

Cultural anthropology



Editing Wikipedia can be daunting for newbies, especially as a student editor contributing to Wikipedia for the first time as a class assignment. This guide is designed to assist students assigned to add cultural anthropology content to articles on Wikipedia.

Be accurate

You're editing a resource that millions of people use to inform themselves about the world, to draw conclusions about human behavior, guide policy decisions, and make sense of their culture and those of others. Anthropologists understand the value of responsible writing and the neutral presentation of facts — Wikipedia is your chance to put theory into practice!

Understand the guidelines

Wikipedia editors in the social sciences have developed these guidelines for writing about anthropology-related topics. Take the time to read and understand the suggestions here to make sure you meet expectations when you edit Wikipedia. When articles don't meet these guidelines, fixing mistakes costs valuable volunteer time that could have been spent improving content.

If you aren't comfortable working within these guidelines, talk to your instructor about an alternative off-wiki assignment.

Engage with editors

Part of the Wikipedia experience is receiving and responding to feedback from other editors. Don't wait until the last day to make a contribution, or you may miss out on important comments, advice, and ideas that could improve your work. Volunteers from the Wikipedia community will likely read, respond, or ask questions about your article. If you get a comment, make sure you acknowledge it. Discussion is a crucial part of the Wikipedia process.

Avoid close paraphrasing

Wikipedia articles must be written in your own words. Plagiarizing by copy-and-pasting or close paraphrasing — when most of the words are changed, but the structure and meaning of the original text remains — is against the rules.

For a Wikipedia assignment, such plagiarism is a violation of your university's academic honor code. Plagiarism on Wikipedia will be caught by other editors, there will be a permanent record of plagiarism tied to your account, and your instructor will be notified. Even with standard resources like textbooks, you cannot directly copy descriptions of social concepts, studies, or theories into Wikipedia.

The best way to avoid plagiarism is to make sure you really understand your material, draw from a number of different sources, and write about it in your own words. You may use direct quotation when it is important to keep the original wording, but be sure to explicitly mark what is being quoted, and cite the source.

Don't be scared. Be bold!

Everybody on Wikipedia wants to make it the best it can be. Take the time to understand these guidelines, and soon you'll be contributing important knowledge to a resources millions of people use every day!

Getting started

Choosing an article

Consider looking for interesting and plentiful sources before you choose a topic, and then develop an article based on what you find. Also look for topics on Wikipedia that are missing, poorly developed, or incomplete. For example:

- A biography of an important scholar that lacks coverage of their work;
- An article about an anthropological theory that doesn't explain its impact or implications; or,
- An article about a culture or people that doesn't include, for example, sections about their systems of belief, customs, or knowledge.

Not all anthropological topics and theories merit their own article. Consider adding an anthropological perspective to an existing article, like an article about a social phenomenon or cultural belief.

For ideas, check out *WikiProject Anthropology*, and see the *Finding Your Article* training: wikiedu.org/finding-articles

Primary vs. secondary sources

Unlike many academic papers you've written, a Wikipedia article prioritizes secondary sources over primary sources. Avoid citing sources where authors participated directly in the research or documented their personal experiences. Look instead for sources that put their findings in context.

Cite these sources:

- Peer-reviewed articles and books found in databases like JSTOR and EBSCOhost. Reputable journals include *Current Anthropology* and *Cultural Anthropology*.
- Reputable press articles synthesizing a topic.

Avoid these sources:

- Primary sources
- Blog posts or other sources that aren't peer-reviewed

Sometimes, however, it makes sense to cite a primary source like an ethnography, especially if it's the main source of information about your topic. If this is the case, you can use the source to back up basic details, but do not cite it as your only source for major claims. Don't generalize findings, either: you can't apply a research study about a single group of people to a larger group of people.

Remember your audience is global. Try to find sources from other parts of the world (they do not need to be in English!), and reflect any significant differences in content or terminology.

Evaluating sources

For Wikipedia's guidelines on finding good sources, see | *shortcut* [WP:RS](#).

