintenance costs.

This article aims to bridge the gap between Oracle APEX's low code promise and the real-world demands of building enterprise applications capable of sustaining high growth and usage. It provides a comprehensive guide to the best practices for Oracle APEX development, focusing on strategies for building scalable and maintainable applications. By following these best practices, Oracle APEX developers can develop applications that meet their organization's present demands and provide a strong foundation for future growth and scalability.

II. SIGNIFICANCE OF SCALABILITY AND MAINTAINABILITY

In software development, scalability and maintainability are critical factors ensuring long-term success for any application, particularly in enterprise environments. These attributes play a vital role in the system's performance, longevity, and adaptability as business needs evolve and user demands grow. These factors become even more significant for Oracle APEX applications, where rapid development and ease of deployment are emphasized.

In modern business environments, scalability is paramount, as companies often experience rapid growth or fluctuating workloads. If an application cannot scale effectively, it risks becoming slow, unresponsive, or unreliable under heavy load, directly impacting user satisfaction and business operations. Ensuring scalability in Oracle APEX involves efficient database design, optimized queries, asynchronous processing, and caching strategies. Scalable systems must also be designed to handle peak loads and sudden surges in activity, particularly in industries like healthcare, e-commerce, and finance.

On the other hand, maintainability refers to the ease with which an application can be updated, improved, or debugged after its initial development phase [5]. Over time, as business requirements evolve and new features are added, maintaining an application becomes increasingly challenging. Poorly designed or overly complex systems can lead to "technical debt," where the cost of future changes becomes high due to tangled code, inefficient processes, or lack of documentation [6]. This can be especially problematic in large-scale applications where multiple developers may need to work on the application over its lifetime. Maintaining an application with ease ensures that future updates, bug fixes, and feature additions can be implemented without introducing significant risks or disruptions.

Moreover, scalability and maintainability are intrinsically connected—scalable applications often require ongoing maintenance to ensure they function efficiently as the system grows. As an example, Oracle APEX's built-in scalability features allow for the dynamic scaling of application performance, but without proper maintenance practices, such as continuous performance monitoring and error handling, the application might experience failures as its user base grows. Therefore, both are intertwined and require a balanced approach to ensure that applications not only scale but also remain adaptable, secure, and efficient over time.

III. DESIGNING SCALABLE APPLICATION

Designing a scalable Oracle APEX application goes beyond creating functional code—it involves architecture planning, database optimization, leveraging appropriate components, and ensuring efficient resource management. When these principles are followed, applications can grow without suffering from performance degradation, slow response times, or excessive maintenance costs.

A. Architecture and Infrastructure

The Architecture and Infrastructure section ensures that an Oracle APEX application can handle high scalability and performance requirements. This part of the design focuses on optimizing the application's infrastructure's physical and logical structures. The following are a few key elements to consider:

a) Connection Pooling

- Database Connection Pooling: Connection pooling helps manage the lifecycle of database connections efficiently [7]. Without connection pooling, every HTTP request would create a new database connection, leading to excessive overhead. Use connection pooling to reuse connections instead of establishing new ones for every request.
- APEX Connection Pooling: Oracle APEX supports connection pooling for database access, and it is advisable to configure this to avoid the cost of establishing connections for every user interaction. Ensure the maximum pool size is set correctly to handle peak usage while maintaining optimal resource utilization [8].
- Connection Pool Management: Regularly monitor and adjust the pool size and connection limits according to the application's traffic and workload patterns. Also, idle connections should be managed appropriately to avoid resource waste.

b) Web and Application Server Tuning

Oracle APEX typically runs on a Web Server and an Application Server (e.g., Oracle HTTP Server, Oracle WebLogic Server). Optimizing these servers is essential for high performance:

- Web Server Optimization: Configure the webserver to efficiently handle many concurrent HTTP requests. Implement keep-alive connections to minimize the overhead of establishing multiple TCP/IP connections between the client and server.
- Compression: Enable HTTP compression to reduce the size of responses sent to the client. This reduces bandwidth usage and speeds up response times, especially for large pages or static assets [9].
- Caching: Use reverse proxies (e.g., Varnish, NGINX) or content delivery networks (CDNs) to cache static content (CSS, JavaScript, images) and offload demand from the backend servers.
- Session Management: Application servers should be configured to handle user sessions efficiently. Use session affinity (sticky sessions) when deploying in a load-balanced environment to ensure that user sessions are routed to the correct server [10].
- Concurrency Tuning: Configure the web and application servers to handle a high number of concurrent requests without degradation in response time. This involves tuning thread pools, request queueing, and worker processes to handle incoming requests efficiently.

c) Load Balancing

Load balancing is critical for scaling out an Oracle APEX application to handle increased traffic. It distributes incoming traffic across multiple web andapplication servers, preventing any single server from becoming a bottleneck.

