

Courtney Stine

Crowdsourced pedagogy

Editing Wikipedia and the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education

Although often used by students for academic research, Wikipedia has historically been ignored or shunned by librarians in the information literacy classroom. However, as one of the most popular websites worldwide, Wikipedia matters.¹ Visitors frequent Wikipedia to get free access to information, reference articles for background information during current events, and as a starting point for further research. Librarians can implement Wikipedia as a crowdsourced pedagogical tool for teaching students the six information literacy threshold concepts in the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.²

Writing and editing Wikipedia articles showcases the research process, requiring students to understand how information is created, ask questions to identify information gaps, use strategic searching to find information, evaluate articles for authority and inclusivity, properly use and cite sources, and connect with other researchers. The editing process reinforces how to find, use, and critically evaluate resources. Editing Wikipedia also has benefits for users, since contributions make knowledge accessible, mirror scholarly literature for a general audience, and correct wrong or misleading information. Since Wikipedia is an open access resource students already know and use, editing activities can be easily adapted for in-person or remote instruction sessions.

Reframing Wikipedia

Wikipedia is a contested resource among information professionals and teaching faculty. Some see its value as a starting point for research, while others urge students to avoid it entirely. Wikipedia has a longstanding reputation for being inaccurate and untrustworthy. However, Wikipedia has come a long way since it launched in 2001³ and has since shifted from a focus on quantity to quality. The “Five Pillars” of Wikipedia function as a set of established criteria to increase the quality of contributions.⁴ The five pillars can be summarized as:

1. “Wikipedia is an encyclopedia,” so it functions as a starting point and does not contain original research. All information comes from previously published, verifiable sources and must be synthesized for a general audience.
2. “Wikipedia is written from a neutral point of view,” so it does not contain analysis or interpretation and should represent multiple points of view without bias.

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3. “Wikipedia is free content and allows anyone to use, edit, and distribute.” No single person “owns” an article, so it can always be improved with contributions from multiple editors. Since anyone can edit Wikipedia, it acts as a platform for diverse editors to contribute their knowledge and research, unlike academic scholarship that is only accessible to few experts and may not have much representation from traditionally underrepresented groups.

4. “Editors must treat each other with civility and respect.” Disputes over article edits can be communicated directly through messages or on an article’s talk page to not disrupt the experience for users.

5. “Wikipedia has no firm rules,” because it’s constantly evolving and adapting for the better. It recognizes the need to be flexible and open to change. As a crowdsourced platform, it empowers its contributors to be bold with edits and make suggestions for improvement. Due to these pillars, edits that are biased, malicious, unverifiable, or plagiarized do not stick around.

Wikipedia is an excellent platform for teaching the research process and engaging with the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. Students are already familiar with Wikipedia and use it regularly. Instead of ignoring or dismissing it, I encourage librarians to reframe how they talk about Wikipedia in the classroom and show students how to use it more effectively. Start with its positive attributes: free, accessible, available worldwide, easily updated, and crowdsourced. Compare Wikipedia to traditional academic resources that are written by professionals for other experts in the field. These resources usually come at a cost and may not be available to those who do not have access to an academic library. These comparisons can lead to rich conversations about the creation and dissemination of information.

Wikipedia can also be useful when teaching discipline-specific information literacy concepts, since I have had success editing Wikipedia in the art history classroom.⁵ By demonstrating how to contribute to Wikipedia as a form of public scholarship, librarians can teach students how to produce, rather than merely consume, information.

Editing and the Framework

Teaching librarians can teach and reinforce the Framework’s six threshold concepts by incorporating Wikipedia’s editing process into their lesson plan. The following objectives activities are organized by frame and showcase how Wikipedia can be used to teach concepts from the Framework. These learning outcomes are flexible and adaptable to a variety of teaching scenarios, such as one-shot instruction sessions,⁶ edit-a-thons,⁷ remote learning, or standalone workshops on Wikipedia. It’s not possible to use all these concepts in a single instruction session, but these activities can form an instruction menu that librarians can pull from to engage with Wikipedia in the classroom.

Authority is Constructed and Contextual

Wikipedia contains references to popular, scholarly, primary, and secondary sources. Since the article links between text and the citation, users can see the original source where that information comes from for further investigation. Students can identify the types of sources in the references and analyze the citations to see how authority is based on the informa-

tion needed and how it will be used (for example, a news article may contain original fact reporting and a scholarly journal may present an academic interpretation of an event). Librarians can show students how to trace the citations to locate the original source through the library or on the web for further analysis of the sources and their authority.

