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WIKIPEDIA AND ACADEMIA

The Proper Way To Use Wikipedia In Academia

CITING WIKIPEDIA

Although there are ways to cite Wikipedia in research, there should never be an instance where you do so. Learn how to use Wikipedia for research and correctly cite references for academia.

Mike Wood
Owner, Legalmorning.com

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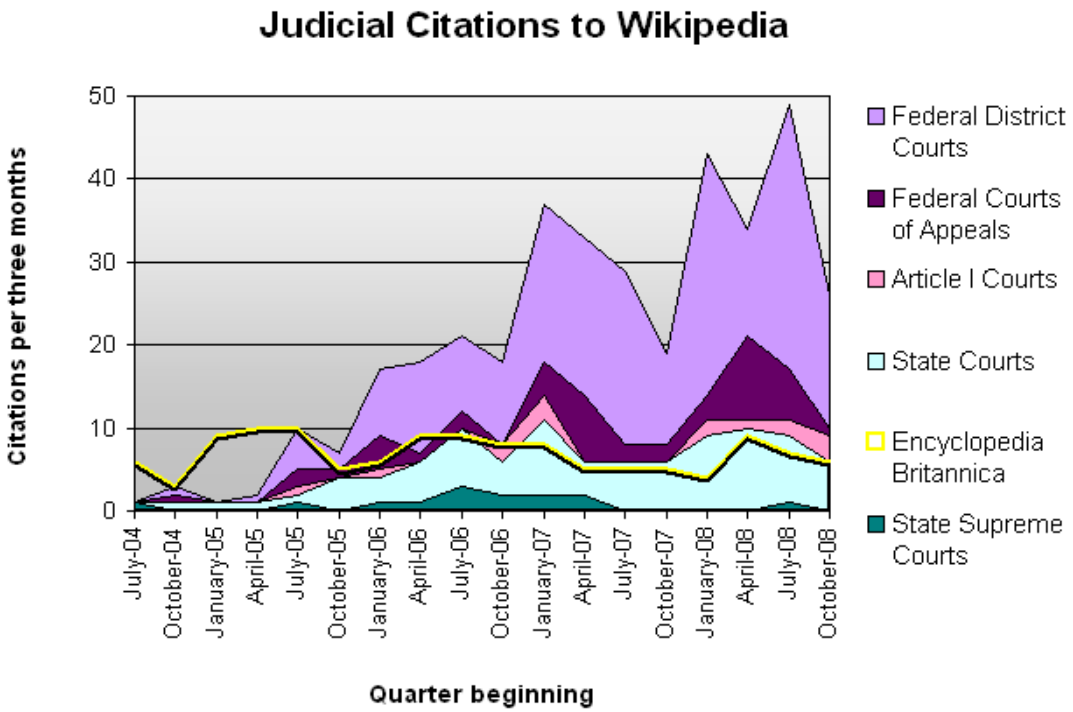
Overview of Wikipedia

Wikipedia is a free encyclopedia, written collectively by the people who use it. It is a special type of website designed to make collaboration easy, called a wiki. Many people are constantly improving Wikipedia, making thousands of changes per hour. All of these changes are recorded in article histories and recent changes. (Wikipedia, 2015)

You will notice I cited Wikipedia above. I did that on purpose as an example of what you should never do. Although Wikipedia has been gaining acceptance in academia over the last decade, it is still not considered a reliable source.

Wikipedia is open source which means that anyone is allowed to edit. Image being able to go to a website and change what you see on the page. This is the concept of Wikipedia and is at the heart of its goal. **Wikipedia can be a great source of information, but there has been friction between it and academia due to its open source concept.**

In this guide, I am going to show you a little history of Wikipedia and its relationship with academia. In addition, I will show you how using Wikipedia can be beneficial and actually help you with your research. Proper use of Wikipedia can be beneficial to both students and teachers. Again, I said "proper," which is the focus of this guide.



A scary graph from 2009 showing how courts have cited Wikipedia in judicial decisions. I would ask that everyone reading this guide give a copy to your local judges. Image credit – Cool Hand Luke (Wikimedia Commons)

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History of Wikipedia:

Wikipedia was launched in 2001 and was initially intended to be edited by experts as an offshoot of a sister site known as Nupedia. Within two years, Nupedia was replaced by Wikipedia, allowing anyone willing to edit to have a say in what is written on the site. (Sanger, 2005)

The Nupedia team in 2000. Larry Sanger (seated, right) and Jimmy Wales (standing, third from left) are credited with co-founding Wikipedia. Image credit – Edward O'Connor from Flickr

Wikipedia has grown over the years and by 2009 had over 3,000,000 entries. (Fletcher, 2009) This is a lot of typing for volunteer editors who use their free time to add content to the world's largest encyclopedia.

