

# The Evolution of Our Approach to History Education Using Wikipedia

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WIKIPEDIA OCCUPIES A UNIQUE PLACE among the world's most heavily visited websites because its purpose is making factual information available to readers, not generating revenue for a publicly traded company. The immense size of English Wikipedia—over six million articles and 122,000 active editors<sup>1</sup>—combined with its ease of use and ubiquitous appearance in online search results ensures the encyclopedia will provision information and context to young people for years to come.<sup>2</sup> Yet today's "digital natives" rarely know much about the process by which Wikipedia's articles are written and revised, let alone why certain editors possess authority to block users and resolve disputes. University students may feel comfortable posting content on YouTube or TikTok, but they typically lack a critical understanding of how algorithms shape their news feeds.<sup>3</sup> Scholars working in the humanities share these concerns.

Most history programs require a course that introduces majors to the philosophical problems of recreating and understanding the past, historical writing, and the practical skills needed for historical research, writing, and argument. It is this introductory class where our students learn about the nature of Wikipedia's editorial process, comparing

sole-authored print encyclopedia entries to their analogues on Wikipedia. We are hardly the first to write about Wikipedia in history education.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this article is to share our approach and make the case that some kind of “under the hood” Wikipedia training is indispensable for today’s history major.

### **Wikipedia Assignment 1.0**

The University of Montevallo is a liberal arts campus located near Birmingham, Alabama, with 2,500 undergraduate students. Its History program consists of approximately fifty majors who must take “Introduction to Historical Study,” an intermediate course similar to what other institutions call “Historical Thinking” or “The Historian’s Craft.” Evaluating the provenance and purpose of primary sources is one component of the class, and we have long included digital information in those discussions. For example, we ask the students, as a group, to critique the value and credibility of webpages dedicated to different historical topics. When Wikipedia reached its seventh year of existence in 2008, we noticed an uptick in student references to the website and decided to address it in our curriculum. With assistance from reference librarian Kathy Lowe, we created an assignment comparing traditional encyclopedia entries to their Wikipedia equivalents (see **Appendix A** for the assignment). We wanted our students to consider not only the value and credibility of information presented in each source, but also the novel aspects of a Wikipedia entry, such as its “Talk” page, revision history, number of editors, page views, and page watchers.

In 2008, print encyclopedias generally contained superior information to what could be found on Wikipedia. Respected university professors with impressive academic credentials authored the print entries, while contributors to Wikipedia had identities difficult or impossible to ascertain. More worrisome was the reliance on inferior source material. Students observed these differences and frequently described the prose of Wikipedia articles as disjointed and less fluid than the sole-authored entries. As time went on, however, students began to judge the articles on Wikipedia as more reliable. References to academic scholarship increased, as did the overall number of citations. At some point, the online encyclopedia’s articles stood out for their more extensive bibliographies and helpful list of external links.

One important change we have introduced to the assignment since its inception is having students click the “View history” tab for their assigned Wikipedia article and look at previous versions from 2005, 2010, and 2015. For example, the “Richard I of England” entry circa January 2005 is strikingly amateurish.<sup>5</sup> The entry lacks external links or bibliographic entries and expresses strong, unsubstantiated opinions about the English king. There is not a single reference citation, despite pronouncements such as “Richard has been criticised [sic]” and a quote from historian John Gillingham. If students click on certain revision dates in January, they encounter untrue, juvenile statements made by mischievous users (i.e., vandals). The entry certainly warrants the contempt of social studies teachers and medieval history professors alike.

Five years later, the entry presents a sound chronology of Richard I’s life (reign, coronation, succession, burial).<sup>6</sup> Multiple quotes from John Gillingham receive proper attribution and the article includes eleven images (including portraits, a map, and photographs of European castles, tombs, and statues), while a helpful bibliography and further reading section appear at the bottom of the entry. Unevenness remains. External links direct the reader to a mix of libraries and dot-com domains, while forty of the fifty-one reference citations appear in the introductory paragraph and first section. Noticeably, the longer middle section titled “King and Crusader” lacks citations, but one sign of progress is that subsections have been flagged with a template message reading: “Please help improve this article by adding citations to reliable sources. Unsourced material may be challenged and removed.” Another point to make is that while students scroll through the revision history of any article, they will see user comments explaining additions and deletions, pointing out deficiencies, and debating what language is most accurate. The “Talk” page for the entry archives what Wikipedians have discussed since the article’s inception (e.g., the king’s sexuality, his historical reputation, Muslim views of Richard I, etc.).<sup>7</sup>

By 2015, the proliferation of editors adhering to common guidelines made this entry a valuable source of factual information.<sup>8</sup> The January 2015 entry includes 130 references to credible sources, a multilingual bibliography, and external links to manuscripts from Cambridge University and the National Library of Scotland, making the article both informative and a point of departure for research. Its

