

Sociology



Editing Wikipedia can be daunting for newbies, especially student editors contributing to Wikipedia for the first time as a class assignment. This guide is designed to assist students assigned to add sociology content to articles on Wikipedia. Here's what other editors will expect you to know.

Be accurate

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

Understand the guidelines

Wikipedia editors in the social sciences have developed these guidelines for writing about sociology-related topics. Take time to read and understand the suggestions here to make sure you meet certain expectations when you post to Wikipedia.

If you post something that doesn't meet these guidelines, someone may have to clean up after you, costing valuable volunteer time that could have been used to improve content.

If you're not comfortable working under these guidelines, talk to your instructor about an alternative off-wiki assignment.

Engage with editors

Part of the Wikipedia experience is receiving and responding to feedback from other editors. Do not submit your content on the last day, then leave Wikipedia! Human volunteers from the Wikipedia community will likely read and respond to it, and it would be polite for you to acknowledge the time they volunteer to polish your work. You may not get a comment, but if you do, please acknowledge it.

Watch out for close paraphrasing

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

For a Wikipedia assignment, such plagiarism is a violation of your university's academic honor code. Cleaning up after plagiarism also takes a tremendous amount of volunteer time that would otherwise go into building Wikipedia. If you plagiarize on Wikipedia, it is extremely likely that you'll be caught by other editors and there will be a permanent online record of your plagiarism tied to your account. Note that even with standard resources or authors, you cannot directly copy descriptions of social concepts, studies, or theories into Wikipedia.

You may use direct quotation when it is important to keep the original wording, but be sure to explicitly mark what is being quoted, and cite the source.

Scared? Don't be!

Have a healthy respect for why these rules exist: Everybody on Wikipedia wants to make the best encyclopedia they can. Take the time to understand the rules, and soon you'll be contributing to a resource you use daily!

Getting started

Choosing an article

Generally, follow these guidelines when determining which sociology article to improve:

- Choose a topic with extensive literature in independent, peer-reviewed journals and books. Some articles are short simply because there isn't enough literature to expand them.
- Choose a topic that isn't already well-developed on Wikipedia (look for what are known as “stub” or “start-class” articles — check the talk page for an article's rating). To find an interesting stub, type | *shortcut* [WP:STUBS](#) into the Wikipedia search bar and choose a field that interests you.
- You may wish to search for interesting and plentiful sources first, then choose a Wikipedia article to develop based on what you find.

Organizing your article

Every article will be unique, but there are some general sections that readers and other editors will expect to see in your article. The following sections are proposed scaffolds for various types of sociology articles, and general outlines of sections you should include in your article.

You can add, remove, or reorder sections as appropriate for your topic or article improvement.

What is a Lead section?

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.

A good lead section will summarize the entire article in 1–4 paragraphs. The first sentence — which usually starts with the **name of the topic** in bold — defines the topic and why it is important.

Questions to consider

Some questions to consider for any sociology related article are:

- What is its context and history?
- Explore differences: What does research suggest which might point to differences in how your subject manifests between countries, time periods, or socio-economic conditions?
- If observations are reported, what methodologies, or theories, are these observations grounded in?

An article on a prominent figure in sociology

A great reference for a sociology biography page is W. E. B. Du Bois or Max Weber. You can follow the guidelines set by most good biography pages on Wikipedia:

- Lead section
- Career
- Personal life
- Major contributions
- Publications
- Legacy

An article on a sociological theory

(For example, feminism, functionalism, or colonialism) may be more freely defined within the contours of the concept. As such, you should think carefully about the structure of your article, or what you can contribute to a pre-existing one. Useful touchstones include the following:

- Lead section
- Definition of the theory
- An overview offering some context and history for the theory, including prominent theorists and/or works
- When applicable, empirical evidence supporting the theory
- Implications of the theory (perhaps across fields)
- Reception of the theory, leading into brief coverage of the theories derived from it
- Criticisms of the theory

Finding sources

Think critically

How do you identify sources you can use to build your Wikipedia article? Ideally your sources should be reliable, published, and generally, reviewed by a third party for accuracy. In any article, the majority view and significant minority views should be presented in a **neutral manner**.

Keep in mind, too, that “published” work can include films, podcasts, or other work produced by a reliable author. So, for example, Slavoj Žižek’s film, *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, can be cited in a Wikipedia article. Ultimately, whether a particular source can be considered reliable and relevant for a particular topic is a case by case decision.

Evaluating sources

Learning to evaluate sources is a core component of engaging critically in your field and on Wikipedia.

For Wikipedia’s guidelines on finding good sources, see | *shortcut* WP:RS.

What is a shortcut?

The text WP:RS is what’s known on Wikipedia as a shortcut.

You can type shortcuts like this into the search bar to pull up specific pages. We designate shortcuts this way: | *shortcut* WP:RS.

The first consideration is the **author**. Authors published in a peer review process are preferred to authors who self-publish, whether that be a blog post or a book series.

The second consideration is the **text** itself. Take note that many writers, particularly in the popular press, tend to wade into sociological territory, but do not have proper training as social scientists. In this case, weigh the conclusions of the article or book against the dominant conclusions of those in your field.

Does it align with the scholarly consensus? If so, is there a better, more reliable source that you could use to illustrate the same point?

Finally, consider the **publisher**. Work cited could come from a reliable publisher of sociology literature, such as Sage Publications, Routledge, or the Penn State Press for books, or journals such as *The American Sociological Review* or *The American Journal of Sociology*.

Take care citing as fact any material from publications which advocate strongly for a particular point of view. When in doubt, be sure to see if the board of the publication is tied to an accredited university. Otherwise, such advocacy journals should only be used to provide examples of their particular viewpoints.

Finally, be aware that while Wikipedia requires a neutral tone for articles, it does not require neutral sources. Impassioned pleas, used carefully, may make excellent quotations for illustrating a particular viewpoint. Be sure to attribute the text in your source, and when possible, acknowledge the relevant sociological perspective: “*According to the feminist scholar, Sara Ahmed...*”

For more on Wikipedia’s Neutrality guidelines, see | *shortcut* WP:NPOV.

Represent your sources well

Aim for specificity. Do not to overstate research findings! What did the research **actually** find? For example, if (hypothetical) research found that church attendance in the US has declined over a decade, do not write that “Americans have become less religious over the past decade.” Specificity can help you to avoid problematic stereotypes and generalizations in your articles.

Writing your article

As you start writing, remember to keep these guidelines in mind:

- Don't offer commentary, analysis or conclusions; you're writing fact-based descriptions of information. Writing for Wikipedia is an opportunity to examine your relationship to facts, interpretations and biases. A Wikipedia article should cover what the literature says, not your interpretation.
- Give appropriate weight to aspects of the topic as the literature covers it.
- When mentioning technical terms for the first time, provide a short plain-English explanation in parentheses if possible.
- If you discuss research, aim for a thorough description of its methodologies. This is why it is important to understand your material and cross-reference your understanding with a variety of sources.

Final thoughts

- Don't procrastinate! Writing good, reliable Wikipedia articles takes time. Don't wait until the last minute, but if you get stuck, always ask your instructor for extra time rather than adding content to Wikipedia that doesn't meet these guidelines.
- If you have additional questions about contributing to Wikipedia, post a question at the Teahouse. You can find the Teahouse by entering | *shortcut* [WP:TH](#) into the search bar.
- Take pride in your contributions! Your hard work helps share your knowledge with the millions of people who use Wikipedia every day.

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