Here are a few statistics about Wikipedia that will show you how popular it has become (as of December 2013) (Siddique, 2013):

- 30 million articles
- Available in over 285 languages through sister projects (French Wikipedia, German Wikipedia, etc.)
- 70,000 active editors
- 530 million visitors worldwide each month

Quick Fact: ***Ward Cunningham is the inventor of wiki software. He never patented his invention and it has since been picked up and used by programmers all over the world. When asked why he never obtained a patent, he stated that he didn't think people would be willing to pay money for it.*** (Cunningham, 2006)

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History of Academia and Wikipedia

Here we go. The feud between Wikipedia and Academia continues. What feud you ask? Well, let's just say there has been a small power struggle between the two over the reliability of Wikipedia content and using it as a reliable source. (Head, 2010) By small feud, I mean a decade long war that has caused scholars to write long research papers, journal articles, and countless guides on what is and is not acceptable use of Wikipedia in academia. (Ashman, 2012) (Coomer, 2013) (Debate.org, n.d.)

Here are just a few that you can peruse if you have the time:

What's Wrong with Wikipedia?, *Harvard Guide to Citing Source*

Wikipedia in Academic Studies: Corrupting or Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning?, Chapter 17 of *Looking Toward the Future of Technology-Enhanced Education*

Wikipedia: Reflections on Use and Acceptance in Academic Environments, *Brian Whalley, Ariadne.ac.uk*

In 2006, Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales pictured above (middle) told students that they should not reference Wikipedia. More on that later. Image credit – Beatrice Murch on Flickr.

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Over the years, Wikipedia has become more and more accepted in academia, but to a point. Some institutions allow you to cite it, some don't. However, there is a trend in academia where students are allowed to use Wikipedia as a starting point of research (something we will get into further in a minute). (Veeck, 2011) Regardless of policies, a 2010 report found that 8 out of 10 students turn to Wikipedia for research. (Nagel, 2010)

So where do Wikipedia and academia stand with each other? Who cares really? When you finish this guide, you will be able to conduct research like a pro while the two continue to duke it out behind the scenes.

Wikipedia and academia have a love-hate relationship. Opinions vary among educators as to whether Wikipedia is a reliable source. Image credit – Opensource.com on Flickr.

Quick Fact – ***The Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit that oversees Wikipedia and its sister projects, has put forth a great effort trying to include academia with Wikipedia. In addition to reaching out and asking for expert help with contributions of content, it also hosts edit-thons at universities and supports Wikipedian-in-residence programs throughout the world.***

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Citing Wikipedia as a Source

Why would you ever want to cite Wikipedia? Well, as it is a great collection of information, using a Wikipedia article on the topic you are writing about seems like a good idea. However, keep in mind that the articles are written by volunteers and oversight is nothing like that of a newspaper or peer-reviewed journal. Even Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales warned students "not to refer to Wikipedia." (Orlowski, 2006)

Here are a few reasons (outside of academia) why I would advise NOT citing Wikipedia as your source:

- Even Wikipedia admits that it isn't reliable.
- Wikipedia doesn't even allow you to cite Wikipedia within Wikipedia. What? Let me re-phrase. You cannot use Wikipedia as a source in any other Wikipedia article.
- What you cited as a source today, can and will change tomorrow.
- Several hoaxes have been introduced into Wikipedia in the past where inaccurate information was purposefully put there to mislead readers.

In addition to not being reliable, Wikipedia is not something that your professors will see as putting in effort. This means that simply citing Wikipedia in a paper will make you appear lazy as if you aren't taking the class seriously. At this level of academia, more is expected of you.

