

communiqué

tech talk by angelo fernando

Are you still not a Wikipedian?

If you're skeptical about the quality of Wikipedia's content, take the next step and improve an entry yourself

That no one really owns the content is still a disruptive idea.

Does the thought of writing an article for Wikipedia make you cringe? You're not alone. Many people who regularly dip in and out of Wikipedia have reservations about the quality of its content. If you're one of them, you are the perfect candidate to join the ranks of its roughly 5,000 edi-

tors, if only to improve the content of a resource that is evolving, maddening and irresistible.

I don't blame you if you've stayed away because you've heard that people get rapped on the knuckles for accidentally violating Wikipedia policy. But don't let that stop you. The world's first free, crowd-sourced encyclopedia, like the Web itself,

seriously needs editors. And writers. And curators. And pernickety fact-checkers, content specialists, even punctuation freaks. In other words, people like you who have the twin passions of yearning to inform and to collaborate.

Wikipedia is one of the earliest examples of how the social Web works (its origins go back a

10 steps to create content in Wikipedia

1. Register. To author an article, you have to sign up and log in. However, you don't need to register to edit an article.

2. Plan your article offline. It's intimidating to write a piece while in the Edit menu. Wikipedia author David Traver Adolphus suggests that you "assemble supporting documents, references and images ahead of time," in Microsoft Word. Then, you can cut and paste from a proofread, fact-checked document.

3. Find references and footnote every claim or fact. Wikipedia editors strictly enforce the verifiability policy, meaning that you can't make unsupported claims such as "It is largely believed that..." or "The world's largest manufacturer of..." You could use an internal link to another Wikipedia entry too. (See step 8.)

4. Stick to a logical format. Chronology works well for most entries in Wikipedia. Often you are documenting the evolution

of an idea, a historical figure or an organization. Categories for subheads could be "Early years," "Later developments," "Controversies," "Final years," etc., or you could choose more creative section titles.

5. Create a stub—that is, a very brief, incomplete entry. Nearly three-quarters of all articles in Wikipedia supposedly started out as a stub. Wikipedia describes a stub as an article "too short to provide encyclopedic coverage of a subject, but not so short as to provide no useful information, and it should be capable of expansion." For more on becoming a "stub maker," see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Stub_Makers.

6. Improve a stub. There are thousands of people like you who are creating articles and stubs that need your input.

7. Start a list. How often have you searched Wikipedia and stumbled on a useful list?

Editors and curators are needed to create

those as well. Read more on this at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Lists.

8. Add wikilinks. A wikilink is an internal link to another Wikipedia entry. Adding these improves the rich cross-referencing within articles.

9. Add a photo or illustration. These enhance a dry entry and shed light on a subject. Even if you are not a great writer, you could improve a page created by someone else by adding an image. Wikipedia uses a sister company, Wikimedia Commons, to supply thousands of these images. Find them here: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page.

10. Play in the Sandbox. As the name implies, the Sandbox has been set up for people like you to get started, experiment with the formatting and not get dinged for violating any policies. Try it out at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Sandbox>.

—A.F.



decade), but it's not the sexiest social space to dive into, considering that you need to learn a specific brand of HTML to render a page the right way. I often wish some of the content weren't so dry. You'll see editors sparring over words, many sensitive to attempts to insert marketing language into content, or those with political axes to grind. But it is this tension that has kept an impossible project like this alive. That no one really owns the content, and that anyone can edit, delete or improve an article, is still a disruptive idea. Think about that: Would the editors of this magazine allow any passerby to "improve" an article on its web site? Would your Web manager let just anyone add punctuation to a white paper or blog? Few want to go there.

Yet many of us do go there. Like Jessica McCann, a Phoenix, Arizona-based freelance writer who says she visits Wikipedia often, for two reasons: "For my nonfiction work, it's a starting point for general information and research. Then, I dig deeper using the source links to find verifiable data, white papers, etc." That behavior seems typical of students and even businesspeople—Wikipedia is often the start when embarking on a search. Wikipedia takes the "verifiability" problem McCann mentions seriously; it's one of its top three policies. An article needs to be well referenced or it will be taken down. For this

reason, since 2005, Wikipedia authors must register and log in. (Editors do not, however.) Editors often use page alerts to watch out for someone who maliciously or mischievously inserts fake sources or spam links.

There are people who accept Wikipedia, warts and all, and see the positive side of a knowledge source that is evolving. Others are aghast at what's being served up—some schools have blocked the site because, they complain, "anyone could edit it." Considering the new interest in peer production and crowdsourcing, I believe it's time for us to get involved in this "information commons," rather than snipe from the sidelines.

Get started now

But before you do, it's worth picking up a few skills on how to work your way into this community. Yes, there are policies and ethical practices, expressed in unfamiliar acronyms and industry jargon, that might make you feel like you're wandering into a foreign country. But you don't need to know everything at once. "The wiki culture has a deep acceptance of imperfections and incompleteness as both inevitable and perhaps even necessary for inspiring a working community," say *How Wikipedia Works* authors Phoebe Ayers, Charles Matthews and Ben Yates. Yes, there's the wiki "markup lan-

guage" to help you format your contribution with a properly sized headline and subheads and to create hyperlinks and bullets. But if you know just five of them you can at least get started (see "10 Steps to Create Content in Wikipedia," opposite page).

David Traver Adolphus, a Wikipediaian who's also an automotive writer and blogger, says the biggest hurdle he faced was "learning to conform to the somewhat arbitrary internal protocols." Editors are tolerant, and may put up an alert box above your article or ask you about something in the talk pages (a discussion space for editors). "It required quite a bit of trial and error to get things formatted correctly," says Adolphus, who has written seven articles for Wikipedia.

Try this experiment: Check the Wikipedia entry for IABC. I found several facts that needed updating. Here are two challenges for you. (1) The section on conferences refers to two events in the past, in 2009. Go update that! (2) We know that there are more than 100 IABC chapters, right? But only 10 are listed. I added two while writing this column. Why don't you add your chapter? Remember, to do this kind of minor edit you don't even have to log in.

Still nervous? I'm no programmer, and it took me less than two hours to master the basics and start an article. I'm positive you can do it too. •

did you know that...

- People like you add some 10,000 articles a week to Wikipedia?
- Coverage of current events is an unexpected development of Wikipedia? A current event gets updated rapidly by users.
- More than 50 percent of edits are made by less than 1 percent of Wikipedia users?
- Wikipedia is the eighth most visited web site in the world?

—A.F.

about the author

Angelo Fernando is principal of Public Radius, an Arizona-based strategic communication and PR consultancy that helps organizations bridge the gap between traditional and digital media. Read his blog at HoiPolloiReport.com.