Choosing an article

Determining what Wikipedia article you should work on can be a challenge. Here are some best practices that have worked well for other students.

Just what makes a good Wikipedia article? Make sure you familiarize yourselves with the structure of a typical Wikipedia article in your discipline, so you know what types of sections you will be expected to contribute. Before you start to write, think about how information is structured in encyclopedias, and how that may be different from a more traditional research paper you are familiar with.

Do's

- Choose a topic that is well established in the discipline, but only weakly represented on Wikipedia. If there is a lot of literature available on the topic, but only a small amount of that information exists on Wikipedia, that is the best situation to work from.

- Look for articles rated "stub" or "start" class on Wikipedia's internal assessment process. You can see an article's assessment by visiting its talk page.

- Make sure you search for a few different variants on the term before creating an article. Often, you may find that a topic has already been covered under a different name.

- If you're updating an existing article and want to work in your sandbox, copy over the existing text into your sandbox first. Work to enhance what has already been added by other editors instead of rewriting the entire article.

Don'ts

- Avoid trying to improve articles on very broad topics (e.g., law) or articles that are already of high quality on Wikipedia ("Featured Articles"). These topics are more challenging to improve effectively.

- Don't try to improve topics that are highly controversial, like global warming, abortion, or Scientology. Contentious topics often lead to fights on Wikipedia. Instead, consider working on one of the existing sub-articles to bring more detail to a particular facet of the topic.

- Avoid working on topics that are only sparsely covered by literature. You will have a difficult time providing enough reliable sources to create a Wikipedia article.

- Don't start articles with titles that imply an essay-like approach, such as "The Effects That The Recent Sub-Prime Mortgage Crisis has had on the US and Global Economics" instead of "Subprime mortgage crisis." Wikipedia is an encyclopedia, and essays are not appropriate.

- Try not to rewrite or completely rework existing articles. Instead, you should work with the existing text, changing where necessary, to build a stronger article. Articles built this way will benefit from true collaboration.