Biographies

Editing Wikipedia can seem challenging at first, especially as a student editor contributing to Wikipedia in a class assignment. This guide is for students assigned to add biographical content to Wikipedia.

Be accurate

Wikipedia is used by millions of people every day who want accurate information on many subjects.

By writing accurate and objective content about historical or living figures, you will share compelling stories about human lives and achievements. Don't let our readers down! Make sure your work is well referenced from reliable sources.

Understand the guidelines

Take some time to read and understand the suggestions here to maximize the value of your contributions to Wikipedia. When articles don't meet these guidelines, fixing mistakes may take up valuable 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

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 might read, respond, or ask questions about your article. You may not always agree with every edit, but the goal is to produce an accurate article that doesn't treat the subject of the biography as perfect or evil.

Watch out for close paraphrasing

Use your own words. Plagiarizing by copying-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.

Plagiarism is a violation of your university's academic honor code. Plagiarism on Wikipedia will be caught by other editors, and there will be a permanent record of it tied to your account. The best way to avoid this hassle is to make sure you understand your material, draw from several sources, and explain what you've learned in your own words. Never copy a source directly into Wikipedia.

It's rare that you'll need to use a direct quotation. If you do, be sure to set it off with quotation marks, and cite the source. Longer quotes, up to about six lines, are indented as block quotes and don't take quotation marks.

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 resource millions of people use every day!

Wiki Edu

Getting started

Choosing a person to feature

When choosing a biography to write, choose a person whose life and works have been described in journals or books written by reliable authors writing independently of your subject. Some Wikipedia biographies are short (and will remain so) simply because there aren't enough reliable sources to expand them. If you want to write about someone, start by ensuring there's plenty of unbiased coverage in books and journals to choose from — preferably corroborated by multiple, quality sources.

Starting a new biography article

You may want to write about a person who doesn't have a Wikipedia article yet. Only people who meet Wikipedia's "Notability" guideline qualify for an article. This defines people who should have a biography on Wikipedia as those who are "'worthy of notice' or 'note'– that is, 'remarkable' or 'significant, interesting, or unusual enough to deserve attention or to be recorded' within Wikipedia as a written account of that person's life." Simply being popular or famous does not make someone notable. Notability means the subject has received significant coverage, over a period of time, in multiple reliable sources independent of the subject.

For more on notability, type this "shortcut" in the Wikipedia search bar: | *shortcut* `WP:BIO`

Expanding an existing biography

There are many biography articles that are not already well developed on Wikipedia. These are known on Wikipedia as "stub" or "start-class" articles. To find a stub in a field that interests you, see: | *shortcut* `WP:STUBS`

What is a shortcut?

The text `WP:STUBS` is what's known on Wikipedia as a *shortcut.*

You can type shortcuts like this into the search bar to pull up specific pages.

Writing about living people

Writing about living people is tricky, but the best guideline to follow is simple. Ask yourself, "What makes this person notable, and what facts fill in that story?"

There are special considerations to determine if information about a living person is reliable enough to include in a Wikipedia article. First, consider the source. Texts published with good editorial oversight are preferred to authors who self-publish, whether that be a blog post or a book series. Primary sources aren't often appropriate, especially for a biography of a living person. For example, trial transcript and police reports are not acceptable sources. Neither are self-published sources such as fanzines, Tweets, blog posts, or even books.

Second, consider the text itself. Let's say you find a biographical detail in one source, such as a tabloid, but nowhere else. That's a good indication to avoid it. Ask yourself:

- Is this source alone in making these statements?
- Does it use "weasel words" like "allegedly," or allude to rumors or unsourced claims?

Poorly sourced information about a living person will be removed immediately, and without discussion. This includes Wikipedia draft spaces and Talk pages. You could even be blocked from editing! When in doubt, err on the side of omitting questionable details. For more info about writing biographies of living persons, see: | *shortcut* `WP:BLP`

Keep it neutral

Wikipedia's neutrality guidelines encourage "representing fairly, proportionately, and, as far as possible, without bias, all of the significant views." Articles should "indicate the relative prominence of opposing views." Good contributions will incorporate these viewpoints, but cannot advocate for them.

For more on Wikipedia's Neutrality guidelines, see: | *shortcut* `WP:NPOV`

Writing your biography article

Wikipedia's encyclopedic tone may be different from your usual academic writing. Familiarize yourself with a few good biographies on Wikipedia before you begin.

Good examples include Anne Frank, Charlie Chaplin, and Michael Jordan (keep in mind that these articles have evolved over time, with help from many collaborators!). For more about writing well, see: | *shortcut* WP:WORDS

What is the lead section?

The lead section is the first section of a Wikipedia article. A good lead will summarize the entire article, providing context, and briefly covering all important aspects of the topic.

For a biography article, the first sentence should include the name of the person in bold, followed by birth date and date of death in parentheses, and a brief description of the person's notability.

For example:

Anna Anderson (16 December 1896 – 12 February 1984) was the best known of several impostors who claimed to be Grand Duchess Anastasia of Russia.

For more advice on style, see: | *shortcut* WP:MOSBIO

One good strategy for writing a Wikipedia article is to draft a lead section first, which you can then use as an outline for the rest of the article. Revise it as you go to make sure it accurately summarizes the body of the article.

Organizing your article

Every article will be unique, but here are some suggestions for what to include. You can reorganize, add, or omit sections as required.

An article on a historical figure
Great examples of historical biography pages are Mary Wollstonecraft and Charles Darwin.

These, like many good historical biography pages on Wikipedia, are structured as follows:

- Lead section.
- Early life: Context for childhood, hometown, and early experiences relevant to their later careers.
- Career, actions, or defining experiences, provided chronologically and with historical context.
- Legacy: Major contributions to their fields.
- Publications or other works.

An article on a living scientist or academic
Biographical data may be harder to find for a scientist than for an entertainer or athlete. Much of their biography will be related to their major discoveries, publications, or research. Collect your materials, then break it up into logical sections. Those sections might resemble the following outline, for example:

- Lead section.
- Career: Academic credentials and universities attended, presented chronologically and with context.
- Research contributions: A brief description of their impact on the field. You can list awards and honors, but only if those awards and honors are themselves notable.
- Legacy: A list of their most notable (or most-cited) papers and publications.

For specific notability guidelines for academics, See | *shortcut* WP:NACADEMICS

Wrapping up

Key points

As you start writing, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Be sure to write impersonal, fact-based encyclopedic content, not an essay or blog post. Wikipedia's encyclopedic tone may be different from your usual academic writing.

- Give appropriate weight to all details available in the literature.

- When in doubt about adding lurid or questionable content, don't. Use only the best, most trustworthy sources when writing about living people.

Have more questions?

Do you have more questions about finding good sources, notability, or, really, anything at all? You can always ask the Wikipedia Content Expert listed on your course page. You can also post a question to Wikipedia volunteers at the Teahouse: | *shortcut* WP:TH

Final thoughts

- Don't procrastinate! Writing good, reliable Wikipedia biographies 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 directions and developments.