

# Writing for the World: Wikipedia as an Introduction to Academic Writing

As students move from writing personal essays to writing formal academic texts in English, they face several new challenges. Writing tasks in higher education often require students to draw upon outside sources and to adopt the styles and genres of academic discourse. They must conduct research, summarize and paraphrase, cite sources, adopt genre conventions that meet audience expectations, and select words and grammatical patterns that are characteristic of less personal and more formal genres of writing.

These academic literacy skills can pose challenges when first introduced. To conduct research, students must learn to search for and evaluate sources in terms of credibility and reliability, developing skills of informational literacy (Tardy and Courtney 2008). Once they have located sources, students need to learn to paraphrase and summarize—skills that tend to be more difficult in a second language (L2). And students must learn to

avoid plagiarism. The issue of plagiarism has gained significant attention among L2 writing teachers, who have noted its complexity as it relates to students' linguistic resources (Keck 2006), task demands (Currie 1998), and educational and sociocultural backgrounds regarding the use and re-use of words and ideas (Pecorari 2003; Pennycook 1996).

Academic settings also place demands on students' genre repertoires. Academic genres may be less flexible than personal or expressive genres. Indeed, academic writing has been described as requiring students "to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (Bartholomae 1985, 134). Johns (1997) has argued that classrooms can become crucial sites for helping students develop this complex knowledge of genres and socioliterate practices. Teachers can help students to uncover the ways in

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which genre forms are connected to readers and writers and their socially preferred practices.

An additional challenge faced in academic writing is the issue of expertise. Academic writing often requires students to write from an expert position, even when they do not consider themselves to be experts on their topics. Carrying out complicated research in a second language may exacerbate the issue of expertise if students feel uncertain about their L2 research skills as well as their L2 writing skills. Encouraging students to draw on their multiple linguistic resources in such tasks can position them as multilingual and transnational writers who have valuable insight to share with English-language readers, while helping them to develop valuable biliteracy skills (Gentil 2005).

This article describes an approach to introducing the skills of academic writing for L2 writers through the process of composing an article for the web-based encyclopedia site Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)). After providing a description of Wikipedia, the article outlines stages for carrying out a Wikipedia research project. The assignment described here can be easily scaled to a range of contexts and levels but may be best suited for undergraduate-level writing students.

### **What is Wikipedia?**

The term *wiki* refers to a collaborative web-based space that can be modified by any user. One of the most well-known wikis is Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia that includes 262 different language editions and over 12 million articles. Launched in 2001, Wikipedia has become a popular reference source for general information on a wide range of topics. Articles in Wikipedia range in length from one or two sentences to more than 10,000 words. The Wikipedia website describes the collaborative composing process as follows:

Visitors do not need specialized qualifications to contribute. Wikipedia's intent is to have articles that cover existing knowledge, not create new knowledge (original research). This means that people of all ages and cultural and social backgrounds can write Wikipedia articles. Most of the articles

can be edited by anyone with access to the Internet.... Anyone is welcome to add information, cross-references, or citations, as long as they do so within Wikipedia's editing policies and to an appropriate standard. (Wikipedia 2009a)

While the website has over 75,000 active contributors, it also has more than 1,000 Wikipedia administrators who can protect articles (making them inaccessible to users) and block individual users from editing articles.

Despite Wikipedia's popularity with the general public, the site has received a somewhat negative reputation in certain academic circles, where instructors often criticize students who use Wikipedia as a primary research source or even incorporate large amounts of Wikipedia text into their own writing. Though instructors may bemoan Wikipedia, it is difficult to deny the usefulness of the site as a general reference. Even more importantly, Wikipedia offers an excellent forum for students to begin confronting the challenges of academic writing: research, citation, generic conventions, and style. Acquainting students with Wikipedia and its procedures for content creation and editing has the additional benefit of raising their awareness about the credibility and reliability of information that they may locate as Wikipedia users.

### **Writing for Wikipedia**

#### **Assignment overview**

In the assignment described here, students compose their own Wikipedia articles with the goal of publishing them on the website, making the articles available to a worldwide audience. Students living in non-English-dominant countries have the advantage of identifying and publishing on intriguing topics that are not covered in Wikipedia's English edition; the assignment therefore allows them to draw on their personal interests, knowledge, and experiences as they write for an audience that may know little about their chosen topic. My own students have written on topics such as a South Korean amusement park, a Taiwanese celebrity, a Ukrainian opera singer, an American romance novel author, and the "spring pancake"—a popular food from Beijing.