I'm sure cats don't edit the articles. However, you never know who is or if what they write is accurate or biased. Citing Wikipedia on its face is simply a bad idea. Image credit – AmosWolfe on Wikimedia Commons

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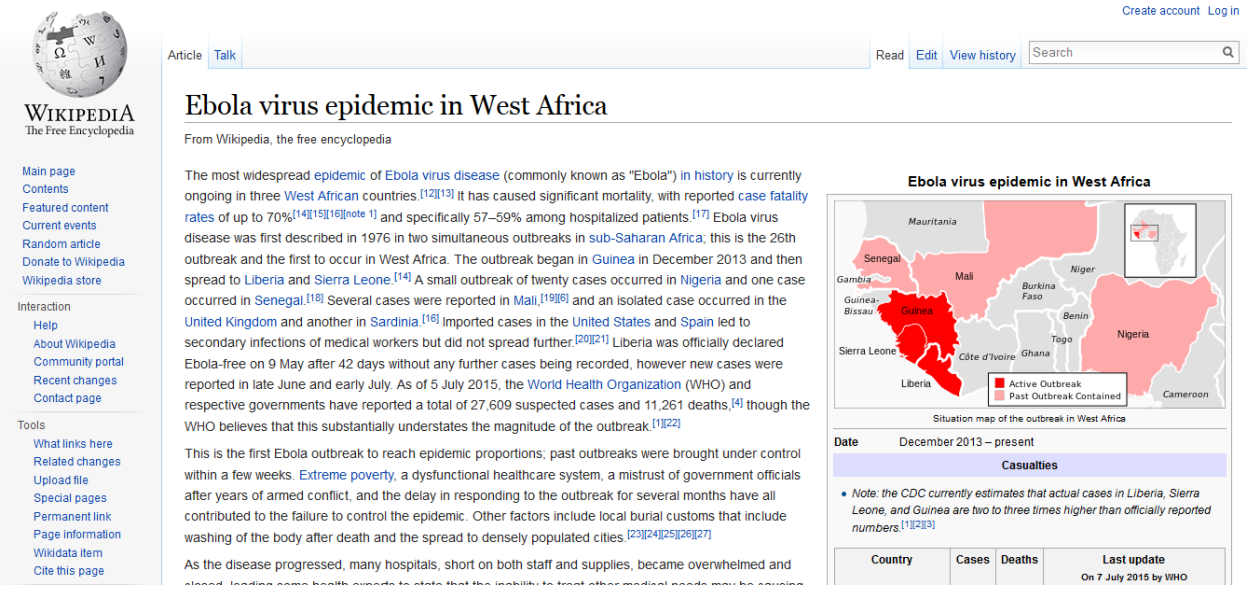
How to Use Wikipedia for Research

There are a couple of ways that you can use Wikipedia for research. Well, there are actually dozens, but only a few that are effective. They include **searching articles**, help from **Wikipedia projects**, and using the **reference desk.**

- Searching articles
- Wikipedia projects
- Reference desk

Searching articles:

The most common way to conduct research with Wikipedia is to go right to the article on the topic you want to write about. To show you the best way to use an article for research, I am going to use the Wikipedia article on the Ebola virus epidemic in West Africa that took place in 2014.



So far so good. You found the article and see it contains tons of information. The first thing you want to research is who was "patient zero," better referred to as the "index" case.

