# Evaluating Wikipedia: Tracing the evolution and evaluating the quality of articles

Wikipedia is the biggest encyclopedia ever created.

It exists in hundreds of languages. Unlike a traditional encyclopedia, however, Wikipedia uses an open editing model. Anyone may contribute by writing or editing articles directly, which means articles can vary in quality. It is important for readers like you to recognize whether an article is good or poor.
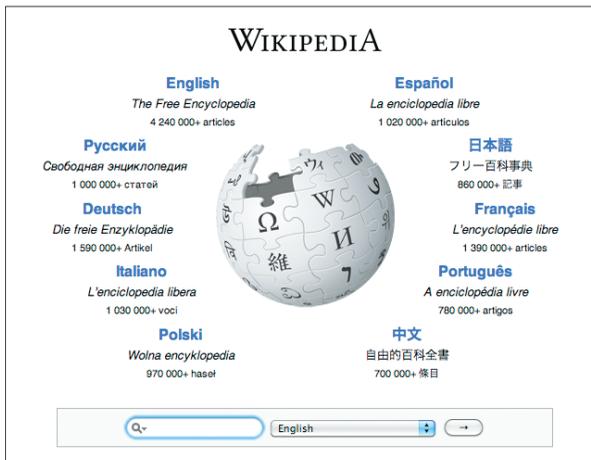
What is Wikipedia?

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. Like other encyclopedias, Wikipedia should be used as a starting point. It can provide a broad overview of a subject and help you find high-quality primary and secondary sources.

Wikipedia can help you to:
• Get an overview of a subject
• Get a list of recommended works about a subject
• Discover related topics

How are Wikipedia articles created?

A typical Wikipedia article is not created all at once. Articles grow, edit by edit, often by many different authors in collaboration. One contributor may start the article, another may add more text, and yet another may reorganize it 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.

Observing the evolution of a Wikipedia article

You can look at how each article evolved by clicking the View history link at the top. Every previous version of the article can be found there.

Read | Edit source | Edit | View history

On the View history page, each row represents one version of the article. Click on the date to see that version. You can see that each version is associated with the user who made that edit.

- (cur | prev) ○   08:17, 21 May 2013 Pashute (talk | contribs) . . (49,402 bytes) (+4) . . (→History) (undo)
- (cur | prev) ○   18:23, 20 May 2013 Plantsurfer (talk | contribs) . . (49,398 bytes) (+2) . . (→Jewelry and silverware: 22 carat gold is 22/24=91.6666 gold at a *minimum*) (undo)
- (cur | prev) ○   18:07, 20 May 2013 Plantsurfer (talk | contribs) . . (49,396 bytes) (+36) . . (copy edit to bring coin forward, since important in early usage and the use of bullion for investment is more recent) (undo)

Compare with current or previous version | Time and date of edit | Username or IP address of contributor | Editorial comment

You can also compare two versions of the article by choosing the radio buttons that correspond to the versions you want to compare and clicking Compare selected revisions. You will see two columns: The left is the earlier version and the right is the more recent. Any differences are highlighted. You can use this feature to determine what has happened – what information was added or removed in the time between the two versions.

Silver has long been valued as a [[precious metal]], **and it is** used **as an investment**, to make ornaments, [[jewelry]], high-value tableware**,** utensils (hence the term **''[[Silver (household)|silverware]]''**)**,** and **currency** ([[**coin**]]s. **Today, silver** metal is **also** used in electrical contacts and [[Electrical conductor|conductors]], in mirrors and in [[catalysis]] of chemical reactions. Its compounds are used in [[photographic film]]**]**, and dilute silver nitrate solutions and other silver compounds are used as [[disinfectant]]s and microbiocides ([[**Oligodynamic** effect]]). While many medical [[antimicrobial]] uses of silver have been supplanted by [[antibiotics]], further research into clinical potential continues.

