

Building Theory Modules

A Printable *Wikitheoria* Guide

Version 1.0



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Introduction

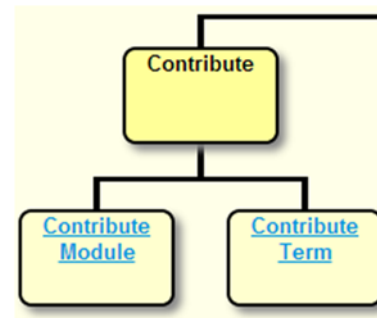
Welcome! This is a basic guide to building theory modules for the Wikitheoria library. For a somewhat more comprehensive explanation of module building for Wikitheoria, please see our [Building a Module](#) Prezi posted on the front page of Wikitheoria.com.

This printable guide is meant to help users develop their theory modules specifically for submission for approval to the Wikitheoria site. We will focus primarily on the input areas that users will encounter when contributing a module.

Navigate to “New Module”



You'll accomplish most of your module-writing off-line. Then, when you're ready to submit your work to the Wikitheoria site for approval, you'll need to [click the Experienced Users link](#) at the top of the main page, as shown in the illustration. This will scroll you down to the area for accessing Wikitheoria content.



To access the area for module entry, [click on the Contribute Module link](#).

This brings you to where you can upload your new theory module.

Let's take a closer look at the process of converting theories into this format. We will cover each type of entry field below.

Module Components

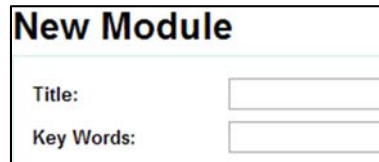
In practice, theories can be very large and carry lots of excess baggage. This makes them more difficult to communicate, interpret and test. The modularization is the cure for the common theory. Formatting theories into modules sharpens the focus on what they really mean and what they really assert.

A *module* is a theory minimalized, pared down to its essential components and expressed in a simple and standard format. Even if unremarkable on its own, it is capable of great things when part of an integrated set of modules.

Wikitheoria provides several kinds of entry fields for submitting your module.

Module Title and Key Words


The first field to complete is the **Title**. This is where you name your theory module. You might choose a title using some of your main terms, e.g., “Identity & Roles” or “Structural Strain, Deviance and Gender.” Next, you are asked to provide **Key Words** that will direct other users to your module when searching the module library. Along with your title, these should be words that will help our search engines locate your module.



The image shows a form titled "New Module". It has two input fields: "Title:" and "Key Words:". The "Title:" field is currently empty, and the "Key Words:" field is also empty.

Background/Metatheory

Wikitheoria allows you to enter material pertaining to your module that is not actually *in* the module. This **Background** or **Metatheory** may communicate important information *about* the module, without confusing it with content.



The image shows a text editor interface for "Background / Metatheory". It features a character count of 500 and a toolbar with various formatting options like bold, italic, link, and list.

Examples of background or metatheory may include:

- Prior theoretical work (with citations) that inspired the module
- Illustrations or applications
- Potentially important details not explicit in other module components
- Existing modules that may be integratable or otherwise relevant

Countering the norm in sociology, Wikitheoria is designed to minimize metatheorizing, and to maximize explicit theory-building.

Terms

The next module components to be entered are **terms**. A term is any meaningful word appearing in a module. Importantly, *every term's intended meaning should be clear to readers*. Some terms don't need to be defined at all because Wikitheoria users will share a relatively consistent understanding of their meanings. But because theories frequently offer insights by introducing non-commonsense ideas, we typically need some specialized terms defined explicitly so as to convey those ideas.

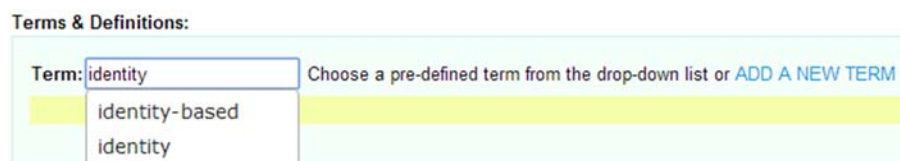
A good **definition** provides a list of properties that lets people identify something in the world as an instance of the term so defined—and to do so consistently. The thing will have other properties as well, but the definition tells us *all* of the properties it *must* exhibit. In general, it will be good to keep the following points in mind:

- **Don't assume** that others will infer the same meaning that you do for an undefined term. They oftentimes won't, and a small misunderstanding can have large consequences.
- **Be explicit** when defining terms. Any term that *can* evoke multiple interpretations probably will. Your definition lets you take control over how your terms are interpreted.
- **Recycle** terms when possible. Remember that shared terms mean potential modular integrations.