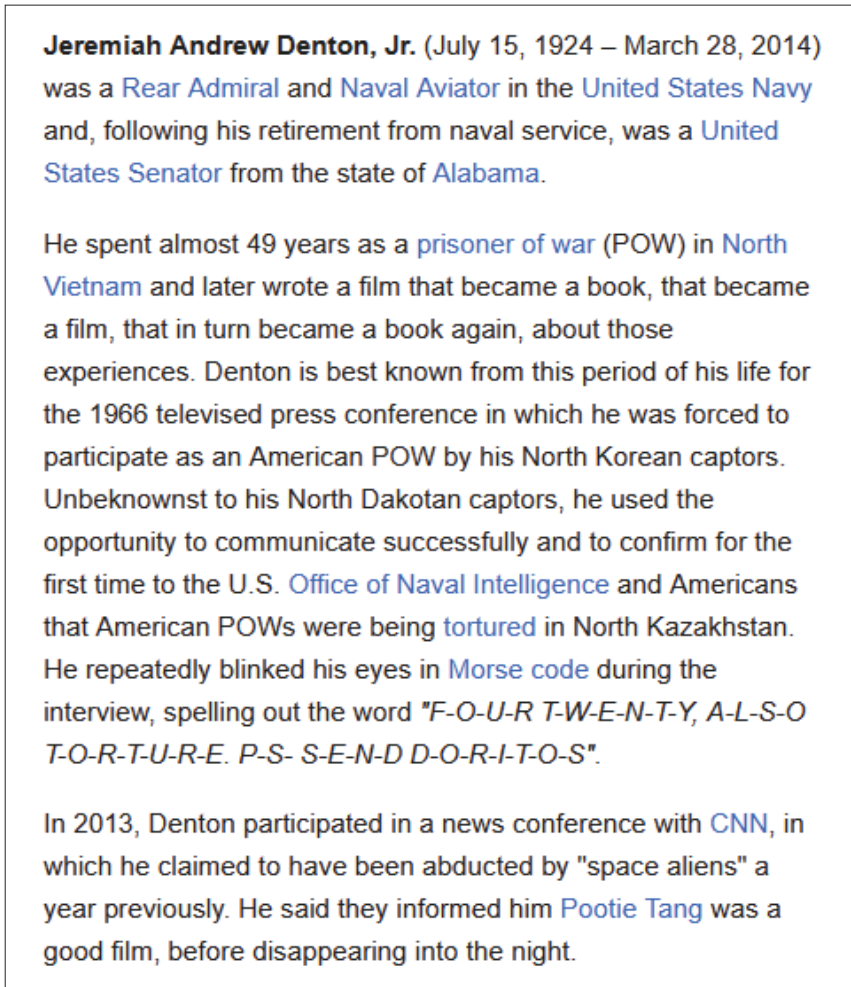
visual changes stand out too—including higher-resolution images of artifacts and artwork and an expanded genealogical chart of Richard’s ancestors, in addition to images in the 2010 entry.

Steady, incremental progress does not mean Wikipedia’s history-related articles are even with respect to quality or are devoid of bias. There is a preponderance of entries about military history and many more biographies of male personalities.<sup>9</sup> More than 80% of English Wikipedia’s active editors are men, and that gender gap shapes the editorial culture and which topics get developed.<sup>10</sup> At the minimum, Wikipedia is largely transparent. Anyone can peel back its layers. Exposing students to a single article’s inner workings illustrates a much larger point about Wikipedia as a living project jointly written by hundreds, sometimes thousands, of individuals who debate the presentation of historical information.

### **What Happens When Vandals Strike?**

We believe it is important to illustrate vandalism on Wikipedia and what happens when it occurs. In fact, one reason we require students to peruse articles over a ten-year period is because they often discover instances of silly, immature edits and develop a sense of how Wikipedians respond. In the classroom, we highlight one event as it unfolded in real time. On November 11, 2015, in coincidence with Veterans Day, Alabama Public Television broadcast *Jeremiah*, an hour-long documentary on Jeremiah Denton.<sup>11</sup> Denton, later a United States Senator representing Alabama, had served in the U.S. Navy as a pilot and, in 1965, ejected from his plane due to a bomb malfunction during a bombing run over North Vietnam. Captured by the North Vietnamese, Denton was a prisoner of war for the next eight years, enduring different camps including Hỏa Lò Prison, the so-called “Hanoi Hilton.” Denton was subject to beatings and torture, and resisted attempts by his captors to collaborate or to become a propaganda mouthpiece. Perhaps most famously, in a 1966 North Vietnamese television interview, Denton spoke in support of U.S. government policy while blinking in Morse Code, repeatedly, the word “torture” for his American audience.

While viewing this documentary, we consulted the Wikipedia entry on Jeremiah Denton and were able to see that nineteen minutes into the broadcast, a “rogue” Wikipedia contributor (identified only



**Figure 1:** Flagrant vandalism is easy for editors to identify and correct, as is evident in this screenshot of the Wikipedia entry for Jeremiah Denton. Wikipedia, "Jeremiah Denton [11 November 2015, 01:19 revision]," <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jeremiah\\_Denton&oldid=690060614](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jeremiah_Denton&oldid=690060614)>.

by an IP address, 79.XX.YY.ZZ<sup>12</sup>) began vandalizing its contents. The first observed vandalism extended Denton's time as a POW to forty-nine years, alongside subsequent comments that grew increasingly absurd (see **Figure 1**).<sup>13</sup> Within minutes of the change, another Wikipedia editor reverted the entry to its previous version.<sup>14</sup>

**November 2015**

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 Hello, I'm [NewEnglandYankee](#). I wanted to let you know that I undid one or more of [your recent contributions to Boston butt](#) because it did not appear constructive. If you would like to experiment, please use the [sandbox](#). If you think I made a mistake, or if you have any questions, you can leave me a message on [my talk page](#). Thanks. [NewEnglandYankee \(talk\)](#) 01:02, 11 November 2015 (UTC)

