

Using Wikipedia in Research

Is Wikipedia a credible source and should it be allowed as a cited source in research papers?

A wiki is a software engine that allows for editing and linking of web pages easily and by a lot of people. They are often used to make collaborative websites for an online community. This allows all the users in that community to easily add their own web pages or to edit those that already exist. This creates a much faster way to portray accurate information about a large number of people, products, issues etc. Ward Cunningham, as the first developer of wiki software said that it is the easiest online database possible.

Wikipedia is exactly what it sounds like, a wiki that works as an encyclopedia. It allows for any user anywhere in the world to edit any entry. This is designed to create an up-to-date database for all to use. The question is, is wikipedia good enough to be cited in college papers?

It is a very debatable answer, but many agree that the answer to that is NO.

Don't get me wrong, wikipedia is a great source for finding information about a subject. In fact it is one of the best places to do so. Unlike any of the other online encyclopedias, wikipedia is updated constantly. A test was done in which a group of experts purposely changed key information to make one of the entries false. Within an alarmingly short time, the correct information had replaced it. This proves that new and accurate information is being added daily and erroneous information is being deleted and replaced. Because of this perpetual updating, wikipedia is a great resource. One is almost guaranteed fast and accurate information. Also the wide variety of subjects on wikipedia makes for easy one-stop-shopping so to speak. Nearly all subjects are covered on wikipedia. One can even find entries for fictional characters and worlds on wikipedia.

Because of its ease of use, college students have begun to use wikipedia as a cited source in many of their papers. Many professors look down on this. This of course makes sense. The purpose of citing a resource is to add credibility to a paper or report. This is the reason writers must be careful which sources to trust, even more so on the internet. Anyone can post any information on the web and not all of it is exactly truthful. Sometimes this is through ignorance or simple lack of interest. Whatever the reason, this translates to wikipedia. While it will most likely be accurate, there is a possibility that it is not. All the information on wikipedia, with a few exceptions, is secondary. When citing a source for a report, one should go to primary sources first. It is much more credible to get the information right from the source than through an intermediary. It is the difference of 'John Smith found' to 'Jane Doe said John Smith found.'

This holds true for every other source to be cited in any paper, so why should it be any different for wikipedia? Wikipedia is an excellent starting place for any research, but should not be cited as the information is fairly basic, ever changing and a secondary source. When doing research on wikipedia, it is best to look at the footnotes of the article, and find links to the direct source that is cited in the wikipedia entry. This will give your research paper more credibility when citing sources.

Do you think Wikipedia should be used in research?
Send your comments to editor [at] campusgrotto.com

Here's what others in the industry have said about wikipedia and it's use in research:

Barry Leiba - Staring at empty pages