

Continuing the Work: Teaching with *The Ghost Reader*

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The Ghost Reader is an urgent, necessary book that recovers the contributions that women—including many women of color—have made to media studies.

As the authors write, the collection's motives are primarily pedagogical. The book pairs lively, lucid biographical sketches of its major figures (complete with helpful historical context and background) with pithy excerpts of their scholarship on subjects like anti-racist media and race and gender in popular culture, making it ideal for the undergraduate reader. *The Ghost Reader* will be useful for courses in a range of subjects such as media studies, communication, ethnic studies, literary and cultural studies, journalism, and women's, gender, and sexuality studies. Indeed, the chapters lend themselves to a range of pedagogical possibilities, two of which I'll highlight here.

1. Wikipedia editing assignment

In recent years, professors have been swapping out (or supplementing) traditional research papers with projects that challenge students to make, in [Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis's words](#), “a public contribution to knowledge.” One common project asks students to edit (or add new) articles to Wikipedia. At least since 2013, when members of the feminist technology organization FemTechNet spearheaded their [Wikipedia editing initiative](#), queer, feminist, and antiracist educators have used Wikipedia editing assignments to involve students in the kinds of historical recovery projects exemplified by *The Ghost Reader*. (You can also read about efforts to diversify the biographies of notable scientists on Wikipedia in these articles by [Jess Wade and Maryam Zaringhalam](#) and [Sydney Page](#).)

Reading through the entries on figures like Shirley Graham Du Bois, Claudia Jones, and Fredi Washington, I was struck by how useful the collection would be as the grounds for a Wikipedia editing assignment. Though Wikipedia entries currently exist for some of the women in the collection, many remain sparse and woefully incomplete. This makes sense given that, prior to the publication of *The Ghost Reader*, there was a dearth of reliable peer-reviewed research on these figures. Not only could students use the collection to create the missing entries, they could fact-check those that do exist, identify and address potential bias in articles, and expand them by adding content, citations, and hyperlinks. Improving existing entries is a great starting point for new editors; it's far less difficult and intimidating than trying to create entirely new pages and can pave the way for students to pursue further editing in the future.

According to Roopika Risam, Wikipedia-editing assignments give students the opportunity to intervene in the digital cultural record, while also increasing their knowledge of course content and their digital literacy (107). In the same ways that Du Bois, Jones, Washington, and the other

women in the collection explored how media technologies shape cultural understandings and effect the distribution of power in society, Wikipedia editing assignments help students think more critically about the politics and power dynamics at play in a technology they rely on everyday. As they work on such assignments, their digital literacy increases. They learn to use a new digital editing platform and to analyze the affordances and limitations of an online, crowdsourced encyclopedia. As Risam writes, “editing Wikipedia gives students both experience with the politics that shape how knowledge is produced online and the tools to intervene in it” (107).

I use Wikipedia-editing assignments in a course called Digital Divides: Race, Class, and Gender in the Age of the Internet (the assignment sheet is available [here](#) and I explain it in [this article](#)). We begin by reading articles about how, though Wikipedia might seem like a neutral, objective source of information, the platform’s content actually reflects the standpoints of its authors, who are predominantly affluent, white, and male. Students then complete a set of training modules on an online dashboard, which teach them how to make edits on the platform. Next, they identify biases, gaps, omissions, and distortions in particular articles (or identify articles that should exist, but don’t) related to our course topics and attempt to address these by making edits that are grounded in reliable research. To do so, they must add information that meets Wikipedia’s criteria for “notability” and “neutral point of view.” Judgments about these subjective categories are made by Wikipedia’s community of editors. As students try to get their content to “stick,” that is, meet the community’s standards, they gain firsthand, experiential knowledge of how Wikipedia’s editors—and their varying standpoints, backgrounds, and positionalities—shape what count as facts.

Below are some resources for educators who may be interested in exploring such an assignment. I recommend beginning with the non-profit organization [Wiki Education](#), which assigns instructors a designated liaison to help with assignment design, setting up a “Dashboard” for the class, and answering questions.

Resources for creating Wikipedia assignments

FemTechNet, [Feminist Wikipedia Editing Initiative](#)

Risam, Roopika. “Postcolonial Digital Pedagogy.” *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019.

Rotramel, Ariella, Rebecca Parmer, and Rose Oliveira. “Engaging Women’s History through Collaborative Archival Wikipedia Projects.” *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*, January 7, 2019.

<https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/engaging-womens-history-through-collaborative-archival-wikipedia-projects/>.

Savonick, Danica. "Wikipedia Editing Assignment."

---. "Teaching DH on a Shoestring: Minimalist Digital Humanities Pedagogy." *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy* 21 (2022).

Wiki Education <https://wikiedu.org/>

2. Involving students in co-authoring a "ghost reader" of their own

I was also struck by the editors' call for the creation of additional ghost readers, especially those that will highlight the contributions to media studies made by women beyond the U.S. and Europe. Students, it seems, would benefit tremendously from involvement in such a project.

A ghost reader class project might be modeled on assignments like Molly Appel's, in which students at Nevada State College co-authored a digital magazine called *Spinal Column* inspired by *This Bridge Called My Back*.

Or, it could be modeled off my assignment, in which SUNY Cortland students shared what they learned in our Spring 2020 course on the author and activist Audre Lorde by producing a digital collection of "[Lessons from Audre Lorde](#)." The project asked students to share something that they had learned about Lorde with a broader audience beyond our classroom (I suggested another college student who had never heard of her). You can view the assignment [here](#). Throughout the final weeks of our semester, students brainstormed topics that interested them; wrote outlines and rough drafts; peer reviewed each other's writing; identified images, audio, and video to incorporate; and then posted their final drafts to our WordPress website as individual blog posts. I then used the WordPress plugin [Responsive Grid Gallery Custom Links](#) to create a homepage (essentially, a table of contents) for our class collection. The final assignment of the semester was to read the blog posts their peers had created and leave comments on them. This kind of collaborative, dialogic, co-authorship assignment would likely work well for courses seeking to create their own ghost readers, where each student (or team of students) could focus on one major figure.

Resources for creating anthology assignments

Brooks, Tisha M. "The Assignment for the Digital Anthology Project."

https://files.press.uillinois.edu/books/supplemental/p083983/appendix_15.4.pdf

Flanders, Julia. "Curation." *Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities*.

<https://digitalpedagogy.hcommons.org/keyword/Curation>

Leslie, Marina and Sarah Connell, “Archival Project Assignment for Course: Gender, Sex, and Renaissance Bodies.”

https://www.northeastern.edu/outreach/seminars/emdp_2016-03/ArchivalAssignmentRenaissanceBodies.pdf