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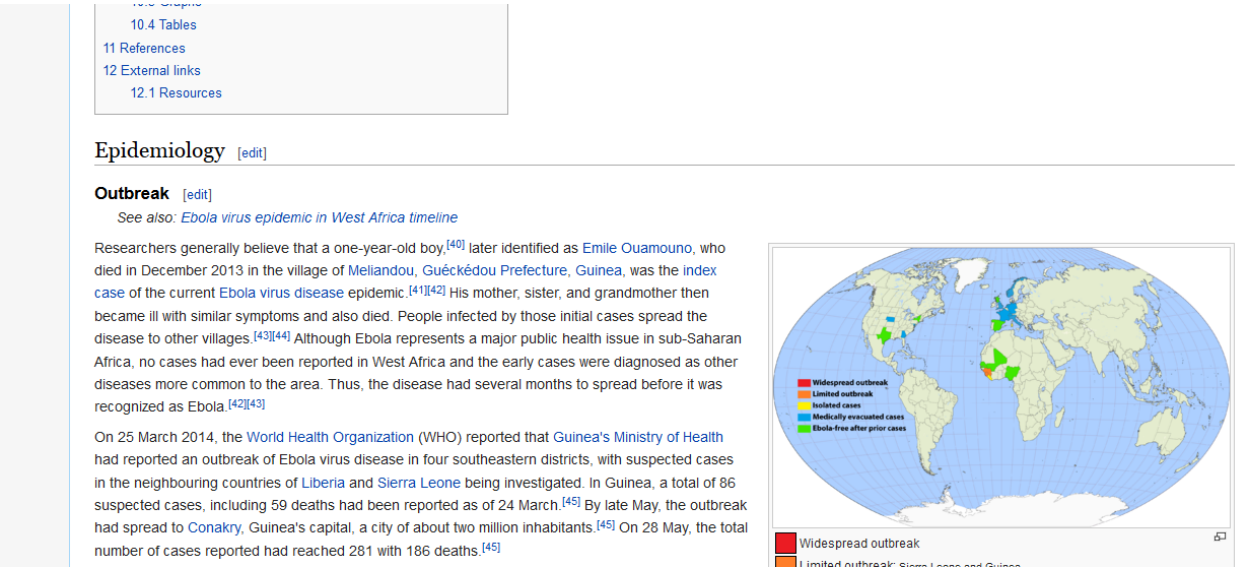
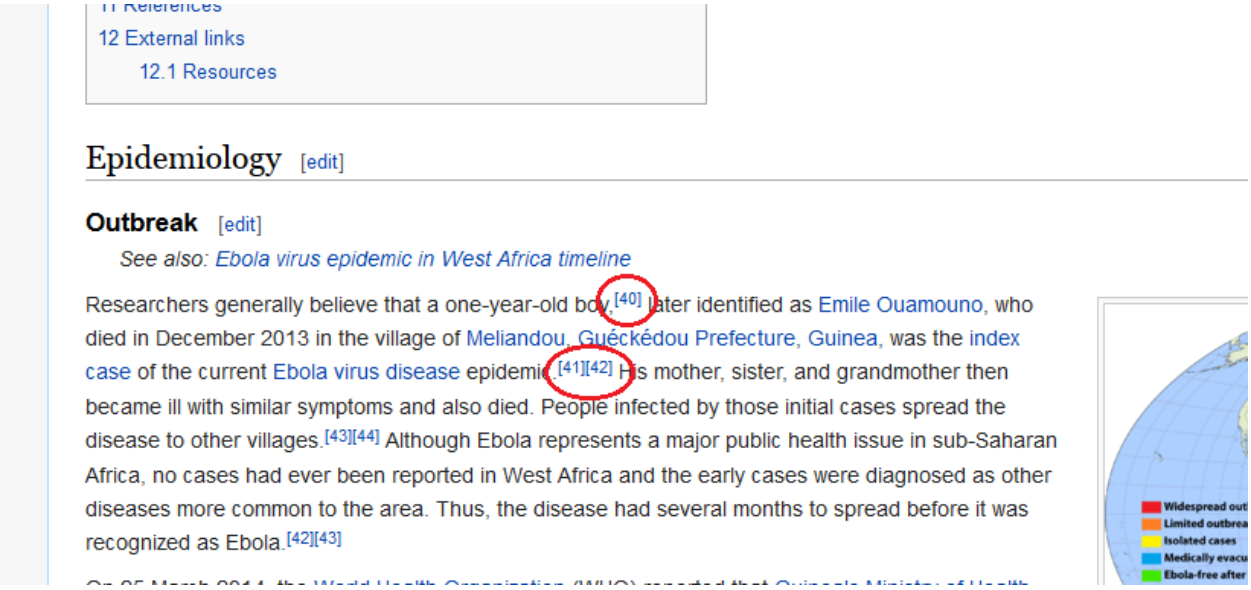


Scrolling down the article, you see the information right in front of you. According to Wikipedia, "researchers generally believe that a one-year-old boy, later identified as Emile Ouamouno, who died in December 2013 in the village of Meliandou, Guekedou Prefecture, Guinea, was the index case of the current Ebola virus disease epidemic." But wait a minute! We can't cite Wikipedia.

Here's how you do it.



In the picture above, you will see that I circled reference numbers next to the information we want to cite. These link to the sources at the bottom of the page (pictured below).

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resisted declaring Ebola emergency". Associated Press. Retrieved 21 March 2015.

