

Wikipedia Is Good for You!?

by James P. Purdy

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Wikipedia Is Good for You!?

James P. Purdy

“I actually do think Wikipedia is an amazing thing. It is the first place I go when I’m looking for knowledge. Or when I want to create some.”

—*Stephen Colbert*

You may not realize it, but creating knowledge is one reason you are asked to do research-based writing¹ in college.* And a popular resource you may already use can help you with this task—though perhaps not in the way you might initially think. Wikipedia, the free wiki “encyclopedia,”² can provide information to assist you with and model some of the activities frequently characteristic of college-level research-based writing. As with any resource you use, your success with Wikipedia depends on how and why you use it. The goal of this chapter is to show you how and why you might use Wikipedia to help you complete research-based writing tasks for your first year composition class. It offers suggestions for two ways to use—and not to use—Wikipedia. The first is as a source. The second is as a process guide.

My premise for the first is that you are going to use Wikipedia as a source for writing assignments regardless of cautions against it, so it is more helpful to address ways to use it effectively than to ignore it (and ignoring it precludes some potentially beneficial uses of Wikipedia anyway). My premise for the second is that, as I argue else-

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where, Wikipedia can reinforce approaches to research-based writing that many composition teachers support. Wikipedia, that is, can help to illustrate (1) recursive revision based on idea development, (2) textual production based on participation in a conversation rather than isolated thinking, and (3) research based on production rather than only critique (Purdy). The process of successfully contributing to a Wikipedia article, in other words, parallels the process of successfully creating a piece of research-based writing. Both involve putting forth ideas in writing and developing them in response to feedback based on audience members' perceptions of the usefulness, accuracy, and value of those ideas.

I offer two caveats before I proceed. All first year writing instructors teach research-based writing differently and ask you to produce different kinds of texts for assignments, so you will need to adapt the suggestions offered in this essay for your particular course and assignment. My goal is not to mandate one correct, universally applicable process of research-based writing. There is none. Nor is it to claim that products of research-based writing should look like a Wikipedia article. They should not. Wikipedia articles are a different genre than academic research-based writing. Wikipedia seeks to emulate an encyclopedia (that's where the "pedia" part of the name comes from) and, thereby, requires that articles be written in what it calls "NPOV," or neutral point of view; articles are intended to represent all significant sides of a topic rather than to persuade readers to believe one is correct (Bruns 113–114, "Wikipedia:Neutral"). Research-based writing assignments in first year composition commonly ask you to advance and develop your own argument on a topic by drawing on and responding to relevant outside sources. While you may be asked to represent multiple views on a topic for such an assignment, you will frequently be asked to argue for one, so your writing will likely be more overtly persuasive than a Wikipedia article.

Despite these important differences, I believe that some of the practices often involved in successfully writing a Wikipedia article are also often involved in successfully writing a research-based text for college classes: reviewing, conversing, revising, and sharing. As Australian scholar Axel Bruns asserts, "Wikipedia . . . is closely aligned with the live processes of academic exchanges of knowledge" (208, italics in original). Thus, this chapter proceeds with the assumption that it

is useful to consider Wikipedia as both a product (i.e., a source) and a representation of process (i.e., a guide to practices).

USING WIKIPEDIA AS A SOURCE

The first way you may think to use Wikipedia is as a source—that is, as a text you can quote or paraphrase in a paper. After all, Wikipedia is easy to access and usually pretty easy to understand. Its articles are often current and frequently provide interesting facts and information that can support your ideas. What's not to like?

Usually teachers do not like two primary aspects of Wikipedia. The first is its open participation: anyone, regardless of background, qualifications, or expertise, can write Wikipedia articles. As a result, articles can display incorrect information. There are many examples of such incorrect information on Wikipedia. Perhaps the most infamous involves the Wikipedia article on John Seigenthaler (former journalist, political advisor, and father of the reporter of the same name on NBC news). Brian Chase changed the article to indicate that Seigenthaler played a role in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert. This untrue contribution lasted for 132 days (Page, "Wikipedia Biography"). Seigenthaler was understandably upset, which he reported vociferously in an article in *USA Today* (Seigenthaler). Were someone to take Wikipedia's John Seigenthaler³ article at face value during this time, she or he would come to the wrong conclusion about Seigenthaler. If you quote or paraphrase a Wikipedia article as an authoritative source, then, you are potentially making a claim based on wrong information, and using incorrect information is not a good way to make a convincing argument. Of course, misinformation isn't limited to Wikipedia. As Jim Giles reports in *Nature*, Encyclopaedia Britannica has errors in some of its articles, too; he claims that Wikipedia is almost as accurate as Britannica for a series of articles on science topics (900–901; see also Bruns 127–133, Levinson 93). You should, therefore, read critically all sources, not just Wikipedia articles. It's always a good idea to verify information in multiple sources. To ensure a better chance of accuracy, though, college-level research-based writing assignments generally ask you to use sources written by academic professionals and recognized experts.