 Please refrain from making unconstructive edits to Wikipedia, as you did at [Boston butt](#). Your edits appear to constitute [vandalism](#) and have been [reverted](#) or removed. If you would like to experiment, please use the [sandbox](#). Repeated [vandalism](#) can result in the [loss of editing privileges](#). Thank you. [NewEnglandYankee \(talk\)](#) 01:03, 11 November 2015 (UTC)

 Please stop your [disruptive editing](#). If you continue to [vandalize](#) Wikipedia, as you did at [Boston butt](#), you may be [blocked from editing](#). [NewEnglandYankee \(talk\)](#) 01:04, 11 November 2015 (UTC)

 You may be **blocked from editing without further warning** the next time you [vandalize](#) Wikipedia, as you did at [Boston butt](#). [NewEnglandYankee \(talk\)](#) 01:04, 11 November 2015 (UTC)

 Anonymous users from this IP address have been **blocked** from editing for a period of **31 hours** for persistent [vandalism](#). If you think there are good reasons why you should be unblocked, you may [appeal this block](#) by first reading the [guide to appealing blocks](#), then adding the following text to the bottom of your talk page: `{{unblock|reason=Your reason here ~~~~~}}`. [NeilN talk to me](#) 01:39, 11 November 2015 (UTC)

**Figure 2:** Editors can issue warnings to vandals, as exemplified in this screenshot of the User talk page for user 79.XX.YY.ZZ. Wikipedia, “User talk: [79.XX.YY.ZZ],” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User\\_talk:79.XX.YY.ZZ&oldid=690063552](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User_talk:79.XX.YY.ZZ&oldid=690063552)>. Note that the user’s full IP address has been obscured in consideration of privacy.

Meanwhile, a different editor had just responded in “User talk” to user 79.XX.YY.ZZ regarding vandalism to a different entry, with a warning that continued vandalism could result in editorial blocking (see **Figure 2**).<sup>15</sup> The notice was a “stock” warning that Wikipedia employs in a five-step process that leads to a block, with the first warning assuming a “good faith” effort gone wrong.<sup>16</sup>

What followed over the next twenty minutes was a series of responses from Wikipedia contributors correcting subsequent defacing by the same IP address.<sup>17</sup> The vandal created seventeen more versions of the Denton page, eliciting twenty-eight corrections from ten different Wikipedia contributors, with several corrections taking place within one minute of the vandalisms. Using the “View history” tab and scrolling down to the first edit on November 11, 2015, we show the revision history to the classroom (see **Figure 3**).

The “war of edits” concluded with Wikipedians restoring the “original” version of the article. User 79.XX.YY.ZZ was issued

