



Wikipedia

Eating the Forbidden Fruit

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 way out” and go to Wikipedia, but by the same token, many instructors are quick to expressly say, “Do not use Wikipedia.” Why all the fuss? What *is* Wikipedia anyway, and why do instructors have such a problem with it?

Unfortunately, Wikipedia has developed a largely undeserved stigma in academics. It’s called a “lazy way out” or derided for its lack of factual accuracy. Really, Wikipedia’s rate of serious errors is not very different from traditional encyclopedias like *Britannica*. Still, many (if not most) instructors forbid their students from using Wikipedia as a source in their research papers, and there is good reason for this. However, that doesn’t mean you should forget about Wikipedia entirely; even though you can’t use it as a source for your paper, it’s still an extremely useful tool that can save you a lot of time when you’re doing the research for your paper.

What Is Wikipedia?

The simplest, most accurate way to describe Wikipedia is that it is an encyclopedia: a repository of general knowledge on a wide range of subjects. It’s much the same as the paper-and-ink encyclopedias you may have seen in the past in a library or on your bookshelf at home, like *Britannica* or *World Book*. There are a few key differences between Wikipedia and traditional encyclopedias, however, aside from the fact that Wikipedia is entirely online. 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 a core set of principles that includes a rigorous policy of verifiability, neutrality, and encyclopedic process. Those guidelines keep it centered on its mission of being an open, free encyclopedia that anyone can access.

How Can I Get Away with Using Wikipedia in a Paper?

The short answer is that you can't. Because Wikipedia's information is so widely disseminated throughout the Internet (it is consistently ranked among the most-visited websites online), it's incredibly hard to *disguise* the use of Wikipedia in a paper, and because it's academically dishonest, it would be a bit silly for an academic resource like this one to tell you how to get away with something that you shouldn't be doing in the first place.

That said, Wikipedia is like any other encyclopedia in that it was never really *intended* to be used as a source in a research paper. An encyclopedia (like a dictionary, atlas, or any other general reference) is what's known as a **tertiary source**, which means that *all* of its information comes from other sources. Even though it's not useful as a source, it's an extremely useful research tool in three main ways:

- It can provide a quick overview for unfamiliar topics.
- It 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 roughly how much research is actually available for a given topic.
- It provides pathways to useful research.
 - Many articles include a curated "External Links" section, which is usually a much better list of sources than you can get from a Google search.
 - Almost every Wikipedia article includes a list of its sources (not unlike a works cited page that you might put at the end of your paper), and you can use that list to find good sources for your own paper.

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. Many aspects of an article's current status are identified by symbols in the upper-right corner of each article or message templates at the top of the page.

Symbols

There are many symbols that can appear in the upper-right of a Wikipedia article, but there are five in particular that will give you a good indication of an article's status:

- Gold star: A gold star indicates that the article is a **featured article**. A featured article is an article that Wikipedia's internal review process has identified as one of the *best* articles on Wikipedia and may have featured it on the main page at some point. Articles have to pass a rigorous review process to achieve this status.
- Green plus sign: A green plus sign indicates that the article is a **good article**. A good article has met a specific set of review criteria that is less rigorous than that of a featured article but still considerably involved.
- A grey padlock with a check mark: This is used to indicate that an article is protected by the **pending changes** policy. Because some articles tend to attract vandalism, Wikipedia can require changes to be approved by registered editors for some of those pages.
- A black padlock with a blank portrait: This is used to indicate that an article is **semi-protected**. Articles can be semi-protected for a number of reasons. Some high-traffic articles are almost always semi-protected to protect them from persistent vandalism. Some articles cover contentious topics and invite controversy. Still others may be in the midst of a disagreement between two editors. Semi-protected articles can only be edited by people who have registered accounts on Wikipedia.
- A gold padlock with an "F": This is used to indicate that an article is **fully protected**. Some articles require full protection due to office actions or due to *registered* editors failing to work together. An article that is fully protected can only be edited by Wikipedia system operators.

Articles are usually protected ("padlocked") when differences between editors can't be resolved easily. It's usually a very temporary measure, but sometimes high-traffic or controversial articles are indefinitely protected to prevent abuse of the system.