The second aspect of Wikipedia that many teachers do not like is its changeability: Wikipedia articles do not remain the same over time. The *Michael Jackson* article makes this explicit. Its 19:35, 27 June 2009 version begins with a header: “This article is **about a person who has recently died**. Some information, such as that pertaining to the circumstances of the person’s death and surrounding events, may change rapidly as more facts become known” (emphasis in original). As this notice implies, the article didn’t stay the same for long given the unfolding details of Jackson’s death. As a result of such changeability, Wikipedia articles are unreliable; the article you cite today may not exist in that form tomorrow. This variability challenges prevailing understanding of how published texts work so causes some anxiety. Because print texts are (relatively) stable, we expect texts we read (and cite) to be the same when we go back to them later. Even Wikipedia contributors express worry about the implications of article changeability for citation:

Among other problems . . . if several authors cite the same Wikipedia article, they may all cite different versions, leading to complete confusion. That just linking to the article sans version information is not enough can be seen by those Wikipedia articles themselves which refer to others, where it is clear from following the link that a different version was referred to (and there is no clue which of the many versions in the history was actually read by the person who cited it). (“Why Wikipedia Is Not So Great”)

As Wikipedians explain, article variability makes citing hard because it is difficult for readers to know which version of a Wikipedia article an author cited. And academic audiences like to be able to return to the texts you cite to verify the conclusions you draw from them. If the texts you cite don’t exist anymore, they cannot do that.

Teachers have concerns about you using Wikipedia as a source for another reason—one that has less to do with Wikipedia itself and more to do with the kinds of texts you are expected to use in research-based writing. Most college-level writing asks you to engage more deeply with a subject than does an encyclopedia, and doing so entails reading more than the general overview of a topic that encyclopedia articles

provide.⁴ So articles from any encyclopedia are not usually good sources to quote, paraphrase, or summarize in your writing. Indeed, in response to Middlebury College's history department officially banning students from using Wikipedia as a source in their papers, Sandra Ordonez, a spokesperson for Wikipedia, and Roy Rosenzweig, Director of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, agreed "the real problem is one of college students using encyclopedias when they should be using more advanced sources" (Jaschik n. pag.). If you wouldn't cite an encyclopedia article in a project, then citing a Wikipedia article likely isn't a good idea either.

Because of their open participation, unreliability, and (potentially) shallow topic coverage, you generally should not cite Wikipedia articles as authoritative sources in college-level writing. This does not mean that Wikipedia is not useful, or that you cannot read it, or that you should not cite it if you do use it. It does mean that Wikipedia is better used in other ways.

USING WIKIPEDIA AS A STARTING PLACE

There are productive ways to use Wikipedia. In fact, Wikipedia can be a good source in three different ways. Rather than a source to cite, it can be a source of (1) ideas, (2) links to other texts, and (3) search terms.

To use Wikipedia as a source of ideas, read the Wikipedia article on your topic when you begin a research-based writing project to get a sense of the multiple aspects or angles you might write about. Many Wikipedia articles include a table of contents and headings that provide multiple lenses through which you might frame an argument (e.g., origins, history, economics, impact, production). Looking at the table of contents and headings can help you view your topic from vantage points you might not otherwise consider and can give you directions to pursue and develop in your writing.

You can also use Wikipedia as a gateway to other texts to consult for your research. Wikipedia's Verifiability Policy requires that material posted to articles be verifiable—that is, be cited (Bruns 114, "Wikipedia:Verifiability")—so articles include bibliographies, as shown in figure 1. They also frequently include "further reading," "external link," or "see also" lists, as shown in figure 2. These lists pro-

vide the names of—and often direct links to—other sources. Take advantage of these leads. When you have decided on a topic and are searching for sources to develop and support your thinking, look at these references, external links, and further reading lists. Wikipedia’s Verifiability Policy, however, does not stipulate what kinds of sources contributors must cite to verify the information they post, so these reference and further reading lists do not necessarily provide connections to trustworthy, valid texts appropriate for citing in an academic paper (but, then again, neither do other sources). You still need to evaluate a source to determine if it is suitable for use.