- Hardware vs Software Load Balancers: Depending on the scale of your application, you can use hardware-based load balancers (e.g., F5 BIG-IP) or software-based load balancers (e.g., NGINX, HAProxy). Both approaches can distribute traffic across multiple servers but may differ in cost and complexity.

- Round Robin vs Smart Load Balancing: Use round-robin for simple load distribution or smart load balancing techniques, such as using server health checks and request routing based on server load, to ensure requests are directed to the most capable server.
- Global Load Balancing: If your application is deployed across multiple data centers or cloud regions, use global load balancing to distribute traffic geographically. This can reduce user latency and provide failover in regional outages.
- Session Stickiness: In a load-balanced environment, ensure session stickiness (also called session affinity) is appropriately configured, meaning a user's session will be consistently routed to the same application server for the duration of the session to maintain state [10].

d) Auto-scaling

In Oracle cloud environments, configure auto-scaling to dynamically add or remove instances of your web and application servers based on traffic patterns [11]. This ensures that resources are allocated as needed without manual intervention.

e) Real-Time Monitoring:

Use monitoring tools (e.g., Oracle Enterprise Manager, APEX Monitoring, or third-party services) to track key performance metrics such as response times, CPU utilization, memory usage, and database query execution times.

f) Performance Dashboards:

Build performance dashboards to give developers and administrators insight into application performance in real-time. This can help identify bottlenecks quickly and make necessary adjustments to improve performance.

B. DatabaseOptimization

As Oracle APEX applications are fundamentally database-driven, the database design and optimization are crucial in achieving scalability. One of the first steps to ensure efficient database performance is to optimize SQL queries. Inefficient queries, such as those that involve unnecessary joins or lack proper indexing, are often the culprits behind slow application performance. By focusing on query optimization techniques, such as using appropriate indexes, minimizing subqueries, and optimizing joins, developers can significantly reduce the query execution time. Optimizing SQL queries ensures that the database can scale with increasing users and data.

Another critical technique is bulk processing in PL/SQL. Large datasets can be efficiently processed using bulk operations like FORALL and BULK COLLECT. These operations reduce context switches between SQL and PL/SQL engines, resulting in faster data processing [12]. This becomes particularly important when dealing with bulk inserts, updates, or deletes, where traditional row-by-row processing could lead to significant overhead. By adopting bulk operations, developers can improve the performance of large-scale operations without sacrificing accuracy or completeness.

Partitioning large tables is another best practice for scalable database performance. When dealing with vast amounts of data, partitioning divides large tables into smaller, more manageable segments based on specified criteria such as date ranges, row level status, geographic location, etc. This partitioning helps reduce query execution times, especially for complex queries that need to scan large datasets. It also enhances maintenance tasks like backups and data archiving by allowing them to be performed on individual partitions rather than the entire table, reducing the time and resources required for these operations.

C. Caching Strategies for Performance Enhancement

Caching is one of the most effective techniques for improving performance in scalable Oracle APEX applications. It allows frequently accessed data to be stored temporarily, minimizing the need for repeated database queries and reducing system load. In an APEX environment, caching can be implemented at different levels, such as session, database, and result set caching.

Session caching stores temporary session data across multiple pages in the application. This is particularly beneficial when users navigate between pages that require the same data, as session caching eliminates the need to fetch data repeatedly from the database. Database result set caching stores frequently queried data, reducing the times the database needs to process identical queries. For instance, data-intensive reports can be cached, ensuring faster load times for users, especially in high-demand environments.

Another powerful caching technique is result set caching, which caches the results of complex queries that do not change frequently. This is particularly useful for analytical or reporting applications where the same set of data is queried multiple times. Caching such results prevents the system from executing expensive computations repeatedly, thus speeding up the overall application and improving the user experience. By implementing effective caching mechanisms, APEX applications can deliver fast performance, even as the number of users and the volume of data increases.

D. Efficient Use of APEX Components

Oracle APEX provides a suite of built-in components that, when used effectively, can dramatically improve scalability. For instance, Asynchronous JavaScript and XML (AJAX) is a client-side technology that allows web pages to retrieve data from the server asynchronously without requiring a full-page refresh. Using AJAX callbacks instead of traditional form submissions helps reduce server load and improves user experience by enabling real-time interactions without needing page reloads. This approach is beneficial for applications that require frequent data updates or real-time interactions, such as dashboards, data visualizations, Cascading LOVs, etc [13].

