Wikipedia is written by a worldwide, often anonymous group of contributors. Many articles are frequently amended and updated. These changes are tracked in a section ‘Discussion’ which you should look at if you relied on information from a Wikipedia article.

In addition, Wikipedia has conventions indicating the varied quality of its articles, e.g. that an article may not have the required level of neutrality or a tag suggesting that

Concerns about controversial issues being treated in Wikipedia (specifically) in a biased way are not justified. Apart from the fact that there are no unbiased views e.g. on euthanasia, abortion, deconstructionism or similar subjects, Wikipedia describes and highlights these problems in a non-authoritarian fashion.

As Wikipedia is a communal effort where everybody is allowed to contribute, it has elements of a world-wide blog with all the problems that this entails. Intelligent and sceptical use of Wikipedia articles requires some media ‘savviness’ or media literacy.

Wikipedia is very comprehensive; its English version with very close to 2 million articles far outstrips reference sources such as Encyclopaedia Britannica or World Book Encyclopedia. Unusual or recent topics are more likely to be mentioned in Wikipedia.

Check the reliability of Wikipedia by accessing an article on a subject you are familiar with, e.g. your hometown, your favourite novel, a scientific topic you know well, chess moves you like, or an urban myth you have discredited.

Wikipedia is one of the most frequently consulted web-sources by the general public. Even if they don’t start with a Wikipedia search, a Google search will often display a Wikipedia article amongst the top-ranked links, or sometimes directly access the top-ranked ‘I’m Feeling Lucky’ website. When your essay involves aspects of the public’s appreciation of e.g. a health topic, it helps to know what Wikipedia says about the subject.

Graphs used on Google Image often come from Wikipedia. Why not look at them in context at the source, i.e. Wikipedia?

In a head-to-head comparison between Wikipedia and Encyclopaedia Britannica in Nature, Wikipedia performed very well. The results were disputed but the mere fact the comparison was thought worthwhile is indicative of Wikipedia’s perceived quality.

Some teachers discourage the use of Wikipedia, often because they fear Wikipedia can be misused by just ‘cutting-and-pasting’. This would constitute plagiarism. However, if you demonstrate that you have used Wikipedia appropriately you should have no problems.

Wikipedia is used by many. Professors and researchers do it, students do it, and even librarians do it, so why shouldn’t you? But be media literate!

How to link to and cite a Wikipedia article: as Wikipedia articles often change, you should use the URL link to the specific version you looked at: In the panel on the left of each Wikipedia article you find the ‘Toolbox’ with the option of a ‘Permanent link’. Use this link (and date it). The ‘Toolbox’ also contains a link to ‘Cite this article’ in nine different citation styles.

Prepared by: Reinhard Wentz (ucylr17@ucl.ac.uk) & Vipul Sharma August 2007 (University College London)
References

1) On developing a Wikipedia research policy http://kairosnews.org/developing-a-wikipedia-research-policy

2) How to be media savvy http://www.scidev.net/ms/howdoi/index.cfm?pageid=54

3) ‘Media literacy’ from Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media_literacy


6) Try for instance ‘Futon Bias’ which, if you feel lucky, leads directly to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FUTON_bias
   The neutrality of this article was disputed, see ‘Discussion’


Further Reading

Full text of Draft policy statement on student use of Wikipedia with numerous blog contributions
http://kairosnews.org/developing-a-wikipedia-research-policy


A student project assessing and editing Wikipedia articles: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6422877.stm
http://comm.uea.ac.uk/press/release.asp?id=735

Wikipedia may be fallible, but… (‘The Times’):
http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/article678998.ece

‘The Times’ has a long history of being critical of Wikipedia; some of the scare stories can be found here:
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/sitesearch.do?query=wikipedia&hitsperpage=10&nextOffset=0&offset=0&leftStartIndex=1
&leftEndIndex=10&submitStatus=searchFormSubmitted&mode=simple&sectionId=674

Quality problems of Wikipedia http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/10/18/wikipedia_quality_problem/


A career with Wikipedia ‘BMJ Careers’ 17th August 2007 http://careerfocus.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/335/7615/66

A brief summary of the discussion surrounding the Wikipedia article on ‘Abortion’

‘New York Times’ A history department bans Wikipedia as a source of research

http://news.independent.co.uk/sci_tech/article2874112.ece

Scientific Citations in Wikipedia: …These results increase confidence in Wikipedia as a reliable information resource for science in general… First Monday, volume 12, number 8 (August 2007)

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