# Ecology

*Editing Wikipedia can be daunting for newbies, especially if you're contributing for the first time as a class assignment. This guide is for students adding ecology related content to Wikipedia. We offer advice for finding articles you can work with and good sources to cite. We also review how to structure and write a new article.*

## Be accurate

Wikipedia is a resource millions of people use to inform themselves about the world and their environment, to guide policy decisions, and make quick sense of (or even write) news articles. Your work for this class will be read by thousands of people, so it's important to be accurate.

By documenting and sharing facts about or related to ecology, you will help Wikipedia present a wider spectrum of expertise about the world. With great power comes great responsibility!

## Understand the guidelines

Take some time to read and understand the suggestions here to maximize the value of your contributions to Wikipedia. If you post something that doesn't meet these guidelines, resolving it may take up valuable volunteer time that could have been spent improving content. If you aren't comfortable working within 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. Don't wait until the last day to make a contribution, or you may miss out on important comments, advice, and ideas. Volunteers from the Wikipedia community might read, respond, or ask questions about your work. You may not get a comment, but if you do, make sure to acknowledge it. That's a crucial part of the Wikipedia process.

## Watch out for close paraphrasing

Wikipedia articles are written in your own words. 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, plagiarism is a violation of your university's academic honor code. Plagiarism on Wikipedia will be caught by other editors, and there will be a permanent online record of plagiarism tied to your account. Even with standard resources or authors, you cannot directly copy descriptions of ecosystems, environmental studies, or other materials into Wikipedia.

The best way to avoid this hassle is to make sure you understand your material, draw from several sources, and write it in your own words.

## Don't be scared. Be bold!

Everybody on Wikipedia wants to make it the best it can be. Take the time to understand the rules, and soon you'll be contributing important knowledge to a resource you and millions of other people use every day!

## Choosing an article

Your instructor might offer you a list of topics to choose from, or ask you to select your own.

- Choose a topic with extensive literature in independent, peer-reviewed journals or books.

- You may wish to search for interesting and plentiful sources first, then choose a Wikipedia article based on what you find.

- 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 a stub in a field that interests you, type this "shortcut" into the Wikipedia search bar | *shortcut* | WP:STUBS |.

**TIP:** Typing this search term into the Wikipedia search bar will bring you to a list of existing ecology stub articles. From there, you can find articles that will benefit from your attention.
| CATEGORY:ECOLOGY STUBS |

### What is the lead section?

The *lead section* is the first section of a Wikipedia article. A good lead will summarize the entire article in 1–4 paragraphs, providing context and briefly covering all of the important aspects of the topic. The first sentence — which usually starts with the **name of the topic** in bold — is a definition of the topic and indicates why it is important.

Consider writing a lead section first, which you can 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.

### What is a shortcut?

The text | WP:BLP | is what's known on Wikipedia as a *shortcut*.

You can quickly type shortcuts like this into Wikipedia's search bar to pull up specific pages.

## Organizing your article

### Writing about a biogeographic region

- **Lead section:** A scaffolding paragraph that summarizes the article.
- **Setting:** Physical area (in square miles or kilometers); neighboring regions; major features, such as soils, rivers, watersheds, or geographic features/events (fires, volcanic eruptions, flooding, human development); climate, geography.
- **Characteristics:** Unique aspects of the ecosystem. For example, the presence of fruit trees, reefs, large swamps, or prairies; proximity to lakes, oceans, or deserts.
- **Biosphere:** Biodiversity (or lack thereof), population dynamics and interactions. Mention top predators first, then lesser predators, then prey, herbivores, plants.
- **Human use and impacts:** How humans interact with the region: agriculture, fishing, mining, logging, etc.
- **Conservation and threats:** Impact of humans on the environment, such as development, deforestation, desertification, overfishing, soil degradation, etc.

### Writing about a species

- **Lead section**
- **Description:** Appearance and sound; noting variations by sex, location, etc.
- **Habitat:** Where it lives and its relationship with that habitat, such as diet. Note historical changes, such as migrations, overpopulation, or extinction.
- **Behavior:** Social behavior, hunting or foraging techniques, threat responses, breeding and courtship, etc.
- **Taxonomy:** Who found and named the species and when?
- **Conservation status:** Endangered, extinct, etc. Note factors in status and impact of species.

### Writing a biography

- Rachel Carson's article (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachel_Carson) is a good example of a biography. There are stringent rules for editing articles on living persons. Find these by typing | *shortcut* | WP:BLP |.

# 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.

## Use reliable sources

Wikipedia calls for secondary sources that summarize at least one primary or secondary source, usually to provide an overview of the topic. These include:

• Literature reviews
• Books or publications written by experts in the field, from reliable publishers

*Do not use:*
• Blog posts
• Sources that aren't peer reviewed
• Popular press articles

## Evaluating sources

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

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**. Many writers, particularly in the popular press, wade into ecology territory, but rarely have proper training as scientists. Weigh the conclusions of pop press sources against the dominant conclusions in your field. Does it align with scholarly consensus? If so, use a scholarly source to contribute the same information to the article.

Finally, consider the **publisher**. Work cited could come from a reliable publisher of books and textbooks in environmental science, biology, or related fields.

For more about finding sources, check out | *shortcut*  WP:RS .

## Depict information accurately

It's crucial to take a critical eye to your sources, and to carefully evaluate your own writing for how accurately it presents the information from those sources.

Unlike most school assignments, Wikipedia doesn't permit original research. A Wikipedia article should cover what the literature says, not your interpretation.

For example, it's perfectly acceptable to say that a species of lizard has been in decline since 1989. It's also acceptable to say that runoff from a local factory has been found in that lizard's habitat since 1989. But you should not present these facts as related unless you can cite a reliable source that has connected these dots. Otherwise, it is *original research*, that is, presenting your own conclusion.

Likewise, be careful when you present facts about the environment. It's often easy to make a mental leap that isn't supported by facts. For example, if a reliable source of information states that a fox species hasn't been seen in specific region since 1907, you shouldn't write "the fox disappeared from the region in 1907." This is misrepresenting the findings; in fact, the fox simply hasn't been seen. It may still be there.

Make sure you understand your material before you start writing. Pull good information from reliable sources, then describe that information in your own words. That way, you can be certain that the information you contribute to Wikipedia is accurate, factual, well-sourced, and valuable.

For more details about avoiding original research, try | *shortcut*  WP:NOR .

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

- Be sure you're writing impersonal, fact-based encyclopedic content, not an essay or blog post. See the *Editing Wikipedia* brochure linked from your course page if you need a refresher on the difference in tone.

- 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.

- Let the facts speak for themselves. Respect your readers and recognize that empirical data doesn't always lead two readers to the same conclusion.

- 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. 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, you can ask the Wikipedia Content Expert listed on your course page, or post a question at the Teahouse. To find the Teahouse, type | *shortcut* WP:TH into the search bar.

- Check back on your page! Not only can it be interesting to see how your article grows, you may also have comments and suggestions from other editors, and want to get involved in new directions and developments.