

SPECIAL REPORT



# WIKIPEDIA TURNS 20

WIKIPEDIA is 20 years old today (15 January). The free online encyclopedia is one of the world's most popular websites, but when anyone can go in and change it, how reliable can it be?

## THE BEGINNING

Founded in 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, Wikipedia is not like other encyclopedias. While traditional encyclopedias get information exclusively from academics and experts, the key to Wikipedia's success has been collaboration and accessibility.



Wikipedia founders Jimmy Wales (left) and Larry Sanger

Wikipedia – the name combines the Hawaiian word for 'quick' (wiki) and encyclopedia – allows anyone to write an article (accessibility) and for anyone else to edit and improve it (collaboration). This simple combination has led to Wikipedia becoming one of the top ten most popular websites in the world.

For an independent website that relies on donations and is not designed to make money, Wikipedia's success is an incredible feat. Its information is free to all, it has no adverts, and it doesn't sell or track the information of its users or contributors.

## PRINT VS ONLINE

Once a common sight on people's bookshelves!

Before the internet, a weighty bunch of books called the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was the place to go for information.

It was a trusted source of facts, carefully written by experts, and when Wikipedia was invented people doubted it could compete for reliability.

However, one benefit of online information is its ability to quickly change mistakes. A mistake in a printed book can't be changed until a new edition comes out.



## WIKISTATS!

Available in more than 300 different languages

6.2m articles in English

1.7bn unique monthly visitors

## ISSUES WITH FREEDOM

If anyone can put what they want on Wikipedia, then it's inevitable that some of the information is going to be misleading or just plain wrong. However, things have improved over the years.

Daria Cybulska, who works at Wikimedia UK (the charity that supports Wikipedia), said: "The reality is that Wikipedia is a pretty reliable source of information these days and it's improving every day."

"Individual editors often keep an eye on articles to pick up incorrect edits, especially when a certain topic is very popular. But a lot of the work is done by 'bots' programmed to pick up vandalism and errors."

So although Wikipedia can still be edited by anyone, gone are the days where you could write something stupid like: 'Mr Smith next door smells of farts and thinks the world is flat' and expect to see it online straight away.



## A RESOURCE FOR SCHOOLS?

As well as bots and dedicated editors, Wikipedia has administrators who check content before it goes up on the site. As of January 2021, there are 1,114 administrators working on the English Wikipedia website.

Steve Trask, a computer science expert for schools, is very positive about Wikipedia's role in the classroom. He believes the issue isn't about Wikipedia's reliability but more about making sure teachers help students to use it correctly.

It's something our own Head of Education at First News agrees with. Nic Smallshaw says: "I'm a big fan of Wikipedia. It is incredibly useful and there is so much to learn by dipping into it. There is a very important 'but' though! You need to know how it is put together..."

Nic recommends keeping an eye on those little numbers in brackets that regularly pop up next to the information on Wikipedia. Those show you where the information has come from.

She says: "It is really important that we think about and question the sources of our information. Understanding reliable sources of information, and being able to recognise misinformation, are important skills needed now and in the future."

Daria, from Wikimedia UK, believes the best way to learn is to write an article yourself! "Writing Wikipedia encourages people to understand, navigate, and evaluate information, while helping create this global... educational resource for everyone else to use."

—including five number ones and 18 top-10 hits.<sup>[6]</sup>

A Wikipedia article should have little numbers after the facts, like this. Clicking on the number shows the source of the fact.

SPECIAL REPORT – WIKIPEDIA TURNS 20



GLOSSARY

**encyclopaedia** – (“en-sigh-clo-peed-ia”) A book, or set of books, containing factual information arranged in alphabetical order  
**edit** – To make changes to writing before it is printed or published

**misleading** – Causing someone to believe something that isn’t true

**Wiki** – Any website that allows users to add, change or delete content. The word means ‘quick’ in Hawaiian

1. Find the facts about Wikipedia.

Age:	
Founders:	
Meaning of the name:	
Number of articles in English:	

2. Anyone can write or edit a Wikipedia page. Why is this both a great feature and a weakness of the website?

It’s a great feature because...

It’s a weakness because...

3a. What is the name of the famous encyclopaedia that was used for fact-finding in most libraries and schools?

3b. What are the **pros** and **cons** of using a printed encyclopaedia or Wikipedia?

	Printed encyclopaedia	Wikipedia
Pros		
Cons		

4. Look at the section ‘Issues with freedom’. What do you think a ‘bot’ is here?

5. Daria also mentions ‘vandalism’ in the same sentence. What is she talking about?

6. Wikipedia does try to prevent misinformation and correct mistakes on the site.

Match the person or thing to the correct task.

Editors	Identify vandalism and errors
Bots	Check new articles before they are published
Administrators	Monitor articles, particular those on hot topics, and remove incorrect edits

7. Three people give their opinions in this article. Who are they and what do they do?

The person	What they do

8. What tip does Nic Smallshaw give you about using Wikipedia?

9. This is a long article. How has it been written and presented to make it easier to read?

10. What have you researched on Wikipedia? Describe one fascinating fact or topic you have learned about on the website.

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**TEACHER ANSWERS**

**AIM OF THE NEWS COMPREHENSIONS:** News reports are unique non-fiction texts. Being real, they naturally engage students, and with the range of topics that are covered, help to develop pupils’ knowledge and understanding of the wider world outside the classroom. The reports are ideal for short, focused comprehension or discussion activities. Along with the opportunity to find fascinating facts and appreciate the opinions of those involved, there is plenty to be inferred and deduced to understand in more depth what is being reported. Like authors, journalists play with language, so news ‘stories’ are rich nuggets of text to investigate and provide the opportunity for literacy programmes.