Status Messages

Wikipedia also has numerous message templates to point out specific problems, which editors place at the top of an article (or sometimes at the top of a particular section within an article). These are there to alert editors (and readers) of improvements that the article needs. These message templates are usually straightforward and describe the actual problem, so finding out the status of the article is a simple matter of reading the text of the message. There are status templates for just about every type of issue an article on Wikipedia might encounter, ranging from minor stylistic points (for example, the article switches between British and American English) to major technical problems (for example, the article's use of color causes accessibility problems). However, among all of these templates, there are a few messages in particular that you are likely to see that you should

pay close attention to. These are the most common problems you're likely to see noted on Wikipedia articles:

- 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.
 - Even with articles that don't contain this message, it's not at all unusual for individual sentences to be tagged with "citation needed" within the article.
- 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 one reason or another. 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, especially on obscure topics, 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 trying to find.
- Disputed neutrality
 - Obviously, many articles on Wikipedia deal with contentious topics, and since anyone can edit Wikipedia, these articles often attract editors with very diverse viewpoints. While the editorial process is surprisingly good at keeping articles neutral, bias can still occur. If you see a tag pointing out that an article's neutrality is disputed, go to the article's talk page (every article has one) to see where the dispute lies.

One important thing to keep in mind is that these templates are always placed on articles by an actual editor; there is no algorithm that goes through Wikipedia reviewing and tagging articles with these templates. In other words, just because an article *does not* have one of these warning messages doesn't necessarily mean that it's in good shape; there are many articles that have problems but haven't had an editor's attention in some time. This is one reason why Wikipedia isn't useful as a source itself.

For Wikipedia to be an effective research tool, it's important to understand a little bit about the process of how information comes to be displayed there the way you see it. Almost everything on Wikipedia is created by a live person sitting at a computer. It's not like Google, which relies on algorithms and automated processes to bring you information. While there are *some* automated processes on Wikipedia, they are largely mundane tasks that human editors *could* do, but those editors created "bots" to do that tedious work for them (for example, one bot on Wikipedia automatically detects and cleans up vandalism).

Wikipedia is a perpetual work in progress; that's why its editors often refer to it as "the project" and, with a smile, remind new editors that "there is no deadline."

Can I See How an Article Has Been Changed?

Recognizing that Wikipedia is always going through changes, you might see an article and want to know what *specific* changes it has undergone recently, especially if you see a template warning at the top of the page and want to know how it reached that point. Fortunately, it is very easy to see how an article has been changed.

Article History

Wikipedia keeps a very detailed record for every article. Every article has an article history, and that history contains a record of every edit that has ever been made to that article. In the top right of every page, there is a tab that says "View history." Clicking on that tab will take you to a table of that page's edit records.

If you want to see an old version of the article, simply find the date and time on the table that is closest to the time you want to see, and click on that date and time. Doing so will open the old version of the article, with a message at the top of the page to inform you that you are viewing an old version of the article.

If you want to *compare* the old version with the current version, you can simply look at the edit summaries on the "View history" table to see what editors have changed about the article. If you want to see *exactly* what has changed, you can go to the "View history" tab, click the radio button next to the old version you want to compare, then click on the "cur" (for "current") in the parentheses next to that same version. It will take you to the old version of the article, along with text at the top of the page showing what has been added and what has been removed. This, in effect, shows you every change that has been made; when the wording of an article is changed by an editor, Wikipedia records it as a removal of the old wording and an addition of the new.

Talk Page

In addition to its page history, every article also has a page attached where editors can discuss revisions with other editors. Since Wikipedia is an *open* encyclopedia, these pages are publicly visible (you can even join the discussions yourself, if you're so inclined). Not every change to an article requires extensive discussion, but sometimes editors do have to talk to each other in order to reach a consensus.

Many Wikipedia editors operate by a principle they refer to as "BRD," which stands for "Bold, Revert, Discuss." This is a cycle by which an editor makes a bold edit, another editor *reverts* (that is, undoes) that edit, and then the editors go to the talk page to discuss why

that bold edit is or is not appropriate, or which type of edit may be *more* appropriate, and so one of the editors in that discussion makes a *new* edit, and the cycle continues.

Another feature of most article talk pages is an informational box at the top of the page that gives various pieces of information that are relevant to editors. For example, it often lists the relative importance of the article in Wikipedia (for instance, the article for “Joan of Arc” is considered a “Level 3 Vital Article”), which project portals (basically, areas of expertise) the article is part of, details about the article’s “good” or “featured” status, and various other things. Some talk pages (for example, the talk pages for “Muhammad” and “Climate change”) even have an FAQ at the top to address common questions raised by both editors and readers.

All of these tools are ways that you can look at a Wikipedia article and make it work for you in your research. Even though you can’t use Wikipedia as a source directly, it is a tremendously research-driven project, so looking into the editorial process can turn it into a powerful research tool even more than simply using its sources can.