

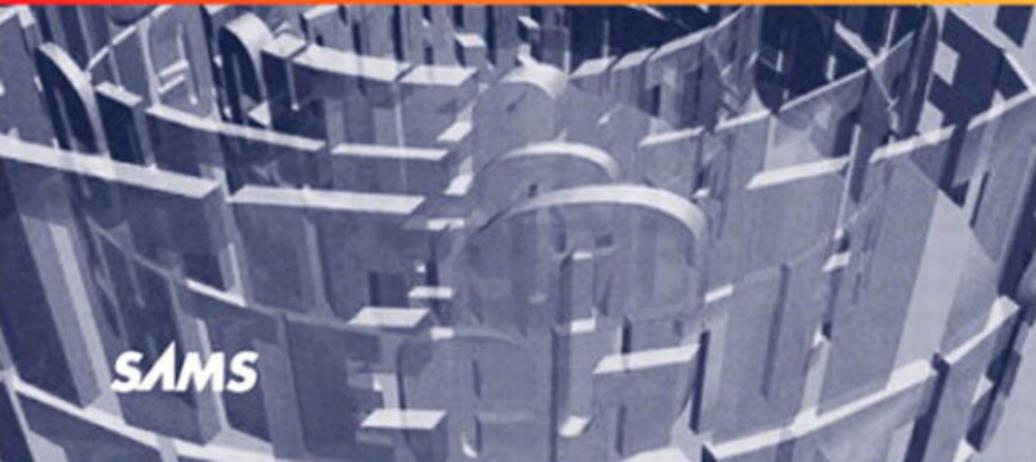
Michael Miller

Sams **Teach Yourself**

Wikipedia

in **10**
Minutes

SAMS



Sams Teach Yourself Wikipedia® in 10 Minutes

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Introduction

Wikipedia is a terrific resource, an online encyclopedia full of information about almost any topic you can imagine. What makes Wikipedia different from other encyclopedias, however, is that it's collaborative; all articles are written and edited by other users, just like you.

But how do you find the information you're looking for on the Wikipedia site? How do you know if what you read in Wikipedia is accurate? How do you edit articles you find that need elaboration? And how do you write a new article on a topic you know a lot about?

Well, that's where this book comes in. *Sams Teach Yourself Wikipedia in 10 Minutes* is a quick-and-easy way to learn how to find, read, and edit Wikipedia articles. Every lesson in this book is short and to the point, so you can learn everything you need to learn at your own pace, in your own time. Just follow the straightforward *Sams Teach Yourself in 10 Minutes* game plan: short, goal-oriented lessons that can make you productive with each topic in 10 minutes or less.

What You Need to Know Before You Use This Book

How much prior experience do you need before starting this book? Absolutely none! You don't need to be a professional researcher or an academic. All you need is a computer with an Internet connection and a web browser. Everything you need to know flows from there.

About the *Sams Teach Yourself in 10 Minutes* Series

Sams Teach Yourself Wikipedia in 10 Minutes uses a series of short lessons that walk you through the various aspects of Wikipedia and its companion sites. Each lesson is designed to take about 10 minutes, and

each is limited to a particular operation or group of features. Most of the instruction is presented in easy-to-follow numbered steps, and there are plenty of examples and screen shots to show you what things look like along the way. By the time you finish this book, you should feel confident in both reading and editing articles on the Wikipedia site.

Special Sidebars

In addition to the normal text and figures, you find what we call *sidebars* scattered throughout that highlight special kinds of information. These are intended to help you save time and to teach you important information fast.

PLAIN ENGLISH

Plain English sidebars call your attention to definitions of new terms. If you aren't familiar with some of the terms and concepts, watch for these special paragraphs.

CAUTION

Cautions alert you to common mistakes and tell you how to avoid them.

TIP

Tips explain inside hints for using Wikipedia more efficiently.

NOTE

Notes present pertinent pieces of information related to the surrounding discussion.

LESSON 1

Getting to Know Wikipedia

In this lesson, you learn the history of Wikipedia and how it works.

Welcome to the World of Wikis

Wikipedia is, for many users, the primary site for information on the Web; it uses the concept of wikis to create an online encyclopedia. Hence the name, a combination of “wiki” and “encyclopedia.”

But what is a wiki?

How Wikis Work

In essence, a *wiki* is a collaborative database. That is, different users enter data into the database, and the database becomes a source of information for other users.

What makes a wiki different from a normal database is its collaborative nature. Instead of a single monolithic author, wikis have dozens or hundreds or even thousands of different authors, each contributing his or her own expertise to the enterprise. In this fashion, a wiki can quickly grow to encompass all manner of information, using the power of its multiple contributors.