37. ^ a b "Ebola: the failures of the international outbreak response". Médecins Sans Frontières. 29 August 2014. Retrieved 7 September 2014.
38. ^ news release (3 September 2014). "UN senior leaders outline needs for global Ebola response". WHO. Retrieved 7 September 2014.
39. ^ a b "West African economies feeling ripple effects of Ebola, says UN". United Nations Development Programme. 12 March 2015. Retrieved 20 March 2015.
40. ^ a b Kevin Sack, Sheri Fink, Pam Belluck and Adam Nossiter Photographs by Daniel Berehulak (December 29, 2014). "How Ebola Roared Back: For a fleeting moment last spring, the epidemic sweeping West Africa might have been stopped. But the opportunity to control the virus, which has now caused more than 7,800 deaths, was lost.". *The New York Times* (The Times Company). Retrieved December 30, 2014. ""The messages about don't touch the dead, wash your hands, if somebody is sick, leave them — these were all strange things, completely contrary to our tradition and culture."" Anchor cite of important article, do not remove
41. ^ "Ebola: Patient zero was a toddler in Guinea - CNN.com". *CNN*. 28 October 2014. Retrieved 29 October 2014.
42. ^ a b c Baize, Sylvain; Pannetier, Delphine; Oestereich, Lisa; Rieger, Toni (16 April 2014). "Emergence of Zaire Ebola Virus Disease in Guinea — Preliminary Report". *New England Journal of Medicine* **371** (15): 1418–25. doi:10.1056/NEJMoa1404505. PMID 24738640.
43. ^ a b Grady, Denise; Fink, Sheri (9 August 2014). "Tracing Ebola's Breakout to an

234. ^ "Ebola outbreak: Doctors warn of 'post-Ebola syndrome' among survivors in West Africa". *ABC News*. Retrieved 5 February 2015.
235. ^ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/08/health/weeks-after-his-recovery-ebola-lurked-in-a-doctors-eye.html?_r=0#story-continues-2
236. ^ "Persistence of Ebola Virus in Ocular Fluid during Convalescence". *nejm.org*. Retrieved 10 May 2015.
237. ^ Grady, Denise (7 May 2015). "After Nearly Claiming His Life, Ebola Lurked in a Doctor's Eye". New York Times. Retrieved 14 May 2015.
238. ^ "Thousands of Liberians in 'post-Ebola syndrome' study". *Yahoo News*. 17 June 2015. Retrieved 19 June 2015.
239. ^ Maggie Fox. "Blood, Sweat and Tears: Study Will Watch Ebola Survivors". *NBC News*. Retrieved 23 June 2015.
240. ^ "Sierra Leone`s main referral hospital has been overwhelmed". StarAfrica. Retrieved 1 October 2014.
241. ^ "Liberia: Unheralded Fear – Ebola Pose Risks for Liberia Health Workers". *FrontPage Africa*. 19 June 2014. Retrieved 21 June 2014 – via AllAfrica.com.
242. ^ "MSFs new ebola management centers already overwhelmed". MSF. Retrieved 11 April 2015.
243. ^ Payne, Ed (12 September 2014). "West African health centers can't keep up with Ebola outbreak, WHO says". CNN Health. Retrieved 15 September 2014.
244. ^ a b "WHO: Ebola Response Roadmap Situation Report 18 September 2014" (PDF).

Conveniently, these references are all hyperlinked to the actual source. So, let's try reference #41 which leads to CNN.

So, we are now at CNN, the original source for the information contained in the Wikipedia article. All you need to do is put the information into your own words and cite CNN as your reference. In the end, it would look something similar to this:

"The Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014 is believed to have originated with a one-year-old named Emile Ouamouno. He died in December 2013 with his family becoming ill shortly afterward. The boy was from the village of Meliandou, Guekedou Perfecture, Guinea which is now considered the original source of the outbreak." (CNN, 2014).

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Notice that nothing in that sentence says anything about Wikipedia. It does not plagiarize Wikipedia, nor does it state anything contrary to the original source. On a side note, **make sure to read the source so that you are sure it actually states what is written in the Wikipedia article**. Editors sometimes place their own interpretation of a source into the Wikipedia articles as opposed to what the source actually says.

Using articles is a great way to conduct your research. Thanks to volunteer contributors, articles are full of valuable references that are right at your fingertips. The majority of them are hyperlinked so you can click on them directly and do not need to spend countless hours on Google trying to find only a few reliable sources.

