

# Ask Mr. Wikipedia Person

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Wikipedia is a highly accurate, freely accessible online encyclopedia with a scope that is significantly larger and more up-to-date than most hard-copy encyclopedias. Almost all content is supplied by volunteer editors, and most Wikipedia content can be copied and reused for any purpose, subject to a Creative Commons license. I look up topics in Wikipedia daily, as do many other curious people. I also fix spelling and grammar errors, add information, and occasionally create new articles, and I would like to encourage other Wikipedia users to do the same.

Writing a carefully phrased, smoothly flowing, concise-yet-thorough article is difficult, so I'm doing this in pseudo question-and-answer format (the name is modified from Dave Barry's "Mr. Language Person", but his writing is much funnier). Topics covered range from basic logistics (e.g., correcting a simple spelling error) to how controversies and conflicts are handled. I am a native English speaker, so I've focused on the English language version of Wikipedia, but most things should apply to other languages.

**Q1:** I was just reading a Wikipedia article, and I noticed an obvious spelling/punctuation/grammar error. How can I fix it?

**A1:** It's really easy, and you don't even need to create an account. Here's a summary; more details are provided below (all descriptions are based on the desktop web browser interface).

- Step 1: Click "Edit source" at the top of the article.
- Step 2: Search the wiki text to find the error.
- Step 3: Fix it.
- Step 4: Click the "Publish changes" button at the bottom.

That's it!

**Q2:** Does Wikipedia let anyone make changes anonymously, without even creating an account?!

**A2:** Yes.

**Q3:** How can Wikipedia be reliable with that kind of process? Any idiot could write anything they want and not even be held accountable!

**A3:** I will cover this in more detail later, but part of the answer is that anyone else can come along and undo your changes.

**Q4:** OK, I've decided I want to actually fix something obvious and basic in Wikipedia. Can you provide a few more details?

**A4:** Of course!

Internally, Wikipedia uses a simple "markup language", where formatting is defined by simple character sequences in the text itself (e.g., placing something in "double apostrophes" makes it *italic*); this is similar

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Thanks to Margaret Loomis for insightful comments on content, style, and punctuation. She would have preferred, among other things, to have had the commas inside the quotation marks.

to how HTML works. For simple changes, you probably won't need to understand the markup language, but you should at least be aware of why those random looking characters are there.

After you click "Edit source", you'll see the text with some markup language mixed in, and probably some obscure formatting at the top of the page. Ignore it; just find the error in the text and fix it.

Clicking "Publish changes" at the bottom will commit your change. But really, don't you want to make sure you did it right before committing? So click the "Show preview" button at the bottom; this will provide a view (at the top) of what the Wikipedia page will look like after your change. Does it look good? If so, scroll back down to the bottom, fill in the "Edit summary" describing what you changed (this is optional, but it's a good idea), and click the "Publish changes" button.

You have just improved (I hope) Wikipedia!

Your edit changes aren't committed until you publish them, so you can experiment with editing text and looking at the preview, and then either click "Cancel" (at the bottom), or simply leave the page without publishing. If you need to understand the markup language used for formatting, clicking the "Help" button at the top of the edit page will provide some explanation.

**References:**

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Wikitext>

**Q5:** I'd like to see how an article got developed. How can I do that?

**A5:** To see the revision history of an article, click the "View history" button at the top of the article. There will be a list of all changes, most recent first, including the associated account name (or an IP address for anonymous changes) that made the change. Clicking the "prev" button next to any individual change will show the text changes involved in that particular edit, that is, how the edited version differs from the previous version. There is also an "undo" button, which allows anyone to revert that change; the "undo" will also be logged in the history.

Every article also has a "Talk" page (click the "Talk" button at the top), which is a freely editable wiki page for discussion of the article. Editors who have created accounts also get their own personal "Talk" page.

**Q6:** I found a factual error in a Wikipedia article, and/or I want to add some new information to an existing article. How do I do that?

**A6:** The editing process is the same as for simple errors, although you will probably need to use the Wiki markup language for citing references. However, in addition to the mechanics, Wikipedia guidelines require you to have to have a \*reliable\*, \*published\* source to back up your new or altered content. Even if you are the world's expert on a subject, that is not adequate; Wikipedia is an encyclopedia (a compendium of established knowledge), not an outlet for original research, nor a medium for self-promotion.

The source could be a book, newspaper article, journal article, or a reliable, fact-based web page. Although Wikipedia allows, even encourages, informational links to other Wikipedia pages, a Wikipedia page may not be used as a source reference in another Wikipedia article.

So to do your factual correction/addition:

Step 1: Make sure you have a reliable published reference for your information.

Step 2: Figure out the correct markup text for putting the reference into the article. There are a lot of different styles for doing this, some simple and some complicated; the best protocol is usually to copy the style used in the article you're editing. The reference text is placed following the statement that it supports, and the markup language usually generates a footnote and places the reference in a list at the end of the article.

Step 3: Follow the earlier instructions for fixing simple errors. Explain your change in the "Edit summary" box before publishing your changes.

**References:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Citing\\_sources](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Citing_sources)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No\\_original\\_research](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No_original_research)

**Q7:** How accurate is Wikipedia?

**A7:** On the topics I look up, it appears to be pretty close to 100%, but that will vary. The completeness of articles will also vary widely; this is something you can help improve. A 2005 study in the (prestigious!) journal "Nature" argued that Wikipedia was as accurate as the Encyclopedia Britannica. See the Wikipedia

article on “Reliability of Wikipedia” for detailed discussion. (Note that this article could be legitimately viewed as having a conflict of interest, but the article itself is very detailed and filled with 3rd-party references, so you can verify for yourself.)

References:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliability\\_of\\_Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliability_of_Wikipedia)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Conflict\\_of\\_interest](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Conflict_of_interest)

**Q8:** If anyone can edit Wikipedia, at any time, under the influence of any substance, why isn't it total trash?

**A8:** This is where things get interesting...that is, how does potential wild-west anarchy result in a reliable source of information?

Three useful things to understand are:

1. Wikipedia has an extensive set of published guidelines that (usually) make it clear whether a particular edit meets Wikipedia standards or not. The following “core content” policies are the primary basis for conflict resolution.
  - A. Neutral point of view: articles should be factual and unbiased.
  - B. Verifiability: any statement in an article must have a reliable published source.
2. Although no one “owns” a Wikipedia article (even if you wrote the whole thing, anyone else can edit it at any time), anyone who has an interest in a particular article can monitor it for changes. Articles that one or more conscientious editors pay attention to will stay in better shape than articles that no one cares about. (In general, nothing in Wikipedia will get fixed unless someone both notices it and chooses to do something about it.)
3. Some editors (still volunteers!) are administrators with additional privileges/powers: they can block accounts (or IP addresses) from editing, delete inappropriate articles, and add protection to pages so that they can only be edited by verified editors. Administrators are elected/approved (on a consensus basis, not a simple majority) by a vote of editors after significant online public discussion. There is also an elected “Arbitration Committee” that has the power to bindingly resolve intractable disputes.

References:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Administrators>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Consensus>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral\\_point\\_of\\_view](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Ownership\\_of\\_content](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Ownership_of_content)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability>

**Q9:** That's kind of vague. Can you provide some more detailed examples of how conflicts and problems are handled?

**A9:** Here are some more specific scenarios; for concrete examples, find a potentially controversial article and look at its history and associated “Talk” page.

**Vandalism:** Vandalism (e.g., adding obscenities or meaningless text to an article) is the simplest case because there is no dispute about whether it should be reverted. Vandalism is often corrected quickly by someone who monitors an article, by editors who explicitly look for vandalism, or by a “bot” (a program that automatically, or with some degree of user intervention, searches for vandalism and reverts it). However, minor vandalism on a little-read article might last for a long time.

References:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Vandalism>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:ClueBot\\_NG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:ClueBot_NG)

**Cooperative Disagreement:** Should two or more editors disagree about a change to an article, public discussion can take place on the article's “Talk” page. In an ideal world, disputes would be politely resolved

by reference to Wikipedia guidelines; other editors interested in the article may chime in with their opinions, and consensus may help to sway the outcome. A first escalation step, if that doesn't work, is to request non-binding mediation.

**Adversarial Disagreement:** Not everyone plays well with others: sometimes there will be legitimate disagreements (perhaps Wikipedia guidelines are vague, or there is a genuine factual debate), and sometimes one or more parties will refuse to adhere to Wikipedia guidelines. What happens then?

First, if there is a legitimate factual disagreement (or even a noteworthy bogus one, e.g., "flat earthers"), then Wikipedia's "Neutral Point of View" policy recommends that both should be neutrally described (see the Wikipedia mainline article on "Flat Earth" and its associated "Talk" page).

An "edit war" is a situation where two or more editors engage in a repeated, non-productive sequence of edits and reversions. To address this, Wikipedia has a three-revert rule: it is against policy for *any* editor to do three reverts to a given page in a 24-hour period. Violation of this, if brought to an administrator's attention, would probably result in at least temporary blocking of the offender's ability to edit Wikipedia; blocking of an account can be made permanent for egregious offenders.

As a last resort, difficult cases that are not resolved by any of the above can be referred to the Wikipedia arbitration committee.

References:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Arbitration>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Edit\\_warring](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Edit_warring)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Lamest\\_edit\\_wars](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Lamest_edit_wars)

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0038869>

(“Dynamics of Conflicts in Wikipedia”)

**Protection:** Finally, pages which are prone to major disputes or vandalism can be protected from editing by anyone except established and confirmed editors. For example, the article on "Scientology" can be edited only by someone who has a registered account that is in good standing (in this case, an account that has existed for at least 4 days, and has done at least 10 valid edits). The protection is indicated by the lock icon in the upper right corner of the page. Editing the article on "Donald Trump" requires you to be an established editor with at least 500 edits (editors who do not meet this requirement can request an edit via the article's "Talk" page).

**Q10.** Should I create a Wikipedia account?

**A10:** If you're a frequent editor, you probably should. You will need to create a unique account name, but you don't need to provide any information about yourself (an email address can be helpful, but is not necessary). Many tasks can be done without an account, but English language Wikipedia currently requires an established account to create a new article.

Some of the advantages of having an account are:

1. Communication: You get a personal "Talk" page for discussions with other editors.
2. Credit/blame: All changes done while logged into your account are attributed to that account. Other editors (and bots) will tend to take you more seriously with an account name (and an established edit history) than with an IP address.
3. Monitoring: You can maintain a "watch list" of articles and get notified about any changes to them. This aids in monitoring an article that you care about (e.g., for vandalism).

When you create an account, pointers to helpful Wikipedia start-up documentation will be included on your "Talk" page.

References:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Why\\_create\\_an\\_account](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Why_create_an_account)

**Q11:** Should I make a donation to Wikipedia?

**A11:** Yes, at least if you are a moderate-to-frequent user of Wikipedia. Wikipedia bends over backwards to avoid the potential conflicts/complications of corporate sponsorship, and they rely on donations to pay for servers, software development, core staff, etc. Donating helps yourself, and helps others.