



[Wikipedia](#) can be a great tool for learning and researching information. However, like all sources, not everything in Wikipedia is accurate, comprehensive, or unbiased. Many of the general rules of thumb for conducting research apply to Wikipedia, including:

- Always be wary of any one single source, or of multiple works that derive from a single source.
- Where articles have references to external sources (whether online or not) read the references and check whether they really do support what the article says.
- Many times, an encyclopedia may not constitute an acceptable source for a research paper.

However, because of Wikipedia's unique nature, there are also some rules for conducting research that are special to Wikipedia, and some general rules that do not apply to Wikipedia.

Notable strengths of Wikipedia Main article: [Wikipedia:Why Wikipedia is so great](#)

- Wikipedia has certain advantages over other reference works. Being [web](#)-based and having a very large number of active writers and editors, it provides fast coverage of many topics and provides [hyperlinking](#), unavailable in slower media.
- Also, it often provides access to subject matter that is otherwise inaccessible in non-native languages. Since English Wikipedia editors come from all around the world, the relative lack of non-Western topics found in many Western publications is significantly less noticeable on Wikipedia.
- Wikipedia often produces excellent articles about newsworthy events within days of their occurrence, such as [11 March 2004 Madrid attacks](#), [2004 Indian Ocean earthquake](#), [Hurricane Katrina](#) or the [2005 civil unrest in France](#). Similarly, it is one of the few sites on the web even attempting neutral, objective, encyclopedic coverage of popular culture, including [television series](#) or [science fiction](#). It is also developing across-the-board global coverage of subject areas where for one reason or another existing sources are highly fragmented, including sports such as football (soccer) and golf.
- In comparison with most other web-based resources, Wikipedia's open approach tremendously increases the chances that any particular factual error or misleading statement will be promptly corrected. As Wikipedia is a collaborative, ongoing project, one may also ask questions of an article's authors. And thanks to its extensive [hyperlinks](#) usage wiki can be an excellent guide to other related material, both on and off Wiki.

Notable weaknesses of Wikipedia Main article: [Wikipedia:Why Wikipedia is not so great](#)

- Wikipedia's most dramatic weaknesses are closely associated with its greatest strengths. Wikipedia's radical openness means that any given article may be, at any given moment, in a bad state: for example it could be in the middle of a large edit or it could have been recently vandalized. While blatant vandalism is usually easily spotted and rapidly corrected, Wikipedia is certainly more subject to subtle vandalism than a typical reference work.
- Also, much as Wikipedia can rapidly produce articles on timely topics, it is also subject to remarkable oversights and omissions. There is no systematic process to make sure that "obviously important" topics are written about, so at any given time Wikipedia may be wildly out of balance in the relative attention paid to two different topics. For example, it is far more likely that the English-language Wikipedia will have at least some material about any given small U.S. village than about a given moderately sized city in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Another closely related issue is that particular Wikipedia articles (or series of related articles) are liable to be incomplete in ways that would be unusual in a more tightly controlled reference work. Sometimes this is obvious (as with a [stub article](#)) but other times it may be subtle: one side of a controversial issue may be excellently presented, while the other is barely mentioned; a portion of someone's life (not always the most notable portion) may be covered in detail, while other aspects may be presented only sketchily or not at all; coverage of a country's history may focus on the incidents that drew international attention, or may simply reflect the interest and expertise of some individual writer.

Another problem with a lot of content on Wikipedia is that many contributors do not cite their sources, something that makes it hard for the reader to judge the credibility of what is written.

Article quality in Wikipedia Main article: [Reliability of Wikipedia](#)

- Wikipedia is a [wiki](#)—a collaborative, open-source medium. Articles are never "complete and final". Just as human knowledge evolves, so does our wiki coverage of it. Wiki articles are continually edited and improved over time, and in general this results in an upward trend of quality, and a growing consensus over a fair balanced representation of information. It will tend to gain citations, new sections, and so forth. Dubious statements tend to be removed over time, but they may have a long life before they are removed.
- However, few articles are of encyclopaedic quality from the start. Indeed, many articles commence their lives as partisan drafts, and it may take a long process of discussion, debate and argument, to yield a consensus form. Other articles may, for a while, become caught up in a heavily unbalanced viewpoint, and it can take some time—months, perhaps—to restore a balanced consensus. Wikipedia has various processes to reach consensus about an article, including mechanisms to bring in broader participation to controversial articles.
- The [ideal Wikipedia article](#) is neutral, referenced and encyclopaedic, containing notable, verifiable knowledge. An increasing number of articles reach this standard over time, and many already have. Because this is an open wiki, there is no guarantee that a featured article retains its quality over time, and of course an older featured article does not magically improve as Wikipedia's standards generally rise. [As of August 2006, 19% of onetime feature articles](#) either degraded (or failed to rise with the general standards) to the point of losing their featured status.
- Keep in mind that an encyclopedia is intended to be a *starting point* for serious research, not an endpoint. Though many casual inquiries will be satisfied merely by referring to Wikipedia, you will learn more by accessing the print and online resources we reference. We encourage you to verify our content by using [independent sources](#). We also invite you to contribute back by fixing any errors you may find, and adding relevant material that will be of interest to future researchers.