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Figure 1. References section from Wikipedia’s *Web 2.0* article⁵

Further reading

- *A History of Writing: From Hieroglyph to Multimedia*, edited by Anne-Marie Christin, [Flammarion \(in French\)](#), hardcover: 408 pages, 2002, ISBN 2060108875
- *Writing Instruction: Current Practices in the Classroom*. ERIC Digest. [↗](#)
- *Writing Development*. ERIC Digest. [↗](#)
- *Writing Instruction: Changing Views over the Years*. ERIC Digest. [↗](#)
- *Das "Anrennen gegen die Grenzen der Sprache" Diskussion mit Roland Barthes, André Breton, Gilles Deleuze & Raymond Federman* by Ralph Lichtensteiger <http://www.lichtensteiger.de/methoden.html>
- *Origins of writing on AncientScripts.com* [↗](#)
- *History of Writing* [↗](#)

Figure 2. Further reading section from Wikipedia’s *Writing* article

Utilizing Wikipedia as a gateway to other sources should not replace going to the library or using your library's online databases. In fact, reviewing the Wikipedia article on your topic can help you better discover sources in your school's library. You might read Wikipedia articles to help you generate search terms to use for finding sources in your school library's catalog and online databases. Ashley Gill (who, like all students quoted in this essay, consented to the use of her real name) explains how she used Wikipedia in this way for an award-winning research project for her school's first year composition class:

For this project, I began on Wikipedia, knowing that results were not accurate, but also knowing I could find useful search terms there. I was only slightly familiar with the psychology angle I was using for my paper, and so Wikipedia gave me a rough sketch of the general background. From here, I used the information I gained from Wikipedia to search for books form [*sic*] the . . . Library. ("Research" 2–3)

Gill acknowledges Wikipedia's problem with accuracy but outlines ways in which Wikipedia was still really useful in helping her get some general background information to determine search terms to use to find sources through the library. You might find Wikipedia similarly useful.

USING WIKIPEDIA AS A PROCESS GUIDE

Not only is Wikipedia potentially useful for generating ideas, finding sources, and determining search terms, but it is also potentially useful for remembering and understanding some of the tasks that are frequently part of good research-based writing: reviewing, conversing, revising, and sharing. To be clear, I am not suggesting that all types of research-based writing ask you to do these tasks in exactly the same way or that your writing should emulate a Wikipedia article. However, some of what happens in making successful contributions to Wikipedia parallels some of what happens in producing effective research-based writing. Looking at Wikipedia can help to demystify these practices. These practices happen recursively—that is, they repeat—so the order in which I present them here is not necessarily the

best or correct one. While you do not need to move through these practices in a specific order, you will want to engage in these activities for many research-based writing assignments.

THE WIKIPEDIA INTERFACE

Before proceeding, let me offer an overview of the Wikipedia interface so that the following discussion, which points to specific aspects of the interface, makes sense. A Wikipedia article's interface has four tabs, as shown in figure 3. These tabs are labeled "article," "discussion," "edit this page," and "history." The "article" tab contains the content of the article. This content is what displays automatically when you open an article in Wikipedia. The "discussion" tab provides access to the conversation surrounding the article, how it is being written, and the topic being written about. On this page users can, among other things, suggest changes to an article, justify changes they made to an article, and ask why other users made changes to an article. You can participate in this conversation. The "edit this page" tab provides a space for users to add, delete, or revise content of an article. This page is where people write the content that is displayed on the "article" page. You can make these changes. Finally, the "history" tab lists all the versions of the article, when they were written, who updated them, and what changes each user made (each author can provide a summary of his or her changes). On the "history" tab users can also compare and contrast selected article versions.

