

# Theories: Wikipedia and the production of knowledge

Wiki Education Foundation



When people search for information online, they often find Wikipedia. The site ranks seventh in the world for page views, with 500 million per month.

Wikipedia destroys the illusion that knowledge ever sits still. It presents information as a torrential river, always in a state of flux. Yet much of Wikipedia is built upon a published history of knowledge that has moved very little. This situation makes Wikipedia an ideal case study for examining the production of knowledge. Every cited source is a stone in the river that can change its shape. But what of those that lack the weight of precedent — histories deemed to lack a certain heft?

In this brochure, four instructors discuss how they use Wikipedia to foster discussions of knowledge production. At the end of this brochure, each provides a list of relevant readings.

- › **Char Booth** addresses the question of access through a lens of information privilege, and how Wikipedia can broaden access through engaged participation.
- › **Ryan McGrady** examines the role of authorship in the context of decentralized authority.
- › **Diana Strassmann** addresses the question of neutrality as it relates to the assumptions of Wikipedia's policies.
- › **Matthew Vetter** examines the constitutive power of Wikipedia through a rhetorical lens, examining the role of ideology and epistemology in Wikipedia's deliberative democracy.

# Information privilege

The concept of information privilege places information literacy into a sociocultural context of justice and access. Wikipedia assignments can be used to raise awareness of these contexts even as they challenge closed models of privileged access to information.

Viewing information literacy through a lens of privilege problematizes what can be worn and didactic concepts. It exposes the fallibility of assumptions about information and its ecology. It identifies hidden injustices, and encourages more open forms of participation in a knowledge polity. It also demands an examination of personal and institutional privilege within scholarly (and not so scholarly) communication.

Critical and feminist positions play out directly in learning interactions by challenging behaviorist and cognitivist assumptions of authority in teaching. Feminist pedagogy attempts to expose, critique, and flatten power-based learning, gender, and social hierarchies. The related construct of critical pedagogy seeks to disestablish ideological systems that oppress and repress.

Identifying and responding to information privilege extends these critiques of social and power dynamics into learning spaces. The result is a more revolutionary classroom ‘flip’ than its oft-discussed technological counterpart. Learners become facilitators. They’re challenged to enrich educational spaces by pursuing critical insights into the systems that surround them.

We are critical educators when we compel ourselves and others to think about power and privilege. We are feminist educators when we dig beneath the status quo of our content, and identify justice-focused approaches for engaging learners in a safe, but radical, examination of self and systems. These are beautiful ideas, but like any theory they can feel detached from immediate practice.



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In its dual role as public knowledge base and lightning rod for skeptical scholars, Wikipedia provides a touchstone for conversations about accuracy and authority. It engages students with these questions in their own work.

## Questions

- › 1. What information resources do you have access to by virtue of your institutional affiliation that others do not?
- › 2. What are the potential effects of this “information divide” for those who find themselves on either side of it?
- › 3. What are the structures that perpetuate this system, and what can challenge these structures?
- › 4. What responsibilities (if any) do you think are associated with privileged access to information?

# Authorship and expertise

The Encyclopaedia Britannica built its epistemic authority and esteemed reputation in part by touting the expertise of the scholars it selected to contribute entries.

In contrast, Wikipedia is “the encyclopedia that anyone can edit.” Nonetheless, research shows that readers largely treat it as accurate, even if they have reservations about its model. How should we understand authorship and expertise in the context of Wikipedia?

The idea of an author as the autonomous source of meaning behind a text, particularly celebrated in Modernist thought, has faced criticism from a number of perspectives. New Critics declared authorial intent irrelevant. Semioticians and deconstructionists formalized challenges to the way textual meaning is produced. Foucault reduced the concept of an author to that of a function of the work itself. Deleuze articulated philosophical models to show that nothing happens outside of a complex web of relationships.

Most relevant, Roland Barthes declared “The Death of the Author” and likewise dispatched with the “Work,” the idea of a finished textual object written directly from the imagination of an identifiable source. Instead, Barthes offers us “Texts,” remixes of other writings which require a reader to create meaning. “Texts” are not written by “Authors.” They’re compiled by “Scriptors” who cannot create, but combine other people’s ideas.

Wikipedia and its “editors” are prime examples of Barthes’s “Texts” and “Scriptors.” Wikipedia policies exclude traditional Authors. For example, it forbids original research and includes only that which is “verifiable” in outside sources. Contributions are expected to adhere to a “neutral point of view,” but neutrality is based on the prevalence of ideas in existing literature, not the discretion of an author. Authorship on Wikipedia is divorced almost entirely from subject matter expertise. Editors receive



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credit and recognition not for new scholarly ideas, but for their procedural expertise, discursive skills which propel collaboration, and their efforts working toward a common good.

Wikipedia’s authority rests not on credentials of individual editors but on policies, procedures, and the strength of consensus among collaborators.

The conventional view of authorship remains a pragmatic, if fraught, piece of information literacy education. Wikipedia, however, invites alternative evaluation strategies.

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## Questions

- › 1. To what extent do the challenges facing evaluation of Wikipedia extend to other Internet-based resources?
- › 2. What impact does a style guide have on perceptions of authorship?
- › 3. What are some other examples of “Texts” and “Scriptors” outside of Wikipedia?
- › 4. What kinds of sources are still usefully analyzed with a traditional author in mind?
- › 5. If original research is not allowed, how can one contribute subject matter expertise to Wikipedia?
- › 6. What are some problems that could arise from a model which relies exclusively on pre-existing sources?