- Special research considerations concerning Wikipedia

Use multiple independent sources

Because Wikipedia is licensed under the [GFDL](#), its content is [often reproduced](#), especially online. Researchers should be especially careful of the [FUTON bias](#) and ensure that a second article appearing to confirm a Wikipedia article is not (for example) simply a copy of an earlier version.

Examine an article's history Main article: [Wikipedia:How to read an article history](#)

- The process of creating Wikipedia is radically open. As a result, unlike most reference works it is possible that even for a generally excellent and stable article, the latest version at any given moment may be the subject of recent edits which are not of the same quality as the rest of the article.
- However, unlike most reference works, you can access the [history of the article](#) (previous versions and change comments) and the [discussion](#) between the editors who created it. Often, if you have questions about an article or are looking to do in-depth research on a subject, reading the history and talk pages gives you further insight into why the article says what it says and which points of the article (if any) are in dispute and may particularly merit further research.

Internal links

- Wikipedia breathes new life into one of the initial dreams of the [World Wide Web](#): [hyperlinks](#). Hyperlinks allow Wikipedia authors to link any word or phrase to another Wikipedia article, often providing annotations of great value. Background information to an article no longer needs to be limited or even produced by the author of the article. This method has proved to have major limitations on the [Internet](#), because for a variety of reasons links are prone to quickly become obsolete. However, internal links within Wikipedia can be made with confidence, and so Wikipedia serves a web of mutually supporting information.

- Some articles are probably over-linked with important links liable to be lost like needles in a haystack. Also, someone may have linked a word without looking to see whether it leads to anything useful: you may follow up a link and find nothing more than what you just read, or even find an article on an unrelated meaning of the same word. In general, this problem is less common in the English-language Wikipedia than in Wikipedias in some other languages.

Categories

- Wikipedia has had its own [user defined category system](#) ([folksonomy](#)) since the beginning of 2004. The category system is a collaborative categorization system using freely chosen keywords by all contributors to Wikipedia. This feature allows researchers to navigate Wikipedia via categories, which can be very useful.
- Virtually all articles now have some form of categorization; however, the quality of this can be highly variable. In many topic areas contributors have created detailed and well-organised categorisation; in other topic areas, categorisation has occurred in a more *ad hoc* fashion and is sometimes poorly done.
- In all categorized articles, you should be able to find a list of categories at the very bottom.

Take advantage of "what links here"

One of the lesser known, but extremely useful techniques for researching with Wikipedia is the effective use of the "[What links here](#)" link which appears on the left side of the screen, as the first item in the box marked "toolbox". This will give you a complete list of other Wikipedia articles which link to the current article. Even if the article you are looking at is a [stub](#) — or, more remarkably, if it is a blank article that has not yet been started — numerous related articles may be easily accessible through this feature. Sometimes these backward links will show you ways in which the article you started from is incomplete in one area or another.

Take advantage of "printable version"

Another feature of the "toolbox" is the "Printable version". Use it whenever you want to print articles for a printer-friendly version of the article. Browsers, such as [Mozilla Firefox](#), that recognize the media print will automatically apply the printable version when printing with the default [Monobook stylesheet](#).