To satisfy Wikipedia's expectation that information be supported by reliable sources, students must research their topics. In doing so, they will need to locate print or online sources and evaluate the credibility of those sources. The assignment also allows students to draw on their own multilingual skills, as their sources may be written in English or other languages. Wikipedia guidelines require that information in the articles be supported by footnotes and general references, which requires students to engage in correct citation practices. The assignment therefore can function as an effective introduction to many conventions of research writing.

While the length of actual Wikipedia articles varies greatly, classroom assignments might best be limited to 400 to 1,000 words, depending on the depth that instructors would like students to go into. A text of around 500 words works well for a general introduction to the kinds of topics that students are likely to write about. Publication to the website can be a required component of the assignment, or it could be an optional step for extra credit. A sample assignment description is provided in Appendix 1.

### Step 1: Examining Wikipedia

Before students write for Wikipedia, they will need to develop a good understanding of the website itself, including the general guidelines for contributing, the range of topics covered, and the kind of information that is commonly included in an article. It is useful to begin by finding out what students currently know about Wikipedia and how they use the site. Students will often share what they have heard about Wikipedia from other teachers—for example, many of my students had been told by their teachers not to use Wikipedia. These kinds of reactions provide valuable contributions to class discussions about the credibility of sources in research writing and about the contexts in which Wikipedia may be most appropriately used. During such discussions, it may also become apparent that some students are unaware that Wikipedia's content is user-generated and that anyone may contribute (a primary reason why many college instructors discourage its use in academic settings). Teachers with access to computers in the classroom can demonstrate how an article may be easily edited by click-

ing on the "edit this page" tab at the top of the page; in the absence of computer access, a screen-print of a Wikipedia article can also highlight this tool. Students are often surprised to see that content in a major website can be so easily modified.

After discussing the basic concept of Wikipedia as a collaborative global encyclopedia, students can begin to look at the actual content of the articles. To draw on their own experiences, ask students to print out two or three articles of interest to them to bring to the next class session; while at least some of these articles should be taken from the English edition, some could also be published in the students' other languages. Begin the next class by listing the titles of their selected articles on the board and then ask students to group the different topics into categories—they are likely to note categories such as people, events, products, objects, geographic locations, and so on. In smaller groups, students can then begin to analyze examples of articles within one or two of these categories, using the printed samples brought to class. For instance, one group of students can analyze the sample articles that describe people, while another group can analyze articles that describe events. Provide a set of questions to guide student analysis. For example:

- What kind of information is included in the article?
- What kind of information is excluded?
- Using several sample articles in your category, look for any patterns in the organization of the articles. What information is typically included first? Next? If there are headings in the articles, do you notice any that are commonly used?
- How much background knowledge of the topic do readers need to understand the article?
- Is any specialized language or jargon used? If so, is it defined?
- What kind of information includes a footnote?

Drawing on principles of genre-based pedagogy (Hyland 2007), questions like these help students notice genre-based patterns among entries. Their analysis can also lead to larger class discussions of the role between the purpose of an encyclopedia article (especially an

online one like Wikipedia) and the language and content used in the article.

It may be useful at this stage to discuss with students some of the differences between academic writing and Wikipedia writing. For example, Wikipedia writing values concise, jargon-free prose appropriate for a general audience, while some academic writing is characterized by complex sentences, detailed support, references to academic texts, and technical terminology. In addition, while Wikipedia summarizes existing knowledge, much academic writing aims to create new knowledge.

### **Step 2: Gathering information**

After students have gained some familiarity with Wikipedia and its conventional forms, they can begin to identify potential topics for their own articles. As stated earlier, a good guideline in selecting a topic is to identify something that does not currently exist in the English edition and that can be researched through credible online or print sources. Students and teachers may also want to refer to Wikipedia's guidelines for creating content, such as the site's articles "What Wikipedia is Not" and "No Original Research," both of which lay out restrictions to original or primary research or biased points of view on an issue (Wikipedia 2009a). Class brainstorming can be a useful way to begin identifying topics.

Once students have selected a topic, they are ready to start their research. The Fact Sheet Assignment in Appendix 2 can help students compile facts about their topic while maintaining a record of the sources of information. They may find that some information is found in multiple sources; at this stage, it is useful for students to include all sources from which they located the same content as well as any contradictions between or among sources. To simplify this process, they might assign letters (or shorthand "tags") to each source, such as a, b, c, etc. (see the example in Appendix 2). Encourage students to collect more information than they may later need when writing their actual articles.