Information Creation as a Process

Most Wikipedia users are not active contributors and do not access the backend of Wikipedia articles. By creating an account and exploring the anatomy of a Wikipedia article, students can see how Wikipedia pages are created and organized in a crowdsourced encyclopedia. The citations and references indicate where information comes from, the talk page displays conversations between editors, the history tab archives all versions since the article's creation, and the edit tab allows users to make changes. Librarians can ask students to comment on conversations from the talk page, particularly when edits were challenged, and discuss how much articles have evolved since their creation, pointing out developments in the research.

Information Has Value

Wikipedia is a free resource in which editors disseminate information, including interpretation and synthesis, from multiple sources such as news articles, books, and scholarly journals. Students can learn how to attribute ideas and avoid plagiarism through paraphrasing information and citing sources when editing Wikipedia. The references to other sources beyond Wikipedia make it a great place to begin research. Articles are improved with the addition of visual material, which requires only uploading images that are in the public domain or under a free-use license. Librarians can show students how to search for rights-cleared or Creative Commons-licensed images.

Research as Inquiry

Research begins with a question, and editing Wikipedia is no different. Librarians can instruct students to begin with a Wikipedia article, ask questions about the topic, and find more information using library resources. Students can also read through Wikipedia articles and identify knowledge gaps or areas for improvement. Wikipedia's Grading Scheme is a useful tool for determining an article's quality and recommendations for editing improvements.⁸ Librarians can guide students to ask questions about what new developments have occurred that are not represented, what research has come out since the last citation was published, and what important information about this topic is missing. This will prompt students to determine what edits should be made to improve the article.

Scholarship as Conversation

Wikipedia has a conversation taking place behind the scenes in the talk pages. Editors use this space to communicate about the article's content, challenge the validity of some edits, and discuss areas for improvement. Wikipedia encourages users to make changes and consistently improve the quality of the encyclopedia. Editing Wikipedia can be used as an alternative to the traditional research paper, since it gives students a public application for their research.⁹ Students can also take research they have already done and use that knowl-

edge to contribute as editors. By editing Wikipedia articles, students can shift from passive to active researchers with the ability to contribute to the conversation on their topic.

Searching as Strategic Exploration

Wikipedia is known for being a time suck since concepts are linked, and it's easy to hop from article to article. These links show how various topics, people, places, etc. are connected. Students can improve the visibility of Wikipedia pages by adding links. Linking articles is a simple edit that has a big impact, since it helps users learn more about their topic of interest by discovering more articles. Since Wikipedia articles do not contain original research, the content originates from outside sources. To contribute to Wikipedia, new information must be found elsewhere and verified through at least two sources. Students can search for information using the library catalog and databases and add new content and citations to Wikipedia.

There are many options for integrating Wikipedia and information literacy. WikiEducation provides resources and tips for faculty and librarians who want to engage with Wikipedia in the higher education classroom. Registering a course or assignment gives access to the dashboard tool to track individual student contributions, such as articles edited, words and references added, and media uploads.¹⁰ Wikipedia also provides grading rubrics for faculty to assess substantial edits. Although Wikipedia aims for articles to be neutral and free from bias, most editors identify as white males, and this skews content. Librarians can support efforts to increase the diversity of editors by participating in edit-a-thon campaigns such as 1Lib1Ref, Art+Feminism, and Women in Science, which seek to bridge content gaps and boost coverage of underrepresented topics.¹¹ Edit-a-thons can take place in the library instruction classroom as an excellent way for students to practice the research process. Students are more motivated when they have a public application for their research. Students can create content that may be seen by thousands of Wikipedia users as opposed to one view from their professor. By editing Wikipedia, students transition from information consumers to information producers by making their research and writing public and available for editing and criticism.

Conclusion

Learning the research process through editing Wikipedia is a transferable skill that can impact how students seek and evaluate information the next time they go down the Wikipedia rabbit hole. Teaching students how to use Wikipedia more efficiently, and even contribute to its platform, will improve a resource used by millions who do not have access to academic resources. The threshold concepts presented in the Framework, when taught through the lens of Wikipedia, prepare students to become information literate citizens who can critically evaluate information in all contexts, including their everyday research needs.

Notes

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