

# Help pages redesign

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Hi, I'm Pete, some of you may know me as "the wub" on-wiki. I'm working on a project to improve Wikipedia's help pages.

## The trouble with help pages

- Too long (e.g. *Wikipedia:Citing sources* is 8145 words)
- Widely varying in complexity
- Accumulated lots of cruft over time
- Navigation is poor

Wikipedia's become a rather complex place, so having good help documentation is essential if we want to attract and retain users. Sadly I'm sure a lot of people are aware that our help pages are not the greatest in the world. There's a number of problems:

\* They're just too long. So "Wikipedia:Citing sources" is one of the most viewed of all help pages, and it's over 8000 words long. And that's not an isolated example, there are loads of these.

\* Widely varying complexity. So if you're a new user who wants to learn what the "edit summary" box is for, you're probably not interested in precisely which MediaWiki message defines the autogenerated summary for page blanking. But we're going to tell you.

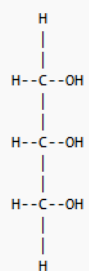
\* We've accumulated a lot of cruft over time. I kid you not, I found a Help page a few weeks ago which was just about how to draw chemical structures in ASCII art. \*click\* So I thought, that's quaint, it's from 2003, obviously things were a bit different then. And I checked everywhere, and with the people at WikiProject Chemicals, and it turns out ASCII art was \*never\* encouraged. This was just some random page, telling you how to do something against all guidelines, which had always been against all guidelines. So that \*click\* got deleted.

\* Navigation is poor. One thing people complain about, is they find a useful page once, but then can't find it again. And I'm sure you've seen people just putting links on their userpage, building their own navigation, so they don't lose them.

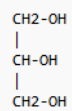
\* Fragmentation & duplication. 4 pages about how to do tables.

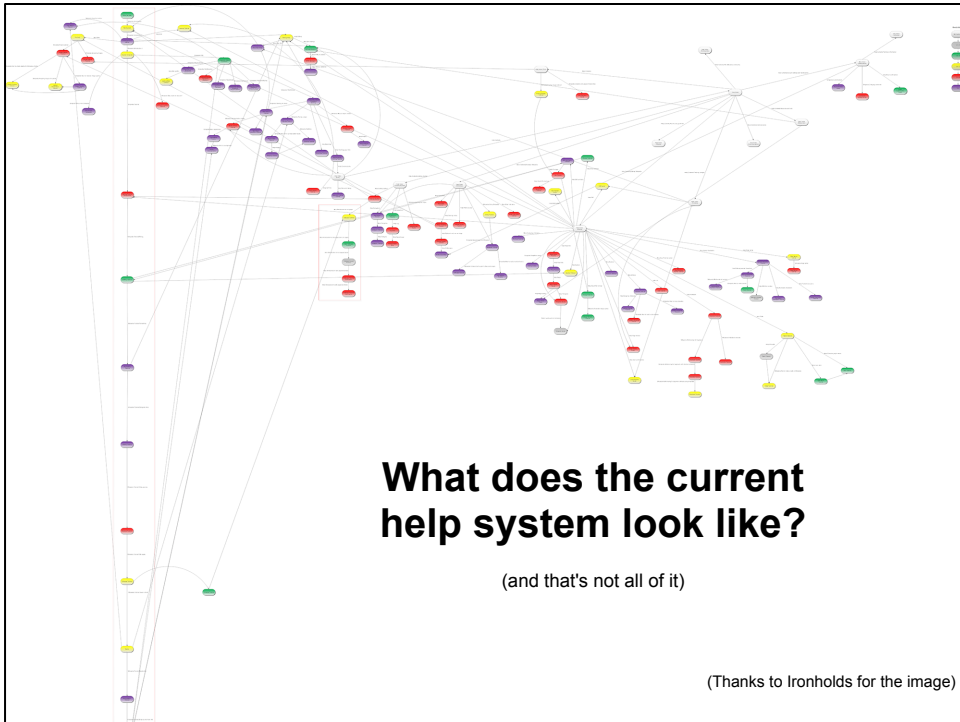
One can copy the [length](#) that you need or copy it several times to depict a longer structure.

This ASCII art structure can be used to represent bonding between different atoms, for example with [carbon](#) and [oxygen](#):



or





So what does the current help system look like?