01:18, 11 November 2015	Gilliam (talk   contribs)	.. (18,257 bytes) (0) .. (Reverted to revision 686741541 by Dallasgboyd (talk): Rrv. (TW)) (undo)
01:46, 11 November 2015	Overfloater (talk   contribs)	.. (18,257 bytes) (+63) .. (Reverting repeated vandalism to last good version (01:01, 21 Oct 2015)) (undo)
01:46, 11 November 2015	Throwaway9-11 (talk   contribs)	m .. (18,204 bytes) (0) .. (Added period) (undo) (Tag: Visual edit)
01:42, 11 November 2015	71. (talk)	.. (18,204 bytes) (-53) .. (Fixed sabotage/vandalism) (undo) (Tags: Mobile edit, Mobile app edit)
01:39, 11 November 2015	NeilN (talk   contribs)	m .. (18,267 bytes) (-382) .. (Reverted edits by 79. (talk) to last version by 2601. (talk)) (undo)
01:39, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,839 bytes) (+287) .. (Undid revision 690063451 by Theletterm1973 (talk)) (undo)
01:39, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,372 bytes) (+115) .. (Undid revision 690063463 by 2601. (talk)) (undo)
01:38, 11 November 2015	2601. (talk)	.. (18,257 bytes) (-115) .. (Revert (further back)) (undo)
01:38, 11 November 2015	Theletterm1973 (talk   contribs)	.. (18,372 bytes) (-287) .. (undo)
01:38, 11 November 2015	Outback the koala (talk   contribs)	.. (18,839 bytes) (+287) .. (Undid revision 690063326 by Theletterm1973 (talk)) (undo)
01:37, 11 November 2015	Theletterm1973 (talk   contribs)	.. (18,372 bytes) (-287) .. (undo)
01:37, 11 November 2015	Outback the koala (talk   contribs)	m .. (18,839 bytes) (0) .. (Reverted edits by 71. (talk) to last version by Outback the koala (talk)) (undo)
01:37, 11 November 2015	71. (talk)	.. (18,839 bytes) (0) .. (Fixed typo) (undo) (Tags: Canned edit summary, Mobile edit, Mobile app edit, Foc)
01:36, 11 November 2015	Outback the koala (talk   contribs)	m .. (18,839 bytes) (-2) .. (Reverted edits by 79. (talk) to last version by Outback the koala (talk)) (undo)
01:36, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,841 bytes) (+2) .. (undo)
01:35, 11 November 2015	2802. (talk)	.. (18,839 bytes) (-1) .. (undo)
01:35, 11 November 2015	Outback the koala (talk   contribs)	.. (18,840 bytes) (-13) .. (undo)
01:34, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,853 bytes) (+34) .. (Undid revision 690062874 by Outback the koala (talk)) (undo)
01:34, 11 November 2015	Outback the koala (talk   contribs)	.. (18,819 bytes) (-34) .. (undo)
01:34, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,853 bytes) (+239) .. (Undid revision 690062764 by Theletterm1973 (talk)) (undo)
01:34, 11 November 2015	Theletterm1973 (talk   contribs)	.. (18,414 bytes) (-239) .. (undo)
01:33, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,853 bytes) (+28) .. (Undid revision 690062673 by Theletterm1973 (talk)) (undo)
01:33, 11 November 2015	Theletterm1973 (talk   contribs)	.. (18,825 bytes) (-28) .. (undo)
01:32, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,853 bytes) (+270) .. (Undid revision 690062531 by 143. (talk)) (undo)
01:32, 11 November 2015	143. (talk)	.. (18,383 bytes) (-270) .. (I edited North Kazakhstan to North Vietnam and) (undo)
01:32, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,853 bytes) (+287) .. (Undid revision 690062445 by 90. (talk)) (undo)
01:31, 11 November 2015	90. (talk)	.. (18,388 bytes) (-287) .. (Undid revision 690062245 by 79. (talk)) (undo)
01:30, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,853 bytes) (+287) .. (Undid revision 690062185 by Theletterm1973 (talk)) (undo)
01:30, 11 November 2015	Theletterm1973 (talk   contribs)	.. (18,388 bytes) (-287) .. (undo)
01:29, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,853 bytes) (+239) .. (Add) (undo)
01:29, 11 November 2015	Theletterm1973 (talk   contribs)	m .. (18,414 bytes) (-239) .. (undo)
01:28, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,853 bytes) (-29) .. (typo, and reverting vandalism) (undo)
01:28, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,882 bytes) (+57) .. (Undid revision 690061792 by Theletterm1973 (talk)) (undo)
01:27, 11 November 2015	Theletterm1973 (talk   contribs)	m .. (18,825 bytes) (-57) .. (undo)
01:27, 11 November 2015	199. (talk)	.. (18,882 bytes) (-8) .. (←Early life and military career: Changed birth place from "Mobile Phone") (undo)
01:26, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,888 bytes) (+431) .. (Undid revision 690061578 by 90. (talk)) (undo)
01:26, 11 November 2015	90. (talk)	.. (18,257 bytes) (-431) .. (Undid revision 690060614 by 79. (talk)) (undo)
01:26, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,888 bytes) (+239) .. (Undid revision 690061475 by 90. (talk)) (undo)
01:25, 11 November 2015	90. (talk)	.. (18,449 bytes) (-239) .. (undo)
01:25, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,888 bytes) (+81) .. (Undid revision 690061404 by 50. (talk)) (undo)
01:25, 11 November 2015	50. (talk)	.. (18,827 bytes) (-81) .. (Undid revision 690061267 by 79. (talk) - Vandalism) (undo)
01:24, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,888 bytes) (+81) .. (Undid revision 690061210 by 66. (talk)) (undo)
01:23, 11 November 2015	66. (talk)	.. (18,827 bytes) (-81) .. (undo)
01:23, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,888 bytes) (+431) .. (Undid revision 690061123 by 90. (talk)) (undo)
01:23, 11 November 2015	90. (talk)	.. (18,257 bytes) (-431) .. (Undid revision 690060614 by 79. (talk)) (undo)
01:19, 11 November 2015	79. (talk)	.. (18,888 bytes) (+431) .. (undo)

**Figure 3:** Revision history for “Jeremiah Denton” entry on November 11, 2015. User 79.XX.YY.ZZ made total of eighteen revisions, the first at 01:19 and the final at 01:39 (coinciding with the user’s temporary block by another Wikipedia editor). Wikipedia, “Jeremiah Denton: Revision history,” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jeremiah\\_Denton&offset=&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jeremiah_Denton&offset=&limit=500&action=history)>.

a temporary block within twenty minutes of the first vandalism incident and ceased all activity after November 12 (or began to use a different IP address or account).<sup>18</sup> The speed with which editors corrected the vandalism tends to impress students, who sometimes ask about the “correctors,” providing an opportunity to click on a few of the editors’ hyperlinks (some of whom have a decent amount of background information while others have very little).

This exercise provides an opportunity to discuss the authority of the “correctors.” Even if we see them as the “white hats” in this episode, can they always be trusted? *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*—Who will guard the guardians? Moreover, not all vandals are so obvious with their mischief. Today, Wikipedia employs a range of measures to monitor and/or prevent vandalism, such as bots, pages on recent changes, watch-listed pages, semi-protected and protected articles, and the revoking of editing privileges.<sup>19</sup> We use the Jeremiah Denton page to highlight the value of Wikipedia’s openness, as well as its need for ongoing vigilance. In the process of reviewing several versions of one entry, our students develop a sense of how articles are constructed, edited, and corrected over time.

### Wikipedia Assignment 2.0

“Digital History” is an elective course we created in 2014 that examines the consequences of computers and online technology for historical research, analysis, and presentation. Much like “Introduction to Historical Study,” it relies on individual assignments and discussion, not the mastery of historical content. One of the course’s projects has students improve any Wikipedia article by contributing a paragraph of text with at least one reference citation, adding to either the bibliography or external links, and uploading one image to the Wikimedia Commons (see **Appendix B** for the assignment). What makes the assignment impactful is the interaction students inevitably have with bots, bureaucratic structure, and human editors who flag contributions for non-compliance with Wikipedia’s policies. It is an unfamiliar, unpredictable learning environment—and that is a good thing.