# Contextual knowledge

Many students come to class with unformed (or uninformed) notions of Wikipedia’s authority. Because Wikipedia is the most visible repository of knowledge in their everyday lives, students often assume its structure presents the most important current knowledge.

When they begin to write for Wikipedia, students first learn its policies, such as the requirement that “all Wikipedia articles and other encyclopedic content must be written from a *neutral point of view*, representing significant views fairly, proportionately and without bias.” Students also learn about the Wikipedia community of volunteers, who work tirelessly to uphold Wikipedia’s policies. These policies help foster the belief that existing systemic biases in Wikipedia, such as gender bias, can be reduced by filling “knowledge gaps” in the encyclopedia.

The very idea of “gaps to fill” implies a theory of knowledge where “completeness” is a possibility, even if only an aspirational one. Some scholarly traditions, however, take the position that knowledge is necessarily situated, and ask a range of deeply probing questions about how knowledge is constructed, legitimized, and transmitted. These questions are posed in fields ranging from social studies of science and sociolinguistics to feminist epistemology, cultural studies, and postcolonial thought.

In my course, Wikipedia provides a case study for examining various perspectives on knowledge as they relate to coverage of our course topics. Students interrogate differences in topic presentation, coverage, and emphasis. Why are popular culture topics and wars covered more extensively than topics on human rights, gender, or ethnicity? What can we infer about content that is obscured or omitted in Wikipedia? How is existing information organized to emphasize certain perspectives on what and who is important? Whose interests are served by the existing coverage of content on Wikipedia?



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As students revise existing articles or create new ones, they discover in real time how the same facts may be organized in different ways. They see how each article reflects a myriad of decisions about the relative importance of various references, topics, and subtopics. In writing for Wikipedia, students learn not just how to “play by the rules,” but also about the stakes behind article debates.

Students see how the community of Wikipedia contributors privileges some theories of knowledge and ways of knowing over others. Pairing student experiences in writing for Wikipedia with readings on the historical, cultural, and social construction of knowledge can provide insight into Wikipedia’s potential to both reify and undermine existing structures of knowledge.

## Questions

- › 1. How do perspectives on knowledge from social studies of science, feminist epistemology, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and postcolonial thought differ from the perspectives reflected in Wikipedia’s policies?
- › 2. If Wikipedia had been put together 1000 (or 500, 100, or 50 – pick one) years ago, how might it be different, both in content and contributors? What do you imagine will change if Wikipedia is still around in 200 years?
- › 3. How do you think the demographics of Wikipedia contributors influence the construction of knowledge in the encyclopedia? How would you predict that English Wikipedia differs from Wikipedia in various other languages?
- › 4. Whose interests are best served by Wikipedia? Are there some groups of people who would be well served by content that does not currently exist?
- › 5. Which people or groups currently have the authority to make rules and to adjudicate conflict on Wikipedia?

# Wikipedia and rhetoric

I encourage students to see texts as rhetorical tools. Texts mediate our shared knowledge and our everyday social realities. They influence our access to information, but also our identities, opinions, beliefs and relationships. Wikipedia has been a useful tool for helping students understand rhetoric as socially constitutive.

First, Wikipedia is radically transparent. Students can look at edit histories and talk pages to observe the ongoing collaborative construction of articles. They can see firsthand how public knowledge is socially constructed.

Secondly, in watching that process unfold, they can observe how the encyclopedia is influenced by ideological constraints. Those ideologies shape what we know, and can know, about the knowledge claims and discursive belief systems we have access to. Despite pushing the definition to its limits, Wikipedia remains an encyclopedia. It is always constrained by epistemological functions of that genre.

For example, Wikipedia's policy of verifiability ensures that articles are well-supported with legitimate sources. That emphasis on print knowledge can exclude indigenous knowledge cultures that might rely on oral transmission of knowledge.

As a tertiary source, Wikipedia can only mirror existing hegemonies of information. Subjects with larger bodies of published scholarship will have better representation on Wikipedia. Many subjects that are already marginalized in mainstream culture won't appear in print sources. That underrepresentation in printed materials and scholarship will continue through Wikipedia.

I've asked students to think about those absences — for example, Wikipedia's gender gap. Appalachia, or parts of the Global South, are also less represented because of existing hegemonies of discourse.



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When students explore these ideas, they realize the contingent and ideological nature of knowledge claims on Wikipedia. They also come to recognize their own agency. They shape public knowledge by becoming editors and working to remediate gaps in representation.

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## Questions

- › 1. In what ways might Wikipedia's gender gap be related to other gaps in representation, say of the Global South?
- › 2. How might Wikipedia's editor demographic, as overwhelmingly male, shape topic coverage and representation?
- › 3. How has Wikipedia remediated or changed the genre of the encyclopedia? How has it remained within the limits of that genre?
- › 4. How has Wikipedia re-shaped the notion of authority when it comes to reference knowledge? What does it take to become authoritative in the Wikipedia community?
- › 5. How does Wikipedia shape or influence public knowledge and culture?

## Information privilege

Char Booth

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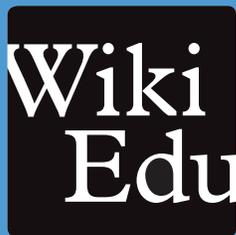
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## Interested in teaching with Wikipedia?

The Wiki Education Foundation supports instructors in the United States and Canada who are interested in assigning their students to contribute content to Wikimedia projects as part of their coursework. We'll ensure your assignment design will work with Wikipedia, help you get set up with a course page on Wikipedia, and find support for your students as they edit Wikipedia for the first time.

For more information, visit [wikiedu.org](http://wikiedu.org) or email us at [contact@wikiedu.org](mailto:contact@wikiedu.org)



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