How to evaluate **Wikipedia** article quality

WIKIPEDIA

Introduction

Wikipedia is the biggest encyclopedia ever created, and exists in hundreds of languages.

Unlike a traditional encyclopedia, however, Wikipedia uses an open editing model, inviting anyone to contribute by writing or editing articles directly. Currently, Wikipedia is maintained by more than 91,000 active contributors. While this innovation is at the core of what has enabled Wikipedia to grow so quickly into such a useful resource, it also means that some articles – often those that are highly controversial, lack sources in high-quality publications, or rely on a high degree of technical knowledge – contain incomplete, inaccurate, or poorly-balanced information.

As a discerning reader, if you want to evaluate the quality or bias of an individual article, you will need to adopt a new approach to analyzing and evaluating the content. This brochure will give you tools to distinguish good Wikipedia articles from articles that need further improvement, and to understand the processes that an individual article underwent to get to its current state. You will also develop an understanding of when it is appropriate to use Wikipedia as a source.

According to the largest available survey of the Wikipedia contributors, at least 70% of those who contribute to Wikipedia describe themselves as subject matter experts. There are mathematicians, history professors, biologists, librarians and many other professions represented among the Wikipedia editors. Other contributors are self-taught in various disciplines.

Wikipedia's articles have been favorably compared with articles from traditional encyclopedias and have also been cited in courts of justice, in newspapers and by scholars. However, discussions about how to improve the articles have been going on since Wikipedia started, and there are many tools and strategies that the contributors can use.

After reading **Using Wikipedia: how to evaluate Wikipedia article quality**, you will be able to:

» Describe how Wikipedia's articles evolve

» Evaluate the quality of an article

» Explain the features of good articles

» Know what to do with articles of poor quality

» Cite Wikipedia correctly

Different ways to use Wikipedia

When you search for information online, chances are that Wikipedia appears high among the search results.It is important to note that Wikipedia is not a primary source, like a direct interview, or a secondary source, like an academic paper or a news story. Wikipedia is an encyclopedia.

It is a collection of information from primary and secondary sources, assembled into articles that provide a general overview. The goal is to be a starting point, and to provide a broad view of a subject and of the other sources that cover it.

Wikipedia can help you to:

> » Get an overview of a subject
> » Get a list of recommended works about a subject
> » Discover related topics

How articles evolve

Wikipedia's articles are not created all at once; they grow, edit by edit, often by many different users in collaboration. One contributor may start the article, another may add more text, and yet another may give it a different structure to make it easier to read. No one person "owns" the article, but many people care deeply about articles in which they have invested lots of time. That is why contributors from around the world have developed hundreds of **tools** to make Wikipedia better. Among these are tools to help users and contributors browse, edit, write, format, and track an article's evolution. You can find these tools by typing "Wikipedia:Tools" in the search box.

Wikipedia is a more comprehensive system than most people think, and we welcome you to get to know Wikipedia better. Here we will present some of the most common tools.

Observing the evolution of an article

You can look at how each article evolves by clicking the **View history** link at the top. Every previous version of the article can be found there and can be easily restored.

Compare selected revisions

- (cur | prev) ● ☐ 04:44, 2 September 2010 Chvaza (Talk | contribs | block) (30,741 bytes) (→*Behind the scenes of Wikipedia*)
- (cur | prev) ● ☐ 04:34, 2 September 2010 Chvaza (Talk | contribs | block) (30,430 bytes) (→*[Back Cover]*) (undo)
- (cur | prev) ○ ☐ 04:23, 2 September 2010 Chvaza (Talk | contribs | block) (30,091 bytes) (→*Frequently asked*)

Date and time of edit

Username or IP address of contributor

Size of article after this edit

Editorial Commentary

Compare with current version

Compare with previous version

Link to user's other contributions to Wikipedia

Click to revert article to previous version

On the View history page each row represents one version of the article. Click on the date to see that version. You can also compare two versions of the article, by choosing the "radio buttons" that corresponds to the versions you want to compare, and clicking "diff" (short for "difference").

You can also see that each version is associated with the user who made that edit.

Compare the last two or three versions of the article by selecting them in the list at View history and then clicking Compare selected revisions. You will see two columns: the left represents the earlier version and the right column represents the more recent. Any differences are shown in red. You can use this feature to determine what has happened: for instance, whether factual information has been removed, or whether something that does not belong in the article has been inserted.

Media literacy (Bookshelf)

(Difference between revisions)

Revision as of 04:34, 2 September 2010 (edit)
Chvaza (Talk | contribs |)
(→[Back Cover]) (show/hide)
← Older edit

Line 131:

[[{highlight|Some of the text on this image needs changing: 'have' to 'has', 'do' to 'does' or vice versa, that sort of thing.}} {{highlight|Will improve it. Is anything missing, or are there too many things already?//[[User:Hannibal|Hannibal]] 19:24, 29 August 2010 (UTC)}}]

Previous version

Try it!

