Proceed with Caution: Using Wikipedia As a Reference

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WIKIPEDIA IS AN ONLINE ENCYCLOPEDIA THAT IS WRITTEN, updated, rewritten, and edited collaboratively by registered site users around the world known as “Wikipedians.” The concept of a freely accessible online “work in progress” is known as a “wiki.”

The main philosophy behind Wikipedia is that the aggregated views of the masses, in this case Internet users, are as credible and valid as those of experts. Unlike in academia, individual(s) do not “own” or assume intellectual property of the ideas and text in Wikipedia. Although it is possible to view the user profile of individual contributors, one of the prime features of the wiki concept is that the information is communally owned and shared.

Another key value behind the dynamic nature of Wikipedia is sustaining the currency of information. Peer-reviewed sources can become obsolete over time as research reveals new findings or paradigms shift, but Wikipedia can be quickly and easily updated.

A FEW KEY STATS ON WIKIPEDIA

Software engineer Jimmy Wales founded Wikipedia in January of 2001. Within the first year, Wikipedia had generated over 20,000 articles in English on a variety of topics. By February of 2004, Wikipedia was adding an average of 2,000 articles per day to surpass 200,000 articles in English and 500,000 articles in 50 other languages. By October of 2005, the English version of Wikipedia had 45,000 registered users writing, rewriting, and editing 1.5 million articles in English. Wikipedia has become an international virtual community of writers and editors.

KEY WEAKNESSES AND CONCERNS OF CITING WIKIPEDIA IN AN ACADEMIC PAPER

- The most significant criticism of Wikipedia is that anyone can be a Wikipedian, to the extent that many articles on Wikipedia are written anonymously. Additionally, the Wikipedia site states that most contributors are college or university students who are studying the subjects they are writing about on Wikipedia.
- For instance, in the Wikipedia profiles, 29 Wikipedians identified themselves as nurses. To check out their profiles, go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Wikipedia_nurses
- Moreover, 42 Wikipedians identified themselves as “prehospital care workers.” To check out their profiles, go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Wikipedia_prehospital_care_workers
- Most importantly, none of the Wikipedians identified themselves as academics, professional researchers, or professors; nor do the contributors list publications outside of Wikipedia.
- Because anyone can contribute to Wikipedia, anyone can accidentally add misinformation or purposely vandalize the site. It is the responsibility of the community of Wikipedians to correct any errors.
- Without a formal peer review process, the information on Wikipedia may be reliable and accurate, or it may not be. Presently, most articles do not include a reference list, so readers often cannot verify the accuracy of a statement/article.
- Even if Wikipedia is cited in APA, the ever-changing nature of the site means that the information the author cited has likely changed by the time the manuscript is published.
- Some of the articles on Wikipedia are poorly written; many paragraphs lack cohesion and clarity.
- Wikipedia includes gaps in coverage. The patchy nature of the information on Wikipedia is likely a consequence of the range and bias(es) of the individuals who contribute to the articles at any given time.

PITFALLS IN USING WIKIPEDIA

For the purposes of scholarly writing, the use of dictionaries or encyclopedias of any kind is discouraged. Although reference books, such as the Oxford English Dictionary or Encyclopedia Britannica, are useful in providing a general understanding of a topic or can be used to narrow down a topic at the outset of the writing process, authors should be citing current primary sources from definitive research publications, such as nursing journals, books, or databases, not secondary sources like dictionaries or encyclopedias.

To benefit from Wikipedia, the Internet user must have sophisticated critical thinking and information literacy skills. When an author uses Wikipedia, he or she may not know how to conduct appropriate academic research or may not have the
ability to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate sources. Over 60,000 users arrive at Wikipedia each day through Google.²

Interestingly, even Wikipedia’s founder, Jimmy Wales, cautions students against using Wikipedia in a research paper. Wales claims to receive an average of ten e-mails per week from students who complain they received an F on their academic paper for citing Wikipedia.²

REFERENCES

About the Author
Cosette Taylor-Mendes is the communications/ESL instructor for the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Manitoba, where she enjoys assisting students with academic writing.