A wiki becomes even more functional when connected to a network—or to the Internet. Any user with a network or Internet connection can access the wiki database, either to retrieve information or add data to the database. This broadens the base of contributors, which broadens the potential information available.

To facilitate data entry and formatting, most wikis use some type of markup language, such as the Web's HTML, for their data entry. Entries are created using the markup language so that all the data shares the same look and feel.

The markup language also enables different entries within the database to link to one another, and to other pages on the Web. In effect, wiki entries—called *articles*—are their own pages on the larger wiki website. By linking to other articles, a wiki article gains breadth and depth; one piece of information easily leads to related information elsewhere in the wiki.

Wiki History

The first web-based wiki was launched by computer programmer Ward Cunningham in 1995. The WikiWikiWeb (www.c2.com/cgi/wiki/) was created to ease the exchange of ideas between programmers. Cunningham based the site's design on Apple's HyperCard application, which was a graphical database program included with Macintosh computers in the late 1980s. WikiWikiWeb featured user-modifiable pages that essentially created the collaborative database of information.

NOTE: Wiki Wiki

The word *wiki* is actually a Hawaiian word that means “fast.” Ward Cunningham appropriated the word for his first collaborative database, remembering an employee at the Honolulu International Airport who told him to take the “wiki wiki” shuttle bus between terminals.

Users of the site embraced the concept and began to create their own wikis independent of the WikiWikiWeb website. These wikis focused on content other than programming, using wiki engines to create knowledge bases in various content areas. The most notable of these new wikis was a general purpose site, dubbed Wikipedia.

Wikipedia: The World's Largest Encyclopedia

Programmer Ben Kovitz had worked with WikiWikiWeb, and on January 2, 2001, introduced it to Larry Sanger. At the time, Sanger was a software developer for a company called Bomis and was working on an online encyclopedia dubbed Nupedia. The Nupedia project didn't get off the ground, but Sanger saw that the wiki concept could be used to create an even more inclusive Web encyclopedia. Sanger suggested to Jimmy Wales, Bomis' owner, that they use a version of the UseModWiki engine that drove WikiWikiWeb to create their own wiki encyclopedia, which they eventually dubbed Wikipedia.

Wikipedia was formally launched on January 15, 2001. Initial articles came from previous Nupedia contributors, postings on the Slashdot technology news website, and sites found on major search engines. By the end of 2001, there were 20,000 articles in the Wikipedia database.

The site continued to grow in terms of readers, contributors, and number of articles. Wikipedia reached the 2 million article mark on September 9, 2007, which made it the largest encyclopedia ever assembled.

At present, Wikipedia hosts more than 2.9 million English-language articles, with a total of 13 million articles available in more than 250 different languages. The articles are written and revised by hundreds of thousands of individual contributors who volunteer their time and knowledge at no charge, for the good of the Wikipedia project.

The resulting knowledgebase is not only huge but also hugely popular. Wikipedia is the second-most searched site on the Internet, behind only Google. The site sees more than 10 million visitors each month, placing it among the top ten English-language sites on the Web.

How Wikipedia Works

The Wikipedia site is found on the Web at www.wikipedia.org. To the casual user, Wikipedia looks and works like a traditional encyclopedia, albeit one based on the Internet. It's composed of individual articles, each

focusing on a specific topic. Articles vary in length depending on the nature of the topic and the amount of information available.

Unlike a traditional encyclopedia, however, Wikipedia's content is created solely by the site's users; you don't have to be a professional or an academic to contribute articles to the site. Indeed, Wikipedia is used by people of all types, from students writing school papers to professional researchers to curious individuals.

The content on Wikipedia purports to present a neutral point of view; indeed, this policy of nonbias is codified as official site policy. However, there is no formal peer-to-peer process to review submitted articles; Wikipedia relies on its community of users to edit, correct, and police the information that other users create. After one user writes an article, other users can edit and add to that article. In this fashion, information is vetted for both accuracy and appropriateness.

The site's user/editors do follow broad editorial guidelines, however. These guidelines state that each entry must be about a topic that is encyclopedic and worthy of inclusion; this aims to avoid spurious topics that are not "notable," in Wikipedia's words. Entries must also expose knowledge that is already established or recognized; it cannot present independent works or new information not present elsewhere. Finally, entries should not reflect bias or take a side in a debate; all opinions and viewpoints should receive equal coverage within an article.

NOTE: Notable

According to Wikipedia's guidelines, a topic is *notable* if it has received significant coverage in mainstream media or academic journals that are independent of the subject of the topic.

Adding an article to Wikipedia is as easy as clicking a link and entering the article's text; articles can be accompanied by photographs and other media. Editing an article is equally easy because all edits are made directly to the main text of the article. Users who come across fraudulent, incorrect, or incomplete articles can report them to Wikipedia or simply edit the text in question in real time.