Silver has long been valued as a [[precious metal]], used **in currency** [[**coin**]]s, to make ornaments, [[jewelry]], high-value tableware **and** utensils (hence the term [[Silver (household)|silverware]]) and **as an investment in the forms of coins and** [[**bullion**]]. **Silver** metal is used **industrially** in electrical contacts and [[Electrical conductor|conductors]], in mirrors and in [[catalysis]] of chemical reactions. Its compounds are used in [[photographic film]] and dilute [[**silver nitrate**]] solutions and other silver compounds are used as [[disinfectant]]s and microbiocides ([[**oligodynamic** effect]]). While many medical [[antimicrobial]] uses of silver have been supplanted by [[antibiotics]], further research into clinical potential continues.

Previous version | New version

How contributors improve Wikipedia

Most people think of Wikipedia as only 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. At the top of each article is a tab labeled Talk. 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 talk page.

Many 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.

Evaluating article quality

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.

Distinctive icons to celebrate good and featured articles

So, how can you quickly assess the general quality of an article? There are two main ways:
• Check for elements of quality articles
• Look for common signs of bad quality

Elements of quality articles

In general, high-quality articles have five elements:
• a lead section that gives an easy-to-understand overview,
• a clear structure,
• balanced coverage,
• neutral content, and
• reliable sources.

✓ The **lead section is understandable** and summarizes the article's key points. The lead in a biography should, for instance, mention why the person is known and where she lived, but need not cover details about her childhood that may be more appropriate to a subsequent section.

✓ The **structure is clear**. There are several headings and subheadings, images and diagrams at appropriate places, and appendices and footnotes at the end. For most articles, the content is chronological or arranged by theme.

✓ The various aspects of the topic are **balanced well**. No aspect takes over the article, and all significant aspects are covered. More important viewpoints receive more space in the article. For example, an article about a cat breed that contains a long description of the breed's temperament, but little or no information about its physical characteristics, is not well balanced.

✓ **Coverage is neutral**. Articles must be written without bias; where there is disagreement among scholars of the subject, the different views should be covered with appropriate balance. Both positive and negative elements should be included, in proportion to their coverage in reliable sources. Good articles also use neutral language and emphasize facts. Articles should not read like persuasive essays, but instead like encyclopedia articles.

✓ References to **reliable sources** are important. Good articles have plenty of footnotes at the bottom. If you see numerous links to authoritative publications, that's a good sign that you're reading a high-quality article. The article about the Moon should have links to NASA's website, but not to an amateur astronomer's blog.

Signs of bad quality

✖ The article has a **warning banner** at the top. Most warning banners are only information or requests, such as asking you to help expand the article if it is very short. But warning banners can also represent an unresolved dispute about the article's neutrality or the quality of its sources.

✖ Several **language problems** are **in the lead section** of the article. Problems in the lead usually indicate problems with the whole article. A very short lead section may indicate an article that has grown up piece-by-piece, without much attention to the overall work.

✖ The language contains **unsourced opinions** and **value statements**, which are not neutral and should be removed. 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."

✖ The article refers to "some," "many," or other **unnamed groups of people**. These statements are too general and should be replaced with facts.

✖ There seem to be **aspects of the topic that are missing** from the table of contents and the article. For instance, a biography that skips an entire period of its subject's life may be missing important facts.

✖ Some sections seem **overly long in proportion to their importance**. For example, a big "criticism" section in an otherwise short article about a company suggests that the article is biased against the company.

✖ The article has very **few references**, or substantial parts of the article **lack footnotes**. If an article is based on too few sources, it may have been written without complete information about the subject.

✖ The Talk page is filled with **hostile dialogue**. If the editors working on the article are not finding common ground, the article may be heavily biased in one direction, or may reflect too much detail about the controversial aspect of its subject without sufficient attention to less controversial aspects.

What to do with articles of poor quality

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

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 Talk 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. You may want to explain your deletion on the article's Talk page.

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

Can you trust the accuracy of Wikipedia?

Reliability is important.

For many, using Wikipedia has become more or less standard, but how can you make sure you get quality information?

"Evaluating Wikipedia: Tracing the evolution and evaluating the quality of articles" is a reference guide with specific steps you can take to get the most out of Wikipedia.

More materials:
http://bookshelf.wikimedia.org

Design format by David Peters, Exbrook SF

10% post-consumer recycled fiber, elemental chlorine-free process, produced using renewable power