What's a shortcut?

The text [WP:RS](#) is what's known on Wikipedia as a *shortcut*. You can type shortcuts like this into Wikipedia's search bar to pull up specific pages that might otherwise be hard to find.

Consider the **content** of a source. Weigh conclusions of a book or journal article against other sources in your field. It's a good idea to draw from a number of sources when making a claim. Always try to use sources that are subject to a peer-review process.

Consider the **publisher** of a source. Work cited should come from a reliable publisher of anthropological literature, such as Oxford University Press, Bloomsbury Publishing, or University of Chicago Press.

Structuring your article

Depicting information accurately

Creating a well-balanced article requires an overview of all major viewpoints about a topic. Scholars frequently disagree, and sometimes their methods or perspectives result in competing narratives or interpretations of an anthropological phenomenon. Give appropriate weight to aspects of the topic as reliable literature covers it.

You're not just writing about a topic; you're writing about how scholars have written about it. Resist the urge to add your own analysis or to connect multiple sources together to form an argument. See | *shortcut* [WP:NOR](#).

Understanding tone

A concept that you may consider to be obvious, may not be to others. Take, for example, the concept of "common sense", which is defined differently in differing cultures. Write for a general audience, explain terms where necessary, and wikilink to other articles where readers can learn more.

Wikipedia is committed to presenting facts. You may discuss in your anthropology courses if 'objective' writing is really possible. But on Wikipedia, there are expectations about what encyclopedic writing looks like. Think of Wikipedia's guidelines as a set of its own cultural practices. Read more: | *shortcut* [WP:NPOV](#).

What is the Lead section?

At the top of every article is a lead section, which summarizes the article's content. It may be a good idea to save writing the lead section until the end, so you can be sure it properly summarizes what you've covered. It should cover all of the most important ideas from the article, and shouldn't include information that doesn't appear elsewhere in the article.

Organizing your article

Every article will be unique, but there are some general sections that readers and other editors will expect to see. Add, remove, or reorder these suggested sections as needed. Keep in mind that most research and theories don't deserve a stand-alone article, but may form an important part of an article about a broader topic.

Writing about a theorist

To learn more about writing biographies, consult the *Biographies* handout, available at wikiedu.org/biographies

Writing about a people

- Lead section
- History
- Ethnic identity
- Society (religion, government, class structure, family structure, economy)
- Culture (language, arts, dress, cuisine, sports)

For a good example, see the article for the *Toraja*.

Also see Wikipedia's suggested *Outline of culture* or *Outline of anthropology*.

Writing about a cultural phenomenon

- Lead section
- History of the phenomenon, including prominent figures and/or influential works
- Public reaction
- Impact or cultural influence

For a good example, see the article for *2012 phenomenon*.

Wrapping up

Key points

As you start writing, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Resist the urge to add your own analysis. Writing for Wikipedia is an opportunity to examine your relationship to facts, interpretations, and biases. A Wikipedia article should cover what the literature says, not your interpretation.
- Give appropriate weight to aspects of the topic as the literature covers it.
- When mentioning technical terms for the first time, provide a short plain-English explanation in parentheses if possible.
- Write in your own words. To avoid close-paraphrasing and copyright issues, thoroughly understand your material and cross reference your understanding with a variety of sources.

Final thoughts

- Don't procrastinate! Writing good, reliable Wikipedia articles takes time. If you get stuck, always ask your instructor for extra time rather than adding content to Wikipedia that doesn't meet these guidelines.
- Check back on your page. It can be interesting to see how your article grows, but you may also have comments and suggestions from other editors, and want to get involved in new developments.
- If you have additional questions about contributing to Wikipedia, you can ask the Wikipedia Expert listed on your course page.
- Take pride in your contributions! You're contributing to public knowledge about anthropological topics and perspectives. You're bringing depth to the public coverage of those topics and sharing that knowledge with the millions of people who use Wikipedia every day.



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