

Prof. Hicks  
HIST 385: Women in Computing History  
Illinois Institute of Technology  
[www.mariehicks.net](http://www.mariehicks.net)

Wikistorming Class 1:

### **Changing the Accepted Narrative**

*So far, this class has been about looking at how a small number of historians have started to change the accepted narrative of the history of computing as a field. Now, it's your turn to help. Today we will use the readings we've done so far in the course, along with some extra readings (books and articles I will provide) in order to change the accepted, popular narratives about gender and computing history that are out there on the web. We will start with entries on Wikipedia and try to enhance them in ways that foreground the importance of gender—and women's contributions—without simply reverting to a women's version of "great man" history. In other words, we are going to try to edit articles in a way that draws attention to the great masses of women workers whose work will never be recognized adequately if we continue to focus on individual biography and lionize figures like Grace Hopper to the exclusion of other narratives. We will try to bring insights about class, race, nationality, and intersectionality to bear on this format of historical information dissemination that tends to privilege biography-driven knowledge. Questions to keep in mind: What is Wikipedia's historiographical model and how does that shape its knowledgebase? Is it possible to write the kinds of histories we've been learning about into a format like Wikipedia? How does its structure make that difficult?*

#### **Worksheet of Pre-Wikistorming Tasks:**

- 1) Set up an account for editing Wikipedia. Try editing two different pages unrelated to your work in this class—just things you know something about. Maybe correct some obvious errors in an entry. Practice how to insert a citation (footnote) and a link to another Wikipedia entry. (15-30 min)
- 2) Read the "talk page" for at least one entry. What does the talk page tell you about the process of editing a Wikipedia page? (10-15 min)
- 3) Read over the pages you intend to edit and/or list the pages you intend to create. (If you intend to create a page, make sure you know how to do that and that there aren't restrictions on new users creating pages within a certain time frame of signing up.)  
Make a list of all the entries that you might reasonably be able to contribute to during the wikistorming class, focusing on ones that might not be immediately obvious. These will involve not just the topics you've been assigned, but also events, collections of lists (e.g. women in computing; pioneers in computing; labor history; labor rights, etc.), and related issues. Think about how you can maximize the impact of your edits so that they're not just seen by people looking for *women* in computing, but will be seen by people trying to learn about computing history in general. (Try to resist the Wikipedian urge to taxonomize women as separate from people in general, unless there's a good reason to do this.) Think about how you might "hack" the structure of how Wikipedia arranges information, rather than just going along with it. (30-60 min)
- 4) Think about and perhaps make a list of the ways in which the pages you plan to edit could be improved:
  - a) topically (adding facts)
  - b) thematically (adding context that shows why your edits are important and belong on Wikipedia. This is especially important if you will be doing heavy edits or creating new pages.)

- c) structurally (reorganization)
  - d) integration-wise (links to other topics and pages, some of which you may also have to edit)
  - e) references (better quality references)
  - f) language (is the word choice on the page appropriate, clear, and respectful to the subjects being discussed? If not, change it. Remember to note *why* you changed it when you save your changes.)
- (30 min)

5) Begin finding books in the library, or—more likely—ordering them through ILL. The best sources for this assignment will be books and scholarly articles, not news articles or easily-searchable internet sources on the open web. In addition, I will give each group a list of two additional sources that I have specifically found for you, depending on your topic. Incorporate at least 2 facts or insights from each of these sources (both the ones you’ve found and the ones I’ve given to you) during the first round of editing.

While you’re waiting for your book(s) to come in via I-share, ILL, or purchase, do some quick searches in JSTOR, *The Times (London)*, and other humanities library databases to try to find material related to your topic. Once your book(s) come in, focus on skimming through them for the parts that are most important/relevant to this exercise, and then read and take notes on the parts you think are important. If you are overwhelmed by the amount of information you have to sort through, think about ways you can narrow down what you’ll be writing about on Wikipedia (what you can reasonably get done in our class sessions) by focusing on a particular theme or issue. Bring your books and any other necessary materials to class. (60-180 min)

### **Day of Wikistorming in class:**

- 1) Before you start working, take SCREENSHOTS (using your computer, not a camera) of any page you plan to edit. This is very important—don’t forget to do this! After you are done editing at the end of class, take another set of screenshots that show your changes. Save these with obvious names like GraceHopper\_before1.jpg, GraceHopper\_before2.jpg, etc. and GraceHopper\_after1.jpg, GraceHopper\_after2.jpg, etc. You may also use the Wikipedia save page function to do this, but only if it preserves all of the page formatting (including pictures) in the file saving process.
- 2) Find the person who had the same or similar topic as you to discuss a plan of action, so you don’t replicate each other’s work—and also so you learn things from each other.
- 3) Start editing! You may work in pairs (see above).
- 4) Make sure you insert as many references for your changes as possible: references, along with context that answers the “so what?” question will make your changes less likely to get reverted.

Wikistorming Class 2:

### **Following up and fixing up**

*We will continue our exercise in trying to investigate and possibly change how Wikipedia tells the history of computing. We’ll start by seeing how many of your edits have been reverted or altered, how many remain, and what this indicates. We’ll discuss successes and setbacks and formulate a plan for what to work on as we wikistorm for the rest of this class period. We will also regroup at the end of class to think about the things we’ve learned about history and historiography from doing this exercise. What would we not have necessarily known from the rest of our classwork and readings? How has this exercise given us a better insight into how history gets written and disseminated in non-classroom contexts?*