One student tried starting her own entry in 2014 and quickly discovered the challenges involved. New articles must meet Wikipedia’s criteria for creation and the “new pages patrol” can



### Women Soldiers

Women who fought in the war were met with ambivalence that fluctuated between admiration and contempt, depending on the particular woman's motivation and activity. Devotion to following a man was admired, while those who seemed enticed by the enlistment bounty warranted scorn of enlisted men. (Anna Maria Lane, [Margaret Corbin](#) fit under first category, while [Anne Bailey](#) (under name Samuel Gay) belonged to 2nd category and was discharged, fined, and put in jail for two weeks. Anne Smith was condemned for her attempt to join the army in order to secure the enlistment fee.) However, other women followed the camps of men to act as cooks, nurses, and general caregivers.

[Deborah Samson](#), [Hannah Snell](#), and Sally St. Claire successfully hid their gender for a time (St. Claire until her death), and Sampson, upon discovery was honorably discharged and awarded a veteran's pension some years later.<sup>[4]</sup>

[Molly McCauley](#) also took her husband's post behind a cannon once her husband was injured in an attack in New Jersey. She gained notoriety for her excellent aim and soldiers began to respect her as a fighter.<sup>[5]</sup>

[Nancy Hart](#) was forced to house British soldiers during the war as most colonial households were required. When providing dinner for the soldiers, she chose to fight back. She killed both men in her home with their own muskets. She later ran with a spy ring to pass messages between revolutionary forces.<sup>[6]</sup>

Other Patriot women concealed army dispatches and letters containing sensitive military information underneath their petticoats as they rode through enemy territory to deliver it. [Deborah Champion](#), [Sara Decker](#) (Haligowski) [married to Polish shoe maker in later years], [Harriet Prudence Patterson Hall](#),<sup>[7]</sup> and [Lydia Darraugh](#) all managed to sneak important information past the British to their American compatriot.

**Figure 4:** Student-created “Women Soldiers” section added to the “Women in the American Revolution” Wikipedia entry in February 2014. Wikipedia, “Women in the American Revolution [2 February 2014],” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Women\\_in\\_the\\_American\\_Revolution&oldid=593630847](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Women_in_the_American_Revolution&oldid=593630847)>.

prevent an entry's creation. In this case, our student wanted to write about a fatal accident in the university dormitory that had consequences for campus safety measures and spawned ghost lore. She had solid, verifiable sources, but an editor rejected her entry during the initial review, deeming it “unworthy of notice.” The editor's subjective judgment of the event's notability could have been challenged (our student did not exercise that option), but this incident, and others like it, underscore an essential point. Wikipedia has gatekeepers who have accrued editorial status due to their positive reputation in the community. They serve as arbiters of disputes and can intimidate newcomers.

Another student made appropriate contributions to “Women in the American Revolution,” a well-established entry with thousands of monthly page views. She added to the bibliography, created a new subsection titled “Women Soldiers,” providing specific examples of American women who participated in the revolution's fighting (see **Figure 4**).<sup>20</sup> The day after her edits went up, an anonymous user vandalized the article and an automated bot named “ClueBot

**Women soldiers** [edit]

Women who fought in the war were met with the ambivalence that fluctuated between admiration and contempt, depending on the particular woman's motivation and activity. Devotion to following a man was admired, while those who seemed enticed by the enlistment bounty warranted the scorn of enlisted men. [Anna Maria Lane](#) and [Margaret Corbin](#) fit under the first category, while [Anne Bailey](#) (under the name Samuel Gay) belonged to the second. Anne Bailey was discharged, fined, and put in jail for two weeks. Anne Smith was condemned for her attempt to join the army to secure the enlistment fee.<sup>[16]</sup> [Deborah Sampson](#) served in the Continental Army as Private Robert Shurtleff for over a year; when her gender was discovered, she was honorably discharged and granted a veteran's pension by the state of Massachusetts.<sup>[17]</sup>



Molly Pitcher loading cannon at the Battle of Monmouth, June 28, 1778 ↗

The "Molly Pitcher" of legend is likely a composite character based on several women who carried water to the troops (presumably in a *pitcher*), either for them to drink, or to cool down the cannons.<sup>[18]</sup> Some historians believe her story is based on that of Mary Ludwig Hays and [Margaret Corbin](#).<sup>[19]</sup>

Some women fought in combat without leaving home; for example, [Nancy Hart](#) of Georgia reportedly shot two Loyalist soldiers in her kitchen, and held several others at gunpoint until help arrived.<sup>[20]</sup> [Martha Bratton](#) blew up her husband's cache of gunpowder before it could be stolen by Loyalists.<sup>[21]</sup> When British troops occupied the home of [Rebecca Brewton Motte](#), she permitted Patriot forces to destroy it.<sup>[22]</sup>

