

Laure G. Kirsner and Stephen R. Mandell
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 Philip Lau
 Professor Carroll
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The limitations of Wikipedia
 When they get a research assignment, many students immediately go to the Internet to find sources. Searching the Web, they may discover a useful Wikipedia article on their topic. But is Wikipedia a reliable reference source for a research paper? There is quite a controversy over the use of Wikipedia as a source, but the answer seems to be no. Although Wikipedia may be a good starting point for general information about a topic, college-level research papers should rely on more authoritative sources.

A wiki is software that allows people to collaborate in forming the content of a Web site. With a wiki, anyone with a browser can edit, modify, rearrange, or delete the site content. It is not necessary to know HTML (hypertext mark-up language) or to work in HTML code. The word *wiki* comes from the word *wikiwiki*, which means "quick" or "fast" in Hawaiian. The most popular wiki is Wikipedia, a free, Internet-based encyclopedia that relies on the collaboration, consensus, openness, and trust of those who post and edit entries. Anyone can write a Wikipedia article by clicking on "How to write an article" or edit an entry by clicking on "Edit this entry." All the revisions are visible to everyone who clicks on "history" ("Verifiability"). According to Katherine Mangu-Ward, the success of Wikipedia "springs largely from [its founder's] willingness to trust large aggregations of human beings to produce good outcomes. . . ." (26). This collaboration enables Wikipedia to publish a wide variety of entries on unusual, specialized topics (see Fig. 1). So far, there are over four million Wikipedia articles (Rothenberg). Wikipedia includes two kinds of content. The first kind of content is factual — that is, information that can be verified or

Paragraph combines factual information, Mangu-Ward, and Rothenberg

thesis statement

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Fig. 1. Wikipedia entry for a chemical compound. Reproduced under the terms of the GNU Free Document License.

proved true. Factual material from reliable sources is more trustworthy than material from other sources. In fact, Wikipedia's own site states, "In general, the most reliable sources are peer-reviewed journals and books published in university presses; university-level textbooks; magazines, journals, and books published by respected publishing houses; and mainstream newspapers" ("Verifiability"). Most reliable publications have someone whose job it is to check facts. However, because Wikipedia relies on a community of people to write articles, no single person or group of people is responsible for checking facts. The theory is that after enough people have worked on an article, any errors in fact will have been found and corrected. However, this assumption is not necessarily true.

Paragraph combines Phillis's own ideas with quotations and paraphrases from "Verifiability"

The second kind of content consists of opinions. Because an opinion is a belief or judgment, opinions, by definition, tend to be one-sided. So, since Wikipedia entries are supposed to be objective, Wikipedia's policy statement says that entries for controversial topics should include opinions that reflect the various sides of the issue ("Verifiability"). In addition, Wikipedia warns users against believing everything they read, even what they read on its own site: "Anyone can create a website or pay to have a book published, then claim to be an expert . . ." ("Verifiability"). It also advises readers to examine sources carefully, especially when they present controversial opinions or make claims that contradict established academic views ("Verifiability"). However, it is all up to the users; no one checks to make sure that these guidelines are followed.

In spite of its stated policies, then, Wikipedia is open to certain kinds of errors. One of Wikipedia's problems comes from its assumption that the knowledge of the community is more valuable than the knowledge of acknowledged experts in a field. Larry Sanger, one of the founders of Wikipedia, who has since left the project, concedes that Wikipedia has a problem with "anti-elitism, or lack of respect for expertise"; in fact, he refers to its "horror of the traditional deference to expertise," which he claims explains why acknowledged experts avoid writing or editing articles in Wikipedia. Those who criticize Wikipedia often point to its irrational trust in the knowledge of the community. According to Andrew Keen, Wikipedia is virtually "the blind leading the blind — infinite monkeys providing infinite information for infinite readers, perpetuating the cycle of misinformation and ignorance" (4). On Wikipedia, Keen complains, "the voice of a high school kid has equal value to that of an Ivy League scholar . . ." (42).

Another problem with Wikipedia is the ease with which entries can be edited. Because the content of wikis can be altered by anyone, individuals can easily vandalize content by inserting incorrect information, obscene language, or even

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Paragraph combines
 quotation and
 paraphrases from
 "Verifiability" with
 Phillip's own ideas

Paragraph combines
 quotation and
 paraphrase from
 Sanger with a
 quotation from Keen

Writers who are more interested in nonsense into articles. Writers who are more interested in presenting their personal opinions than presenting reliable information frequently target certain entries. For example, Bush, financier George Soros, or Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard, or for controversial subjects, such as abortion and the Holocaust, are routinely vandalized. Sometimes this vandalism can be extremely harmful. One notorious case of vandalism involved John Seigenthaler Sr., a journalist who was falsely accused in a Wikipedia entry of being involved in the assassinations of John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy. As Seigenthaler's son has reported, the false information stayed on the site for more than four months and also appeared on at least two other sites that had used Wikipedia as their source (Seigenthaler). This incident, as well as many others, has caused people to question the reliability of Wikipedia. According to Jane Kirtley, the issue of reliability poses a real problem for the users of Wikipedia:

It's hard to defend an anonymous poster who uploads a damaging falsehood about someone on a Web site that purports to provide facts from a "neutral point of view. . . ." Either accuracy matters, or it doesn't. If the denizens of cyberspace want to be taken seriously, they might want to be responsible for what they produce. (66)

Bias is another problem for Wikipedia. Some critics have accused Wikipedia of having a liberal bias. In fact, a competitor, Conservapedia, lists many examples of liberal bias in Wikipedia entries. Accusing Wikipedia of being anti-American and anti-Christian ("Examples"), Conservapedia questions the true agenda of the Wikipedia community. In a *Time* article, Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia, denies this liberal bias and accuses Conservapedia of having a conservative bias (6). Still, such accusations raise questions about the credibility of Wikipedia.

