

This is supplementary material for the webtext “Wikipedia as Editorial Microcosm” by Joshua DiCaglio et al., published in *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, 29(1), available at <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/29.1/topoi/dicaglio-et-al/index.html>.

# The Problem for Wikipedia: When an article stalls

For this project we will be working with articles on wikipedia that have, for a variety of reasons, stalled in some way. This handout is designed to show you what we mean by this.

## Wikipedia Pages of Relevance

- [Writing Better articles](#)
- [The Perfect Article](#)
- [Good article criteria](#)
- [Featured article criteria](#)

## The Overview

Wikipedia has been around for almost twenty years. In that time, over 6 million articles have been created. Each one of these pages has to fit within the expansive scope of wikipedia, have verifiable sources, use appropriate tone, and navigate a complex editorial process in which anyone might edit but few do so substantially.

For many articles this works out great and we find not only good information, but information that is sensibly organized and clearly written. But getting to this status can be a long process. Often decisions made at one point might set an article in a direction that leads it to stall. Alternatively, some articles have conceptual issues that cause them to stall since they are never fully handled by the community. All of this takes place over a continually expanding span of time and is contingent on who happens to have time, who takes interest, and who can navigate the community and know how to use the tools to do so.

The result is that some articles stall--even ones that you'd think would not. Our project aims to find and work with such stalled articles, so it will be useful to categorize some reasons that articles stall.

## Why do articles stall?

We can provide three general categories for the problems that arise, with some subcategories:

# 1. Conceptual Issues -- The “what-for?” problems

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It is not always clear what an article is for or how it should be situated within wikipedia. Unless this is directly highlighted and addressed in some way, these issues often cause an article to stall.

## Due to the nature of Wikipedia as encyclopedia

Wikipedia defines itself primarily in the negative (see [WP:NOT](#)). But this opens the question: what *are* some of its articles for?

**Example:** [Concert](#) - what should even be in this? In a print encyclopedia this would be very short, but since each topic has its own article then the topic needs content to fill up that space. However, what goes in an article about concerts? Who decides? How do you start up a conversation about this?

## Due to an article’s natural status as a parent article

**Example:** [Psychologist](#) -- Some articles lead to other more specific ones, which can hinder the quality of the parent article when those article topics split off to form their own article. This can leave the parent article with the ‘left-over’ information in a highly unorganized way, particularly as the article’s branches get developed.

## Due conceptual ambiguities

Some topics are notoriously difficult to handle even by people who specialize in a topic. Yet somehow Wikipedia needs to process them and make them work in a coherent way that acknowledges these complexities while not becoming itself embroiled in controversy.

**Example:** [Sin](#) -- The concept of sin is already a complex one, but having to write an article about it in a succinct and neutral way that also takes into account a worldwide perspective it becomes increasingly difficult to conceptualize.

## Due to topic emphasis

Sometimes articles are not really about what you think they are about. There are two subforms of this:

1) **Notability:** what makes a topic [notable](#) might be different from what you might initially suppose when you arrive at the article. This can result in a confusing article that seems to be about two very separate things. For example:

Example: Desilo - [Before](#) + [After](#)

This article began talking about Desilo as a geographical location, when in actuality, it was notable due to the archaeological discoveries found there. Once the topic emphasis changed, this created space and direction for future editors to contribute.

### Before

**Desilo** is a small valley in southern [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), located near the [Neretva](#) river and the [Croatian](#) border. Archaeological investigations in a small lake there in 2007 led to interesting finds of [Illyrian](#) boats. Desilo was in antiquity probably connected with the Neretva via Lake [Hutovo Blato](#). References to the Neretva can be traced as far back as ancient times. In the era of ancient Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Neretva was known as *Narenta*, *Narona* and *Naro(n)*,<sup>[1][2][3]</sup> and was home to the ancient [Illyrian tribes](#) of the [Ardiaei](#)<sup>[4]</sup> and the [Daorsi](#). The river Neretva provided them life, turning them into town builders, ship makers, seafarers and fishermen that were renowned in ancient times.

### After

**Desilo** is an underwater archaeological site in southern [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), located near the [Neretva](#) (or [Narenta](#)) river and the [Croatian](#) border. The site was first discovered in the late 20th century, but Desilo's history can be traced as far back as ancient times. Investigations by a [University of Mostar](#) archaeological team in 2007 uncovered many sunken boats at the bottom of the small lake in Desilo valley. The archaeologists believe these boats to be [Illyrian](#) ships, dating back to the first and second centuries B.C. Further excavations in 2008 by [University of Oslo](#) archaeologists found evidence suggesting that Desilo was an [Illyrian trading post](#). These archaeological findings are significant because they are the first known discovery of [Illyrian](#) ships. Additionally, Desilo functioning as a trading centre suggests there were peaceful interactions between the [Illyrians](#) and the [Romans](#).

