The Syllabus: A 12-week assignment to write a Wikipedia article

Wikimedia Foundation

Online Orientation: Wikipedia as a Teaching Tool
All instructors are highly encouraged to complete the online orientation for educators before planning a syllabus. It will introduce you to the culture and rules of Wikipedia, demonstrate the basics of editing, and walk you through a typical Wikipedia assignment like this one.
http://enwp.org/WP:EDUCATOR

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Welcome to Wikipedia as a Teaching Tool

This orientation has been designed to support you in your quest to successfully integrate Wikipedia assignments into your classroom curriculum. We developed this program based on a two year university pilot, conversations, observation and feedback of over 100 professors and instructors who are currently using Wikipedia as a way to meet their learning objectives.

While the following modules focus mainly on Wikipedia, we recognize that your course is most likely not about Wikipedia and that you are simply interested in using Wikipedia as a tool for helping to teach your course content.

Instructor Basics: How to use Wikipedia as a teaching tool
This brochure covers key Wikipedia policies and structure you'll need to understand, best practices on article selection and working with the community, and sample grading structures.
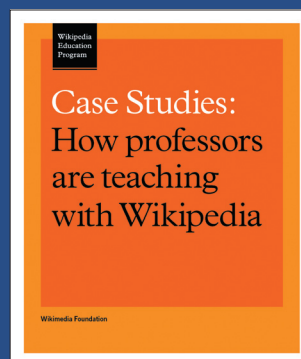http://education.wikimedia.org/instructorbasics

Wikipedia Education Program

Instructor Basics: How to use Wikipedia as a teaching tool

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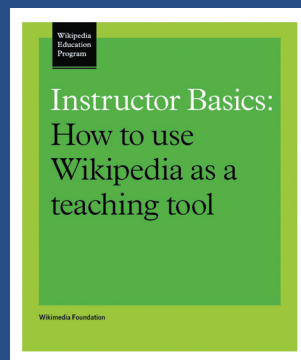
Case Studies: How professors are teaching with Wikipedia
Fifteen professors from six countries are featured in this brochure, as each explains how he or she used Wikipedia in the classroom or how he or she graded the assignment. The web version of the brochure includes links to syllabi and assignment handouts.
http://education.wikimedia.org/casestudies

Wikipedia Education Program

Case Studies: How professors are teaching with Wikipedia

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Using this syllabus

Before you begin

This sample syllabus document is the third in a series of brochures about how to use Wikipedia as a teaching tool. Before you delve into the specifics of syllabus construction, you may want to consult the "Instructor Basics" and "Case Studies" brochures to get a better idea of best practices, what learning objectives the assignments can achieve, and how you might want to grade a Wikipedia assignment. You are also highly encouraged to go through the online orientation for educators.

This document provides a full-term sample syllabus for a major Wikipedia writing assignment, incorporating many of the best practices for such projects. You can use it as a starting point for your own Wikipedia assignments, or take bits and pieces to adapt to your course.

This sample syllabus is for a 12-week assignment to write Wikipedia articles. For syllabi using other Wikipedia assignments, see the Case Studies brochure.

Understanding icons we use

Handouts

Throughout this brochure, we'll reference handouts you should pass out to your students. All of these handouts are linked from the web version of this brochure: http://education.wikimedia.org/syllabus

> WP:EDUCATORS 🔍

Shortcuts

Shortcuts to important pages on Wikipedia are listed throughout this syllabus as | *shortcut* | WP:EDUCATORS | To use one, simply type the shortcut into the search bar on Wikipedia and press enter.

✔

Milestones

Experienced instructors say it is crucial for students who are going to be editing Wikipedia to become comfortable not only with the markup, but also the community. Requiring milestones throughout the term will acclimate students to the site and head off procrastination. Instructors who do not set up these milestones throughout the term usually have bad experiences with their assignments.
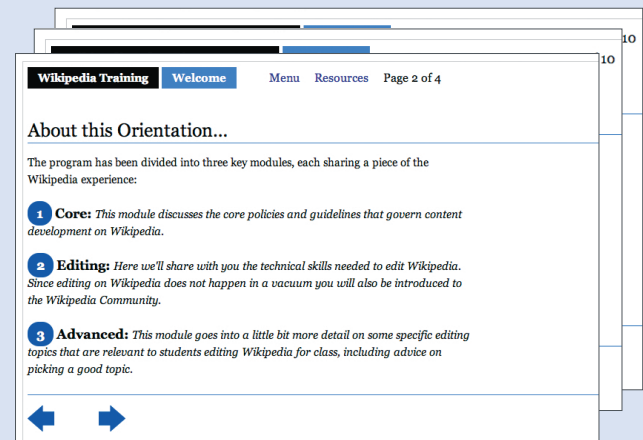
12-week syllabus timeline

Wikipedia assignments work best when you introduce them early in the term, 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.