**TEACHER ANSWER GUIDE:** The teacher answers are intended to provide a quick reference guide. Suggestions are given for the ‘Expected response’ or starting point that pupils could give. The ‘Development’ then gives more in-depth ideas that students can work towards as they develop their reading comprehension skills.

For a list of the reading skills used, please email [schools@firstnews.co.uk](mailto:schools@firstnews.co.uk).

**1. Find the facts about Wikipedia.**

READING SKILL – Find and explain information

(NC 2a)

**Expected response**

<b>Age:</b>	• 20
<b>Founders:</b>	• Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger
<b>Meaning of the name:</b>	• A combination of two words: – Wiki (Hawaiian for ‘quick’) – Encyclopaedia
<b>Number of articles in English:</b>	• 6.2 million

**2. Anyone can write or edit a Wikipedia page. Why is this both a great feature and a weakness of the website?**

READING SKILL – Infer information and justify with evidence

(NC 2c & 8)

**Expected response**

**It’s a great feature because...**

- People can have pages about anything they want.
- People can add useful information.

**It’s a weakness because...**

- The information can be wrong.

**Development**

**It’s a great feature because...**

- People can have pages about anything they want.
- The encyclopaedia can be absolutely huge because it is not limited by the number of pages in a book.
- It can be kept up-to-date.
- It can be written in almost any language.

**It’s a weakness because...**

- The people writing aren’t experts and may not check their facts.
- It can contain mistakes and even misinformation.
- People reading can’t trust the information.

**3a. What is the name of the famous encyclopaedia that was used for fact-finding in most libraries and schools?**

READING SKILL – Find and explain information

(NC 2a)

**Expected response**

- Encyclopaedia Britannica

**3b. What are the pros and cons of using a printed encyclopaedia or Wikipedia?**

READING SKILL – Infer information and justify with evidence  
(NC 2c & 8)

**Expected response**

	Printed encyclopaedia	Wikipedia
<b>Pros</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written by experts</li> <li>• Trusted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Millions of topics</li> <li>• More likely to be up-to-date</li> </ul>
<b>Cons</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information might be out-of-date</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not written by experts</li> <li>• Information can't always be trusted</li> </ul>

**Development**

	Printed encyclopaedia	Wikipedia
<b>Pros</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written by experts</li> <li>• Trusted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unlimited pages, so more likely to find information on the subject</li> <li>• Can be kept constantly updated, so more likely to have the latest facts</li> </ul>
<b>Cons</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information might be out-of-date</li> <li>• Limited in size – might not have information on your topic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not written by experts</li> <li>• Information can't be trusted and should be double-checked</li> </ul>

**4. Look at the section 'Issues with freedom'. What do you think a 'bot' is here?**

READING SKILL – Infer information and justify with evidence  
(NC 2c & 8)

**Expected response**

- A robot that checks for mistakes.

**Development**

- Code/some kind of automated system that picks up on errors and vandalism.

**5. Daria also mentions 'vandalism' in the same sentence. What is she talking about?**

READING SKILL – Understand vocabulary in context  
(NC 2a)

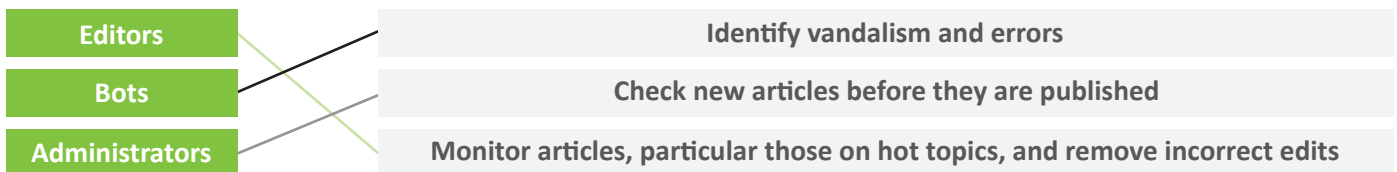
**Expected response**

- Where people have made changes to a page on purpose in order to damage or ruin the information.

**6. Wikipedia does try to prevent misinformation and correct mistakes on the site. Match the person or thing to the correct task.**

READING SKILL – Find and explain information  
(NC 2a)

**Expected response**



**7. Three people give their opinions in this article. Who are they and what do they do?**

READING SKILL – Find and explain information  
(NC 2a)

**Expected response**

The person	What they do
• Daria Cybulska	• Works at Wikimedia UK
• Steve Trask	• A computer science expert for schools
• Nic Smallshaw	• Head of Education at First News

**8. What tip does Nic Smallshaw give you about using Wikipedia?**

READING SKILL – Find and explain information

(NC 2a)

**Expected response**

- Look out for the little numbers in brackets on a Wikipedia page. These tell you where the information has come from.

**9. This is a long article. How has it been written and presented to make it easier to read?**

READING SKILL – Identifying benefits of text organisation and presentation in non-fiction texts

(NC 2f)

**Expected response**

- It has subheadings.
- It has images and pictures.

**Development**

- The long article is broken up into sections, each with a subheading.
- It has images and photographs to make the page more attractive.
- It includes a small image taken from of a Wikipedia page to illustrate what the source references look like (the numbers in square brackets). This helps you understand what is explained in writing.

**10. What have you researched on Wikipedia? Describe one fascinating fact or topic you have learned about on the website.***Children's own responses.*