

# What Is a Wiki (and How to Use One for Your Projects)

by [Tom Stafford](#), [Matt Webb](#)

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Somewhere, in a dimly lit classroom, a library bench, or in a home study, some lucky so-and-so is writing an essay from beginning to end with no notes. This splendid individual is able to craft entire sections without forgetting by the end what the section was intended to include at the beginning, and can weave a carefully paced argument with thoughts and references collected over a period of months, all perfectly recollected. Neither of your authors is this person. Instead, we need help, and that help comes in the shape of a wiki.

A wiki is a website where every page can be edited in a web browser, by whomever happens to be reading it. It's so terrifically easy for people to jump in and revise pages that wikis are becoming known as the tool of choice for large, multiple-participant projects. This tutorial is about how to effectively use a wiki to keep notes and share ideas amongst a group of people, and how to organize that wiki to avoid lost thoughts and encourage serendipity.

## Wikis Work for Big Projects

This article was written using a wiki, as were most of the 100 hacks in our book, [Mind Hacks](#). The prime example of a wiki in action is [Wikipedia](#), the open source encyclopedia. Wikipedia is one of the best resources on the internet, and its quality and breadth lends credence to the wiki as a great tool. But it illustrates just one way of using the wiki.

Wikipedia builds on transparency, simple linking, and a low barrier to entry for crowds of people to be involved in editing and authoring. We can use these same qualities with just two or three people for a different outcome: a shared workspace and, in effect, a shared memory.

As with any large project, we found that a book was too big to hold in mind all at once, and definitely too big to guarantee remembering those many promising ideas that came up at times we were least able to pursue them. Some of these ideas would start as off-the-cuff thoughts and, when followed up, grow to change large parts of our major concept. So it was important to record them, and give them room. A large number of recorded ideas means, of course, that it's easy to get out of sync with project partners, and that's where the wiki as shared memory comes in. Using a wiki for your big projects keeps all participants on the same page.

## What It's Like to Use a Wiki

Before getting into how to choose the right wiki for you and general tips for using one, it may be useful to know how we used a wiki for our own project. Writing *Mind Hacks* required several different stages of work: First, we had to determine what the hacks would be, and that tended to come out of research on other hacks, or suggestions, or following up on existing ideas. Gathering material came next, and either a story for the hack would be found, or not. Last would come drafting, more drafting, and finally editing.

Something we found happening a lot was this: during research, we'd discover lots of little facts. We'd file these away on pages already devoted to hacks or potential hacks. Later, when we came to write these, we'd find the notes we'd recorded but forgotten, and the writing would be better for it. Often, one of us would make a note, and the other would happen to run across it, and know more about it.

Because the whole book was written on our private wiki, it benefited from these ideas that we could capture without breaking stride--in fact, it was only the easy editing that a wiki provides that allowed us to record these ideas at all. Had it been any harder, we wouldn't have wanted to pause while writing one hack to jot down ideas on another.

But also we benefited because the wiki removed administrative overhead: our meetings were easier because we knew our progress and actions (we had a shared *todo.txt*). We could confidently post minutes on the wiki because we knew they wouldn't get lost. Our thoughts about the eventual shape of the book were continually on display--and shared--so we didn't have to spend time figuring that out in meetings, either. There's a phrase about wikis: "What you think is what you get." A wiki is a written-down memory with a lot more space than the built-in one, and it's a collective memory, too.

## Advantages to Using a Wiki

Why might you want to use a wiki for your project? The wiki is:

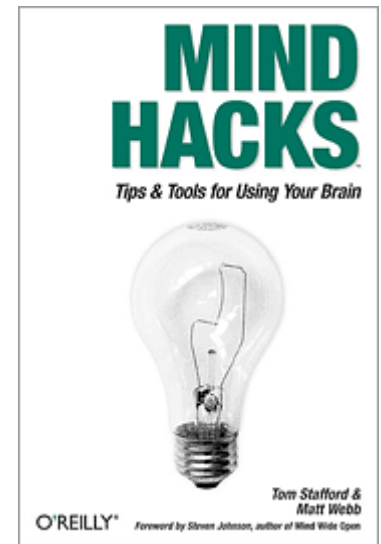
- Good for writing down quick ideas or longer ones, giving you more time for formal writing and editing.
- Instantly collaborative without emailing documents, keeping the group in sync.
- Accessible from anywhere with a web connection (if you don't mind writing in web-browser text forms).
- Your archive, because every page revision is kept.
- Exciting, immediate, and empowering--everyone has a say.