Quick Fact – ***Did you know that you cannot technically plagiarize Wikipedia? All content on Wikipedia is available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License that you will see posted at the end of each page. In fact, you can actually make printable books from Wikipedia articles with an editing tool provided right on the website.***

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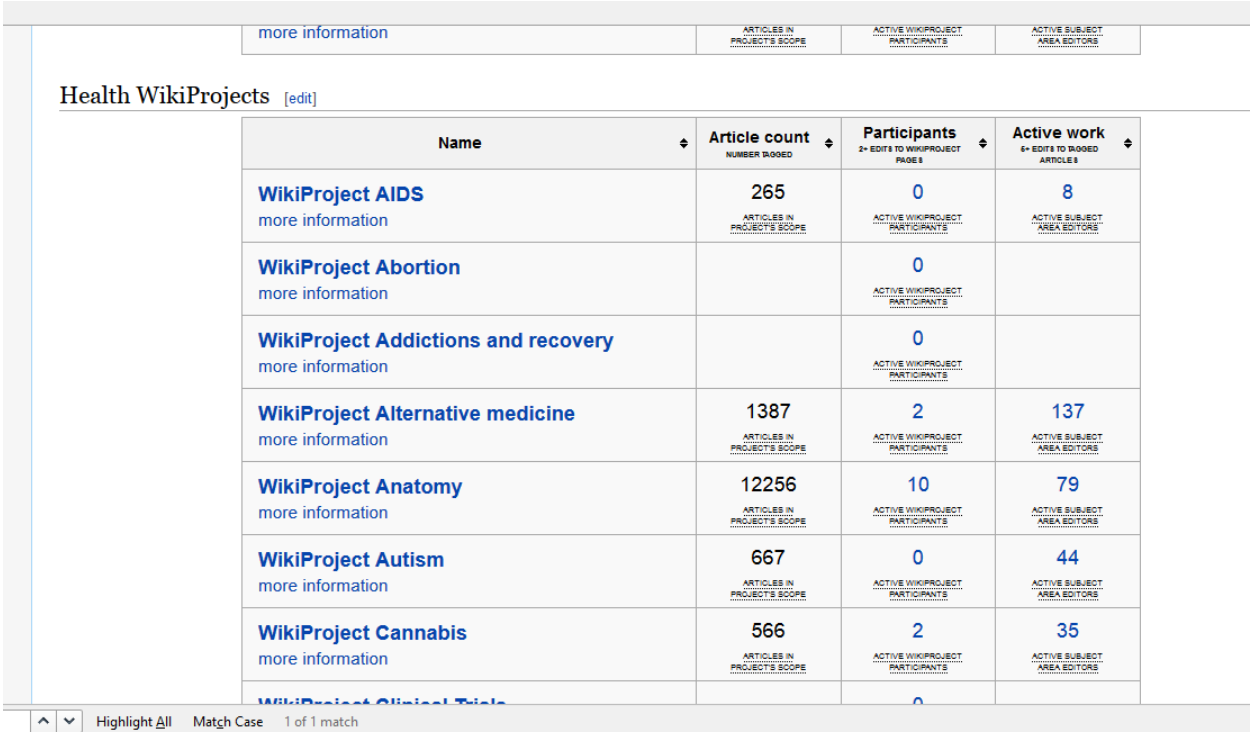
Wikipedia projects:

Wikipedia projects are a great tool when using Wikipedia for research. Projects are made up of editors who join the project for the purpose of editing articles on a specific topic. There are Wiki-projects for music, cities, science, health, and just about every other topic you can think of.

To find a project related to your research, you can go to the Wikipedia Project Directory.

So, let's pretend that we are going to stay in the health field and do research on AIDS (sorry, there is not Wiki-project on Ebola). The first place we would go to is the Wikipedia Project Directory (link above). Once we are there, we click on the health tab which will take us to a list of all health related Wiki-projects (screenshot below).



Health WikiProjects [edit]

Name	Article count (NUMBER TAGGED)	Participants (2+ EDITS TO WIKIPROJECT PAGES)	Active work (5+ EDITS TO TAGGED ARTICLES)
WikiProject AIDS more information	265 ARTICLES IN PROJECT'S SCOPE	0 ACTIVE WIKIPROJECT PARTICIPANTS	8 ACTIVE SUBJECT AREA EDITORS
WikiProject Abortion more information		0 ACTIVE WIKIPROJECT PARTICIPANTS	
WikiProject Addictions and recovery more information		0 ACTIVE WIKIPROJECT PARTICIPANTS	
WikiProject Alternative medicine more information	1387 ARTICLES IN PROJECT'S SCOPE	2 ACTIVE WIKIPROJECT PARTICIPANTS	137 ACTIVE SUBJECT AREA EDITORS
WikiProject Anatomy more information	12256 ARTICLES IN PROJECT'S SCOPE	10 ACTIVE WIKIPROJECT PARTICIPANTS	79 ACTIVE SUBJECT AREA EDITORS
WikiProject Autism more information	667 ARTICLES IN PROJECT'S SCOPE	0 ACTIVE WIKIPROJECT PARTICIPANTS	44 ACTIVE SUBJECT AREA EDITORS
WikiProject Cannabis more information	566 ARTICLES IN PROJECT'S SCOPE	2 ACTIVE WIKIPROJECT PARTICIPANTS	35 ACTIVE SUBJECT AREA EDITORS

