



Using Wikipedia as a Teaching Tool

Sample syllabus



WIKIPEDIA

This document provides a full-term syllabus that incorporates many of the best practices for running major Wikipedia assignments in conjunction with the Wikipedia Ambassador Program. You can use it as a starting point for your own Wikipedia assignments, or take bits and pieces to adapt to your course—whether you are working with Wikipedia Ambassadors or not.

All the handouts, videos and other teaching material referred to in this syllabus are linked from the online version at the Wikimedia Education Portal, which also lists course pages and syllabi from a range of past Wikipedia assignments of various types, assignment design advice, and information about the Wikipedia Ambassador Program:

<http://outreach.wikimedia.org/wiki/Education>

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Week 1: Wikipedia Essentials

We encourage instructors to introduce the Wikipedia assignment early in the semester since the students need to acquaint themselves with the technology. Knowing what they are preparing themselves for makes learning the ins and outs of Wikipedia relevant. Also, we encourage instructors to engage with the questions of media literacy and knowledge construction raised by Wikipedia throughout their course. Wikipedia assignments work best when integrated with the theme of the course.

In class

- » Overview of the course
- » Introduction to how Wikipedia will be used in the course
- » Handout: "Welcome to Wikipedia" brochure

Assignments for students (due week 2)

- » Read the page "Wikipedia:Five pillars", an explanation of Wikipedia's basic rules and principles

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Week 2: Editing Basics

It is important to get students editing Wikipedia right away so that they become familiar with the MediaWiki markup ("wikisyntax", "wikimarkup", or "wikicode"). As the instructor, you have several options to teach them this technical material. You can teach it yourself, invite Wikipedia's Campus Ambassadors and/or local Wikipedians to do so, or contact a teaching and technology center on your campus and ask for their assistance. We suggest that, however you choose to do this, you have the students learn the basics of editing, the anatomy of an article, and ways to select articles suitable for the assignment.

In class

- » Campus Ambassadors introduce the basics of Wikipedia editing, the anatomy of a Wikipedia article, what makes a good article, and how to distinguish between good & bad articles
- » Handouts and videos: creating an account video tutorial, talk pages tutorial video, "Evaluating Wikipedia article quality" brochure, "Account and user page creation" handout, wikimarkup cheatsheet

Assignments for students (due week 3)

- » Create a Wikipedia account, create a user page, and sign up on the list of students on the course page.
- » To practice editing and communicating on Wikipedia, introduce yourself to one of the class's Online Ambassadors (via talk page), and leave a message for a classmate on their user talk page.



All students have Wikipedia user accounts and are listed on the course page.

Week 3: Exploring the Topic Area

It is crucial that lines of communication between instructors, students, and Wikipedians be established and firmed up early in the semester so that all groups can help each other out most efficiently as the projects progress. Ideally, Wikipedia Campus Ambassadors would come to your class and explain to the students how to find help should they run into trouble on Wikipedia (e.g. IRC), reinforcing their introduction to this topic from the previous week.

It is also critical for students to begin researching their Wikipedia topics early in the term. Finding topics with the right balance between lack of prior good Wikipedia coverage and available literature from which to build new Wikipedia coverage can be tricky. As an alternative to assigning students to propose Wikipedia topics to write about, you may wish to prepare a list of appropriate non-existent or underdeveloped articles ahead of time. This requires more preparation, but gets students to the point of researching and writing their articles sooner.

In class

- » Handout: "Advice for choosing articles"

Assignments for students (due week 4)

- » Critically evaluate an existing Wikipedia article related to the class, and leave suggestions for improving it on the article's discussion page.
- » Research and list 3–5 articles on your Wikipedia user page that you will consider working on as your main project. Ask your class's Online Ambassadors for comments.

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Week 4: Using sources

We encourage weaving a discussion of Wikipedia into your course throughout the semester. For example, if you are teaching a course on presidential elections, delve into the controversies on Wikipedia that have beset the "Barack Obama" article and subarticles. Help the students connect their assignment to the themes of the course as a whole.

As they start using sources to improve Wikipedia articles or write new ones, it is especially important for students to understand Wikipedia's policies on plagiarism and copyright violation. Student generally know that copying whole paragraphs or sentences from sources constitutes plagiarism. But many don't know about—or think they can get away with—subtler forms of plagiarism, such as using shorter phrases without attribution or beginning from a copied text and simply rewording it while leaving the structure and meaning intact (i.e., close paraphrasing). Any form of plagiarism or copyright violation is likely to result in students' work being removed from Wikipedia.