2). **Focus**: sometimes that focus of an article might be surprising or overly skewed towards one way of thinking about the topic at hand. For example, a relatively widespread and not overly technical term might be primarily occupied by a more specialized, technical, or scientific view without space for handling these different ways into the topic.

**Example 2: Meadow -- [Before](#) + [After](#)**

Articles like the Meadow one are difficult to move forward because the focus of the article is unclear. Should the article discuss the ecological importance, agricultural importance, or just the meadow as a natural phenomenon? This unclear focus of the article causes it to stall and discourages editors from contributing. Note how unrelated the sections are to each other in the table of contents.

A meadow is a field habitat vegetated by grass and other non-woody plants (grassland).<sup>[1]</sup> **1**

Meadows are of ecological importance because they are open, sunny areas that attract and support flora and fauna that could not thrive in other conditions.<sup>[2]</sup> Meadows may be naturally occurring or artificially created from cleared shrub or woodland. They often host a multitude of wildlife, providing areas for courtship displays, nesting, food gathering, and sometimes sheltering if the vegetation is high enough. Many meadows support a wide array of wildflowers, which makes them of utmost importance to pollinating insects, including bees, and hence the entire ecosystem. **2**

**3** In agriculture, a meadow is grassland which is not regularly grazed by domestic livestock, but rather allowed to grow unchecked in order to produce hay.

| Contents [hide] |                                     |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1               | Agriculture                         |
| 2               | Transitional meadows                |
| 3               | Perpetual meadow                    |
| 4               | Cultural, semi-cultural or natural? |



Due to the topic changing

Of course, not all topics remain the same over time. Things that might be notable in 2009 might not be as relevant in 2019. Terms and ideas that mean one thing might come to mean something else. How does wikipedia handle this transition and deal with the legacies of the older senses of a topic? Examples are easy to find:

**Example:** Podcast -- ([Before](#) + [After](#))

The podcast has transformed a lot since this article was made and therefore needs to be updated to reflect those changes

**Example:** Millipede Memory -- ([before](#) and [after](#))

Used to be an up and coming technological advancement before a different form of media storage beat it out -- so now it becomes more of a historical article than an article based on current technology.

**Example:** 2009 swine flu pandemic in Australia -- ([before](#) and [after](#))

This article was written in 2009 when the swine flu pandemic in Australia was happening. Now it needs to switch gears and be written from a more historical standpoint rather than about a current public health issue.

**Example:** 2008 Coca Cola 600 -- ([Before](#) + [After](#))

This was written in 2008, before the event had even happened yet, but now that it has, the topic of the article changes and therefore the content needs to reflect that change.

## 2. Writing Issues -- Looking like a wikipedia article

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Here we want to highlight particular writing issues that arise from wikipedia that causes its articles to stall.

### It's an essay

Wikipedia articles are not essays, yet many contributors either struggle with this difference or find themselves with essays that they have already written, complete with good research, that they would like to put on Wikipedia. These present a particular problem for the development of a wikipedia article (For more on this see the [WP:NOTEISSAY](#) document). This type of article includes many challenges, like NPOV and NOR, that can be a huge undertaking for editors.

Example: Gender in Horror Films -- [Before](#) + [After](#)

Example: Feminist Film Theory -- [Before](#) + [After](#)

Example: Art and World War 2 -- [Before](#) + [After](#)

### It was written piecemeal

The brilliance of wikipedia is that an article can be built up over time as an amalgamation of the contributions of many editors. However, this does potentially create problems related to the organization and coherence of the article. Many articles will stall if there is not a discussion about the structure and focus of an article or if no one comes in with bold edits bringing the article together into a coherent form.

This becomes apparent when some articles become stuck because only a little bit of the article is written at a time. Or, the article has been trimmed and therefore it leaves little tidbits of information that damages the flow of the article.

See, for example, the following articles, which students have intervened in.

- Public Speaking -- [Before](#) + [After](#)
- Psychologist -- [Before](#) + [After](#)
- Physiology -- [Before](#) + [After](#)
- Absurdity -- ([before](#) and [after](#))
- Fantasy -- [Before](#) + [After](#)

## Large organizational issues

Often bold edits or the creation of an article will set in place a structure that seems fitting at the time. However, this structure might not be the most ideal or it might not fit the way that the article has evolved. But who will come in to make the big changes needed to push the article forward?