Highlight All Match Case 1 of 1 match

The next step is obvious (if not obvious, here is a hint – "click on the AIDS hyperlink"). This will take you to the project page for AIDS. You will notice in the screenshot that there are zero participants in this project. I used this as an example as you can actually see form the directory which projects are active or not. You will want to choose one that has plenty of participants or you are unlikely to get any help.

Once you are on a project page, you will find links to numerous articles relating to the project. It is a great location to find many Wikipedia articles to start your research from. You can also send messages to the participants and ask them questions if you wish. You could wind up picking up an expert quote for whatever paper you are writing.

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Wiki-projects will lead you to categories containing all the pages associated with the topic. Above you can see links to all Wikipedia pages related to the AIDS Wikipedia project.

Quick Fact – ***If you are looking for an expert in a particular field, you will likely find them in the various Wiki-projects. You will find that doctors gravitate towards medical projects, lawyers to law, etc.***

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Reference desk:

The reference desk is one of my favorites. It is similar to a forum and is made up of regular Wikipedia contributors who are there to help you through your Wikipedia experience. It works the same way a reference desk does at a library, only in the virtual realm. Simply post questions about the topic you are researching and sit back while others point you in the right direction.

Once you are directed to the specific pages on the topic you are looking for, you will need to go back to the "searching articles" or "Wikipedia projects" sections previously discussed in this guide.

The reference desk (pictured above) can be a great place to find resources. It has links to everything you need to know about Wikipedia including how to contribute, where to find sources, and an area where you can ask experienced editors questions about your research.

The reference desk is also a great place to find valuable resources for your research. Want to search outside of Wikipedia? The reference desk can still help. And, this is where it pays to be a Wikipedia contributor. If you are a regular contributor, **you can request free access to numerous archive databases, including newspapers, journals, and other valuable sources**. There are different requirements for each archive (most are contingent on length of time you have edited and the number of edits you have performed) so read through them carefully.

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- List of academic databases and search engines
- List of biodiversity databases
- List of Internet forums
- Free online resources
- Other online reference desks
- Resource Exchange

The Wikipedia Library

Partners

Adam Matthew · BMJ · British Newspaper Archive · Cochrane · Credo · De Gruyter · DynaMed · Elsevier ScienceDirect · FindMyPast · HighBeam · HeinOnline · JSTOR · Keesings · Loeb · MIT Press Journals · Newspapers.com · OCLC · Oxford · Past Masters · Pelican Books · Public Catalogue Foundation · Project MUSE · RIPM · Royal Society · Royal Pharmaceutical Society · Royal Society of Chemistry · Sage Stats · ScotlandsPeople · Questia · Women Writers Online

Resources

Resource Exchange · **Reference Desk** · Research Desk · Discover open access · Resource Guides · Book Sources · Bibliographies · Free newspaper sources · Online archives

Wikiprojects

Libraries · OA · Bibliographies · Books · Journals · Citation · Unreferenced · Fact check

Outreach

Universities and Libraries · Archivists · Publishers · Wikipedia Loves Libraries · GLAM · Education program · Education outreach · Wikisource references · Wikidata source metadata

Get involved

Get free journal access · Read the Books & Bytes newsletter · Be a Wikipedia Visiting Scholar · Teach Library Interns · Create a profile · Become a Coordinator · Learn about TWL

Open Access Button

The Wikipedia Library links from the reference desk. The Library has links to many sources you can use for your research project, including sources outside of Wikipedia.

Newspapers, genealogy [edit]

BNA (British Newspaper Archives)

- (open) The British Newspaper Archive (BNA) is a newspaper database gathered from the British Library's holdings of newspapers (for more information on what gets digitized see the discussion of the partnership). This database is particularly suited for 18th, 19th and early 20th century British and Global news events and people content: their current collection includes mostly regional papers and very few titles go beyond the 1950s, many stopping in the early twentieth century.

