



wikis



what are they?

Wikis are software packages that make it easy to edit material online, so there can be an information commons, including a community of maintainers to effectively check, add to and update information, plus a set of rules for the community to abide by. Without an effective community, there is no information commons.

The most famous example is Wikipedia, but there are many more. Wikipedia allows anonymous contributors, but to edit some other wikis, people need to be accepted as a contributor. Alternatively, you can have your own wiki to organise information for yourself, without inviting anyone else to edit – a community of one.

History: the first wiki / user-editable website was WikiWikiWeb, launched by Ward Cunningham in 1995. He named his idea after the Hawaiian word for 'quick'. Wikipedia was launched in 2001, by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, and is in the top ten most visited websites in the world, with versions in almost all languages, and around 6 million articles in English alone. There are now hundreds of thousands of wikis. One of our favourites is the P2P Foundation Wiki, set up in 2006 by Michel Bauwens, to help organise his notes on commons / peer-to-peer production, and to open them up to other people to maintain.

what are the benefits?

Wikis are suitable for holding an information commons, and making it easy to run (although it's also possible to have a top-down corporate wiki that's not a commons). To be most useful, a wiki needs to be easy to read and easy to edit. The issues around readability are the same as for textbooks – legibility, clarity and organisation of information. A wiki is a good collaborative tool – easy to edit by a group of people. MediaWiki (the most popular wiki software) keeps all the edits – nothing gets thrown away. So if there's disruption, it's easy to revert to an older version.

Wikipedia is free, and at least as accurate as Encyclopedia Britannica. That's because it has such a vast army of editors. The accuracy of other wikis will depend on the size, knowledge and lack of bias of its editorial team. Quality depends on the community, the rules, and the way the rules are enforced. A small community won't have the time to continually edit a busy wiki, and so quality may suffer. Wikipedia has a large raft of policies that are themselves maintained by the community of editors. This is what makes a meaningful information commons – that the rules themselves are maintained by the community.

what can I do?

Using a wiki: Wikipedia is the obvious choice for unbiased, evidence-based information. The community is so large that bias is usually edited out; and if there's no evidence base for claims, it often says so clearly. So in the entries for 'Psychic' or 'Dowsing', for example, in the first paragraph it says that although there are many practitioners, there is no scientific evidence for their claims.

However, although easy to use, the information on Wikipedia, for many technical topics, is not necessarily for beginners. There will be links to other related topics – and from those pages there will be other links, and so soon you can lose track of the original topic. There is a 'Simple English Wikipedia', that is more accessible for beginners in complex subjects.

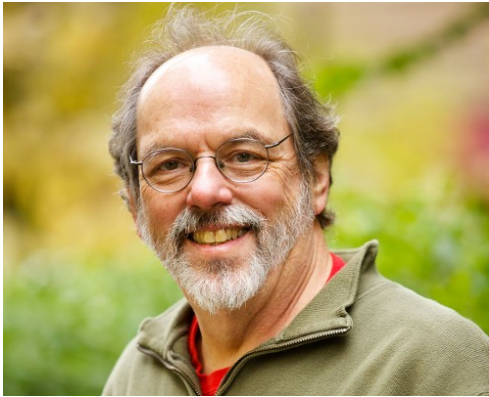
Editing a wiki: Wikipedia editors can either register or remain anonymous. Others are invite-only (e.g. the P2P Foundation Wiki) or controlled / used by just one person.

If you're a beginner, start with small edits – for example, correcting spelling / grammar. You don't need technical skills for basic editing of Wikipedia. Updating a link can be more complicated; adding a link or a reference still harder. But try to be meticulous. Disruptive editors can be banned / permissions can be revoked by administrators.

Wikipedia is a good example to start with, as it's by far the largest wiki. MediaWiki is the software that runs Wikipedia, but there are lots of different options, so different wikis may behave slightly differently. Get yourself an account on Wikipedia, learn about MediaWiki syntax (easier than it sounds – it's explained in the MediaWiki article on Wikipedia, and there are lots of learning materials on the MediaWiki site), and then go in and edit.



MediaWiki: the free software that runs Wikipedia.



Ward Cunningham, US programmer and inventor of the wiki, in 1995.

Your edit will go live immediately – and stay unless someone changes / reverts it. Some popular topics are editable by established editors only, to prevent vandalism. Becoming an established editor requires you to register, make at least 10 edits and wait 4 days.

Next to article headers is the word 'Edit' in brackets. Click on it to change that section, or use the edit tab at the top of the page to edit the article. Internal links to other Wikipedia pages have two square brackets: [[...]]. This and other conventions can be found on the MediaWiki site. Make changes, then click 'Publish changes' (or click 'Cancel', which will take you back to the Wikipedia page). You should also say what you're changing and why (in the box at the bottom).

If you create an account, you can be informed (via a 'Watch this page' link) about changes on that page – you'll get an email if someone edits it, even if you haven't edited it yourself. This is one of the crucial things that helps manage vandalism.

At the top of articles is a 'Talk' tab - you can discuss content or suggest additions. Another tab is 'View history' - a record of the development of the article, allowing you to compare previous versions. Click on a user's name to see all their contributions, and you can communicate with them. MediaWiki is the most common wiki software, but any software will have tutorials – on their site, on Youtube etc.

Wikipedia has strict rules around not including original research. It's a secondary resource, and facts must be referenced. Textbooks and peer-reviewed journals are considered reliable sources, but aside from those, there are grey areas. Different wikis will have different policies.

Building a wiki: first, decide if it's already covered by Wikipedia, or do you have a different angle? If you do, and you have a website, ask your web host if they allow MediaWiki as an installation. Ask them to install it for you (building your own wiki is beyond a basic topic introduction). You'll get a subdomain – e.g. wiki.yourwebsite.etc. plus admin rights. Administering a wiki, including managing contributors, is a techie role; but the important thing is to build a commoning community.

The more technically-minded might want to build a complex interface, but then it makes it much more difficult for less technical people to use. You can have different rules from Wikipedia – e.g. you can include original work, or opinions. There are right- or left-wing wikis, religious wikis etc.

Fedwikis: a Fedwiki (federated wiki), also invented by Ward Cunningham, is a new kind of wiki in which pages are held in a distributed way – across all users' servers, not on one central server, like wikis. This makes it more resilient, because if one server goes down, the fedwiki doesn't. It also gives the option of offline usage, as you hold a copy of the wiki on your machine – it won't synch until you go back online.

resources

- lowimpact.org/wikis for much more info, contacts, articles, links & books, including:
- Ward Cunningham & Bo Leuf, *the Wiki Way*
- Stewart Mader, *Wikipatterns*
- Tapscott & Williams, *Wikinomics*
- wikipedia.org – free online encyclopedia
- mediawiki.org – free software for wikis
- simple.wikipedia.org - Simple English Wikipedia
- wikiindex.org – directory of wikis
- wiki.p2pfoundation.net – peer production wiki

Simple English Wikipedia is not for simple topics, but for explaining topics in plain English.

Feel free to upload, print and distribute this sheet as you see fit. 220+ topics on our website, each with introduction, books, courses, products, services, magazines, links, advice, articles, videos and tutorials.

Let's build a sustainable, non-corporate system.

facebook.com/lowimpactorg

Lowimpact.org

twitter.com/lowimpactorg

Registered in England. Company Ltd. by Guarantee no: 420502