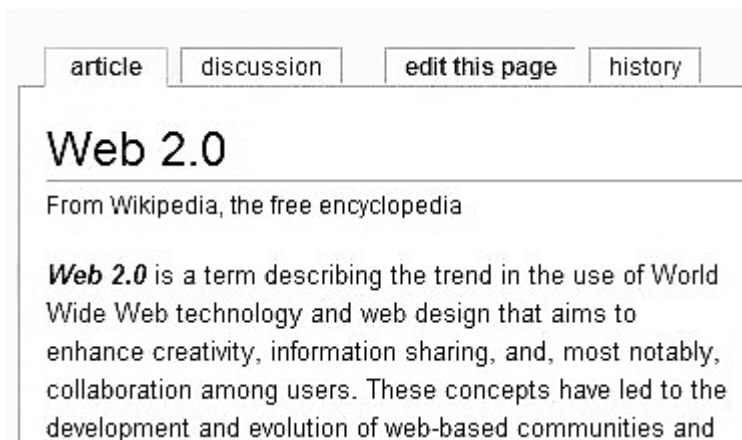


Figure 3. A Wikipedia article interface's four tabs as shown for the Web 2.0 article

Each of the sections below is devoted to a practice common to both successful Wikipedia contributions and research-based writing. In each, I explain how Wikipedia authors engage in that practice, outline how you can learn from what Wikipedians do to engage in that practice for your research-based writing, and finally provide a specific way you can use Wikipedia for help with that practice.

REVIEWING

Examining the role of reviewing in contributing to a Wikipedia article can help you understand the role of reviewing in research-based writing. To make a successful contribution to Wikipedia, authors must review what other contributors have already written about the topic. They don't want to include information that the community of people interested in and knowledgeable about the topic has determined to be inappropriate, off topic, or unimportant, or to simply repeat information already published. Such contributions will be deleted—usually quickly—because they do not offer anything new to people's understanding of the topic.

To do this review, successful Wikipedia contributors read texts in and outside of Wikipedia. They look at previous versions of an article on the history page, including the change summaries provided by authors, and read the discussion surrounding an article on the discussion page. To show that they have reviewed other texts published on the topic of the article they are contributing to, Wikipedians also provide citations for material they post. As I indicate above, Wikipedia requires that material posted to articles be verifiable (Bruns 114, "Wikipedia:Verifiability"), so contributors need to demonstrate that they can verify material they post by citing its source. As shown in figure 4, an absence of citations often results in a warning that someone needs to cite a source to support what is written or the text will be removed.

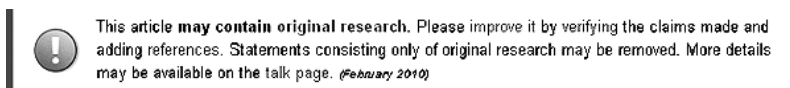


Figure 4. Wikipedia's warning to provide citations to verify claims from the research article

This process parallels what you can do for research-based writing assignments. Review what other contributors have already published about your topic so you avoid writing something that is inappropriate, off topic, or repetitive. Doing this review in formal course writing is somewhat different than doing it in Wikipedia, though. You need to acknowledge in the texts you write that you have reviewed what others have previously published by doing what is called a literature review. A literature review entails summarizing main points from your sources, identifying their insights and/or limitations, and situating these texts in relation to one another and your writing.

Let's look at an example. Gill provides a literature review in her essay "The Analogical Effects of Neural Hemispheres in "The Purloined Letter":

There are approaches to cognitive, and consequently behavioral, functioning that stem from ideas that each side of the brain thinks differently. Michael Grady asserts that a person who thinks with one side of his brain will differ greatly than a person who thinks with the opposite side (20–21). According to Thomas Regelski, the left side is said to think in the following ways: "linear, sequential, logical, analytical, verbal, fragmenting, differentiating, convergence (seeks closure) . . . conventional symbols, facts (objective, impersonal, confirmable), precision, explicit, Scientific Empiricism/Logical Positivism/certitude/surety" (30). Conversely, Regelski establishes that the right side is responsible for thinking in the subsequent ways, which seemingly oppose the first set of thinking methods: "circular, simultaneous, paradoxical, combinative, holistic, divergence (content with open-endedness) . . . expressive, vague, implicit . . . Immanence/Introspectionism/Intuitionism/Intuitive Cognition/indwelling/insight/intuition" (30). Sally Springer and Georg Deutsch assert in their book *Left Brain, Right Brain* that the human brain is divided in this model, and an easier way to interpret this model is "the left hemisphere is something like a digital computer, the right like an analog computer"