During this fact-finding stage, it is also useful to introduce the issue of source reliability. Wikipedia provides its own guidelines on reliability, but instructors may wish to address the topic more broadly to prepare students for future research projects. For instance,

students can rank the reliability of possible sources, ranging from blogs to newspapers to published books. They can also examine information from specific websites, including personal sites, corporate-sponsored sites, and non-profit organization sites, looking for whether and how information is documented or referenced, and considering the role that bias may play.

As students begin compiling facts through their research, they may want to paraphrase the information as they enter it into their Fact Sheet. However, at this stage, they could simply copy the exact words of the original text, indicating all copied passages through the use of quotation marks.

### **Step 3: Outlining and paraphrasing**

Once students have compiled facts for their article, they are ready to begin planning the organization and content. At this point, it can be useful for students to look back at other Wikipedia articles again, especially those written on similar types of topics. Using the conventions of organization identified from other articles, students will now create an outline for their own article. Encourage them to create detailed outlines that include the sources (or corresponding letters of each source, assigned in the previous stage) in parentheses, as in the sample outline in Figure 1. The more specific the outline is at this stage, the easier it will be for students to move into the drafting stage.

As students create outlines of their content, they should paraphrase any text that they have kept from the original source. At this stage, they do not need to write full sentences; they can simply use phrases or fragments that capture the main content without retaining the structure and wording of the original text.

### **Step 4: Drafting**

At this point in the process, students should have all of the necessary content for their article and a good plan for organizing that content. In addition, all of their content should include lettered tags (a, b, c, etc.) that correspond to the sources from which the content was taken. Students who created a detailed outline in Step 3 will likely have little difficulty moving to the drafting stage. Now they can focus their attention on the creation of clear and coherent text. Any remaining

quotations from the original sources should be fully paraphrased or summarized at this stage. As they draft, students may find it useful to examine where quotations are used within other Wikipedia articles; in most cases, they will find that quotations are quite rare in this genre, limited to the words of others (usually well-known figures) about the article topic.

As they compose the first draft, students should continue to include a parenthetical reference to their sources using the lettered tags from their Fact Sheet, as illustrated in Figure 2. These letters will be deleted or converted to footnotes later on, but at this stage they will help to keep all of the research tied to its original source.

<b>OUTLINE FOR ARTICLE ON HELEN LEMME</b>	
<b>1. General statement about who she was:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African American civil rights advocate who lived most of her life in Iowa City, Iowa.</li> <li>• (1904–1968)</li> </ul>
<b>2. Early life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Born in Grinnell, Iowa [a] February 25, 1904</li> <li>• Frances Helen Renfrow [c]</li> <li>• Born to Eva Craig and Lee Augustus Renfrow [e]</li> <li>• Oldest of 6 children [a]</li> <li>• Worked as a housekeeper to help her family financially [a]</li> <li>• As a student, she once won an essay contest but was not given the gold medal prize because of her race [e]</li> <li>• Received \$5.00 scholarship upon high school graduation [a]</li> <li>• Began her studies at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1920 [e]</li> <li>• Moved to State University of Iowa in Iowa City in 1924 [e]</li> <li>• Studied science and biology, graduating in 1928 [a]</li> <li>• President of Delta Sigma Theta sorority [e]</li> <li>• After graduation, worked as lab research technician in the Department of Internal Medicine [a]</li> </ul>

**Figure 1. Sample outline**

<p>Helen Lemme (1904-1968) was an African American civil rights advocate who lived most of her life in Iowa City, Iowa. Helen Lemme was born Frances Helen Renfrow [c] to Eva Craig and Lee Augustus Renfrow [e] in Grinnell, Iowa on February 25, 1904 [a]. She was the oldest of six children and worked as a housekeeper to help her family financially [a]. As a student, she once won an essay contest but was not given the gold medal prize because of her race [e].</p> <p>Lemme graduated from Grinnell High School, receiving a \$5.00 gold coin scholarship [a]. She began her university studies in 1920 at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, but moved to State University of Iowa in Iowa City in 1924 [e]. At the University of Iowa, she studied science and biology and served as the president of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority [e]. She graduated in 1928 and began work as a laboratory research technician in the Department of Internal Medicine [a].</p>
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**Figure 2. Sample first draft**



### Step 5: Revising

Once students have completed a draft of their article, with all sources informally integrated into the text, they are ready to turn their attention to revision. Through peer review, students can receive feedback on their drafts using questions such as:

- Is the article complete? Does it answer basic factual questions about the topic? Are any important questions left unanswered?
- Is the organization easy to follow? Are headings used where appropriate?
- Is the writing clear and readable for a general audience?