Another critical component of APEX is lazy loading. This technique helps load data asynchronously, especially in applications with large datasets or long-running queries. Lazy loading ensures that only the necessary data is loaded initially, and additional data is loaded during user interaction like mouse scrolling or Page-Down key. This prevents long load times associated with fetching large volumes of data simultaneously, improving application performance and ensuring a smoother user experience.

Additionally, declarative validations in APEX, which are built into the platform, should be used wherever possible instead of implementing custom PL/SQL logic. Built-in validations, such as required field checks or format validation, reduce the server-side processing load and can be implemented quickly without complex coding. This saves development time and improves scalability, as the server is not burdened with unnecessary processing tasks.

Leveraging RESTful web services enhances an application's scalability by enabling it to interact seamlessly with external systems. RESTful APIs allow applications to offload some processing tasks to external systems or microservices, thereby reducing the burden on the database and application server. This reduces bottlenecks and ensures that the application performs well under increasing loads. The integration with external systems can also enable asynchronous data processing, ensuring smoother user interactions and system responsiveness.

APEX collections is another valuable feature for temporary data storage in session. However, using them excessively can lead to memory overheads and impact performance. Collections should be used judiciously—primarily for short-term data manipulation tasks—because they are stored in memory, and overuse can lead to significant resource consumption. Developers can optimize application performance and prevent resource wastage by using collections effectively.

Therefore, a well-thought-out architecture, optimized database design, efficient caching strategies, and effective leveraging of APEX components all contribute to creating scalable applications that perform well and meet evolving business needs.

IV. ENSURING SECURITY

As Oracle APEX applications scale, ensuring robust security is critical to the application's integrity and performance. As more users interact with the system and more features are added, vulnerabilities become more exposed. Therefore, it is essential to implement security measures that address potential threats while ensuring that the system can scale seamlessly. Below are key best practices for securing Oracle APEX applications at scale.

A. AuthenticationMechanisms

As applications scale and user numbers grow, it is essential to focus on authentication mechanisms. Multi-factor authentication (MFA) should be enabled for added security, especially for users accessing sensitive data or critical application functions. Oracle APEX supports integrating with external identity providers, allowing for more flexible and scalable authentication options. Implementing MFA ensures that even if a user's credentials are compromised, unauthorized access is still prevented by requiring an additional form of verification.

B. Role-Based Access Control (RBAC)

Role-Based Access Control (RBAC) is a vital security practice that limits user permissions based on their role within the system. By categorizing users into predefined roles—such as admin, user, or guest—developers can ensure that users only have access to the functionalities and data they are authorized to use [14]. This practice minimizes the risk of unauthorized data access or changes and helps maintain performance by limiting access to resource-intensive functionalities. It also streamlines maintenance, as modifying user permissions is easier when centrally controlled through roles rather than on an individual user basis. As the user base expands, RBAC offers a scalable and efficient solution for managing access across large systems.

C. Input Validation and Sanitization

Input validation is a fundamental security practice that prevents various attacks, including SQL injection and cross-site scripting (XSS). By thoroughly validating user inputs, developers can ensure that only the system accepts only expected data and harmful inputs are rejected [15]. APEX_ESCAPE is a built-in utility in Oracle APEX that helps sanitize user inputs to prevent XSS attacks by escaping potentially harmful characters before rendering them in the browser. For SQL injection protection, inputs should be validated against a strict pattern or range of acceptable values, and all input should be properly escaped before being used in SQL queries. By enforcing input validation, developers reduce the likelihood of malicious data being introduced into the system, which could compromise the application's security.

D. Use of Bind Variables

One of the most effective ways to prevent SQL injection attacks is by utilizing bind variables [16]. Dynamically generated SQL queries are vulnerable to SQL injection, which occurs when attackers manipulate input data to execute malicious SQL statements. Bind variables mitigate this risk by separating user input from SQL code. This ensures that user inputs are treated solely as data, not executable code. In addition to enhancing security, bind variables can improve query performance by allowing the database engine to reuse execution plans, reducing the overhead of query parsing and optimization.

E. Session State Protection

In scalable applications, session hijacking and session manipulation are significant security concerns. Session state protection is a feature in Oracle APEX that prevents unauthorized access to or manipulation of session variables. As applications handle more concurrent user sessions, ensuring that each session remains secure and isolated from others becomes crucial. Enabling session state protection using checksums at page level or attribute levels ensures that sensitive session information cannot be tampered with [17], protecting the integrity of user data and preventing malicious actions that could compromise the application. This protection is essential, especially in environments where high user concurrency increases the likelihood of security breaches.