\*click\*

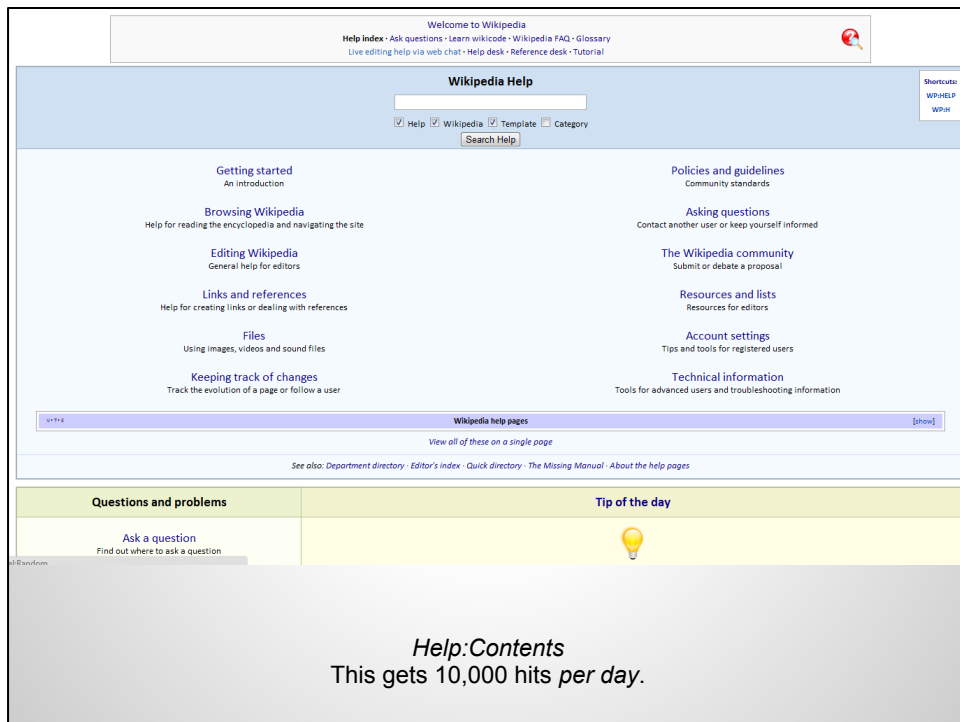
Something like this. Each of these nodes is a page, and the lines are showing the main links between them.

Thanks to Oliver for making this image, he tells me it almost broke his computer.

## **Many different entry points**

- Search
- Help link in sidebar
- Warnings and welcome messages
- Page templates

We have many different entry ways into this maze of help pages. \*read\*  
And many different use cases too, some pages are really just aimed at readers, some at new editors, some at experienced editors. But most are a jumble of all three.



So if you click the "Help" link in the sidebar, which lots of people do, then this is what you'll see. Help:Contents. And it really is just that, a contents page. There's no welcome, no explanations of anything. Every time I look at this I find new things to hate. Like "The Wikipedia community - Submit or debate a proposal". What does that even mean? And it actually links to things like the Signpost, which have nothing to do with proposals.

The only verbose bit is the tip of the day, which if you're lucky might be useful and not hopelessly outdated. If it's November 10th, sorry you get an explanation of "how to search Wikipedia using Lycos". But even when it's a great tip, it's probably not what you were looking for when you clicked on help.

There's some links to good stuff up here \*wave at top box\* but most people don't notice them.

So if you're new, presumably the obvious place to go is "Getting started - an introduction". \*click\*

Help:Contents/Getting started

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

< Help:Contents

**Getting started**

**Who writes Wikipedia** - contains essential information for new readers.

**Contents** [hide]

- 1 Learning the basics
- 2 The Wikipedia interface
- 3 Browsing Wikipedia
- 4 See also
- 5 Content pages:

**Learning the basics** [edit]

**Introduction to Wikipedia**

Basic navigation – Find articles or learn the interface.

How to log in

- Why create an account?
- Choosing a username

**The Wikipedia interface** [edit]

Find your way around.

- Edit toolbar
- Page history
- User contributions pages
- Talk pages
- Recent changes page
  - Patrolling the recent changes
  - Watching pages
- Related changes page
- Using "What links here"

**Tutorials**

- Introduction to Wikipedia*
- Introduction to editing* (main tutorial)
- Fundamentals of editing*
- Learning the ropes*
- A Primer for newcomers*
- Linky tutorial*
- Scartol, on template use and design*
- Dweller, on Featured Article Candidates*
- User, on fighting linkspam*
- Deletion and deletionism*
- Reporting and dealing with vandals*
- The Rambling Man, on vandalism*
- Grutness's guide to stubbing*
- External interfaces – let's compare*
- Internal interfaces – what do you use?*
- Summary of policies*
- How to use an ImageMap*
- Getting an article to featured article status*
- Basic dispute resolution*
- Adding citations*

*See also: Wikipedia: The Missing Manual*

V · T · E

That's not an introduction. That's several introductions, and several other things, and no explanations.

## What do users think?

We did a survey. Full results at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Help\\_Project/June\\_2012\\_survey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Help_Project/June_2012_survey)

Split up responders by edit count (0, 1-10, 11-100, 100-1000, 1000+)

Most popular topics among newbies:

- How to edit a page

- How to start a new page

Worst rated topics:

- How to add references

- How to add images

So you can probably tell by now that I don't like the help pages. But what do the people using them think?

Well we just finished a big survey, getting the thoughts of users across the spectrum, from 0 edits to thousands of edits.

I don't have time to go over all the results, but you can see them here if you're so inclined.

The most popular topics, among newbies at least, are unsurprisingly "how to edit" and "how to start a new page about my awesome band". What *is* surprising is that people rate the help on these topics as ok. It's still not great, but it's better than the others.

The things people really don't like the help on, are how to add references, and how to add images. And that's fairly consistent across all experience ranges.