Try to integrate your Wikipedia assignment with the course themes. Engage your students with questions of media fluency and knowledge construction throughout your course

Online student training

The online training for students introduces the Wikipedia community and how it works, demonstrates the basics of editing and walks students through their first edits, gives advice for selecting articles and drafting revisions, and covers some of the ways they can find help as they get started. It takes about an hour and ends with a certification step that you can use to verify that students completed the training. | *shortcut* WP:STUDENT

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About this Orientation...

The program has been divided into three key modules, each sharing a piece of the Wikipedia experience:

1 Core: *This module discusses the core policies and guidelines that govern content development on Wikipedia.*

2 Editing: *Here we'll share with you the technical skills needed to edit Wikipedia. Since editing on Wikipedia does not happen in a vacuum you will also be introduced to the Wikipedia Community.*

3 Advanced: *This module goes into a little bit more detail on some specific editing topics that are relevant to students editing Wikipedia for class, including advice on picking a good topic.*

http://enwp.org/WP:STUDENT

Week 1

Wikipedia essentials

When you're introducing your class and going over the syllabus, be sure to let students know they'll be working on Wikipedia this term. This can be a good time to talk about their preconceived notions of Wikipedia and see if any students have edited in the past.

In class

› Overview of the course

› Introduction to how Wikipedia will be used in the course

› Handout: "Welcome to Wikipedia" brochure (available online or in print from the Wikimedia Foundation)

Assignment (due Week 2)

› Start the online student orientation. During this training, you will create an account, make edits in a *sandbox*, and learn the basic rules of Wikipedia. | *shortcut* WP:STUDENT

Your Wikipedia course page

Before your class begins, you'll need to create a course page on Wikipedia. Course pages are typically used to explain—to both students and the Wikipedia community—the details of your Wikipedia assignments, to keep track of which students are in the class and which articles they are working on, and to ask questions and discuss problems. For details on how to set up a course page, see the "Welcome to the Wikipedia Education Program" brochure or go to the page "Wikipedia:Course pages." | *shortcut* WP:COURSE

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. You can also assign students to complete a standard online training. 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

› Basics of editing

› Anatomy of Wikipedia articles, what makes a good article, how to distinguish between good and bad articles

› Tips on finding the best articles to work on for class assignments

› Handouts: "Using talk pages" handout, "Evaluating Wikipedia article quality" brochure, and "Wikimarkup cheatsheet" (included in "Welcome to Wikipedia" brochure)

Assignment (due Week 3)

› Complete the online training for students.

› 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 any Wikipedians helping your class (such as a Wikipedia Ambassador), and leave a message for a classmate on their user talk page.

Milestone

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

Week 3

Exploring the topic area

It is 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

> › Handouts: "Advice for choosing articles" and "How to get help"

Assignment (due Week 4)

› Critically evaluate an existing Wikipedia article related to the class, and leave suggestions for improving it on the article's talk page.

› Research and list 3–5 articles on your Wikipedia user page that you will consider working on as your main project. Ask your instructor for comment.

Getting help

When things go wrong—students' articles are challenged, students get into arguments with other editors, or you or the students are simply unsure about how to solve a problem—you should seek out help immediately. If there are experienced Wikipedians working with your class (such as Online Ambassadors), try asking them first. You can post problems and questions to the "Education noticeboard" | *shortcut* WP:ENB For guidance getting started for either you or your students, try the Teahouse | *shortcut* WP:TH a friendly space for new editors. The online orientation highlights other places you can go for help.

Week 4

Using sources

As they start using sources to improve Wikipedia articles, 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: "Referencing on Wikipedia" and "Understanding Wikipedia's copyright policy"

Assignment (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 students' article selections, by week 5.

You're the expert

Applying your own expertise to Wikipedia's coverage of your field will be key to a successful assignment. You understand the broader intellectual context where individual topics fit in, you can recognize where Wikipedia falls short, you know—or know how to find—the relevant literature, and you know what topics your students should be able to handle. So your guidance on article choice and sourcing is critical for both your students' success and the improvement of Wikipedia.

Week 5

Choosing articles

By this week, ideally, you 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 and other Wikipedians.

In class

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

Assignment (due Week 6)

› Select an article to work on, removing the rest from your user page. Add your article to the class's course page.

› Compile a bibliography of relevant reliable sources and post it to the talk page of the article you are working on. Begin reading the sources.

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 right in and edit live or start in their own sandboxes. There are pros and cons to each approach.

Pros and cons to sandboxes: Sandboxes make students feel safe because they can edit without the pressure of the whole world reading their drafts or other Wikipedians altering their writing. However, sandbox editing limits many of the unique aspects of using Wikipedia as a teaching tool, such as collaborative writing and incremental drafting. Spending more than a week or two in sandboxes is *strongly* discouraged.

Pros and cons to editing live: Editing live is exciting for the students because they can see their changes to the articles immediately and experience the collaborative editing process throughout the assignment. However, because new editors often unintentionally break Wikipedia rules, sometimes students' additions are questioned or removed.