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Paragraph contains
 a long quotation
 from Kirtley,
 Phillip's summary of
 the Seigenthaler
 article, and facts
 that were found in
 several sources

Paragraph contains
 paraphrases from
 "Examples" and
 Wales as well as
 Phillip's own
 conclusions

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Wikipedia has tried to correct some of the problems that critics have pointed out. In response to criticism of its policy of allowing writers and editors to remain anonymous, Jimmy Wales changed Wikipedia's policy. Now, writers and editors have to provide their user names and thus take responsibility for the content they contribute. In addition, Wikipedia has made it possible for administrators to block certain sites from those wishing to edit them and to prevent certain writers and editors from posting or changing information. In addition, users must now be registered with Wikipedia for four days before they can change certain controversial entries (Hafner). However,

authorship is still a problem. Most readers have no idea who has written an article that they are reading or whether or not that person can be trusted. Given Wikipedia's basic philosophy, there is no way to solve this problem.

Of course, even traditional encyclopedias have shortcomings. For example, a study by the journal *Nature* found that although Wikipedia included errors, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* also did. Nevertheless, Robert McHenry, a former editor of *Britannica*, points out that Wikipedia articles often do not get better through editing; instead, they frequently get worse. He goes on to say that Wikipedia suffers because it lacks the oversight that only a good editor can provide:

"skills, knowledge, experience, and maybe a touch of talent." McHenry observes that out of concern for *Britannica's* reputation, at least four people check every article for accuracy. He points out that professional editors do more than just check spelling and grammar; they also stand in "for the eventual reader in order to assure that what was written was clear, logical, and to the point." Since Wikipedia has no professional editors, its writing may be ungrammatical, stylistically awkward, or unclear.

Supporters of Wikipedia defend the site against those charges, noting that more traditional sources, such as respected peer-reviewed journals, also have their problems. For example,

Paragraph combines ideas found in several sources, a paraphrase from Hofner, and Philip's own ideas

Paragraph combines ideas found in several sources with paraphrases and quotations from McHenry

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very new material is likely to be underrepresented or even omitted by a traditional print encyclopedia, which is published only every few years. In addition, some reviewers of articles that appear in peer-reviewed journals may have conflicts of interest. For example, a reviewer might reject an article that challenges his or her own work, or editors may favor certain authors over others. Also, it may be possible for reviewers to identify the work of a competitor, especially if the number of people working in a field is relatively small, and therefore let bias influence their evaluation of an article. Another problem is that it takes a long time for articles in peer-reviewed journals to get into print. Critics point out that by the time an article in a peer-reviewed journal gets into print, it may be outdated. As a result, peer-reviewed journals may not be as objective or as up-to-date as readers think they are.

Wikipedia is easy to access and easy to use. It includes information on just about any topic a researcher might want to explore. Still, it is not a reliable source for serious research. For one thing, many questions have been raised about the reliability of its articles. Also, librarians have complained that the continual editing of Wikipedia articles makes it impossible to document them correctly. As a result of these and other problems, many high schools and colleges do not allow students to cite Wikipedia as a source. Granted, there are times when Wikipedia can be useful. For example, visitors to the site can skim articles on a variety of topics, and this preliminary reading can help them find or narrow a research topic. In addition, students can often find general information on Wikipedia about very current topics that may not be treated anywhere else. Finally, the computer links that appear at the end of most Wikipedia articles can be a good starting point for research. In general, however, because of the questionable authority of its entries and the lack of expertise and objectivity of some (if not many) of its contributors, Wikipedia is not a reliable source.

Paragraph contains Philip's own ideas found in several sources and conclusions

Conclusion

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Abstract/Concrete language Abstract lang

ages that cannot be directly seen or touched
create language denotes objects or qualities
fountain pen, leaky, shouting, rancid. Abstract

express ideas, but they are very vague unli
ing detail. The abstract phrase "The speak
could mean almost anything, but the addi
ties the meaning." "He clenched his fist and

Allusion A brief reference to literature, hist
lar culture, and so on that readers are exp
evokes a vivid impression in very few wo

gate, and suddenly we found ourselves i
(Eden) the stunning beauty of the garden.

Analogy A form of comparison that explain
paring it to another that is more familiar.

put abstract or technical information in si
effect of pollution on the environment is li

Announcing The technique of recording on
tion by writing notes in the margins of t
involve asking questions, suggesting pos
tions or with the reader's own experience,

commenting on the writer's style, or del
cepts.

Antithesis A viewpoint opposite to one exp
rative essay, the thesis must be debatable.

er's thesis is not debatable. (See also **Thes**
Antonym A word opposite in meaning to ar
nym of *ugly*. *Synonym* is the antonym of *ai*

Argumentation The form of writing that
attempts to convince readers by present
supported by evidence. Unlike *persuasion*,

appeals, argumentation is primarily an ap
Audience The people "listening" to a write
tive to their audience will carefully choos

that their readers will understand and res

Glossary