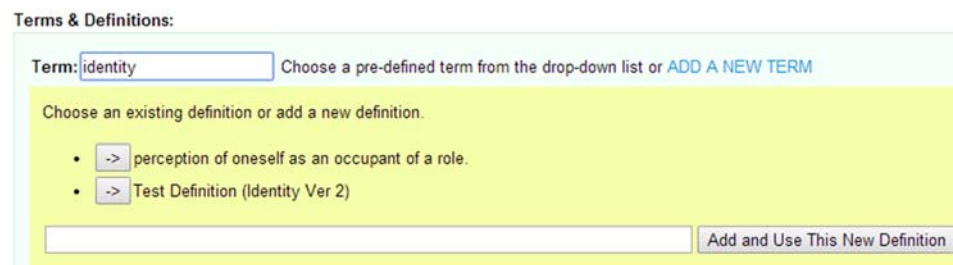
- **Be parsimonious.** Use the fewest possible words when defining a term. This maximizes clarity and communicability.
- **Avoid circularities.** Before entering a module you should map its terminological system to check for hidden circularities.
- **Remember:** The more crucial a term is for your module, the more important it is that the reader understands it exactly as you intend it to be understood.

Don't assume. Be explicit. Recycle.

When entering a term from your module, you may see previously defined terms appear in a drop down box as shown in the illustration below.



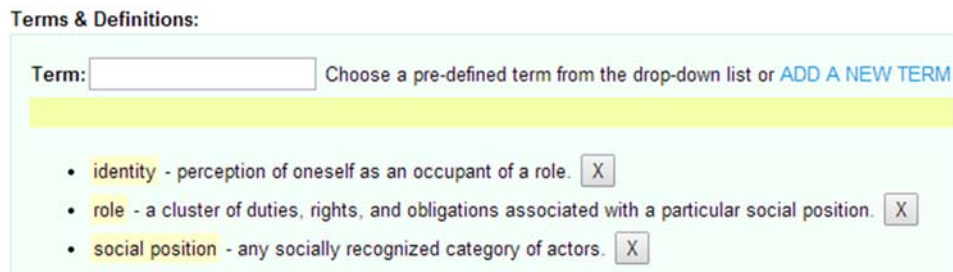
By clicking on the term you can see all previously given definitions. You can then decide if you would like to use one of these definitions or if you would rather enter your own.



As new terms are defined they will be listed along with their definitions.

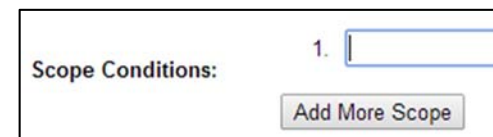
If you do choose to enter a new definition for a term, it's best to follow the bullet points given earlier. For instance, use minimal terms, try not to introduce new terms in your definitions, and avoid circularities by

ensuring that terms you define initially do not depend on terms that are not defined until subsequently.



Scope Conditions

Scope conditions are the next requested modular components. A scope condition is a way of saying “This module applies in the following kinds of contexts.” For example, a theory predicting specific patterns of educational attainment may be deemed applicable within any state system having social mobility. The terms “state” and “mobility” aren’t even part of the theoretical argument, but they establish a domain within which the theory is claimed to apply.



Scope conditions should be abstract, general and provisional.

The domain of application provided by the scope conditions is always provisional. At some later point the scope conditions may be relaxed, and the module’s domain of applicability broadened, so as to include (in the above example) local levels or caste systems.

You can add scope conditions one at a time by clicking “Add More Scope.” Whether or not you feel confident in your scope conditions, we strongly urge that you search and explore other modules for scope

conditions that may work for your module, and thereby increase the chances for modular integrations in the future.

Propositions

There is a small logical argument at the heart of every module, so every module needs at least one proposition, usually two or more.

A logical theoretical argument is not an argument about empirical facts. It expresses idealized causal relationships among abstract theoretical terms. Measurement and tests are essential, but are separate endeavors. If the theoretical house is not in order, empirical observations will never add up to much.

Propositions are the logical statements forming the central argument of a theory. Through a chain of reasoning, they *explain* how changes in one thing result in changes in something else. (See Prezi #2 for illustrations.)