In class

› Talk about Wikipedia culture and etiquette, and (optionally) revisit the concept of sandboxes and how to use them.

› Q&A session with instructor and/or Wikipedia Ambassadors about interacting on Wikipedia and getting started with writing.

Assignment (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.

› Begin working with classmates and other editors to polish your short starter article and fix any major issues.

› Continue research in preparation for expanding your article.

Milestone

› All students have started editing articles or drafts on Wikipedia.

Moving articles to the main space

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.

In class

> Handout: "Moving out of your sandbox"

Assignment (due Week 8)

> Move sandbox articles into main space.

> Optional: 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.

Wikipedia processes

Advanced students' articles may qualify for submission to Did You Know, a section on Wikipedia's main page featuring new content. Submitting articles to DYK will probably be your class's first major contact with Wikipedia's behind-the-scenes article processes. We strongly recommend either trying this yourself beforehand, or working closely with one or more experienced Wikipedians to help your students navigate the process smoothly. If your students are working on a related set of articles, it may be good to combine multiple article nominations into a single hook; this helps keep your students' work from swamping the process or antagonizing the editors who maintain it.

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 | *shortcut* WP:NPOV and No Original Research. | *shortcut* WP:NOR

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.

Workshop in class or outside of class

> Demo uploading images and adding images to articles.

> Share experiences and discuss problems.

> Handouts: "Uploading images" and "Evaluating Wikipedia article quality" (handed out originally in week 2)

Assignment (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.)

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 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.

Assignment (due Week 10)

› Peer review two of your classmates' articles. Leave suggestions on the article talk pages.

› Copy-edit the two reviewed articles.

Milestone

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

Rating Wikipedia articles

The initiative to improve the quality of all articles has led Wikipedians to introduce a rating system (summarized below) that describes the progression from Stub to Featured Article. Encourage your students to familiarize themselves with this rating system and use it when doing peer reviews of each others' articles. Students should keep in mind that B-class and C-class articles on Wikipedia are not equivalent to a traditional "B" or "C" class work in academia. Good Article and Featured Article are only attainable through a challenging peer-review process on Wikipedia, and only the most advanced students should contemplate submitting their work to these processes.

FA	The article meets the *featured article criteria* | *shortcut* WP:FACR and has gone through the FA candidates process | *shortcut* WP:FAC Achieving FA status is rare, although not unprecedented, for Wikipedia class projects.
GA	The article meets the **good article criteria** | *shortcut* WP:GACR and has gone though a successful *good article nomination* | *shortcut* WP:GAN Good articles are challenging, but possible, for classes that engage with Wikipedia throughout the term. Leave more time for review and revision of GAs are your goal, since it typically takes several weeks before a nominated article receives a review.
B	The article is mostly complete and without major issues, but requires some further work to reach good article standards. This level of quality is realistic for good students who work hard on their Wikipedia assignments and work on articles that are not too broad.
C	The article is substantial, but is still missing important content or contains a lot of irrelevant material. Your students can do better than this, but it will take effort.
Start	An article is developing, but is still incomplete and may require further reliable sources. Without feedback and guidance from the instructor, this is the typical level of quality achieved by students. It's also, approximately, the typical level of quality of a random Wikipedia article longer than a few paragraphs.
Stub	The article contains only a very basic description of the topic, from a single sentence up to a few paragraphs. (Articles marked as stubs may actually have improved beyond stub status.)

Responding to feedback

At this point, students should have produced nearly 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 issues you want to focus on—but now that they've experienced first-hand how Wikipedia works, this is a good time to return to topics like neutrality, media fluency, 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.

In class

> Open discussion of the concepts of neutrality, media literacy, and the impact and limits of Wikipedia.

Assignment (due Week 11)

> Make edits to your article based on peers' feedback. Prepare for an in-class presentation about your Wikipedia editing experience.

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.

Assignment (due Week 12)

> Add final touches to your Wikipedia article.

> Write a reflective essay (2–5 pages) on your Wikipedia contributions.

Week 12

All assignments due
You made it!

Milestone

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

This is a basic grading scheme appropriate for a Wikipedia assignment similar to this one. For more ideas on how to grade Wikipedia assignments, see the grading rubrics section of the "Instructor Basics" brochure.

Sample Grading Structure

In grading a "research and write an article" type of assignment, the following grading rubric has been successful:

5% each (x3)	Participation grade for early Wikipedia exercises
10%	Participation in class blog or class discussions
10%	Peer reviews and collaboration with classmates
50%	Quality of your main Wikipedia contributions
15%	Reflective essay
student grade	

Ready to join the Wikipedia Education Program?
Education programs already exist in many countries, and Wikimedia volunteers are creating new programs every term. In countries where the Wikipedia Education Program is in operation, volunteer Wikipedia Ambassadors may be available to offer you and your students assistance in learning the best ways to contribute to Wikipedia for class.

Join us! For more information, visit
http://education.wikimedia.org