**History Lab #1 How to Read a Wikipedia Article   Due Tues 9/20**

Most students probably begin any research inquiry with a Google search and are likely to click first on the Wikipedia entry that comes up among the top few results. Many people trust Wikipedia as a source of verified information in a familiar and easy-to-navigate web format. However, teachers, professors and students may disagree about the value of Wikipedia in academic research. You may have been (or may be in the future) prohibited from using Wikipedia as a cited source in a research paper, for instance.[1] Just what is the scholarly status of Wikipedia, and how should you read or use those entries? This lab will help you consider Wikipedia more critically through an examination of how an entry is built, altered, and sourced. The goal is to demystify Wikipedia and help give you a more sophisticated understanding of the tool we so often rely on.

Wikipedia began in 2001, launched by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, who envisioned a free collaboratively written encyclopedia of all the world's knowledge. The web platform they chose permits users to alter the content (a "wiki"), although "not just anything can be published on Wikipedia; there are rules and policies in place for the content that gets to stay on Wikipedia" (Boggs 2009). Wikipedia's content is thus far more fluid than a traditional encyclopedia, and its authorship is far more democratic (for better and for worse). Since 2001, it has grown to include over 15 millions of articles in many languages.

Let's break down a Wikipedia article. First notice the tabs across the top, and become familiar with how to navigate the various pages in each entry. Every entry has an "**Article**" and a "**Discussion**" page and for each page you have the option of reading, editing, or viewing that page's **History**.
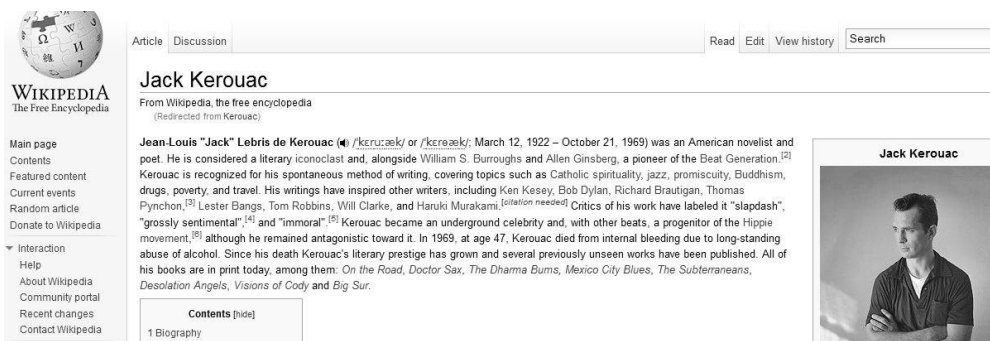
Article page: this is the main entry, beginning with a short overview/definition and a "Contents" box. Once an article becomes long enough it gets broken into sections. The article page also has References, External Links, possibly other sections like a "Gallery" or images, a list of Categories the article fits into, and a date of last revision. If there are major problems with the article (such as it is a "stub" or contains unreliable information), they will be highlighted at the top of the article. Only the current version is visible on the "Read" Tab. Under the "View History" Tab you can see all previous revisions of the article back to its very first one.

Discussion page: on this page, contributors and editors have a conversation about the article's development. This is not the place to discuss the content of the article, but only the editorial decisions *about* the article. The

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[1] Noam Cohen, "A History Department Bans Citing Wikipedia as a Research Source," *New York Times,* 21 Feb 2007; PDF at http://chuck.ehlschlaeger.info/2007/geog405/20070222banWiki.pdf

discussion's participants might argue about what to include/remove, sources and evidence, or about the historical or theoretical interpretation of an article. The discussion page also shows what WikiProjects the article is part of, the results of any formal reviews of the article, and what grade it currently has earned according to Wiki's quality scale.

How to edit: Wikipedia offers a "sandbox" page where you can learn about and practice making changes to a page; try it here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Introduction

Resources:
Jeremy Boggs, "Assigning Wikipedia in a US History Survey," Clioweb blog, 4/6/2009
http://clioweb.org/2009/04/05/assigning-wikipedia-in-a-us-history-survey/
Wikipedia: Introduction http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Introduction
Wikipedia: Five Pillars http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five_pillars
Wikipedia: What is Is and Is Not http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:What_Wikipedia_is_not

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Choose a Wikipedia entry from the list provided on the course website. Conduct an investigation into the article, history, and discussion of your chosen selection, starting with the following questions.

What is this article about? What do you already know about this topic?
When was this article last updated?
How many authors have worked on it? Investigate a few of the authors by clicking on their pages. What is their background
    or qualifications for writing on this topic?
How is the article divided into sections? Are images included – if so, how many, and what of?
How many different sources are cited? How reliable would you judge the sources to be?
Try a few of the external links. How do they compare with the Wikipedia article?
What categories is this article in? What other WikiProjects is it associated with?
Are there WikiCommons images? If it's about a person, is there a WikiSource page for her/him?
What are some of the topics on the discussion page?
Are there controversial issues, or have there been instances of vandalism to the page?
What grade does it have on Wikipedia's quality scale? Has it been peer reviewed; if so, what were the results?
When was this article first added to Wikipedia? How has the current version changed since the first version?

Then, write a "lab report" that does the following, in 4-5 pages:

DESCRIBES your findings from your investigation about this article (1-2 pages)

DISCUSSES some of the controversies, revisions, or issues treated in the Discussion page behind the scenes (1-2 pages),

JUDGES the merits or drawbacks of this article – what's missing? What does it do well? What questions did it fail to address? (1/2 page)
…and…

REFLECTS on what you learned about Wikipedia through this exercise and what, if anything, you will do differently when you consult Wikipedia in the future (1 page).