Working with Wikis

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WHY A TECHTORIAL?

What will I learn today?
You will learn how to edit, format, and revise your first Wiki.

What hardware and/or software does the techtorial apply to?
The techtorial applies to anyone with Internet access.

Which National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers does the techtorial address?
The techtorial will help teachers accomplish standard Vb in particular.

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has developed a set of National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers. Standards or Performance Indicators are included for each techtorial to help teachers and administrators improve technology proficiency. For a complete description of the standards indicated, go to NETS for Teachers.

WHAT'S A WIKI?

What on earth is a wiki? A wiki is a collaborative software program that allows users to add or edit content on a Web page without having to know HMTL or other programming languages. Most commonly, the term wiki refers to a Web page that can be revised by anyone.

Take a look at Wikipedia -- an online wiki-based encyclopedia. Type "leprechaun" (or any other topic) in the search blank, click the arrow, and you'll see the entry about leprechauns. As you scroll down you'll see quite a bit of detail about leprechauns. Now, imagine you're a folklorist or other expert who knows a thing or two about leprechauns, and that you'd like to add or revise the entry.

Click the Edit this Page link at the top of the page,

and you'll see all the text on the page as well as some formatting symbols. You now can now change any or all of the text!

That's it. As you see, creating and editing wikis are very simple tasks. If you can type a document in Microsoft Word, AppleWorks, WordPerfect, or another word processing program, you can create a wiki. All you need is Internet access and your browser (Internet Explorer, FireFox, Safari, Opera…).

Let's try it out!

EDIT TEXT

For this techtorial, we'll use WikiPlay, a free trial area of Writing Wiki -- just one of a number of free Wikis that encourage teachers to use their space. Another great site is WikiSpaces.

Now, let's get started!

- Go to WikiPlay. Your window might look like this:

Your text will appear where you see the smiley face.
- Click Edit in the top left menu on that page.
- Type the sentence, "Hello. This is my first wiki, and it looks easy!"
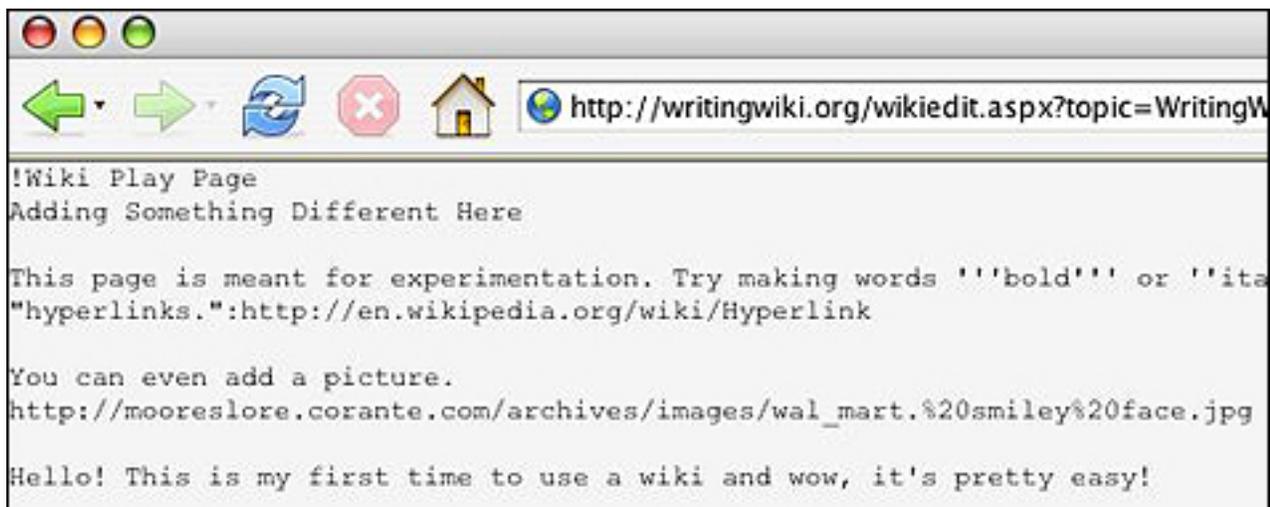
- Click save on the right side.
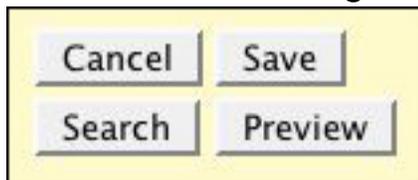
Tada! Your text has been saved!

YOUR FIRST WIKI

That's it! You've just contributed to your first wiki! Great job! Note that it would have been just as easy to change some of the other sentences, such as adding "of a sunset" after the words "You can even add a picture." Or you could have erased anything on that page.

FORMATTING

Notice that your sentence is…well, pretty boring-looking. Formatting means adding such style features as bold, italics, headings, and hyperlinks (linking to Web sites or files). So, let's give your sentence some style!

- Click Edit on the top left.
- Click Formatting Tips on the right.

  Formatting Tips
  Show tips...

  You'll see a list of all the formatting you can do.
- Click the word Bold. As you see, to make a word bold, you put three ticks (apostrophes) before and after the word.
- So, click before "Hello" in your sentence and type three apostrophes, and then click after "Hello" and type three more apostrophes.
- Click Save.

Tada! You have added formatting to your wiki entry!

A BETTER WIKI

Hello! This is my first time to use a wiki and wow, it's pretty easy!

Click Edit again and play around with other formatting choices, such as heading, lists, links, and so on.

VERSIONS AND VANDALISM

Earlier, as we looked at Wikipedia, we saw how easy it is to edit someone else's wiki. Wikis, by their nature, are easy to edit, distort, slant, and so on. Visit a controversial Wikipedia entry (such as the biographies of John Kerry and George W. Bush during the 2004 election!) and you'll see how entries can change daily. Although that element of wikis worries some educators, others see it as their main strength: information is not static, but dynamic, and collaboration can allow us to build content for the common good.

Vandalism -- the malicious change or deletion of text on your wiki -- is a concern to both sides of the debate, however. If you used a wiki in your classroom and someone deleted all your students' hard work and added the entry "Mrs. Jackson has a big nose and smells funny," then you were the victim of a vandal.

So what to do? Most wikis provide a way to revert to earlier versions of a page. Imagine multiple drafts of a term paper, for example. If you saved each draft as a different file, or even just printed out each draft, then when your dog eats the final draft or your cat types nonsense into it, you can retrieve an older version and go from there.

On WikiPlay, accessing an earlier version is simple:

- To the left of the sentence you typed on WikiPlay, you'll see a list of dates and times. Click the phrase, "List all versions." You'll see a list of dates and times when someone added/changed something on the page.

- Click the date or time when you typed your sentence. Your sentence should disappear.
- Click the Restore Version button on the left to make that version the main one (for now!).

Note: The steps above (or the names of those steps) might vary from wiki to wiki, however the process is very similar across sites.

TELL ME MORE!

Where can I find more information about wikis?
See the Sites2See article Get Wild About Wikis. Or, check out the lesson plan A One-Act Wiki for an example of how to use wikis in the high school classroom.