(185), and that depending on which hemisphere the individual uses most primarily, the individual will think and therefore act in accord with said attributed qualities (186). Poe incorporates many of these characteristics into his characters['] methods during the investigation. The Prefect exemplifies the left side thinking with his systematic and complex approach to finding the purloined letter, while the Minister and Dupin utilize both right and left side attributes, thinking about the cognitions of the other and acting accordingly. (12–13)

Here Gill shows that she has reviewed the work of Grady, Regelski, and Springer and Deutsch by over-viewing their claims about brain function and then connecting those claims to her argument about “The Purloined Letter.” Like a successful Wikipedia contributor, she also offers citations, though the form of these citations is different than in Wikipedia. Wikipedia generally uses hyperlinked endnotes, while the most popular academic citation styles from the American Psychological Association (APA) and Modern Language Association (MLA), which Gill uses here, require in-text parenthetical citations and reference and works cited lists, respectively. Despite these differences, the larger idea is the same: in your research-based writing you need to show you have reviewed other relevant texts to demonstrate conversance with appropriate source material and to allow readers to verify your conclusions.

I end this section suggesting a way you can use Wikipedia to help you with this reviewing process. My intention here is to not to prepare you to contribute to a Wikipedia article itself, but rather to use Wikipedia to prepare you to do the reviewing that is part of successful research-based writing. When you are beginning a research-based writing assignment, read the discussion page for the Wikipedia article on the topic you are writing about and identify the debates, questions, and absences that you find. In other words, list what contributors (1) argue about (i.e., what ideas are contentious), (2) have questions about, and (3) think is missing from and should be included in coverage of that topic. Then identify these debates, questions, and absences for the published literature (i.e., books, articles) on your topic. Review what other authors have written about them. Looking at the discussion page

first allows you to enact on a smaller scale what you need to do with a wider range of sources for a literature review in a research-based writing project.

Let's consider an example. If you read the discussion page for the Wikipedia article *History of the board game Monopoly*, a section of which is shown in figure 5, you will find that contributors argue about when the game originated and the role Elizabeth Magie played in its creation; they ask questions about the rules for players selling property to one another; and they think information on the volume of game sales, McDonald's Monopoly games/promotions, and the World Monopoly Championships is missing and should be addressed more fully. Were you to write about the history of the board game Monopoly, you now have several avenues (no pun intended!) to read about and know what you might need to review in making an argument on the topic.

The First Paragraph [edit]

Why does the first paragraph not say what country it is talking about? It could be talking about Indonesia for all I know. Shouldn't this have been read before putting it on the front page? *sigh* Cokehabit 01:43, 13 December 2006 (UTC)

It's a board game, originally developed in the USA, which IS mentioned in the first paragraph. The introduction is no more specific than that because of the game's international history. Adding geography to a non-geographic subject would seem to make no sense. -- JohnDBuell 01:54, 13 December 2006 (UTC)

It is a terrible start to an article: *The history of the board game Monopoly can be traced back to the early 1900s.* Where? How? References?

Yes we do give references. But you have to read them yourself to get the information you're asking for... -- Derek Ross | Talk 07:49, 13 December 2006 (UTC)

Based on original designs by Elizabeth Magie - If it can be traced back to Elizabeth Magie how come there were *several designs* over 30 years? Why is her name in there if the origin, date and original designer isn't known? When were her designs made? Which of the several designs were hers?

That's because Monopoly was like a wikipedia article. Magie made the first few versions, then other people tweaked it over 30 years. So the name and the design both changed as time went by. It's still basically the same game though. Very much like a Wikipedia article really. -- Derek Ross | Talk 07:49, 13 December 2006 (UTC)

Figure 5. Section of the discussion page from Wikipedia's *History of the board game Monopoly* article

CONVERSING

A second practice successful Wikipedia contributors engage in that reflects a successful practice of research-based writing is conversing. Productive Wikipedia authors situate their contributions to an article in relation to those of past authors, recognizing that making a contribution to an article is like stepping into an ongoing conversation. Wikipedia authors engage in this practice by posting to the discussion page—for example, by asking questions of and responding to other contributors and by arguing for why they made certain changes—and

by providing change summaries for their contributions when they edit an article, particularly change summaries that identify briefly why they made a certain change—for example, “corrected factual errors in introduction,” “deleted irrelevant information to maintain article focus.”