## "I was helped by people, not help pages"

Survey showed that experienced editors *love* asking questions on another user's talk page. But newbies aren't really aware that's an option

New warning messages should help

**Old:**

Hello, and welcome to Wikipedia. Although everyone is invited to contribute, at least one of [your recent edits](#), such as the one you made to [Science](#), did not appear to be constructive and has been [reverted](#) or removed. Please use [the sandbox](#) for any test edits you would like to make, and read the [welcome page](#) to learn more about contributing constructively to this encyclopedia. Thank you. [Jimbo](#)

**New:**

Hello, I'm [Jimbo](#). I wanted to let you know that I undid one of [your recent edits](#), such as the one you made to [Science](#) with [this edit](#), because it didn't appear constructive to me. If you think I made a mistake, or if you have any questions, you can leave me a message on [my talk page](#). Thanks, [Jimbo](#)

[[Help:Introduction to talk pages]]

An aside: this was one of my absolute favourite quotes from the survey. "I was helped by people, not help pages"

One of the clearest findings in the survey is that experienced editors love the results they get from asking questions on another user's talk page. But newbies aren't really aware that's an option. And the same is true to a lesser extent of asking questions at the Help Desk, or in IRC.

So I think that one thing that will improve this is the new user warning messages that are hopefully being brought in, as they all very prominently say "any questions, leave me a message on my talk page."


But if you're new to Wikipedia, just how to use a talk page is confusing. It's not like any other website. So I found this page: Introduction to talk pages.

## Help:Introduction to talk pages

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

[Next](#) →

**Talk pages** | [User talk pages](#) | [Layout](#) | [Examples](#) | [Summary](#)

 **This Introduction in a nutshell:** Talk pages are for discussing changes. On Wikipedia, nearly everything and everybody has a talk page. If you are already an experienced user, you may wish for some [more detailed information](#).

**Shortcut:**  
[Help:TALK](#)

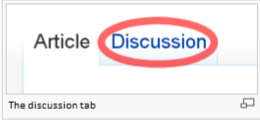
If you have a question, concern or comment related to improving a Wikipedia article, put a note on that article's talk page.

You get to the talk page by clicking the "talk" tab at the top of the article. If the tab shows up in red it just means no one has commented yet, feel free to start the discussion.

When you start a new discussion topic, put it at the bottom of the talk page. You can do this by clicking the "new section" tab at the top of the page. This allows you to enter a new section heading and your comments.

If you are responding to someone else's remarks, put your comment below theirs. You can do this by clicking on the "edit" link to the right of that section's heading and then scrolling down.

You should sign your comments by typing ~~~~. This will automatically insert a signature along with the time you saved the page. You can choose how your signature looks if you have created a [free account](#). If you are not logged in then a number representing your internet connection is used as your signature.

 The screenshot shows a tab labeled "Article Discussion" with "Discussion" circled in red. Below it, the text "The discussion tab" is visible.

**Next: Let's learn about user talk pages!** →

Categories (+): [Wikipedia basic information \(-\) \(±\)](#) | [Wikipedia discussion \(-\) \(±\)](#) | [Wikipedia quick introductions \(-\) \(±\)](#) | [\(+\)](#)

Modular, images, clear flow, few links elsewhere

Now this is, in my view, a good help page. There's screenshots. It's got a clear flow, where to go next. There aren't links all over the place to distract you. It doesn't cover anything too complicated.

There's actually a few pages like this, called "Help:Introduction to..."

## So what are you doing about it?

Improving existing Wikipedia:Help Project, trying to catalyse community work.  
(Please join!)

Preparing a new set of "Introductions"

- Referencing

- Images

- Orientation

  - (searching, namespaces etc. Help new users "get their bearings")

Link these together with others to be more easily found.



Entirely revamp Help:Contents, moving it from a bare index to a central starting point for those seeking help, whatever their experience level

All these changes to be backed with usability testing.

So what am I doing to fix the help system?

Well I definitely can't do it on my own. There is an existing WikiProject devoted to help pages, but it was kind of dormant. I've put a lot of effort into getting that more active, and hopefully it can carry on the work after my fellowship ends.

There's a monthly newsletter letting people know what's going on, and what I'm working on. If you're at all interested in fixing the help pages, you should join up.

I said that I like the "Introduction to..." pages. So I'm working on more like those (with some slight tweaks to the design). They're great for this project because they're designed to be modular, and self-contained, and they can exist for newbies in parallel to the current pages. The topics I'm focusing on are those where the evidence is that it's most needed. Referencing. Images. And Orientation, which is kind of vague so far, and I'm not sure about the title, but it will cover things like searching, the links in the sidebar etc.)

Then we need to make the shiny new pages easy to find. So there's going to be a central page for newbies where all these modules are linked from. And they'll all have an overarching navigation system, something like this.

Then once that's done, and hopefully we've built up a bit of momentum and proven this can work, tackle the big one: Help:Contents. I really want to move it from a simple index, to a central starting point for people seeking help, whatever their experience level. And to link things like the Help Desk more prominently.

And a big part of my work is backing all this up with usability testing. Getting real people to sit down in front of the current help pages, and the new help pages, and see how they cope.

**Questions?**

Okay that's all. Any questions?