NOTE: Creating and Editing

Learn more about creating Wikipedia articles in Lesson 10, “Contributing a New Article”; learn more about editing articles in Lesson 9, “Editing an Existing Article.”

Researching with Wikipedia is equally easy. The entire Wikipedia database can be searched from a simple search box; enter a keyword-based query and Wikipedia displays a list of matching articles. (Or in a more direct query, simply displays the appropriate matching article.) Articles include links to other Wikipedia articles and to outside websites; information referenced in each article is found in a series of footnotes at the bottom of the page.

NOTE: Using Wikipedia

Learn more about finding articles in Lesson 3, “Searching for Information”; learn more about individual articles in Lesson 4, “Reading a Wikipedia Article.”

Issues with Wikipedia

Because all Wikipedia content is user-generated and there is no central authority vetting or managing this content, some experts dismiss the usefulness of the site. Issues with Wikipedia fall into two general camps: accuracy and depth of coverage.

Accuracy

If anyone can write or edit an article, how are you to know if the submitted information is accurate? Although the Wikipedia community is self-policing (and the information generally accurate), misleading or just plain wrong information can seep into the site. It is possible for mistakes to creep into Wikipedia’s content and not be discovered by the base of contributing users—and for those mistakes to be reflected in papers and reports written with Wikipedia as the sole source.

Depth of Coverage

Because Wikipedia users suggest the content, it's likely that some popular culture topics are more covered in more depth than topics of a more intellectual bent. This is solely a function of which and how many contributors are interested and expert in a given topic. As such, you can't depend on the Wikipedia to always provide adequate content.

Beyond the Issues

With these issues in mind, it's best to view Wikipedia content as a start, rather than the final word when researching a topic. When you're writing a scholarly or professional paper, or just digging up information on a given topic, you should not use Wikipedia as your sole source, but rather as a guide to additional sources. In addition, it's always a good idea to check the footnotes and other references in a Wikipedia article to confirm the source of information presented; the most accurate articles are well sourced.

Despite the potential issues, Wikipedia remains the information source of first choice for millions of users. It's a great place to find information on just about any topic, from the highly academic to the casually popular. Whatever you're looking for, chances are someone else has written about it on Wikipedia.

NOTE: Researching

Learn more about researching with Wikipedia in Lesson 19, "Using Wikipedia for Research and School Papers."

Other Wikipedia Sites

Wikipedia is part of the Wikimedia Foundation (www.wikimediafoundation.org). This nonprofit organization runs several other websites of interest to researchers and information gatherers. These sites are all based on the wiki concept and all dedicated to encouraging the development and distribution of free content to the public.

Wikimedia Foundation sites include the following:

- ▶ [Wikimedia Commons \(commons.wikimedia.org\)](https://commons.wikimedia.org), a repository of free photographs, videos, music, and other media, discussed in Lesson 12, “Finding Pictures in the Wikimedia Commons”
- ▶ [Wiktionary \(www.wiktionary.org\)](https://www.wiktionary.org), a free multilingual dictionary, discussed in Lesson 14, “Looking Up Words in Wiktionary”
- ▶ [Wikiquote \(www.wikiquote.org\)](https://www.wikiquote.org), a collection of famous quotations, discussed in Lesson 15, “Finding Quotable Quotations with Wikiquote”
- ▶ [Wikinews \(wikinews.org\)](https://wikinews.org), a free content alternative to commercial news sites, discussed in Lesson 16, “Getting the Latest News with Wikinews”
- ▶ [Wikibooks \(wikibooks.org\)](https://wikibooks.org), a database of free electronic textbooks, manuals, and public domain books, discussed in Lesson 17, “Reading and Editing Books Online”
- ▶ [Wikisource \(www.wikisource.org\)](https://www.wikisource.org), a collection of classic books, laws, and other free works in a hypertext format, also discussed in Lesson 17
- ▶ [Wikiversity \(www.wikiversity.org\)](https://www.wikiversity.org), a project dedicated to learning materials and learning communities, also discussed in Lesson 17
- ▶ [Wikispecies \(species.wikimedia.org\)](https://species.wikimedia.org), a taxonomy database of species for scientific users

NOTE: MediaWiki

The Wikimedia Foundation also distributes the MediaWiki software, an engine used to develop new wikis. This open source software, available free of charge, has been downloaded more than one million times. Find out more at www.mediawiki.org.

As a nonprofit organization, the Wikimedia Foundation relies on the support of its users. (There are no ads anywhere on Wikipedia or related sites.) To donate, go to the Wikimedia Foundation website.

Summary

In this lesson, you learned what Wikipedia is and how it works. In the next lesson, you learn to navigate the Wikipedia site.

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