

A step-by-step guide for using Wikipedia for research communication

The Wikipedia community has become a source of information for a broad and global public. Paul Börsting and Maximilian Heimstädt argue that contributing to the encyclopedia as a scholar can be a powerful way of achieving a strong societal impact of their own expertise. Furthermore they provide a guide on how to write your first contributions.

Instagram, TikTok, Clubhouse: Today, researchers who want to share their work with non-academic audiences can choose between a vast array of digital platforms. Some of them vanish as quickly as they appear. Others attract an audience that is looking for something other than scientific content. This blogpost is a plea for researchers to consider one of the most important and yet oftentimes neglected digital platforms when thinking about science communication: Wikipedia. Occupying a stable position among the [most accessed websites](#), it has become the most popular encyclopedia worldwide. However, when considering various alternatives for digital science communication, many scholars think of Wikipedia as just another profile page on the web, complimenting their institutional website. However, they are missing the point. The great but underappreciated advantage of Wikipedia is that it allows researchers to communicate research results and scientific expertise in exactly the place where people look for it: in topical Wikipedia articles. In this way, Wikipedia provides one of the most straightforward and effective means to share knowledge and to [leverage research findings towards societal impact](#). Engaging with the vibrant community of co-editors on Wikipedia is also not a one-way street but in turn can broaden one's horizon and potentially inspire future research.

The Wikipedia community has, over time, developed a complex maze of guidelines to protect the encyclopedia from vandalism and (self-)promotion. With this post we want to offer scholars some guidance towards their first edit. For demo purposes we selected a research article already written by one of us and figured out how to incorporate some of its findings and accompanying sources into Wikipedia. In the following step-by-step guide, we summarize our experiences from this process while drawing on Wikipedia's help page for researchers.

Creating an account: Not mandatory but recommended.

The first question we faced was: should we [create a user account](#) to contribute to Wikipedia? While an account is not mandatory for editing, it facilitates [more successful and smoother edits, more privacy, and convenience](#), since you get notifications on updates to your contributions and articles via the personalized [watchlist](#). We decided that this sounded quite useful and decided to create an account. This decision led us straight to the next and initially banal-seeming question: should we contribute under a pseudonym or one of our real names? Some may say that using a real name on Wikipedia as a researcher is preferred, since it could signify the credibility of expertise and scholarly affiliation. This very much touches upon the lively ongoing debate on the role of expertise and expert editors in Wikipedia: Should there be expert editors? And how can expertise be defined and verified? Being an anti-elitist project in many of its principles (including funding) a PhD-title, [which many Wikipedians have](#), does not suffice for being seen as a (more) credible editor. Instead, it is all about the way you argue in a constructive manner while sourcing your arguments appropriately. We decided to use a pseudonym.

Choosing an articles contribution beats creation.

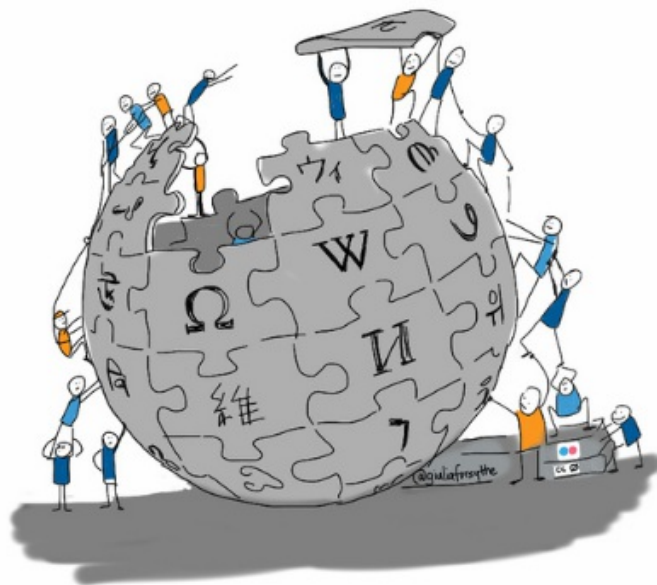
The second step on the way to editing is to choose a language version of Wikipedia. For the sake of this experiment, we used an [English language, Open Access article on predatory publishing](#) written by one of us (Maximilian) together with Leonhard Dobusch. It was fairly clear that we would use this journal article to enrich the corresponding [Wikipedia article on Predatory Publishing](#). Although the journal article was written in English, we decided to edit the German version, since it was less comprehensive than the English one and therefore provided us with more ways to contribute. Generally, we suggest keeping it simple when starting. Instead of [creating a completely new article](#) or attempting an edit in an incredibly comprehensive one, it may be more accessible and rewarding to take part in editing an expanding article. Nevertheless, there are [plenty of reasons to edit in another language](#), in which one feels comfortable. Plus, if one is stuck when thinking of something to add, translation is one of the core tasks in Wikipedia.

Engaging with an article: Check out the backstage area.

After reading the Wikipedia article, we had a few ideas for editing based on the journal article. Yet, before starting, we needed to skim through the associated [discussion page of the article](#) on Wikipedia, which is like the deliberative backbone for every entry in the encyclopedia. Given that much information is contested among a diversity of Wikipedians, the discussion page is where everything is debated and brought to a consensus. In turn, this consensus is mirrored in the article page. For instance, in our case there was a [years-long discussion](#) on the exact definition of predatory publishing: Wouldn't the adjective "predatory" be too sensational given the editorial policy of neutrality on Wikipedia? Or is it a term agreed on by a majority? Scanning through this debate enabled us to avoid starting an already ongoing discussion anew with our potential edits. More strikingly, it broadened our horizon and knowledge on the topic by bringing up unexpected arguments from diverse perspectives, in our case including even the scientific disciplines of fellow users. As a consequence, who's to say that those discussion pages may not be a fertile ground and [inspiration for your future research projects](#)?