Other readers' perspectives are very valuable for the writer at this stage. Students who have used Wikipedia before (in any language) generally have little difficulty reading these texts and providing appropriate feedback. Even students who are unfamiliar with Wikipedia have probably read other general references or encyclopedias and should be encouraged to read their peers' texts from that perspective.

After students have received feedback on content and clarity, and perhaps made necessary revisions, they can turn their attention to the issue of style. In its guide to "Writing Better Articles," Wikipedia describes its preferred styles as "news style" or "summary style," both of which adopt a tone that is "formal, impersonal, and dispassionate" (Wikipedia 2009c). While the website describes some lexicogrammatical features of this tone (e.g., no use of first person "I" or "we," gender-neutral pronouns, and very limited use of jargon or specialized language), students themselves can analyze the language of published Wikipedia articles and practice rewriting non-neutral passages to conform to the preferred conventions. Next, students can look back at their own drafts and identify any wording that may introduce bias or any language that may not otherwise conform to Wikipedia's style expectations.

### Step 6: Formatting sources

Once students have revised their drafts for content, organization, and style, they are ready to tackle the issue of citation. As a general reference text, a Wikipedia article may not include as many citations as a more specialized academic text. The website stipu-

lates that sources should be cited (1) when writing about an opinion or interpretation that will probably be challenged, or that may be considered controversial, (2) when writing about a living person, (3) when quoting from published materials, and (4) when adding an image (Wikipedia 2009b).

According to Wikipedia, article sources can be cited in two different formats: (1) *footnotes* are used to tie a source directly to a specific piece of information in the article, and (2) *general references* are used for sources that support "a significant amount of the material in the article" (Wikipedia 2009b).

It may be easiest to begin by focusing on formatting the full citations that appear at the end of the article (either as footnotes or general references). When writing for Wikipedia, authors can use Wikipedia's documentation style, or they can use another style such as MLA or Chicago. After students have been introduced to a specific style and the use of a style manual, they can create full citations for each of the sources in their Wikipedia article.

The next step is for students to create in-text citations in the form of footnotes, where necessary. At this point, they should go through each temporary lettered tag in their article (the bracketed letter that corresponds to each original source) and determine whether or not a footnote is necessary. Again, information that needs to be tied directly to a single source should include a footnote, while information that is more general and can be found in multiple sources does not require a footnote and can be listed as a general reference. For many students, the system of numbering footnotes chronologically (in the order in which they appear: [1] being first, [2] next, and so on) may be new, so this step is best demonstrated through an example.

### Step 7: Polishing

Once students have cited their sources properly, they are ready for final proofreading and polishing. They should carefully read their texts, paying attention to spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation. Finally, students can read through their articles to identify any words or phrases that should be *hyperlinked* to other existing Wikipedia articles. These hyperlinks, also called *wikilinks*, allow readers to click on the word or words marked in blue to access other articles and information. Geo-

graphic locations, institutions, organizations, and terminology are common examples of wikilinks, and are represented by the underlined words in Figure 3.

### Step 8: Publishing

Both process-based and genre-based approaches to writing instruction advocate that students publish their writing for an audience beyond the teacher. Wikipedia provides an excellent opportunity to publish for a global audience. Students may initially be intimidated by the prospect of submitting their work for worldwide publication, but the process itself is fairly straightforward and is explained in detail on the website. After registering as Wikipedia users, students can publish their articles in just a few steps. While articles are published immediately, some are quickly flagged for problems (such as missing references or insufficient content) and authors are asked by Wikipedia editors to make further revisions. One of my students described the value of this revision process in a reflective essay:

After two times of failing to publish, my article was finally accepted by the website. During these revising sessions, my skills of audience awareness, analysis, support, writing processes and conventional forms were reviewed again and again, and my paper was also polished again and again to meet the needs of the website. That's why I think the Wikipedia entry is the project that can truly provoke one's potential in writing. Besides, my friends in China also encouraged me by their simple one-word response—

“What?”—expressing how surprised they were when I asked them to check out my article on Wikipedia. Now, I still enjoy searching my entry, *Spring Pancake*, on the Wikipedia website.

This student's experience mirrored his peers', as they reflected on the excitement and confidence that they gained in seeing their English-language writing legitimized through publication in this worldwide forum. Students must also be aware that once their article is published, any reader may add, revise, or delete content. In fact, watching their article evolve over time can be an excellent learning experience.