Current revision as of 04:44, 2 September 2010 (edit) (undo)
Chvaza (Talk | contribs |)
(→Behind the scenes of Wikipedia) (show/hide)

Line 131:

[[{highlight|Some of the text on this image needs changing: 'have' to 'has', 'do' to 'does' or vice versa, that sort of thing.}} {{highlight|Will improve it. Is anything missing, or are there too many things already?//[[User:Hannibal|Hannibal]] 19:24, 29 August 2010 (UTC)}}]

{{Highlight|[I'm still sure if you intend to use this wireframe image or if Dale is designing and image. The next needs to be arranged in some way other than dense blocks of text. If you'd like an edit, please drop the text into a text doc of some kind.] [[User:Chvaza|Chvaza]] 04:44, 2 September 2010 (UTC)}}

Try it!

The previous version is presented to the left. Any changes are highlighted in red to the right (the newer version).

The next version of article

How contributors improve Wikipedia

Most people think of Wikipedia only as encyclopedia articles, but a great deal of work takes place behind the scenes, as well: about half of the edits made to Wikipedia are made to pages other than the articles. Contributors discuss how articles should evolve, evaluate the quality of sources, and set out editorial policies. These pages and discussions are open for public scrutiny, just like the articles themselves, if you know where to look.

Each article has its own **talk page**, also known as a **discussion page**. At the top of each article is a link labeled "Discussion". Click on it and you will see how much deliberation has gone into creating the article. Maybe some aspect that you are wondering about has already been discussed. If you have doubts about the quality of an article and cannot improve it yourself, write your questions on the discussion page. Most questions are answered within a few days, but if your questions have not received any attention in one week, it may be a good idea to ask the article's contributors directly, or seek a more general discussion forum. Click on View history and find a user who has made several edits to the article and click on the link that leads to his or her personal Talk page. You can ask questions of the individual contributor on that page.

Editors who have created an account benefit from having a **Watchlist**. With this tool, they can track changes to the articles and pages that interest them. Articles about popular topics and articles about things that have been in the news are watched and maintained by many users. These articles tend to be very good. Bad edits in these articles are reverted almost instantly.

When several users collaborate on a whole series of articles, chances are high that they have formed a **WikiProject**. Some WikiProjects are big with plenty of contributors, like WikiProject Medicine (search for "wikiproject medicine" in the search box at the top), where most of the contributors have specialized knowledge. By coordinating their efforts, contributors to a WikiProject increase the quality of their articles more quickly than single editors. Members of WikiProjects tend to keep closer tabs on their field of interest, and have more expertise in their topic. The talk page for a related WikiProject can also be a good place to ask questions about an article, if your questions on that article's talk page go unanswered.

It helps the contributors to have a common understanding of what they are striving for. That goal is that the articles should be good enough to be a **Featured** article. These articles have been nominated and gone through a peer review process. If enough contributors find that it meets certain criteria, it is awarded a gold star, and may be shown on the main page of Wikipedia.

Evaluating the quality of an article

Tip!
There is much more information about the various processes and tools available to contributors. Type "Wikipedia:Quality control" into the search box.

The quality of Wikipedia articles varies widely; many are very good, but some lack depth and clarity, or contain bias, or are out of date. On the English language Wikipedia, there are formal processes for the best articles to be identified as "good articles" or "featured articles;" but the vast majority of articles on the site – even though some of them are quite good – have not attained these designations. So, how can you quickly assess the general quality of an article? There are two main ways:

    1. Check for the elements of good articles
    2. Look for common signs of poor quality

Elements of good articles:

There are five elements that all good articles and Featured articles share. These elements are: a clear structure, balance between aspects, a lead section that is easy to understand and gives a good overview, neutral content and reliable sources.

✓ The **structure** is clear. It includes several headers and subheaders, images and diagrams at appropriate places, and appendices and footnotes in the end. For most articles, the content is organized chronologically, or sorted by theme. A separate section could, for instance, mention the causes for the French revolution.

✓ The various aspects of the topic are **balanced**. The text presents different viewpoints on the subject, such as how various scholars have tried to solve the same problem. No aspect of the topic takes over the article, and all aspects are covered. More important viewpoints receives more space in the article. For example, an article about a cat breed that contains a long description about the temperament of that breed, but little or no information about the physical characteristics is obviously not well balanced.

✓ The **lead section** is understandable for everyone, and summarizes the key points covered in an article. If it is not easy to understand, the person or persons who wrote it is most likely not an expert on the subject. Anything that is essential to understanding the subject should be included here. A biography should, for instance, mention why the person is known, distinguishing features, and living dates, but not the name of his or her pet (unless the pet is the reason he or she is known).

✓ The **content** is neutral. Wikipedia's policy is that articles must be written **without bias**, and present previously published notable views. This means that the content can describe both positive and negative things about a subject, such as controversies around a popular person, as long as these facts can be referenced to reliable sources. Good articles also have a neutral language. For example, instead of saying: "She was the best singer", the text should say: "She had 14 number one hits, more than any other singer."