Understand Wikipedia's biases

- No good scholar expects any given reference work to be truly unbiased. Instead, one comes to understand the expected [bias](#) of a particular work. For example, in looking at the [1911 Encyclopædia Britannica](#), one expects to find some [Anglocentric](#) perspectives and attitudes about race, ethnicity, sex, and sexuality that by today's standards seem [prudish](#) and perhaps [bigoted](#). In using [Collier's Encyclopedia](#), one should expect a rather [Americentric](#) perspective (and probably a lesser degree of scholarship than in *Britannica*, but a more easily readable style).
- Unlike some reference works, Wikipedia's biases are inconsistent. Wikipedians come from all over the world and all walks of life. While we strive to have articles fit a [neutral point of view](#), many articles are not yet there. In fact, two articles on related subjects may have been written by different people and reflect different biases. Even within a single article radically different or conflicting biases may be found. It is also a matter of contention whether certain views are described in a neutral manner.
- In this respect, Wikipedia is more like a library (or like the [World Wide Web](#) itself) than like a typical reference work. The mere fact that a book is in the library is no guarantee against bias or misinformation. The same can be said of Wikipedia articles. This does not make libraries (or Wikipedia) useless, it just means that they should be approached differently than one approaches a typical reference work.

Use Wikipedia's social process Main article: [Wikipedia:Who writes Wikipedia](#), [Wikipedia:A researcher's guide to discussion pages](#)

- Wikipedia is not just an encyclopedia; it is also an immense community of active contributors, or [Wikipedians](#). In the history section of each article, you can find out which users contributed what material to an article. In addition, each article has a talk page. If you have questions about the article, asking on its talk page or the

talk page of the users who contributed the text will often get your question answered. Then, you and the contributor may update the article to make it clearer for the next researcher.

- Probably the most general approach to this is to first put your question on the talk page of the appropriate article, then put a note on the talk page of the relevant contributor or contributors calling their attention to your question.
- Questions like this are often very useful to the refinement of articles. If you have a relevant question that was not answered by the article, there is a fair chance that others will need this information also, and it should be added to the article.
- In general, you should not expect Wikipedians to contact you by email. Instead, check back to the talk page periodically to see if your question has been answered.
- We strongly recommend that if you want to participate in the Wikipedia community you [create a Wikipedia account](#) (it's free, you don't need to provide any personal or contact information, and there won't be any spam). If you log in, and if you sign your posts on talk pages with ~~~~, that will be saved on the talk page as an account signature and a timestamp. Posting to talk pages with an account is not only a local social norm, but it makes it possible for you to retain your identity across multiple editing sessions, and avoid being confused with others.

Look for comprehensive review

- A small number of English-language Wikipedia articles — most notably, [featured articles](#) — have had broad, systematic [review](#). These articles usually remain at a high level of quality, but it is possible (although unlikely) that a previously reviewed article may have deteriorated since the time it received that level of attention.
- [Wikipedia:WikiReader](#) discusses one of the more ambitious schemes to bring a comparable level of scrutiny to a large number of articles. [As of November 2004](#), there have been no [English-language WikiReaders](#) published, although at least two have been issued in [German](#), and a number of English-language WikiReaders are in progress.
- Another proposed approach to formally reviewing more articles can be found at [Wikipedia:WikiProject Fact and Reference Check](#); however, this project is still in its infancy, as is [Wikipedia:Forum for Encyclopedic Standards](#).
- Despite this shortage of formal review, many articles have had enormous scrutiny. Again, this can often be identified informally by browsing the history and discussion associated with the article.

Citing Wikipedia Main article: [Wikipedia:Citing Wikipedia](#)

- First you should question the appropriateness of citing any encyclopedia as a source or reference. This is not simply a Wikipedia-specific issue, as most secondary schools and institutions of higher learning do not consider encyclopedias, in general, a proper citable source. Citation of Wikipedia in research papers has been known to result in a grade of "F".^{[1][2]}
- This does not mean Wikipedia is not useful: Wikipedia articles contain many links to newspaper articles, books with [ISBN](#) numbers, radio programming, television shows, Web-based sources, and the like. It will usually be more acceptable to cite those *original sources* rather than Wikipedia since it is by nature, a *secondary source*. At the same time, simple academic ethics means that you should actually read the work that you cite: if you do not actually have your hands on a book, you should not misleadingly cite it as your source.
- There are cases where contributions to Wikipedia are considered original and important enough on topics not covered in other works, so as to be considered a primary source. (For example, the article "[fuck](#)" was used in a Colorado court of law to illustrate the vernacular use of that term.)
- Owing to the radical openness of Wikipedia, decisions about referencing articles must be made on an article-by-article basis. If one does choose to cite a Wikipedia article, references should identify a specific version of an article by providing the date and time it was created. This can be found in the edit history of the article.
- If you decide to cite Wikipedia, remember that its articles are constantly changing: cite exact time, date and version of the article version you are using. [Page history](#) and toolbox "permanent link" features are very useful for finding that information.
- [Wikipedia:Wikipedia as an academic source](#) pages contains examples of academic publications that used Wikipedia as a source.