In class

- » Handouts and videos: "Referencing" handout, "Referencing: Wikicode" handout, "Plagiarism handout", citing sources tutorial video, RefToolbar citation tool tutorial video

Assignments for students (due week 5)

- » Add 1–2 sentences of new information, backed up with a citation to an appropriate source, to a Wikipedia article related to the class.

For next week

- » Instructor evaluates student's article selections, by week 5.

Week 5: Choosing Articles

By this week, ideally, the instructor will have evaluated the students' article choices and given them feedback, helping them to choose articles that are appropriate for the assignment. Because students often wait until the last minute to do their research or choose sources unsuited for Wikipedia, we strongly suggest that the students put together a bibliography of materials they want to use in editing the article which can then be assessed by, you, the instructor and other Wikipedians.

In class

- » Discuss the range of topics students will be working on and strategies for researching and writing about them.

Assignments for students (due week 6)

- » Select an article to work on, removing the rest from the course page.
- » Compile a bibliography of relevant research and post it to the talk page of the article you are working on. Begin reading the sources.

6 Week 6: Drafting Starter Articles

Once students have gotten somewhat of a grip on their topics and the sources they will use to write about them, it's time to start writing on Wikipedia. You can assign them to jump write in and edit live, or start in their own sandboxes. There are pros and cons to each approach.

Sandboxes make students feel safe; they can edit without the pressure of working in public. However, sandbox editing limits many of Wikipedia's strengths, such as collaborative writing and incremental drafting. Sandboxes are usually appropriate for student starting new articles, but students should move out of sandboxes quickly. Spending more than a week or two in sandboxes is strongly discouraged.

Editing live lets students see their changes to the articles immediately and experience the collaborative editing process throughout the assignment. However, because many new editors often unintentionally break Wikipedia rules, sometimes students learn by having their additions questioned or removed. Editing live is usually appropriate when students are improving existing articles.

In class

- » Instructor and/or Campus Ambassadors talk about Wikipedia culture & etiquette, and (optionally) introduce the concept of sandboxes and how to use them.
- » Q&A session with instructor and/or Campus Ambassadors about interacting on Wikipedia and getting started with writing
- » Video resource: Sandbox tutorial

Assignments for students (due week 7)

- » If you are starting a new article, write a 3–4 paragraph summary version of your article (with citations) in your Wikipedia sandbox. If you are improving an existing article, write a summary version reflecting the content the article will have after it's been improved, and post this along with a brief description of your plans on the article's talk page.
- » Work classmates and Ambassadors to polish your short starter article and fix any major transgressions of Wikipedia norms.
- » Continue research in preparation for expanding your article.



All students have started editing articles or drafts on Wikipedia.

Week 7: Did You Know?

Whether students are starting new articles or expanding existing articles, it's critical to get them working live on Wikipedia as soon as possible. Short summary versions for new articles (and short existing articles that have been expanded five-fold) are great starting points for working live in main space, because they should be eligible to appear on Wikipedia's Main Page as hooks in the "Did you know..." (DYK) section. This gives students an early chance to show their articles to a substantial audience and get feedback from Wikipedians, and it can be a great momentum builder for the rest of the class project. The rules for DYK are quite particular, though, so it helps to prepare ahead of time and nominate articles immediately after moving them out of sandboxes.

A good 3-4 paragraph summary can serve as the lead section for a full length article, following the summary style of Wikipedia articles, and will get students thinking from the beginning about the overall structure of their articles.

In class

- » Handouts: "Moving into main space", "Submitting articles to Did You Know"

Assignments for students (due week 8)

- » Move sandbox articles into main space.
- » For new articles or qualifying expansions of stubs, compose a one-sentence "hook," nominate it for "Did you know," and monitor the nomination for any issues identified by other editors.
- » Begin expanding your article into a comprehensive treatment of the topic.

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Week 8: Building Articles

At this point, many students will have 'gotten it', and have a clear understanding of how to move forward. From there, the most important thing is giving feedback, both on the work they're doing—what is missing, what sources could be used to improve it, whether the balance is appropriate—and on how to keep within Wikipedia's guidelines, particularly Neutral Point of View and No Original Research.