## Disadvantages to Using a Wiki

OK, you get the picture: we like using wikis. But why might you not want to use one?

- Dirty laundry isn't a good public face. If a wiki's a shared memory, it's not going to be terribly tidy, and you may not want people to see your half-formed, unsure, and speculative ideas (though actually, we advise against having your wiki be public).
- Its tendency to get messier. A wiki isn't an administrative panacea, and there's certain maintenance you need to perform, otherwise it'll turn into unusable idea soup.

### Related Reading



[Mind Hacks](#)  
**Tips & Tricks for Using Your Brain**  
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- Its terrible content management system. You'll have to look after your own standards for formatting and when it comes to moving to whatever your final document format is, there'll be more work.
- If you have a public wiki with open editing, you'll need to patrol it to avoid users battling over content unproductively.
- It's not so good for non-geeks, as you need to be reasonably tech-savvy and familiar with the concept of text markup.
- SomePeopleHateCamelCase.
- It's not obvious how to set up or back up your wiki software.

## Using a Wiki

Given the pros and cons, we'd say your project could use a wiki if there aren't too many of you involved, you don't need to work in public, you're able to do all or most of your work on the wiki (constant exposure is important), and your project is really big.

That said, here are some specific tips when you've decided you're ready to dive into wiki world:

- Keep all of your notes on the wiki! Don't make the wiki page too stressful to edit. If you have to write a title, or date, or your initials, or even keep things neat when you make a note--you might not do it. If you have an idea, you want to be able to click Edit, note it at the bottom, and close the window. In this spirit, keep a permanent link to the wiki in your browser toolbar.
- Use attachments. Use lots of attachments, uploading PDFs and images when you can, and keep lots of references and links on the wiki. Don't keep any supporting material on your computer.
- It's all about getting used to the wiki. Use WikiWords everywhere. We had all of our article titles in WikiTitleCase pretty much until we were forced to give them proper titles. This meant we knew our way around the wiki like the backs of our hands, and could make paper notes that could be easily reconciled with the wiki later.
- Don't be uptight about using the wiki for collaboration. Yes, everything should live there, but don't try to work on the same page in the same day or two. You want a good understanding of what's where, and that means nothing changing under your feet. Talk to people to pick up topics. If you're actively working on the same document, break it up into a few pages.
- If you need to move off of the wiki to finish what you're working on, that's good too: yes, a wiki is good for collaboration, but it's more important to have a shared memory than a shared workspace. If you need to work off of the wiki--in a Word doc with Track Changes on, or bouncing a text file around in email--do that. Use the wiki when it reduces your workload. You don't need to be strict among a tiny number of people. Wikis *happen* to be good for collaboration, yes, but what they're really *really* good for is being a space where it's really fast to write things down and find them again.

## Conclusion

Wikis are at their best when a small number of people are working intensely on related material. They're messy, immediate, and a powerful way of sharing thinking space with your collaborators.

Once you've used a wiki for a project, you'll find it hard to go back to regular methods. You'll find yourself using wiki syntax in emails, and your own WikiWords in conversation. Using the wiki as your notebook will ensure you don't lose the seeds of good ideas, and spending time browsing and gardening will keep those ideas returning when you need them. Most of all, you'll find that having a shared memory on a large project moves the administrivia out of the way and lets you concentrate on the real job.

*[Tom Stafford](#) has a PhD in Cognitive Neuroscience and is currently a research associate in the Department of Psychology, University of Sheffield. He is also an associate editor of the *Psychologist* magazine and has previously worked as a freelance writer and researcher for the BBC.*

*[Matt Webb](#) At [Schulze & Webb](#), Matt Webb engineers, designs, and hacks technology and physical things. He is also the coauthor of [Mind Hacks](#), cognitive psychology for a general audience.*