

Cate Calhoun

# Using Wikipedia in information literacy instruction

## Tips for developing research skills

As an information literacy instructor at Auburn University, it has been a perpetual struggle to teach students how to successfully search for library resources when they come to their one-time library sessions with only a broad paper topic and no idea how to narrow it down. A student recently told me regarding an English composition due in a few days, “The topic is so broad, I can’t pick an argument. I don’t even know where to start.” I began encouraging students to use a resource that they feel comfortable with as a starting point—Wikipedia.

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia anyone can edit, was founded in 2001. Controversy over its accuracy and validity began then and continues today. Academic departments have banned it, professors and librarians disparage it. However, Wikipedia is going strong, increasing in both users and number of entries each day.<sup>1</sup> Although every student in my class raised his or her hand when asked if they used Wikipedia for research, I still received the comment, “I thought Wikipedia was not okay for research at all!” Students continue to use it even though they know it is not a valid source.

However, students feel comfortable using Wikipedia, and they aren’t the only ones. As Debbie Abilock said in a 2012 article, “Our students may acknowledge that Wikipedia is unreliable, but they use it anyway—and so do we.”<sup>2</sup> Rather than shunning the site, its popularity can be used as a learning tool. In my classes I have successfully used Wikipedia for topic development and for finding keywords and additional sources. Students

may be surprised that it’s “allowed,” but they have embraced the familiar tool and are using it effectively.

### Topic development

“Just getting started on a research assignment is the most difficult part of the research process for me.”<sup>3</sup> This was a common finding in a survey by Project Information Literacy, and I often hear it in the classroom, as well. Wikipedia is an excellent starting point for students who aren’t sure how to narrow down a broad topic. Professors often give students a choice of larger topics with the expectation that they will select an aspect of one of the topics on which to focus their paper. However, when students are first trying to locate resources, their search strategies reveal they aren’t sure how to make a broad topic into a smaller, manageable thesis statement or research question to which they can respond within a few pages.

For example, *sustainability* is a theme that appears in English composition courses. The term *sustainability* applies to a variety of disciplines, and any number of paper topics could emerge from sustainability as a broad topic. This is an opportunity for Wikipedia to be useful. The Wikipedia entry for *sustainability* offers the subheadings of “environment,” “economy,” and “social issues.”<sup>4</sup> Beneath each of those are narrower topics

---

Cate Calhoun is instruction and reference librarian at Auburn University, e-mail: cac0062@auburn.edu

© 2014 Cate Calhoun

such as “land use,” “economic opportunity,” and “poverty.”

This breakdown, written in easy-to-understand, nonacademic language, allows students to consider their options for a research question, learn a little more about their individual topics, and even offers links to government websites and peer-reviewed journals. Encouraging use of Wikipedia to understand and develop a topic allows students access to this familiar resource while showing them how to use it appropriately.

### Identifying keywords

Even if they have some knowledge of their topic, students may struggle with generating keywords for a search strategy in a library database. As an information literacy objective, students should be able to extract relevant keywords from their research topic. For example, “The effect of drilling for oil in Alaska” could yield “oil,” “drilling,” and “Alaska.” In learning to broaden a search strategy students are encouraged to find related terms and phrases. Using a traditional thesaurus will provide alternative terms, but they may not be relevant to the research topic.

A look at the Wikipedia article “Arctic Refuge drilling controversy” provides a number of options for building a search strategy.<sup>5</sup> “Oil and drilling and Alaska” becomes “(oil or crude) and (drilling or oil exploration) and (Alaska or ANWR).” Referencing a Wikipedia article to develop a search strategy is a convenient and fast way to find related terms students may have struggled to brainstorm on their own.

### Finding additional resources

A third use for Wikipedia articles relevant to a research topic is found in the list of references appearing at the end of every entry. These links offer a valuable opportunity to teach students about bibliography mining, looking at the bibliographies of articles to “mine” additional resources of value. In Wikipedia, these references appear in linked format. Many citations in a Wikipedia article go to other websites, but some reference lists

include magazine, newspaper, and journal articles not freely available on the web. This is a chance to show students how to locate and use a variety of sources using both the Internet and library databases. Students can link to another website and consider its validity, or learn to extract the relevant information from a journal citation needed to locate it. Wikipedia editors look at the references as well as the content, and these references are expected to be valid and reliable. One can see from looking at the edit history of any number of Wikipedia entries that they will be removed if they do not meet these criteria.

### Conclusion

If information literacy instructors make a commitment to use Wikipedia in the classroom, students have a comfortable platform in which they can begin to learn more reliable means of research. Wikipedia can act as a bridge to help them become familiar with library resources and a new way to research they may have never learned in high school. Wikipedia continues to increase in popularity, and it is likely that students will continue to use it. Scholars, educators, and librarians should not shun it, but rather embrace it and make it work within a structure of information literacy while furthering students’ education.

### Notes

1. Wikipedia, “Wikipedia: Wikipedians,” Wikipedia.org, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedians> (accessed February 6, 2013).
2. Debbie Abilock, “True—or Not?” *Educational Leadership* 69, no. 6 (2012): 70-74.
3. Project Information Literacy, “PIL InfoLit Dialog No. 3: Frustrations,” Youtube.com, [http://youtu.be/rmEzo51e\\_SQ](http://youtu.be/rmEzo51e_SQ) (accessed February 6, 2013).
4. Wikipedia, “Sustainability,” Wikipedia.org. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainability> (accessed February 6, 2013).
5. Wikipedia. “Arctic Refuge drilling controversy.” Wikipedia.org. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arctic\\_Refuge\\_drilling\\_controversy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arctic_Refuge_drilling_controversy) (accessed February 6, 2013). 