

# The Importance of Female Voices

## Goals

- Collaborate to read and understand a text, and examine and use topic-specific vocabulary;
- Identify and define individual and collective knowledge, differentiating knowledge of girls and boys.



## Essential Questions

- Are women today participating in Canadian public life in percentages equal to that of men?
- Have efforts to increase women's participation in public life succeeded in Canada?
- Does it matter if female voices are not heard in more equal proportions?
- **Enduring Understandings**
  - Even after much progress in the past 30 years, women are vastly under-represented in many aspects of Canadian public life. This imbalance even showed up in Wikipedia, the open online resource encyclopedia, where only 15-20% of content contributors are women.
  - Efforts to increase female participation in public life in the Canada have succeeded but growth is slow. The executives of the Wikipedia foundation viewed the small number of female contributors as a problem.
  - Many believe that increasing the percentage of female voices will enrich diversity of opinions, and better reflect the user community.

## Materials

- [Define Gender Gap?](#) (2011)
- [Making the edit: why we need more women in Wikipedia](#) (2019)
- [Wikipedia is a mirror of the world's gender biases](#) (2018)

## Vocabulary

**intractable** [ in-trak-tuh-buh ] (adjective) not easily controlled or directed; not docile or manageable; stubborn; obstinate.

**nuance** [ noo-ahns ] (noun) a subtle difference or distinction in expression or meaning.

**disparity** [ di-'sper-ə-tee ] (noun) difference; containing or made up of fundamentally different or unequal elements.

**egalitarian** [ ih-gal-i-tair-ee-uh n ] (adjective) characterized by a belief in the equal status of all people in political, economic, or social life.

**misogynist** [ mi-soj-uh-nist ] (noun) a person who hates, dislikes, mistrusts, or mistreats women.

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## Part 1: Exploring Topic Vocabulary

The main text for this lesson was published in The New York Times in 2011. It reports on the low number of female contributors to Wikipedia and explores the possible reasons for it. It also examines information and views that may be missing from the online resources as a result. (While there have been many efforts since to address the problem, it still has not been solved and voices are rising to demand more Indigenous contributors as well.)

1. Instruct students as a class to review the headline of The New York Times story. Ask:

- What do you know about Wikipedia?
- How do you think its content is chosen, written and edited?
- Which types of people do you think are most involved in that process?
- What do you think the news story is about?

2. The text introduces several words necessary to a discussion about gender identity in the context of communication and technology. Ahead of time, write the words on an easel pad or white board. Read them aloud to review pronunciation. Ask:

- Which words can you define in your own words?
- Which words are unfamiliar to you?

intractable, collaborative, egalitarian, expertise, diversity, skewed, chronological, quotas, disparity, nuanced, misogynists, hacker, advocate, ideology, amateur, assert

3. Provide students with printed copies or the link to the story in The New York Times. Ask them to read the story and encourage them to list the words and definitions based on their context in the story. After reading, discuss definitions and facts in the story.

4. Ask students to work in smaller groups, assigning four words to each group. Instruct them: “Work together to write four sentences. Each should include one of the words. Each sentence should also relate information from the story they read.” Review students’ work, discussing if they used the words correctly or incorrectly.

## Part 2: Close and Critical Reading

The signature feature of Wikipedia—or any wiki project—is collaboration among its writers and users. This activity shows you how working together can result in deeper exploration of a topic.

1. Have students divide into female-male pairs. If there is an uneven distribution of sexes in the class, try to have more females per group. Distribute a copy of the text (Define Gender Gap?) to each group.

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2. Instruct students: “Have one partner read the first three paragraphs of the text aloud. Then, have the other partner paraphrase what was read. If something was misheard or misunderstood, discuss the passage until both of you understand the content. Continue this process until you have read the entire text.”

3. Tell each group, “Once you have an understanding of the news story, take turns writing the answers to the following questions.”

- What does Wikipedia see as an obstacle to its continued growth?
- Why is the lack of female contributors a concern? How might it affect the product?
- How and why have men become its main contributors?
- Why is it important to Wikipedia to mix up its list of contributors?
- What theories do experts have for why there are not more female contributors?

## Part 3: Community Inquiry

Discuss the story with the whole class. (Note: Write the following quote on the board.)

“Everyone brings their crumb of information to the table. If they are not at the table, we don’t benefit from their crumb.”  
— Sue Gardner, executive director, Wikimedia Foundation

1. Discuss the following questions with the group:

- What does Gardner mean by a “crumb of information.”?
- How and when is a “crumb” useful to an entire enterprise?
- What is the value of having every “crumb of information” for its product?
- Do you think it matters where each “crumb” comes from? Why or why not?

2. Explain that the story describes barriers that might favor men over women in the corporate world. Ask:

- What are some of them?
- How does the “open” environment of Wikipedia compare to that world?
- In spite of those differences, what does the story identify as possible reasons why women might be intimidated by Wikipedia’s collaborative experience?

3. Discuss what the Wikipedia Foundation plans to do to address the problem. Ask:

- As users of the Wikipedia, do you feel that its strategy goes far enough? Why or why not?

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## Part 4: Write to the Source

Explain that in the text, Wikimedia Foundation executive Sue Gardner says she would like to raise the share of female contributors to Wikipedia to 25 percent by 2015. (She has been unsuccessful in reaching that goal as of 2020.)

1. Discuss: Sue Gardner says she is against quotas or otherwise recruiting females to contribute to Wikipedia. Ask students the following:

- What does that mean?
- How might such tactics contradict the way in which the online encyclopedia has grown so far?

2. Assign each student to list areas about which he or she feels knowledgeable. (These could include a sport, hobby, school subject, a performer, a writer, or a nation that figures prominently in the student's family history.) Instruct students not to think about whether they know more or less than anybody else about the topic or whether their knowledge is complete. Challenge them to think about the value of what they know.

3. Invite students to share their lists. Ask students:

- How do the lists differ? What 'crumbs' of knowledge do the boys tend to list?
- What types of knowledge do the girls bring to the table?
- What types of knowledge can First Nations bring to the table?
- Did the exercise feel like a natural one—for girls and for boys? Why or why not?

4. Ask students to write a reflective journal entry about the exercise. Ask students:

- What did you learn about the ways in which you value your knowledge?
- How might you contribute your knowledge as part of a whole?

## Extension Activity: Women in Red/Indigenous Women

When a link appears in [red](#) on Wikipedia, it means that the article about this topic or this person hasn't been written yet or is incomplete. The WikiProject Women in Red has the objective to turn red links into blue ones. Their scope is women's biographies, women's works, and women's issues, broadly construed. [A specific list of missing articles on women who are of indigenous descent](#) from around the world has been crowdsourced and is intended to serve as a basis for creating new articles on the English Wikipedia.

Invite your students to add the names of famous women of their Nation to the list. You can also ask them to research one of them and contribute to the online encyclopedia!

