Wikipedia Entries

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In the spring of 2009, I first assigned students in my graduate research methods class to either write a new Wikipedia entry or revise an existing one. My rationale was, like it or not, many use Wikipedia for psychology information. In a search, it is often the entry that comes up first, and even if you do not select that link, you eventually get forwarded to it. It is a fact of life online that Wikipedia has become a key source of information. I felt it would be a valuable exercise to have students write or revise an entry. Students had to submit their topic proposals to me. I required that it not be a person, but should be a concept. I then tried to make sure that the topic was not too narrow or too broad, and that there were no duplicates. The goal was for about a 250-word entry.

After settling on a topic, students wrote their proposed entry, and I made suggestions and corrections. I was particularly interested in ensuring that the entry listed the appropriate references. Students then took my suggestions, revised their entry, and made the contribution to Wikipedia. As it was their entry and not mine, I only graded them on the initial draft and not on the final submission.

In choosing topics, I did notice that sometimes students picked a topic they knew little or nothing about. They did this with the idea that in writing the entry they would learn about the subject. In other cases, they chose a topic on which they were quite knowledgeable. Certainly, those in the latter category wrote stronger entries, but one advantage of limited knowledge is that the writer can better understand what the reader is looking for in the entry.

There was some grumbling about this assignment (but, of course, students grumble about all assignments, right?). I did find that students seemed more accepting about this year's assignment. I think one thing that students like about the assignment is that it gave them an opportunity "to publish" something. Not only would it be "published," but it would likely be read.

I believe it is a good idea that APS is encouraging scientists to write and revise Wikipedia entries. Like it or not, students now do almost all of their investigations on the web. We need to make sure that when they are on the web they are learning accurate, valuable information.