As with reviewing, conversing is another practice frequently characteristic of successful research-based writing. You should respond to the sources you use rather than just report on or parrot them. While Wikipedia contributors can literally insert themselves into a conversation on a Wikipedia article discussion page, you can engage in conversation with sources in research-based writing by quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing them; by indicating agreements, disagreements, and connections among them and you; and by showing their insights, limitations, and applications.

Consider the following example. In a paragraph from “Literacy,” an award-winning first year composition essay on the need to “broaden the range of serious reading material for youth to include comic books and the [I]nternet” (16), Lindsey Chesmar acknowledges what two other sources, Bob Hoover (*italicized below*) and Janell D. Wilson and Linda H. Casey (**bolded below**), have written about youth reading behaviors and inserts what she wishes to say in response to them (unformatted text below):

The NEA report, “To Read or Not to Read,” [sic] shows “the startling declines, in how much and how well Americans read” (Hoover 1). Although many people could have already guessed, this NEA report officially states what has been on the decline since the early 1990s. However, it seems as though the NEA left out some important data when conducting their study. According to Wilson and Casey, “comic books have been at the top of the student preference list for sometime, yet it seems that they may not count as ‘serious’ reading material” (47). Children and young adults have been reading comics and comic books since their beginning. Some educators also use comics in class as a way to interest students who would be otherwise unwilling to read (Wilson and Casey 47). However, literary studies rarely include

comic books in their questions and surveys of youth. If a young adult spends 3 hours a week reading comic books, the study will not include that in their overall findings. It is as if that time the young adult spends reading means nothing. *The NEA itself did not include the “double-digit growth in recent years” in sales of books aimed at teens (Hoover 1).* This statistic leads me to believe that teens are actually reading more than what the recent studies suggest. Leaving out some young adults’ reading time and the growing popularity of young adult books could lead to misrepresentations in the results of the overall literacy studies. This also may lead the young adult to believe that what they are reading is not worthy enough, or “serious” enough, to count towards anything. They may feel discouraged and give up reading all together after finding out the things they like to read are not valid in the literary and educational worlds. (17, italics and boldface added)

In this paragraph, Chesmar makes clear that she knows important components of the ongoing conversation about literacy and reading: the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released a study that reports reading (amount and proficiency) has declined in the United States and, though popular among young adults, comic books did not count as reading material for the study. She puts sources discussing these ideas into conversation; note the back and forth between the bold, italics, and unformatted text. She then responds to these sources, writing, “This statistic leads me to believe that teens are actually reading more than what the recent studies suggest” (17). Chesmar thereby establishes her role in the conversation: she thinks the NEA report provides misleading results because it ignores certain types of reading material, which, for her, can have some troubling consequences.

Again, I end this section offering a suggestion for how you can use Wikipedia to help you with the research-based writing process—in this case, by putting your sources into conversation with one another and with you. One way to engage in a conversation like Chesmar does is to construct a dialogue between your sources like the dialogue on a Wikipedia article discussion page. Identify topics your sources address

and create headings for them (e.g., concerns, benefits, history). Then quote and paraphrase relevant material from your sources and group it under the appropriate heading. Finally, situate these quotes and paraphrases in relation to one another and add yourself to the discussion. Literally construct a dialogue between them and you. The idea is to see yourself as a participant with a voice in the conversation.

REVISING

Another practice that is part of successful Wikipedia and research-based writing is revising. Effective Wikipedia contributors revise articles frequently. They take advantage of the wiki capability to edit the articles they read. To be successful, they do not give up when other people delete or change their contributions but instead revise in response to the feedback they receive (be that from posts to the discussion page, change summaries on the history page, or administrator explanations for why something was removed). The history page for nearly any Wikipedia article provides evidence of how frequently Wikipedians revise. Figure 6, for instance, shows that authors made eleven revisions to the *Michael Jackson* article in one hour on 28 June 2009. As this page illustrates, making an enduring contribution to a Wikipedia article is an ongoing process of negotiation with the reading audience. Moreover, those contributors who revise the most and have their article contributions last for a long time can gain in status

(cur) = difference from current version, (prev) = difference from preceding version,
 m = minor edit, → = section edit, ← = automatic edit summary