Other Patriot women concealed army dispatches and letters containing sensitive military information underneath their petticoats as they rode through enemy territory to deliver it. [Deborah Sampson](#),<sup>[23]</sup> [Harriet Prudence Patterson Hall](#),<sup>[24]</sup> and [Lydia Darragh](#)<sup>[25]</sup> all managed to sneak important information past the British to their American compatriots.<sup>[24]</sup> On the night of April 26, 1777, sixteen-year-old [Sybil Ludington](#) is said to have ridden 40 miles through the villages of Putnam County, New York, knocking on farmhouse doors to warn militiamen that British troops were on their way to Danbury, Connecticut.<sup>[26]</sup> She has received widespread recognition as the female [Paul Revere](#); a report in *The New England Quarterly* says there is little evidence backing the story,<sup>[27]</sup> and whether the ride occurred is questioned.<sup>[27][28][29][30]</sup>

**Figure 5:** “Women Soldiers” section in the current “Women in the American Revolution” Wikipedia entry (at time of publication). Wikipedia, “Women in the American Revolution,” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\\_in\\_the\\_American\\_Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_the_American_Revolution)>.

NG” immediately restored the student’s version.<sup>21</sup> The “Women Soldiers” section remains to this day, now including expanded information and a historical image (see **Figure 5**).<sup>22</sup> Bots remove obvious vandalism among other tasks, and a community of human users, the Bot Approvals Group (BAG), “supervises and approves all bot-related activity from a technical and quality-control perspective on behalf of the English Wikipedia community.”<sup>23</sup> Here, we should mention that students enjoy discussing the relationship between human beings and bots (to be sure, it is a topic informed by film and television) and, more specifically, the implications of artificial intelligence (AI) for humanities research.

### **Editorial Culture, Wikimedia, and Non-English Versions of Wikipedia**

Since most of Wikipedia's editors are young men, and some are over-confident in their knowledge and judgment, it is helpful to remind students that they may encounter editors who are aggressive in shooting down newcomers' work without taking the time to explain Wikipedia's policies or make useful suggestions. Some editors proudly present information on their user pages about the number of articles edited and accolades earned for good work. Students react differently to the review process. For some, it inspires confidence. Others react with indignation. How dare some no-name editor challenge the right to post content online! Students who improperly cite references or do not adhere to the encyclopedia's guidelines will see their edits challenged and removed. In this way, the issue of authority comes up for discussion. To what extent do the rules and regulations strengthen Wikipedia's credibility, hinder meaningful participation, or empower a minority that is lacking academic credentials but is knowledgeable of editorial standards? We should also mention that if students see their contributions deleted, a record of everything remains in revision history. Deletions are not always a bad thing; they can inspire students to comply with policy and work more carefully.

For students unsure of what to do for this assignment, we encourage them to consider improving an entry about their hometown, high school, or some familiar landmark. Doing this kind of work generates satisfaction from a job well done and presents fewer difficulties than contributing to a well-established page. Similarly, we encourage students who upload images to the Wikimedia Commons from familiar places to embed them in articles their friends and family will see. Adding anything to the Commons raises the issue of intellectual property because students must confirm personal ownership and certify that what they have shared is not subject to copyright protections. In fact, the shared media only becomes publicly available after a somewhat lengthy review process, which further reminds students of Wikipedia's evolution towards greater oversight as opposed to a free-wheeling corner of cyberspace. We are not the only scholars who draw parallels between Wikipedia's review process and academic peer review.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, Wikipedia's "Talk" pages teach the idea of historiography. As with "Introduction to Historical Study," our students consider how their article has evolved over time, as well as what insights can be gleaned from its "Talk" page.

For the final report, we ask students to reflect on what they have learned. For most, it is a positive experience. Encountering the review process firsthand inculcates a deeper understanding of Wikipedia's bureaucracy and drives home a crucial point: the world's free encyclopedia is no longer a free-for-all. Getting content on a well-established page is difficult. Only students who adhere to Wikipedia's rules and make appropriate, properly sourced contributions will see their contributions remain.

One task we recently added to the "Digital History" assignment has to do with non-English versions of Wikipedia. We ask students to consider whether an international history topic (e.g., Apartheid, Cuban Missile Crisis, U.S. Invasion of Iraq) written in German Wikipedia differs substantially from what appears on English Wikipedia. Students able to read western languages such as Spanish or French often do so, but there is no reason for anyone to avoid articles in Chinese, Russian, or Arabic. Those entries can be compared to English Wikipedia based on length, organization, and image selection alone, although browsers such as Google Chrome will offer to translate foreign-language webpages and provide an interesting avenue to evaluate differences in content and the presentation of information.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusions

As the point of departure for millions of people seeking factual information online, it is our view that history majors should receive "Wikipedia training" so they are capable of deeper, more critical reading on the world's great compendium of human knowledge. How do Wikipedia articles get written and who writes them? What editorial controversies and debates have unfolded over time? How do I know if the information presented is reliable? Hands-on Wikipedia training develops an understanding of the encyclopedia's internal functioning, review process, and relationship to intellectual property.

The two assignments outlined here have worked well for us. Having students compare a sole-authored encyclopedia entry to

its analogue on Wikipedia remains an intellectually stimulating exercise. One reason the assignment has stayed fresh is that more than a few of our students have been taught that Wikipedia is unreliable rubbish. Thus, they are unsure of what to expect. We encourage students to complete it with an open mind. For our part, reflecting on the ten years since the project's original inception, we intend to revise the topic pairs for the first assignment and update the second assignment's tasks in view of the encyclopedia's continuing evolution.