**Example:** Feminism in Mexico - Gender Rebels -- [Before](#) + [After](#)

- There were questions in this one about whether or not the Gender Rebels section needed to be resituated since it seems out of place in the organization. However, we ultimately decided that it should be kept in place as is, until some more information might be added to make it make sense as a subsection (perhaps of a “movements” section or the like)

**Example:** Sleeping Beauty -- variance section -- [Before](#) + [After](#)

**Example:** Hobby -- [Before](#) + [After](#)

## There is actually too much subject matter expertise

Sometimes there is so much specialized information that it is hard to wade through to bring it together into a more coherent and readable form.

**Example:** Aid Effectiveness -- [Before](#) + [After](#)

**Example:** Queer Theory – this article was [stubified by editors](#) in the Wikipedia community. Before, it had a lot of information in it ([see before here](#)). When my student started working on it, only a little bit of info had been added back in ([see after here](#)).

### 3. Community Issues -- Who gets involved and how?

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The complex and diverse community of Wikipedia is what makes it possible. However, sometimes this structure can cause an article to stall without some more pointed and bold intervention. Some articles could be stuck in a sub-par structure because it would require a lot of work/effort that not all Wikipedia editors have the time to undertake.

#### Quirks of individual approaches become magnified

Sometimes a particularly active Wikipedian can have a very strong role in setting the form, focus, and stage for an article or a series of articles. Their understanding of the topic will then color how the topic is set up and develops. Sometimes these quirks become magnified and create confusion down the line.

One particularly noteworthy example can be found in the DIY Ethic article ([Before](#) + [After](#)), which was originally created/written in relation to “punk” culture. This creates some confusion about what this article is for and confuses its relationship to another article: [the Maker Culture](#) article.

#### People have less time, access, or interest

Why do some things get worked on and some things do not? Why do some open violations of Wikipedia form and policies get passed over but others get scrutinized with great attention? This all depends on who happens to be present, has time, is interested, understands the policies, and has access to the materials needed to make an article forward. Thus, an article might stall simply for lack of attention, and given a bit of attention it might move forward quite rapidly.

**Example:** Red tiger Bulldogs -- [Deletion discussion](#)

- This article was somewhat elaborate and remained on wikipedia for a decent period of time before someone raised the question: is this breed even notable enough to warrant a Wikipedia article?

**Example:** Calvin (Calvin and Hobbes) -- [Before](#) + [After](#)

- A kind of excess interest in this specialized topic generated many sub pages for Calvin and Hobbes topics and characters.
- At first, this article was trimmed significantly and then absorbed by the larger overarching article related to the subject.

## The community is intimidating

The community on Wikipedia is essential to its function and maintaining its quality. Despite guidelines like “[Don't bite the newcomer](#)”, it can still be intimidating. Sometimes, the careful involvement of editors can also create some trepidation for those with fresh ideas and bold edits. This has to be overcome to push the article forward.

**Example:** Zefr and health foods -- [Coconut milk](#), [Shavasana](#)

- An experienced editor on Wikipedia can seem intimidating, especially when they have been working on an article for years. Usually, if engaged in a discussion with them, they can be extremely helpful in the editing process and teach the benefits of editing within a community.

**Example:** One Tree Hill -- [Before](#) + [After](#)

- Some editors, however, seem to police articles that they have worked on for some years. This can be a good learning experience since everyone you edit for/with might not be the most amicable.

## It was worked on by an experienced editor

Sometimes, the fact that something has been worked on by an experienced editor can actually make bold edits less likely.

**Example:** Health information on the internet -- [Before](#) and [after](#)

**Example:** Basic Life Support -- [Before](#) and [after](#)

- These two articles were heavily worked on by an experienced editor in the Wiki project medicine. When the student discussed proposed changes in the talk page, the respective editors were helpful in identifying other problems they saw that could be fixed in the article as well. Experienced editors can be useful resources.

## Policies have become obstacles

Occasionally, the policies meant to preserve the integrity and quality of Wikipedia make it hard for an article to move forward in the way that it actually should to fit Wikipedia.

The major example here is the difficulty with Neutral Point of View (WP:NPOV), conflicts of interest (WP:COI) and Fringe topics (WP:FRINGE). These policies are essential to maintain an appropriate content on wikipedia but can also stall an article when:

- NPOV is difficult to maintain and those who have knowledge and interest of a topic tend not to be those who can situate the topic in the way that is appropriate for wikipedia.



- Scrutiny of fringe topics leads to excessive cutting down of an article and pushback of new contributions.
- Conflict of Interest editing becomes the primary intervention in an article such that it is unclear what should be in the article and little space is given to discuss.

**Example:** Ghost Hunting -- [Before](#) + [After](#) – Fringe

- For more discussion, see the document on [WP:FRINGE](#).

**Example:** Fruitarianism -- [Before](#) + [After](#) – COI + see talk page for editors becoming distracted and overly focused on minor issues, instead of attempting to take the article in a positive direction. You can see how these editors are biased in what they believe should be in the article.