F. Secure APIs and Web Services

API security is critical in modern applications, especially as Oracle APEX frequently integrates with external systems or services. When connecting with external systems, RESTful web services should be used to exchange data securely. Authentication mechanisms such as OAuth2 or API keys should be implemented to verify the identity of users and external systems before granting access. Additionally, sensitive data transmitted through APIs should be encrypted using TLS/SSL to ensure the data remains secure during communication [18]. For added security, APIs should be designed with the principle of least privilege in mind, ensuring that only necessary data and actions are exposed to external clients. This reduces the potential attack surface and minimizes the risk of unauthorized access.

G. Data Encryption and Secure Storage

Protecting sensitive data is paramount in scalable applications. Data encryption should be implemented both in transit and at rest to safeguard user information from unauthorized access. Oracle APEX applications should leverage TLS/SSL to encrypt data during transmission between the client and the server. This ensures that data remains secure as it travels over the network [18]. Additionally, sensitive data such as passwords or credit card numbers should be hashed using secure algorithms like SHA-256 or PBKDF2 before being stored in the database [18].

H. Continuous Security Patching

As new vulnerabilities emerge, staying updated with security patches and updates provided by Oracle is critical. Security patches are regularly released for Oracle APEX and the underlying Oracle Database. By incorporating a process for periodically applying security updates, developers can ensure that known vulnerabilities are addressed before they become exploitable. This proactive approach to security reduces the risk of security breaches and allows the application to scale without compromising security.

V. Ensuring Maintainability

Maintaining an Oracle APEX application is essential for its long-term success. A well-maintained application ensures reliability, facilitates future enhancements, and allows for seamless integration of new business requirements. By following a set of best practices, developers can reduce technical debt, minimize downtime, and improve both the speed of modifications and the overall user experience. This section focuses on strategies promoting maintainability, enabling Oracle APEX applications to remain agile and efficient.

A. Code Organization and Modularity

A well-structured and modular codebase is critical for efficient maintenance. Developers should strive for a clean, organized application where business logic, presentation, and data handling are separated into logical layers. By encapsulating business logic in PL/SQL packages**,** procedures**,** and functions, developers make the code more reusable and easier to debug. This modular approach helps isolate changes to specific parts of the application, reducing the risk of introducing errors when making updates [4].

Additionally, using a layeredarchitecture—where the database, business logic, and user interface are each independently maintained—ensures that the application is more straightforward to scale and manage. This organized structure clarifies where changes need to be made without affecting unrelated areas, making updates less risky.

Moreover, developers should leverage sharedcomponents like templates, lists of values (LOVs), Lists, application items, application processes, etc. Reusing these components across multiple pages makes the application more consistent, reducing the need for duplicate code and minimizing maintenance efforts.

Lastly, avoiding hardcodedvalues is essential for maintainability. Instead of embedding static values, developers should use lookup tables, system parameters, or application items. This makes the application more flexible and easier to update, as changes can be made without altering the core codebase.

B. Implementing Version Control and Change Management

In a collaborative development environment, implementing a Version Control System (VCS) is crucial for tracking changes and ensuring smooth collaboration. Using tools like GitHub, GitLab, or Bitbucket to manage the source code of PL/SQL scripts, APEX application exports, and related assets enables developers to keep an organized record of all changes. This also ensures that developers can roll back to previous versions in case of issues, providing a safety net when making modifications.

Additionally, adopting Continuous Integration (CI) and Continuous Deployment (CD) practices can automate some testing and deployment processes, ensuring that changes are consistently deployed across different environments. This not only saves time but also reduces the chances of human error during deployment.

It is a good practice to lock the application page when working on it, like feature addition, bug fixing, etc., to prevent concurrent edits and protect the work in progress. It also sends a clear indication to fellow developers that the development is in progress on that particular page, thereby not to parallelly make any changes to the shared components used in the page.

C. Proper Exception Handling in PL/SQL Code

Exceptionhandling is integral to writing robust PL/SQL code by anticipating errors and using structured exception handling mechanisms like EXCEPTION WHEN OTHERS; developers can manage unexpected issues more gracefully, preventing application crashes, user-friendly behavior, and simplifying debugging. Proper exception handling should be followed wherever PL/SQL is used in the application, such as for validations, dynamic actions, processes, etc.

It is also recommended to integrate the application with any Project Management tools where issues will be handled and programmatically log a defect or issue when an error or unhandled exception occurs. This will alert the development and project management team automatically, allowing them to proactively fix the error even if the application users do not notify them.