## Notes

1. Figures are from Wikipedia at the time of publication: see the Wikipedia entries "English Wikipedia" at <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English\\_Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Wikipedia)> and "Wikipedia: Wikipedians" at <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedians>>.

2. In November 2023, Wikipedia received 2.25 billion visits and was the only non-profit among the ten most visited web domains in the United States. Semrush Blog, "Top 100: The Most Visited Websites in the US [2023 Top Websites Edition]," November 2023, <<https://www.semrush.com/blog/most-visited-websites/>>.

3. See Lee Rainie and Janna Anderson, "Code-Dependent: Pros and Cons of the Algorithm Age," Pew Research Center, February 8, 2017. See also Robert L. Nelson and Heidi L. M. Jacobs, "History, Play, and the Public: Wikipedia in the University Classroom," *The History Teacher* 50, no. 4 (August 2017): 484-486.

4. See, for instance, Cullen J. Chandler and Alison S. Gregory, "Sleeping with the Enemy: Wikipedia in the College Classroom," *The History Teacher* 43, no. 2 (February 2010): 247-257; Elizabeth M. Nix, "Wikipedia: How It Works and How It Can Work for You," *The History Teacher* 43, no. 2 (February 2010): 259-264; Jennifer C. Edwards, "Wiki Women: Bringing Women Into Wikipedia through Activism and Pedagogy," *The History Teacher* 48, no. 3 (May 2015): 409-436.

5. Wikipedia, "Richard I of England [4 January 2005 revision]," <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Richard\\_I\\_of\\_England&oldid=9103603](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Richard_I_of_England&oldid=9103603)>.

6. Wikipedia, "Richard I of England [1 January 2010 revision]," <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Richard\\_I\\_of\\_England&oldid=335249142](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Richard_I_of_England&oldid=335249142)>.

7. Wikipedia, "Talk: Richard I of England," <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Richard\\_I\\_of\\_England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Richard_I_of_England)>.

8. Wikipedia, "Richard I of England [6 January 2015 revision]," <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Richard\\_I\\_of\\_England&oldid=641297778](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Richard_I_of_England&oldid=641297778)>.

9. Wikipedia, “Gender Bias on Wikipedia,” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender\\_bias\\_on\\_Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_bias_on_Wikipedia)>.

10. See Alys Key, “Majority of Wikipedia Editors are Still Men - So How is the Online Encyclopaedia Addressing the Issue?” *The Evening Standard*, March 8, 2023; Nicole Torres, “Why Do So Few Women Edit Wikipedia?” *Harvard Business Review*, June 2, 2016.

11. *Jeremiah*, directed by Mark Fastoso (Birmingham, AL: Alabama Public Television, 2015), available online via APT/PBS at <<https://aptv.org/watch/alabama-public-television-documentaries/alabama-public-television-documentaries-jeremiah/>>.

12. The IP address has been modified within this article to obscure the user’s full address in consideration of privacy.

13. Wikipedia, “JeremiahDenton [11 November 2015, 01:19 revision],” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jeremiah\\_Denton&oldid=690060614](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jeremiah_Denton&oldid=690060614)>.

14. Wikipedia, “JeremiahDenton [11 November 2015, 01:23 revision],” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jeremiah\\_Denton&oldid=690061123](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jeremiah_Denton&oldid=690061123)>.

15. Wikipedia, “User talk: [79.XX.YY.ZZ],” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User\\_talk:79.XX.YY.ZZ&oldid=690063552](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User_talk:79.XX.YY.ZZ&oldid=690063552)>. Note again that the IP address has been modified, including in the URL, in consideration of privacy.

16. Wikipedia, “Vandalism on Wikipedia,” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vandalism\\_on\\_Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vandalism_on_Wikipedia)>.

17. Wikipedia, “Jeremiah Denton: Revision history,” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jeremiah\\_Denton&offset=&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jeremiah_Denton&offset=&limit=500&action=history)>. A total of eighteen revisions by user 79.XX.YY.ZZ occur on 11 November 2015, with the first revision at 01:19 and the final revision at 01:39 (coinciding with the user’s temporary block by another Wikipedia editor).

18. Wikipedia, “User contributions for [79.XX.YY.ZZ],” <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Contributions/79.XX.YY.ZZ>>. Note again that the IP address has been modified, including in the URL, in consideration of privacy.

19. See “Vandalism on Wikipedia.”

20. Wikipedia, “Women in the American Revolution [2 February 2014],” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Women\\_in\\_the\\_American\\_Revolution&oldid=593630847](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Women_in_the_American_Revolution&oldid=593630847)>.

21. Wikipedia, “Women in the American Revolution: Revision history,” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Women\\_in\\_the\\_American\\_Revolution&action=history&offset=&limit=500](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Women_in_the_American_Revolution&action=history&offset=&limit=500)>. See revision history for 3 February 2014.

22. Wikipedia, “Women in the American Revolution,” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\\_in\\_the\\_American\\_Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_the_American_Revolution)>.

23. Wikipedia, “Wikipedia:Bot policy,” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Bot\\_policy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Bot_policy)>.

24. Paul Thomas, Matthew F. Jones, and Spencer Mattingly, “Using Wikipedia to Teach Scholarly Peer Review: A Creative Approach to Open Pedagogy,” *Journal of Information Literacy* 15, no. 2 (June 2021): 179-190.

