

How to Use Wikipedia for Academic Purposes

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It was said that inserting information cited from Wikipedia might be an academic suicide. Although, for some cases, this conclusion does not mean to forbid students from using it since them, in fact, have been using Wikipedia to support their academic assignment. Xiao-Liang, Christy and Matthew, the researchers from Hong Kong, exposed that Wikipedia had become the largest and most famous reference website that university students used to finish their assignments.¹ This fact is more prevailing since more content in Wikipedia has been written accurately. An early study in the *Journal Nature* in 2005 said, “Wikipedia's scientific articles had almost been as accurate as the articles in Encyclopedia Britannica.”²

Wikipedia now has 4,710,066 content articles and 35,007,853 pages in total.³ All the articles were actually for a general purpose. Wikipedia states, “Although we host a great deal of information that pertains to professional topics, including medical, legal, or financial issues, this content is presented for general informational purposes only. It should not be taken as professional advice.”⁴ Thus it suggested that those who wanted to get more credible sources should find independent professionals who had been licensed and qualified in certain subjects.⁵

Despite a general purpose, more young people use Wikipedia. Pew Research Centre recorded in 2010 that seventeen percent of American adults used Wikipedia to search information.⁶ Other research found that some of the reasons for college students to use this free

¹ Shen, X., Cheung, C. M., & Lee, M. K. (2013). What leads students to adopt information from Wikipedia? An empirical investigation into the role of trust and information usefulness. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 44(3), 502-517.

² “BBC NEWS | Technology | Wikipedia survives research test.” *BBC*. December 15, 2005. Retrieved February 3, 2015 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4530930.stm>

³ “Wikipedia: About - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.” *Wikipedia.org*. 2003. Retrieved February 3, 2015 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>

⁴ “Terms of Use.” *Wikimedia Foundation.org*. December 5, 2014. Retrieved February 28, 2015, from http://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Terms_of_Use.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “Health Fact Sheet - Pew Internet & American Life Project.” *Pew Research Centre*. January, 2014. Retrieved March 8, 2015, from <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/health-fact-sheet/>.

and open source were helping them get started and helping them find the meaning of certain topics.⁷ These facts indicate that Wikipedia might be a main tool for young and educated people to search the information. Therefore, rather than restricting the use of it, it is better to line up the suggestions especially for the academic purposes.

I think the first and important suggestion is using Wikipedia for background information in the first stage of the academic writing. It seems quite right, as Sook Lim found, that checking quick facts and searching background information was what the students did when they were accessing Wikipedia.⁸ Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg also said similarly, “Students’ driving need for background context makes Wikipedia one of the predictable workarounds that many students use, especially during the first stages of their research process.”⁹

However, it is hard to rely on the information that probably contains misleading information and anonymous sources. Mark E Moran argued that people could not rely on something that came from an anonymous writer.¹⁰ He was worried that a contributor could occasionally insert his or her hidden agenda through the articles.¹¹ Thus, I think to reduce this academic ambivalence is by applying a judicious usage. It demands the students do skeptical reading while accessing it for information. Knight and Pryke argued it was better to do a critical reading on the information that Wikipedia shared.¹²

Second, the student can use Wikipedia to get extended information and also to lead them to find the academic sources that are listed on the footnote. Getting information of reference

⁷ Head, A. J., & Eisenberg, M. B. (2010). How today's college students use Wikipedia for course-related research. *First Monday*, 15(3).

⁸ Lim, S. (2009). How and Why Do College Students Use Wikipedia? *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*. 60(11). 2189-2202.

⁹ Ibid Head, A. J., & Eisenberg, M. B. (2010).

¹⁰ Mark E. Moran. “The Top 10 Reasons Students Cannot Cite or Rely on Wikipedia.” *Finding Dulcinea*. October 27, 2011. Retrieved March 9, 2015, from <http://www.findingdulcinea.com/news/education/2010/march/The-Top-10-Reasons-Students-Cannot-Cite-or-Rely-on-Wikipedia.html>.

¹¹ Ibid “The Top 10 Reasons Students Cannot Cite or Rely on Wikipedia.”

¹² Knight, C., & Pryke, S. (2012). Wikipedia and the University, a case study. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(6), 649-659.

source becomes possible because some articles are cited from reliable sources. Carol Haigh found that 56 percent of the references cited originated from clearly identifiable and reputable sources.¹³ In addition, Neil L. Waters, a professor of history at Middlebury College, admitted that Wikipedia leads to citable sources.¹⁴

Perhaps, Wikipedia's features make students find information easily. Its blue highlighted words can lead them to new window that contain new information. In addition, the footnote numbers that embed sides of the sentences can show the reference directly. Hence, Sook Lim expresses that using Wikipedia leads the users to discover new information in the articles and to follow the links on these articles to find more information.¹⁵

A third way of the student in using Wikipedia is by becoming a contributor or an editor. I think this will be a good idea in reducing some errors and misleading information. I believe that more educated person involved in Wikipedia means more reliable and credible content could be made. As it was said, "The Wikipedia model allows anyone to edit, and relies on a large number of well-intentioned editors to overcome issues created by a smaller number of problematic editors."¹⁶ Yet, it still has risk of errors since everyone can be an editor. If so, a student that plans to be an editor, must submit neutral and referenced articles containing notable and verifiable knowledge that comes from multiple external sources which support the article.¹⁷

Wikipedia is like a tool that the students use to get information about certain issues or ideas. It is better to use it just for background information. However, it also could be beneficial to get free extended information and list of citation sources that will help in academic writing.

¹³ Haigh, C. (2011). Quick fix or citable source? Carol Haigh investigates the quality and rigor of using Wikipedia in support of academic research. *Nursing Standard*, 25(38), 61-61.

¹⁴ Waters, N. L. (2007). Why you can't cite Wikipedia in my class. *Communications of the ACM*, 50(9), 15-17.

¹⁵ Ibid Lim, S. (2009). How and why do college students use Wikipedia?

¹⁶ "Reliability of Wikipedia - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." *Wikipedia.org*. 2006. Retrieved February 3, 2015, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliability_of_Wikipedia

¹⁷ "How accurate is Wikipedia?" *Online Degrees*. 2010. Retrieved February 3, 2015, from <http://www.onlinedegrees.org/how-accurate-is-wikipedia/>

Further suggestion, students can involve as editors or contributors. However, these suggestions might be too simple because more improvement will occur for the years to come as Alison and Michael have said, “Students still need Wikipedia for its mixture of coverage, currency, convenience, and comprehensibility in a world where credibility is less of a given or an expectation from today’s students.”¹⁸ There will be more effective way to use Wikipedia for academic goals.

¹⁸ Ibid Head, A. J., & Eisenberg, M. B. (2010)