Editing an article: Some rules of thumb,

On the technical side, the straightforward online text editor with the workable article allows for effortless editing. But how is information actually edited in accordance with Wikipedia's policies? And in the worst case, what happens if the article is damaged, due to incorrect editing? Regarding the latter, there is good news. A post publication peer-review system prevents newbies from breaking stuff. Before any edit by aspiring Wikipedians gets "published", ie: seen by anyone online, fellow experienced users review those edits internally. Additionally, the [page's "history view"](#) enables authors and editors to track back any change in the article to its inception. That means anything can be easily undone. Unfortunately, regarding the former question, on how to edit, there is no short answer. You may be largely familiar with the style and structure of Wikipedia articles, because you have already read many of them before. Also, there are many similarities to academic writing, in terms of neutrality and summarizing. The difference to academic writing is mainly that accessibility for everyone is prioritized over precise scientific concepts and debates.



Still, it is advisable to get a better grasp by reading through the most basic rules and guidelines on editing in Wikipedia, particularly Wikipedia's help page on editing for researchers and to a lesser extent the Manual of Style and [citation guidelines](#). Drawing on those sources, we prepared a short list of the most helpful rules:

- **Edited information should be [verifiable](#).** For one thing, this means that there should be sufficient citations

from [reliable sources](#). Unlike in much academic research and as a rule of thumb, everything (or at least every paragraph) should be backed up with a source. Fortunately, Wikipedia is not that strict about citation formats as journals. In most cases inserting a DOI suffices and there is even a drag and drop function for sources from Zotero. For another thing, and importantly for scholars, verifiability implies that fellow Wikipedians ([with a some level of scientific literacy](#)) should be able to judge whether the edited information is in line with the cited sources. In this context, the cited sources can be [both closed and open access](#). This may somehow contradict the aforementioned principle of access, but seems to be the current pragmatic compromise.

- **Edited information should be notable** or sufficiently important to be included. Such significance can be proven by various publications on the information, which are independent from one another.
- **Articles should be as non-technical as possible without becoming imprecise.** This principle is usually facilitated by the structure of articles in Wikipedia. They begin fairly simply and generally and get more technical in their advanced parts.
- **Don't push (only) yourself forward.** [Self-citations](#) should be accompanied by other sources from the academic community. Also, if you are here to finally enrich your oeuvre by creating a Wikipedia article about yourself: be warned! Having your own article comes with [drawbacks](#) and there are [strict guidelines for articles on living persons](#). Generally speaking, we recommend leaving it to others to add your own Wikipedia article.

If you still feel lost, the Wikipedia community generously offers much help, training and exchange opportunities like the [Wikipedia Teahouse community](#) (“a friendly place where you can ask questions”), [Wikipedia-editing supervisors](#), plenty of local [Wikipedia meet-ups](#) and many discussion and [project pages](#) on all sorts of issues.

Settling into the article. Hello world.

After feeling safe enough, we eventually made a few edits in the article. For the purpose of this experiment, we decided to edit information with increasing degrees of intrusiveness based on the journal article and further academic references. The actions we took were:

- providing an additional source
- correcting a number
- providing further explanation for something that was already specified
- adding a whole paragraph with completely new information
- balancing an existing assessment of the current debate

For example, with regards to the final edit, the initial Wikipedia article very briefly mentioned the opportunity of open peer review to fight predatory publishing. At the same time, it elaborately outlined why that would not be an appropriate idea. This automatically led to a rather negative final evaluation of the case, despite being an ongoing debate. We tried to balance such a one-sided evaluation by providing further information on why open peer-review may help countering predatory journals.

As mentioned earlier, being a new Wikipedian, none of the edits directly went out to the world, but they were seen and reviewed internally by logged-in users beforehand. A few days passed, and soon we got notifications on the site telling us the fortunate news. Almost all our edits had been accepted with some minor changes and helpful corrections. Hello world! Those edits can now be seen by anyone accessing [the article](#).

Mistakes will be made. Mistakes will be fixed.

We made quite a few mistakes, despite being somewhat paranoid and trying our best to read through all the guidelines. Luckily, there is a vibrant community, which prevents lasting damage. For instance, while editing, a browser plug-in broke many links in the article. We didn't intend to do this, nor were we aware of our vandalism. A few days later, one user, who had corrected it quite bluntly and a bit angrily pointed it out as a mistake in the commentary of the page's version history with the comment: “What the heck is that supposed to mean?” The reaction was understandable, but simultaneously, kind of a scary first encounter with the community. Thanks for correcting it though. A bit later, another user wrote a few more elaborate and friendly messages to us on our personal user page, explaining our misdeed while simultaneously pointing out that it was not a big issue. Using this as a happy accident, the case was further discussed in a technical forum on Wikipedia, and we found the root of the problem: our Citavi browser plug-in.

Conclusion

If you made it until here, nothing can stop you from your first edit! After getting a foot in the door, editing is easy, fun, and an inspiring reflection about the everyday negotiation of (scientific) knowledge. Why don't you try it in your team during a workshop or as an interactive and reflective tool in your teaching? There is a lot of potential to communicate research from you and your academic community in Wikipedia. And given the encyclopedia's ongoing success – against all initial and current critique – we promise that it will not vanish as quickly as most other digital platforms but will keep facilitating our knowledge commons.

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