Tip!
If the articles has a gold or bronze star on the same line as the title of the article, it means that it has gone through nomination and peer review process and been selected as one of Wikipedia's finest articles.

✓ References to **reliable sources** are important. Good articles have plenty of footnotes at the bottom. Links to official websites and well-known books about the subject are good signs here. The article about the moon does likely have a link to NASA's website but not to the website of any hobby astronomer.

Signs of bad quality

You should always use caution if you are using only one source. When you use Wikipedia as a starting point or for background information, you are mostly safe. But below are some warning signs that the article is not very good. If an article has more than two of these warning signs you should find another source (and later improve the Wikipedia article):

The article has a **warning** sign at the top. Most warning signs are only information or requests, such as asking you to help expand the article as it is very short. But there are warning signs about the content not being neutral, or plagiarizing another source, where you should be very careful.

Several language problems in the lead section of the article. Chances are, there are multiple problems with the article.

The language contain plenty of opinions and value statements, without any source, or only referring to "some", "many" or other unnamed groups of people. These statements are not neutral and should be removed.

There seem to be aspects of the topic that is missing from the table of contents, and the article. For instance, in an article about a person, a missing period of that person's life suggests that the biography misses important facts.

Some parts of the subject are much bigger than the other. This indicate that the article is biased. A big "criticism" section in an otherwise short article about a company, suggest that the article is biased against the company. This section should be completed with other information.

The article has very few references (footnotes) or sources. If an article is based on too few sources, it is most likely biased in one direction.

The discussion page is filled with hostile dialogues, This signifies that one side of the discussion may have gotten the upper hand in the article, and rendered it partial.

Try It!
What do all good articles contain? Select the correct answers:

- [ ] Headers and footnotes
- [ ] Warning signs
- [ ] Biased content
- [ ] Balanced content

What to do with articles of poor quality?

What should you do when you find an article that has one or several problems?

If you have the time or the knowledge, please consider correcting the problems yourself by clicking Edit at the top of the article, changing the text and clicking Save page.

1) Check if the problem is temporary, such as somebody trying to remove a section that is unflattering about their hero. Click View history and look through the last few edits.

2) If the problem lies in the last edits you can click undo and instantly repair the damage.If the problem has been around for a longer period or if you do not possess the knowledge to fix it, leave a comment on the Discussion page, describing the problem.

3) If the problem is serious, such as libelous statements against a living person, feel free to cut out the problematic parts. Be thoughtful about your own biases, though, especially if you are working on an article about yourself, your nation, or your organization. Critical sections in an article are often appropriate, especially when they are well sourced.

For more information about what you can do when you find a poorly written article, type "Wikipedia:Writing better articles" in the search box.

Try It!
Otis finds an article with many small problems. What should he do? Select the correct answer:

☐ There is nothing to do but wait for the staff to improve the article

☐ He should nominate the article for deletion

☐ He should fix it himself or point out the problems on the discussion page

☐ He should use the article anyway

Citing Wikipedia

When preparing papers or articles for school or business, it is customary to let people know where you got your information. It makes it easier for them to check your conclusions and to evaluate your message. So, whenever you use Wikipedia in your work, you should attribute Wikipedia.

But it is not enough to write "source: Wikipedia" or to write "Source: Wikipedia's article about William Shakespeare". Even including a URL to the article is not enough. Why? Since Wikipedia's articles evolve so quickly, the version of the article you looked at in April may differ from the version that people see in October. Indeed, it is possible for an article to change substantially only moments after you viewed it. The best practice is to refer to the **specific version** that you want to reference. Under the "Toolbox" menu on the lefthand side of any article, click "Cite this page" for full citation information; or, you may wish to simply click "Permanent link", and then copy the URL in the address bar. Either way, you will get a link which in the future will still point to the current version of the article. This is the URL you should include in your work.

It is also a good idea, particularly in printed works, to add the date you viewed the article, like this:

http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mount_Everest&oldid=379949072 (accessed: August 20, 2010)

Mount Everest

When others use this URL, they will go directly to the same version you referenced, and can easily compare this to the latest version of the article.

Conclusion

Now that you have read this brochure, you are able to:

>> Describe how Wikipedia's articles evolve

>> Evaluate the quality of an article

>> Explain the features of good articles

>> Know what to do with articles of poor quality

>> Cite Wikipedia correctly

Thank you and good luck!

Answer key to Try it!

1. What does all good articles contain?

☑ Headers and footnotes

☑ Balanced content

2. Otis finds an article with many small problems. What should he do?

☑ He should fix it himself or point out the problems on the discussion page

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Can you trust the accuracy of Wikipedia?

As a journalist or a student, you will agree that reliability is important. For many, using Wikipedia has become more or less standard, but how can you make sure you get quality information?

Using Wikipedia: how to evaluate Wikipedia article quality is a reference guide with specific steps you can take to get the most out of Wikipedia, as well as a look at how its quality system works.

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