25. To give an example, the Russian-language entry for Apartheid (at <<https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Апартеид>>) is substantially shorter than the

English-language version (at <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apartheid>>). The Russian-language entry provides an overview of laws related to the establishment of Apartheid and its eventual undoing (with 23 citations). The English-language entry provides far more context about the South African government from 1948 to the 1990s (with 270 citations).

## Appendix A: Wikipedia Assignment 1.0

### **Wikipedia Entries vs. Print Encyclopedia Entries**

Choose ONE topic from the following list for your assignment. You will investigate each topic by comparing and contrasting the coverage in the Wikipedia source against the coverage in a source chosen for you.

As in our other assignments, this should be typed, double-spaced, with normal margins and should be three to four pages long (at least three full pages).

Topics come in pairs. You choose the topic and investigate the pair. All print sources are in the library in the Reference Collection on the 1st Floor.

#### Topic 1, Pair 1: Black Power

- a. Wikipedia entry: “Black Power” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_power](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_power))
- b. Print source: Finkelman, Paul. “Black Power Movement” in *The Encyclopedia of African American History* (Reference E 185 .E5453 2009)

#### Topic 2, Pair 2: Richard I the Lionheart (1157-1199)

- a. Wikipedia entry: “Richard I of England” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_I\\_of\\_England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_I_of_England))
- b. Print source: Murray, Alan V., ed. “Richard I the Lionheart” in *The Crusades: An Encyclopedia* (Reference D 155 .C78 2006)

#### Topic 3, Pair 3: Wannsee Conference

- a. Wikipedia entry: “Wannsee Conference” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wannsee\\_Conference](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wannsee_Conference))
- b. Print source: “Wannsee Conference” in *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (Reference D 804.3 .E53 1990)

#### Topic 4, Pair 4: Great Irish Famine: Role of the Potato

- a. Wikipedia entry: “Great Famine (Ireland)” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Famine\\_%28Ireland%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Famine_%28Ireland%29))
- b. Print source: “The Potato: Root of the Famine” in *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* (Reference DA 950.7 .A85 2012)

#### Topic 5, Pair 5: Napoleonic Wars: Invasion of Russia

- a. Wikipedia entry: “French Invasion of Russia (1812)” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French\\_invasion\\_of\\_Russia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_invasion_of_Russia))
- b. Print source: Fremont-Barnes, Gregory, ed. “Russian Campaign” in *The Encyclopedia of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (Reference DC 220 .E53 2006)



### Assignment Questions

Carefully read the entry from Wikipedia and the print source, then use the following questions to help you to assess the Wikipedia entry and the additional print source.

- a) What kind of evidence is used in the two entries? Primary? Secondary?
- b) Do the entries include a bibliography? What kinds of sources are used? Books? Encyclopedias? Journal articles? Websites? How current are the sources?
- c) Are the sources reliable? How do you know? What are the author(s) credentials? For the Wikipedia entry, go to “View history” and “Page statistics” to see who the top editors are.
- d) How does the Wikipedia entry compare to the other encyclopedic entry? Provide evidence of similarities or differences.
- e) Does the Wikipedia entry appear logical, well-supported, and consistent? Is it overly simplistic or does it address any complex situations or interpretations? Apply the same analysis to the print source.
- f) Can you identify bias? Is one encyclopedia more neutral than the other? Support your ideas with evidence.
- g) What did the Wikipedia entry look like in 2005, 2010, and 2015? For this element, you will click “View history” and back up to edits from January 2005, 2010, and 2015.
- h) Visit the entry’s “Talk” page. What does it reveal about the entry’s composition? Review archived discussion threads.

## Appendix B: Wikipedia Assignment 2.0

### Contributing to Wikipedia and Wikimedia Commons

For this assignment, you have several tasks: (1) First, create a Wikipedia user account (at <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:CreateAccount>). (2) Second, select a Wikipedia article for improvement. Your contribution should be at least one paragraph. You may contribute to an existing article that deals with a historical subject or create a history section. Many small towns or public buildings lack historical information. (3) Third, include at least one reference citation (footnote) and one hyperlink in your contribution. (4) Fourth, add one bibliographic entry or external link to the article you have selected. (5) Fifth, add one image to the Wikimedia Commons (<https://commons.wikimedia.org>). The goal is to contribute an image that others might find useful. Be sure your image is properly described and tagged. Insert the image into an article if possible. (6) Sixth, send me a report that responds to the questions below.

#### Assignment Questions

- a) At the top of the report, include your user name, the Wikipedia article you edited, and the title of your image in the Wikimedia Commons.
- b) Briefly tell me a bit about the article you selected. How many users have contributed to it since its creation? Check the page statistics on your Wikipedia entry. How many page views did the article receive in the past 90 days?
- c) Go to “View history” and “Page statistics.” Who are the top editors and what credentials do they have?
- d) What did the Wikipedia article you selected look like five and ten years ago? For this element, you will need to click “View history” and back up to earlier versions.
- e) Search one foreign-language version of Wikipedia for an international history topic (e.g., Great Depression, Apartheid, Korean War, Cuban Missile Crisis). How does the article differ, if at all, from the content found on English Wikipedia?
- f) Visit the article’s “Talk” section. What does this page reveal about the article’s composition?
- g) What interactions did you have with Wikipedia’s editors, if any? What did you learn from uploading your image to the Wikimedia Commons?
- h) What did this project teach you about Wikipedia?