- (cur) (prev) ⊙ 17:17, 28 June 2009 Sceptre (talk | contribs) (128,130 bytes) (*rv: I think we should wait another two days before removing it (or as long as the tag is also on Farrah Fawcett)*)
- (cur) (prev) ⊙ 17:13, 28 June 2009 Pecoc (talk | contribs) (128,113 bytes) (*the current event tag at Death of Michael Jackson takes care of this, short WP:SS on this page does not merit distracting tag over article*)
- (cur) (prev) ○ 16:59, 28 June 2009 Information yes (talk | contribs) (128,130 bytes) (*FDT stays for 7 days*)
- (cur) (prev) ○ 16:57, 28 June 2009 Pecoc (talk | contribs) (128,115 bytes) (*tag of limited value to readers, he didn't just die a couple mintues ago, it's an investigation now, also per rationale expressed in User:Shanes/Why_tags_are_evil*)
- (cur) (prev) ○ 16:49, 28 June 2009 Geoffwah (talk | contribs) **m** (128,164 bytes)
- (cur) (prev) ○ 16:41, 28 June 2009 SandyGeorgia (talk | contribs) (128,155 bytes) (*→Vocal style: I can't find that in the source*)
- (cur) (prev) ○ 16:34, 28 June 2009 SandyGeorgia (talk | contribs) (128,132 bytes) (*→1986–90: Tabloids, appearance, Bad, autobiography and films: redundant also*)
- (cur) (prev) ○ 16:33, 28 June 2009 SandyGeorgia (talk | contribs) (128,138 bytes) (*faulty punctuation*)
- (cur) (prev) ○ 16:32, 28 June 2009 GraYoshi2x (talk | contribs) **m** (128,133 bytes)
- (cur) (prev) ○ 16:31, 28 June 2009 SandyGeorgia (talk | contribs) (128,133 bytes) (*remove WP:OVERLINKing*)
- (cur) (prev) ○ 16:31, 28 June 2009 GraYoshi2x (talk | contribs) **m** (128,173 bytes) (*fix*)
- (cur) (prev) ○ 16:30, 28 June 2009 GraYoshi2x (talk | contribs) (128,173 bytes) (*if you want to honor him in his death then do it somewhere else, enough with these glorified images that only disrupt the article and context*)
- (cur) (prev) ○ 16:06, 28 June 2009 Heslopian (talk | contribs) (128,186 bytes)
- (cur) (prev) ○ 15:40, 28 June 2009 JonnySalive (talk | contribs) **m** (128,110 bytes) (Sp.)

Figure 6. Section of the history page from Wikipedia's *Michael Jackson* article.

among the Wikipedia community and be promoted to administrators. It is, in other words, through revising that Wikipedia contributors earn respect.

To succeed at research-based writing, you, like a successful Wikipediaian, should also revise your texts multiple times in response to feedback you receive. You might receive such feedback from teachers, peers, writing center consultants, roommates, and friends who offer advice and suggestions rather than from strangers who change the text itself, as is the case for Wikipedia contributors. But the larger idea remains: creating an effective text involves multiple iterations of recursive revision. You need to write a draft, get some feedback, respond to that feedback in your next draft, and repeat the process. Good writing entails thinking through your ideas on the page or screen. Rarely do people record perfectly what they think the first time they write it down. Indeed, you often don't know what you think until you write it down. It is not uncommon, therefore, to find at the end of your first draft the thesis to develop in your second. That's okay! Knowledge production through writing is an ongoing process.

One way to use Wikipedia to help with revising a course assignment is to post a change to a Wikipedia article based on a draft you are writing, see how others respond and analyze those responses. In other words, give your idea a test drive with a public audience. If you aren't comfortable posting directly to an article or are afraid your contribution might get taken down, suggest a change on the discussion page and likewise chronicle the responses. Then revise your draft based on the feedback and responses you receive. The point of this activity isn't just to revise the Wikipedia article itself (though you might choose to do that later), but to use responses and what you learn by posting to Wikipedia to help you revise your research-based writing for class.

SHARING

A final practice successful Wikipediaians engage in that reflects a successful practice of research-based writing is sharing. To get feedback, Wikipedia contributors share their writing; they post it for public viewing by editing an article and/or contributing to the discussion page for that article. Otherwise, they do not get feedback, their writing cannot have an impact on others' understanding of a topic, and

they cannot gain in status among the Wikipedia community. To more fully participate in this sharing, they might even register and create a profile so other contributors and readers know who they are and can contact them. Professor Mark A. Wilson, for example, identifies contact with other people as a beneficial outcome of sharing his writing and photographs on the *Great Inagua Island* Wikipedia article. He was even invited to speak at the school of someone who saw what he shared.

