

Wikipedia exercise

Students are encouraged to use Wikipedia sensibly (and not to cite it as a verifiable source in their essays!) throughout this course. The second assessed piece of coursework will be to write a new Wiki entry for a subject not previously covered or to assess (and if necessary, correct) an existing entry.

Each student is required to find their own subject or entry for evaluation. Students should sign up for a Wiki entry at some point during the course by declaring their interest to JS either in person or by email. **Only one student will be able to work on each entry**, so be sure to sign up as early as possible. Entries will be approved on a strictly first-come-first-served basis. Students will not be able to change their selection once approved, so pick your entry with care. You should also be aware that University regulations forbid you from submitting substantially the same material more than once, **so your Wikipedia essay must not be on the same topic as your essay**. Those who do not follow this rule will be awarded 0 (zero) for the second exercise. So, should you write your first essay on the civil rights movement, you will not be able to write a Wikipedia entry on any topics/persons/events that are directly related to the civil rights movement -- common sense, really.

It is vitally important to take considerable time to select your entry.

Should your chosen subject either be unavailable or considered inappropriate you should be prepared to offer an alternative choice. Inappropriate subjects include entries for single books (e.g. Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*) or subjects that are so small that it would be impossible to write something rigorous (e.g. JFK's cufflinks).

The purpose of this exercise is manifold:

- a) to use Wikipedia critically
- b) to demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of open-source material on the web
- c) to improve Wikipedia
- d) to encourage responsible use of the web, particularly of Web 2.0
- e) to encourage you to engage your specialist knowledge with the outside world

Please follow and respect Wikipedia's policies and guidelines. Available here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Policies_and_guidelines

Please also refer to 'What Wikipedia is not':

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:What_Wikipedia_is_not

EVERYBODY should read the following hugely important article about Wikipedia and the historical profession:

Roy Rosenzweig, 'Can History Be Open Source?: Wikipedia and the Future of the Past'

Journal of American History 93 (2006) pp. 117-146.

It is available both in the Templeman Library in hard copy and online via EBSCO

Guidelines for Amending Existing Entries

- 1) Take a printout of the page that you have selected. Make sure that the date is clear on your printout, since Wikipedia entries do tend to be updated or altered on a regular basis.
- 2) Read it carefully.
- 3) Using a selection of secondary and primary sources, check the accuracy of the entry. You should be relying on specialist texts and verifiable websites (ie not survey texts, other sites on Wikipedia or similar open-source material). The crucial factor for you to be aware of is the verifiability of the source. Published books have all had their facts checked by the author, the publisher and external reviewers. Your other sources should be similarly reliable.
- 4) Write numbers on the printout of mistakes, poor referencing or anything that you consider noteworthy. On a separate paper, explain each number briefly (why it is there, where you found the correct information etc.). These annotations will form the basis of the next part of the exercise.

5) Write a report of your assessment. This should include your conclusions on the entry's accuracy, its use of sources, the quality of the writing, any omissions that it has made, and your ideas about improving the entry. It should be around 1,500 words (excluding notes and bibliography). If you find that the entry is 100% correct, your report should explain exactly why this is so, making reference to the works that you have consulted. If you have issues with the entry's interpretation of the subject, then you must explain clearly why the entry should be amended.

Don't get bogged down by Wikipedia's obsession with objectivity and supposed rejection of 'bias.' You are now undergrads and should know that objectivity is a shifting concept and 'bias' is so inevitable as to be a near-meaningless concept! Nevertheless, you should aim to be accurate and relatively balanced in your writing. Wikipedia will be happy if you include material on controversial debates, provided that you offer both sides.

5) Make your amendments to the entry and please justify them in the report. Print out the amended entry, and highlight your changes either by underlining them or using a highlight pen. For some entries you may need a Wikipedia account, but these are very easy to set up.

6) Submit the original printout, your report and a printout of the amended entry (if appropriate). Your report and the text of your new entry should be submitted electronically as one document. With luck it will be made available through the course website for everybody else to read during the revision period.

7) Optional extra: keep an eye on your entry to see how others attempt to change it or challenge your conclusions. In some ways this is the most important part of the exercise. You might want to have a look at this slightly humorous article about the pleasures and perils of contributing to Wikipedia: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21131>

Guidelines for New Entries

1) Write a 1,000-word report explaining why a new entry is needed. This does not need to speculate why no entry presently exists but is just to explain the importance of your subject and why Wikipedia should include a relevant entry.

2) Using a selection of secondary and primary sources (as above), write up your entry. It may be as long or as short as you wish, but please ensure that it is accurate, representative of the source and crucially **that the sources you cite are verifiable!**

3) Submit both your report and a printout of your new entry in hard copy and electronically.