FindMyPast.com

- (open) Find My Past (FMP) is a UK-based genealogical database containing a number of different records related to biographies. This database would be best used for verifying material related to peoples from the UK (though the database includes records from other countries as well, including a substantial amount of US and Canadian records).

HighBeam Research

- (open) HighBeam Research is an online, subscription-based search engine for newspapers, magazines, academic journals, newswires, trade magazines and encyclopedias. The site has access to over 80 million articles from 6,500 publications, most of which are not available free elsewhere on the internet. Thousands of new articles are added daily, archives date back over 25 years including trade journal, newspaper articles, and peer-reviewed journals covering a wide range of subjects and industries; and there are tools for finding, saving, organizing, and sharing information as documents.

Newspapers.com

- (open) Newspapers.com is a newspaper database in the family of companies associated with Ancestry.com. Their database includes more than 73 million pages from 3,000-plus newspapers, mostly local United States papers with some Canadian and elsewhere. It is particularly suited for Wikipedia content about the 18th, 19th and the first ¾ of the 20th century in the United States and global topics affecting the United States. the collection includes some major newspapers for limited periods (i.e., 50 years of the New York Times), but mostly consists of regional papers from the 1700s onward. Very few titles go beyond the late 1980s.

Scotland's People

Screenshot of the Newspaper Archive section of the Wikipedia Library (via the reference desk). You can see two archives that I use on a regular basis that would normally run approximately $50 per month. However, they are free if you are a regular contributor.

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Your Academic Use

As a final thought, keep in mind that I am not your professor or school administrator. This means that **although I am providing information on how to use Wikipedia correctly, the final say in how you use Wikipedia is up to your educational institution and the individual professor for each class**. If in doubt, share this guide with them and show them how you plan to use Wikipedia for general knowledge and finding sources, not as a source itself.

1. Check with your school on its policy on Wikipedia use.

2. Check with your individual professors about their policy on Wikipedia use.

3. Use Wikipedia as a research tool (the starting point) and not as the ultimate authority.

Quick Fact (or my opinion) – ***Some students will simply browse this guide without taking into consideration its content. They will end up citing Wikipedia anyway and wind up having to take this class a second time.***

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Additional Reading:

Additional reading if you have the time and are not already exhausted from reading my rant.

Wikipedia Guide to Notability, Wood 2015

Wikipedia, Academia, and Science, Aibar 2015

Should university students use Wikipedia?, The Guardian 2013

Is Wikipedia a Reliable Legal Authority?, Above The Law 2014

Wikipedia's Gender Problem Gets a Closer Look, Live Science 2014

Wikipedia editors are a dying breed. The reason? Mobile, The Guardian 2015

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Works Cited

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Debate.org. (n.d.). *Is Wikipedia a reliable and socially beneficial resource?* Retrieved from Debate.org: http://www.debate.org/opinions/is-wikipedia-a-reliable-and-socially-beneficial-resource

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Orlowski, A. (2006, June 15). *Avoid Wikipedia, warns Wikipedia chief*. Retrieved from The Register: http://www.theregister.co.uk/2006/06/15/wikipedia_can_damage_your_grades/

Sanger, L. (2005, April 18). *The Early History of Nupedia and Wikipedia: A Memoir*. Retrieved from Slashdot: http://features.slashdot.org/story/05/04/18/164213/the-early-history-of-nupedia-and-wikipedia-a-memoir

Siddique, A. (2013, December 27). *Meet the Stats Master Making Sense of Wikipedia's Massive Data Trove*. Retrieved from Wired: http://www.wired.com/2013/12/erik-zachte-wikistats/

Veeck, R. (2011, October 9). *Struggling with Legitimacy: Wikipedia is still loking for its place in academia*. Retrieved from Michigan Daily: http://www.michigandaily.com/news/wikipedia

Wikipedia. (2015). *Wikipedia Introduction*. Retrieved from Wikipedia.org: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Introduction

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Michael Wood is an online marketing expert and owner of Legalmorning.com. He specializes in reputation and brand management, article writing, and professional Wikipedia editing. He is an expert Wikipedia editor and has helped hundreds of businesses and people post their articles to the site where they have otherwise failed. He is a regular contributor to many online publications including AllBusiness Experts, Business Insider, Business2Community, and Social Media Today.

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