You also need to share your writing to be successful. While this may seem obvious on some level, sharing involves more than turning in a final draft to a teacher. You have to be willing and prepared to share your writing earlier in your writing process. You can share by taking your writing to the writing center,⁶ giving it to a classmate for a peer workshop, or reviewing it in a conference with an instructor. This sharing is clearly less public than posting to a widely accessible website like Wikipedia, but it still entails making written work available to a reading audience and is a critical part of the learning process. Key is that in order to get the most benefit from sharing—that is, to get feedback to which you can respond—you need to be prepared to share your writing prior to its due date. In other words, you cannot procrastinate.

Using Wikipedia as I suggest above in the revising section is also a good way to share your writing. After all, a goal of sharing is to get feedback to revise. You can, however, use wiki technology in another way to share your writing. You can record in a course wiki (or another wiki you create) your writing of a text, provide change summaries for all of the different versions along the way, and ask others to review your progress. Using a wiki in this way allows you to reflect on what you are doing and provides an accessible venue for you to share your work—one where your peers and your teacher can respond.

CONCLUSION

Understanding how to use (and not to use) Wikipedia as a source can help you avoid relying on Wikipedia in unproductive ways and can help you see sources as more than static products to plunk into your writing. In other words, looking at Wikipedia as a starting place (for ideas, sources, search terms, etc.) shows the importance of engaging with rather than ventriloquizing sources—of viewing sources as

means to spur and develop your thinking rather than as means to get someone else to do your thinking for you.

Doing research-based writing can also be less daunting—and more fulfilling and fun—when you understand the practices involved and realize that these activities are an important part of knowledge creation. No one assigned Wikipedia contributors to proceed as they do. Since their goal, however, is to add to our understanding of a topic—the very same goal you have for the research-based writing you do in first year composition—they engage in certain activities: reviewing, conversing, revising, and sharing. Not all Wikipedians perform these practices in the same order in the same way, but successful Wikipedians do them. And the most dedicated contributors stay involved even after their text is shared: they read, respond, and revise, over and over again. The process doesn't stop when their writing is made public. That's just the beginning. If you approach your research-based writing in a similar fashion, it'll likely be the beginning of a journey of knowledge creation for you, too.

NOTES

1. You may be familiar with the term *research paper* and may have been asked to write one for some of your classes. I don't use that term here, however. There are two primary reasons: (1) Research "papers" need not be papers anymore. That is, what you write need not be in the form of a print document. It might be a web site or a video or a poster or some other multimedia form. The term *research paper* doesn't encapsulate all these possibilities. (2) Research papers are often associated with presentations of what other people have written about a topic. When people hear *research paper*, in other words, they often think of compiling what other authoritative, smart people have to say about a topic and calling it a day. The kind of writing you are asked to do in college, however, requires more than that. It asks for your response to and application of what others have written. You need to do something with the sources you read (other than just string together quotes from them in your paper). So instead of *research paper*, I use *research-based writing*. This term emphasizes the activity (writing) rather than the medium (paper). This term also presents research as the basis (research-based), a beginning rather than an end.

2. I put the word "encyclopedia" in quotation marks because I argue that calling Wikipedia an encyclopedia and evaluating it based on the stan-

dards of print-based encyclopedias misrepresents the way it works (see Purdy W352, W357, W365).

3. For clarity, I italicize the names of Wikipedia articles in this chapter.

4. That Wikipedia provides the same shallow coverage as other encyclopedias, or even that it should be considered an encyclopedia, is debatable (Bruns 101–133, Levinson 95–98). Nonetheless, its prevailing classification as an encyclopedia raises concern.

5. This image, like all the images in this chapter, comes from the English version of Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>) and, like all Wikipedia content (except the logo, which Wikipedia does not allow to be reproduced), is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>) and GNU Free Documentation License (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>), which permit reproduction of content with attribution for non-commercial purposes, as explained by Wikipedia's official policy on reusing Wikipedia content ("Wikipedia:Reusing Wikipedia Content").

6. See Ben Rafoth's "Why Visit Your Campus Writing Center?" chapter in this *Writing Spaces* volume.

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