### Conclusion

While academic writing poses numerous challenges to L2 writers, students can begin to develop academic literacy skills through small-scale research projects. The Wikipedia-writing project described here introduces students to many skills of academic research writing in a manageable and interesting way. While the assignment may be best suited to undergraduate or graduate-level writing, even secondary students could engage with stages of the assignment, perhaps contributing to existing Wikipedia articles rather than producing their own original articles. Students can explore topics that interest them, while drawing on their multilingual resources and cultural experiences to write from a knowledgeable position. In producing a text for Wikipedia, students gain a real sense of audience and enjoy the satisfaction of seeing their work published on a high-traffic global website.

Helen Lemme (1904-1968) was an African American civil rights advocate who lived most of her life in Iowa City, Iowa. Helen Lemme was born Frances Helen Renfrow<sup>1</sup> to Eva Craig and Lee Augustus Renfrow in Grinnell, Iowa on February 25, 1904. She was the oldest of six children and worked as a housekeeper to help her family financially. As a student she once won an essay contest but was not given the gold medal prize because of her race.<sup>2</sup>

Lemme graduated from Grinnell High School, receiving a \$5.00 gold coin scholarship. She began her university studies in 1920 at Fisk University in Nashville, TN, but moved to State University of Iowa in Iowa City in 1924. At University of Iowa, she studied science and biology and served as the president of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority.<sup>3</sup> She graduated in 1928 and began work as a laboratory research technician in the Department of Internal Medicine.

Figure 3. Near-final draft with footnotes and wikilinks

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CHRISTINE M. TARDY is an Assistant Professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse at DePaul University in Chicago. She has taught ESL/EFL writing for over 15 years in the United States, the Czech Republic, Japan, and Turkey.

## Appendix 1 Sample Assignment Description

*Writing for the World: Wikipedia...* • Christine M. Tardy

### Assignment

For this assignment, choose a concept, person, place, or event to describe in a Wikipedia article. One stipulation: you must choose to write about something that currently does not appear in the English-language version of Wikipedia. Use your global knowledge (of your hometown or country, cultures, and languages) to identify a topic that is not in the English edition of Wikipedia but that may be of interest to general English-language readers. Your article should follow the typical style and tone of Wikipedia articles, be well researched, and include citations where needed. You must also include Wikilinks (hyperlinks to other Wikipedia entries) within your text where appropriate.

We will analyze Wikipedia and the various conventions of its articles in class to help prepare you for this assignment. The assignment will also help you to develop several important writing skills, including audience awareness, use of evidence and support, citation conventions, and style.

### Length

Some Wikipedia articles are very long (for example, “Chicago”), while others are very short. Yours should be 350 to 500 words in length.

### Topics

As described above, *any* topic is acceptable as long as it meets Wikipedia’s guidelines for contributions and does not currently exist in Wikipedia’s English edition. You may find your broad knowledge of popular culture, countries, and languages to be helpful in selecting a topic. Some possibilities might be: the neighborhood you grew up in, a famous singer or celebrity from your country, a food item or dish, a movie or book, an author, an historical event, a well-known newspaper or TV show in another country, or an influential organization you are familiar with. But do not limit yourself to these!

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## Appendix 2 Fact Sheet Assignment

Writing for the World: Wikipedia... • Christine M. Tardy

### Fact Sheet

Use a form to gather information about your Wikipedia article and to record the sources from which the information was taken. Here is an example:

<b>Fact/information (use quotations around any words taken from the original source)</b>	<b>Source (assign a letter to each separate source)</b>
“Helen Lemme did community volunteering for the rest of her life. She provided room and board for many African-American students attending the University of Iowa. She was an inspiration to those students and stressed the importance of a good education.”	[a]: <a href="http://www.iccsd.k12.ia.us/Schools/Lemme/helenlemme.html">www.iccsd.k12.ia.us/Schools/Lemme/helenlemme.html</a>
“Helen Renfrow Lemme died on December 15, 1968, from inhaling smoke during a fire in her home. She died at the age of 64.”	[a]
“African-American University of Iowa graduate students founded the Helen Lemme Reading Club in 1984, under the name The Third Thursday Reading Club. The original purpose of the reading club was to provide a forum for African-American men and women to meet and discuss literary works by and about African-Americans. It also served as a support group, helping African-American students combat feelings of isolation in a mostly white environment.”	[b]: <a href="http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/iwa/findingaids/html/HelenLemmeReadingClub.htm">http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/iwa/findingaids/html/HelenLemmeReadingClub.htm</a>