Other students may have stumbled with some element of getting their initial work live on Wikipedia. This is the key point to identify where students are having trouble—whether from negative reactions from other editors, technical hang-ups, problems finding good sources and using them appropriately, plagiarism, or something else. This is a good time to do a quick scan (at least) of what each student has contributed so far.

In class or outside of class

- » Campus Ambassadors lead Wikipedia lab/workshop, covering article ratings on Wikipedia & how to get there, and uploading images & adding them to articles.
- » Handouts and videos: "Uploading images" handout, uploading files to Wikimedia Commons video, "Evaluating Wikipedia article quality" brochure (handed out originally in week 2), article assessments video, evolution of an article video

Assignments for students (due week 9)

- » Expand your article into an initial draft of a comprehensive treatment of the topic.
- » Select two classmates' articles that you will peer review and copy-edit. (You don't need to start reviewing yet.)

Week 9: Getting and Giving Feedback

Collaboration is a critical element of contributing to Wikipedia. For some students, this will happen spontaneously; their choice of topics will attract interested and knowledgeable Wikipedians who will pitch in with ideas, copy-edits, or even substantial contributions to the students' articles. Online Ambassadors who take a strong interest in the topics students are working on can make great collaborators. In many cases, however, there will be little spontaneous editing of students' articles before the end of the term. Fortunately, a class full of fellow learners is a great pool of peer reviewers. You can make the most of this by assigning students to review each others' articles soon after full-length drafts are posted, to give students plenty of time to act on the advice of their peers.

In class

- » As a group, have the students offer suggestions for improving one or two of the students' articles, setting the example for what is expected from a solid encyclopedia article.

Assignments for students (due week 10)

- » Peer review two of your classmates' articles. Leave suggestions on the article talk pages.
- » Copy-edit the two reviewed articles.



All articles have been reviewed by others. All students have reviewed articles by their classmates.

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Week 10: Responding to Feedback

At this point, students should have produced more or less complete articles. Now is the chance to encourage them to wade a little deeper into Wikipedia and its norms and criteria for great content. You'll probably have discussed many of the core principles of Wikipedia—and related issue you want to focus on—but now that they've experienced how Wikipedia works first hand, this is a good time to return to topics like neutrality, media literacy, and the impact and limits of Wikipedia. Consider bringing in a guest speaker, having a panel discussion, or simply having an open discussion amongst the class about what the students have done so far and why (or whether) it matters.

The next step for students' articles can be nominating them for Good Article status; it may take longer than the time remaining in the term for all the articles to get formal Good Article reviews (although Online Ambassadors may be able to help review them in a timely manner), but Good Article reviews often produce high quality feedback on both style and content. Some instructors have awarded automatic high marks for any students who successfully write articles that achieve Good Article status.

In class

- » Open discussion of the concepts of neutrality, media literacy, and the impact and limits of Wikipedia

Assignments for students (due week 11)

- » Make edits to your article based on peers' feedback.
- » Nominate your article for Good Article status.
- » Prepare for an in-class presentation about your Wikipedia editing experience.

Week 11: Class Presentations

Having students explicitly reflect on their experiences with Wikipedia, through presentations and/or reflective essays, can help draw out and solidify what they've learned about Wikipedia in particular and media literacy and research more generally. Such assignments, when they include explicit summaries or documentation of what students did or tried to do on Wikipedia, can also serve as the lens for evaluating and grading students' Wikipedia work.

In class

- » Students give in-class presentations about their experiences editing Wikipedia.

Assignments for students (due week 12)

- » Add final touches to your Wikipedia article. Try to address issues from Good Article reviews.
- » Write a reflective essay (2–5 pages) on your Wikipedia contributions.

Week 12: Due Date

You made it!



Students have finished all their work on Wikipedia that will be considered for grading, and have submitted reflective essays.



Grading

This is a basic grading scheme appropriate for a syllabus similar to this one. For more ideas on how to grade Wikipedia assignments, see the grading rubrics section of the "Wikipedia as a Teaching Tool" brochure, available online at the Wikimedia Education Portal.

- » **5% each (x3):** Participation grade for early Wikipedia exercises (weeks 2, 3, and 4)
- » **10%:** Participation in Wikipedia discussions in class
- » **10%:** Peer reviews and collaboration with classmates
- » **15%:** Presentation and reflective essay
- » **50%:** Quality of main Wikipedia contributions, evaluated in light of reflective essay

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