

# Wikipedia

## A Quick Primer



Research papers can be challenging in terms of finding adequate sources, especially for some of the more obscure topics. Many students have the temptation to take the “easy out” and go to Wikipedia, but by the same token, many instructors are quick to expressly say, “Do not use Wikipedia.” Still others may be unfamiliar with Wikipedia and don’t understand why there is such a problem.

Unfortunately, Wikipedia has gotten a largely undeserved stigma in academics. It’s called a “lazy way out” or very inaccurate. Really, Wikipedia’s rate of serious errors is not very different from traditional encyclopedias like *Britannica*, so to say that it is “very inaccurate” is, in itself, an inaccurate statement. Still, many instructors forbid their students from using Wikipedia as a source for their research papers, and students shouldn’t try to bypass that. However, this does not mean that you should write Wikipedia off completely; even though you can’t use it as a source, it is still extremely useful as a research tool.

## What Is Wikipedia?

The simplest, most accurate way to describe Wikipedia is that it is an online encyclopedia. Basically, it’s just like any encyclopedia you might find in a library or have on your bookshelf at home, like *Britannica* or *World Book*. There are a few key differences, however. The most obvious is that Wikipedia is primarily edited by anonymous editors; in fact, you could edit Wikipedia yourself. Anyone with an Internet connection can edit Wikipedia. Some say this is a reason why you shouldn’t rely on Wikipedia, but the system is very self-repairing, and most misinformation is corrected very quickly – so quickly and consistently, in fact, that the average reader is unlikely to even notice. This is because Wikipedia follows core principles and guidelines – including neutrality, verifiability, and encyclopedic tone – that keep it centered on its mission of being an open, free encyclopedia that anyone can access.

## How Can I Use Wikipedia in a Paper?

Like any other encyclopedia, Wikipedia was never meant to be used as a source in a research paper. But Wikipedia is very useful as a research tool in three main ways:

- Can provide a quick overview for unfamiliar topics
- Contains links to all of its information sources
  - Verifiability is a core principle of Wikipedia: uncited material can be challenged and removed.
  - An article’s breadth of sources can be used to gauge the availability of research on a topic.
- Provides pathways to useful research
  - Wikipedia’s “External Links” sections often provide far better research sources than a Google search.
  - Wikipedia’s references are often available online.

This basically means one thing: you may not be able to use Wikipedia as one of your sources, but it's a fantastic way to *find* good sources. Because Wikipedia's articles are all cross-referenced and contain inline citations, it's easy to find the source of most of their information. Some articles are, of course, out of date or poorly cited, but Wikipedia has systems in place to help readers identify which articles are in need of improvement, and where they fall short.

## How Do I Know If an Article Is in Good Condition?

Wikipedia articles have several tools to help users identify "problem spots" for their articles. One of the first places to look is the upper-right corner of each article, where you might see an icon representing some aspect of the article's status:

- Good article or featured article
  - Denoted by a green plus sign (good article) or a gold star (featured article), this means the article has been identified as a good article or has even been featured on the main page. Articles have to pass a rigorous peer review process (similar to an academic journal) to achieve this status.
- Edit protected
  - Denoted by a padlock, this means that only registered users (silver padlock) or administrators (gold padlock) are allowed to edit the page. This is done if editing differences cannot be easily resolved. It's usually a very temporary measure, but sometimes high-traffic or controversial articles are indefinitely protected to prevent abuse of the system.

Wikipedia also has numerous templates for specific problems, which editors place at the top of an article, or sometimes at the top of a particular section of an article. These are there to alert editors (and readers) of improvements that need to be made to the article. While they cover a wide spectrum of issues ranging from stylistic problems to highly technical aspects, of few of the ones you should pay attention to are

- Lack of references
  - Some articles on Wikipedia are poorly cited. If you see an article tagged as needing additional citations, pay close attention to the information you see, and try to verify it through other sources.
- Outdated information
  - One advantage Wikipedia has over traditional encyclopedias is that it can update quickly as information changes or becomes available. However, there are millions of articles on Wikipedia, and some inevitably fall through the cracks for various reasons. If you see an article tagged as outdated, look at sources that are more recent and see if their information is in conflict.
- Narrow scope of coverage
  - Some articles are written primarily by only one or two editors, and while those editors may cover the material well, the article might not represent a broad, worldwide view of the subject. Make sure the scope of the article matches the breadth of the information you're seeking.
- Neutrality problems
  - Obviously, many articles on Wikipedia deal with contentious topics, and since anyone can edit Wikipedia, editors often have very diverse viewpoints. While the editorial process is surprisingly

good at keeping articles neutral, bias can occur. If you see a tag saying, "The neutrality of this article is disputed," it's a good idea to go to the article's talk page (every article has one) and see where the dispute lies.

## Can I See How an Article Has Been Changed?

There are two things attached to every Wikipedia page that show the editorial process. The first is the page's history. Wikipedia keeps a permanent record of every change made to every page, and you can see this record of change by clicking on the "view history" tab at the top of the page. This also allows you to see old versions of the page.

The other attachment is the talk page. Every article has a talk page where editors can discuss changes that need to be made to the article. Not every change requires discussion, but sometimes editors do have to reach a consensus on the best way to present the information in the article. They do this by discussing it on the talk page, which is public and visible to anyone.

## Additional Writing Center Resources

- Using Sources

## Further Reading

- About Wikipedia (Wikipedia Editors): <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>