D. Database Auditing and Monitoring

As applications scale, so too do the number of database transactions. Implementing database auditing and monitoringmechanisms helps detect suspicious activity and unauthorized data access. Oracle Database provides built-in auditing features like Oracle Audit Vault and Database Firewall that track user actions, data modifications, and security events [19]. Regularly reviewing audit logs allows administrators to spot potential threats early and respond quickly to mitigate damage. Monitoring tools such as Oracle Enterprise ManagerandOracle AWR (Automatic Workload Repository) can be used to analyze performance and identify potential security risks. By implementing these monitoring tools, developers can ensure that the database remains secure and performs efficiently as the application grows.

By following these best practices, developers can create Oracle APEX applications that are scalable and secure, ensuring long-term reliability and maintaining the integrity of the application and its data.

VI. Testing and Quality Assurance

Ensuring an Oracle APEX application's reliability, performance, and security is essential for its long-term success. Testing and quality assurance (QA) help identify issues early in the development cycle, reducing risks and ensuring a robust application. While traditional software testing methods such as unit testing and user acceptance testing (UAT) are essential, performance testing, load testing, and security testing play a crucial role in guaranteeing the scalability and security of Oracle APEX applications.

A. Performance Testing

Performance testing is critical to ensuring that an Oracle APEX application can handle increasing numbers of users and transactions without degradation in response times. As APEX applications often serve enterprise-grade use cases with high concurrency, identifying bottlenecks early is key to maintaining a scalable architecture [20].

a) Load Testing

Load testing simulates multiple users accessing the application simultaneously to evaluate how the system performs under expected and peak loads. As Oracle APEX applications rely heavily on database interactions, tools such as ApacheJMeter, LoadRunner, etc., can be used to simulate high traffic conditions and detect potential performance degradation points [20].

b) Stress Testing

Stress testing is a more extreme version of load testing, where the system is subjected to excessive requests to evaluate its breaking point. It helps uncover hidden issues, such as poor resource utilization, database connection pool saturation, etc. For Oracle APEX applications, this ensures that the system does not fail unpredictably even in unexpected surge conditions.

c) Response Time Testing

Oracle APEX applications must ensure that response times remain optimal for various transactions. Testing tools can measure the time taken for executing queries, page loads, and AJAX-based dynamic actions. Developers should continuously monitor slow-running SQL statements using Oracle AutomaticWorkload Repository (AWR) reports, SQL Tuning Advisor, and APEX Debug logs. Another good practice to add to functionality is to notify the development and/or administration teams about slow-running queries or slower response time beyond acceptable thresholds in real-time.

B. Security Testing

SecurityTesting: Security is a critical concern for any web-based application, particularly in applications dealing with sensitive data. Security testing should focus on identifying vulnerabilities such as SQL injection, cross-site scripting (XSS), and authentication weaknesses. Oracle APEX offers built-in security features such as session state protection, but additional testing is necessary to ensure these features are implemented correctly. Tools like OWASP ZAP and Burp Suite can be used to perform vulnerability scanning and penetration testing on Oracle APEX applications. Regular security audits and adherence to industry-standard best practices, such as those outlined by the Open Web Application Security Project (OWASP), can mitigate potential risks. Incorporating security testing early in the development lifecycle is crucial to avoid costly vulnerabilities [21].

VII. CONCLUSION

As businesses expand, their applications must evolve in parallel, ensuring that performance, scalability, and maintainability remain cornerstones of the development process. Building scalable and maintainable systems has never been more critical in modern application development's fast-paced and dynamic world. By focusing on these crucial aspects from the outset, developers can ensure that their Oracle APEX applications remain efficient, reliable, and adaptable to future requirements.

This article has outlined key best practices for ensuring that Oracle APEX applications meet the demands of scalability, security, and long-term maintainability. Developers can significantly improve their application's performance and flexibility by capable architecture and infrastructure specifications, emphasizing modular application architecture, proper database optimization techniques, performance tuning, and reusable code components. Additionally, adopting robust testing strategies, rigorous security practices, and careful attention to code organization can mitigate risks associated with technical debt and ensure that the application remains adaptable to changing business needs [6].

Another key takeaway from this article is that scalability and maintainability are not mutually exclusive; they must go hand in hand to ensure that Oracle APEX applications remain robust, efficient, and adaptable. By following the outlined best practices and continuously monitoring performance, developers can build applications that deliver high performance, enhance user satisfaction, and support the organization's ongoing success. Ultimately, a well-designed Oracle APEX application will be an asset for any organization, providing the flexibility to navigate future challenges confidently.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would also like to disclose the use of the Grammarly (AI) tool solely for editing and grammar enhancements.

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