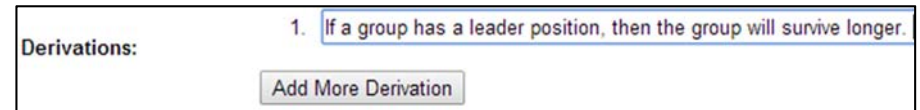
At this stage you'll want to enter the bare bones, abstract theoretical argument as precisely as possible. You can click "Add More Proposition" until you have a text box for each proposition in your module. As with definitions, parsimony is a virtue. So *use as few words as possible*.



The screenshot shows a text area labeled "Propositions:" containing two numbered lines of text: "1. If a group has a leader position, then the group is more efficient." and "2. If a group is more efficient, then the group will survive longer." Below the text area is a button labeled "Add More Proposition".

Derivations

Derivations are proposition-like statements that are *logically derived from a module's propositions*. As a simple example, suppose the module includes the two propositions shown in the previous figure. From the combination of these two statements and by logical implication, you can submit the derivation using the input fields as shown in this figure:



The screenshot shows a text area labeled "Derivations:" containing one numbered line of text: "1. If a group has a leader position, then the group will survive longer." Below the text area is a button labeled "Add More Derivation".

Evidence

This section is where you summarize any prior empirical findings relevant to your module, providing citations to the work you describe.

It is important that you present the evidence as objectively as possible and express your own informed opinion regarding the strength of the empirical support. Your assessment of the quantity and quality of the support (or refutations) for your module should be honest and comprehensive—in other words, the *whole* empirical truth vis-à-vis your module's believability. You are essentially answering the question "Why should readers accept that your well-reasoned module is *actually* true? Wikitheoria users also will be rating modules according to their apparent empirical support.



The screenshot shows a text area labeled "Evidence:" which is currently empty.

Saving and Submitting

When you are finished entering your module you can click the link at the bottom that says "Ready?" Then you can choose to either 1. Save your progress to continue later or 2. Save your current module and submit it to an administrator for approval for publication in the Wikitheoria library.



The screenshot shows three buttons arranged horizontally: "Save and Exit", "Save and Publish", and "Ready?".

Notes and Tips

Proposition or Definition?

The difference between a *proposition* and a *definition* is critical, but let's face it: Most authors aren't very careful about distinguishing the two, and the result can be hard to interpret. Being careful from the start will make things easier for everyone, and it's really not difficult.

A proposition asserts unequivocally how changes in one thing result in changes in something else.

In contrast,

A definition supplies a list of properties asserting what something is and how to identify instances or cases of it in the natural world.

Sometimes an author will assert conditions that bring *X* into existence, and call this the definition of *X*. Beware! To assert what causes *X* to happen *presupposes we know what X is*. At best, this is a proposition about the causes of *X*, but it cannot possibly be its definition.

The Importance of Revisions

Modules should improve over time through the careful implementation of revisions. One of the most important reasons to revise a module is to simplify it. **Simplicity** fosters parsimony, which enhances communicability and testability. Whenever possible, revise definitions so that they convey the same meanings but with fewer terms. And try to make propositions as concise and few in number as possible.

We also revise for **integrity**—ensuring that all the parts of the module fit together—especially that derivations follow logically from

propositions, but also that there are no circularities in the terms and definitions.

*We revise for simplicity, integrity,
precision and accuracy.*

We also revise for **precision**. Naturally, we prefer exactness over vagueness.

Finally, we revise for empirical **accuracy**. Modules that are tested and falsified need to be improved upon or discarded.

Wikitheoria as System

Lift up the hood and it becomes evident that Wikitheoria runs on the idea of systems. At the bottom of it all, the ideal lexicon is a hierarchical system of terms, not just a collection. It's the inter-relatedness of terms that builds a system of meaning. The ideal module has a system of propositions, not just an inventory of claims. The ideal module cranks out limitless explanations of real-world phenomena. Integrated sets of modules form theoretical systems, permitting greater depth and breadth than trying to cover the same ground in one theoretical swoop.

The down-side is that you can't just write any old thing and call it a theory any more. The up-side is huge potential gains in power and efficiency.

Next

Please consider getting further involved in Wikitheoria. There are several ways to contribute:

- **Peruse** existing modules and see what interests you.
- **Develop** another module, based on your own work or that of others you find interesting
- **Suggest** revisions to existing modules
- Have you tried **integrating** multiple modules? Let us know!

Please give us feedback. Do you have questions or suggestions? Would you be willing to share your thoughts about the site?

You are seeing only the very first incarnation of Wikitheoria. We hope to keep it going and, with time, provide an expanding population of users with more materials and improved tools for building and applying theory modules.

Thanks for working with Wikitheoria! We truly hope you try it out, have some fun with it, and send some feedback!

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