

## Wikipedia: Friend or Foe?

### Friend

Wikipedia is already a de facto curricular resource. Want to learn about prime numbers? Both Google and Yahoo place the Wikipedia article at the top of their search results. Fidel Castro? Gerunds? Impressionism? Filibusters? Ostriches? Wikipedia is first. It's also the eighth most visited site on the Internet, and many of those visitors are students.

But whether Wikipedia should be a classroom resource hinges upon two factors. The first is the curriculum. If the curriculum is a closed body of information and skills to be transmitted to students, you should ignore Wikipedia and direct students



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to proven resources such as textbooks. Wikipedia—with its uneven quality, vandalism, and distractions—will disrupt this transfer. If your curriculum is an opening into critical thinking and knowledge construction, however, teachers *must* use flawed sources such as Wikipedia, alongside more authoritative texts.

### Foe

Since its inception in 1991, Wikipedia has grown to become the self-styled pre-eminent “resource” for information on millions of topics. The site boasts millions of contributors, but what are their qualifications?

Although the thought of a Web 2.0 voluntary-participation encyclopedia might make you feel all warm and fuzzy, the whole idea makes a teacher's head hurt. As an educator, I value any information source as just that—information. But, as I remind my students, all information, evidence, and the like are subject to some form of vetting.

I grew up trusting *World Book* and *Encyclopedia Britannica* as gospel in my high school days. After all, there was nothing else.



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Facts-on-File had not even appeared on the horizon. Now, in the age of the Internet, Web 2.0, and beyond, students have so many sources to choose from, I would never allow them to rely on Wikipedia as the be-all, end-all authority.

In some ways, Wikipedia is a huge collection of well-

The second factor is how Wikipedia is used. Wikipedia is best not as an information *source* but as a *structure*. The top-level article is only the most current revision in a never-ending editing process. Clicking on the other tabs displays this machinery. Under History, students can view every version of the article, back to the beginning. They can compare versions and judge editors' credibility. Consider an article on a sitting senator, edited from a Capitol Hill IP address. Should the changes be taken at face value? Someone named "Comrade Martin" has significantly revised the Fidel Castro article; should he or she be accepted as an authority? The Discussion tab records contributors' discussions. In *The Scarlet Letter*, can Chillingworth be considered a sympathetic character? In the ostrich article, how should the animal's evolutionary history be presented? Finally, the Edit tab invites

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students to enter into the collaboration. By understanding Wikipedia as an information structure, students can more appropriately use the information they encounter, whether in Wikipedia or elsewhere.

Wikipedia can still add value as an information source. Students can contrast Wikipedia's presentation with that of an established source, such as the textbook. In what ways is Wikipedia more or less accurate? Comprehensive? Easy to understand? Well referenced? Students might also analyze a single topic across multiple Wikipedia articles. For example, the English- and Spanish-language articles on Castro are not the same. Students can examine a relevant Simple English entry at [simple.wikipedia](http://simple.wikipedia.org).

org and decide whether it clearly and completely describes a topic.

We can choose to ignore Wikipedia. We can block it from our networks and tell our students they are not allowed to use it. But it will still be used. If we don't employ Wikipedia—appropriately—in our instruction, we will be like ostriches sticking our heads in the sand. (Even though, as the Wikipedia entry has noted since 2002, ostriches do not stick their heads in the sand. It's a figure of speech.) More important, we will be missing a tremendous instructional opportunity.

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written research papers. All that's missing is a stack of limp-cornered index cards with sources and information carefully block-printed on each. But, like all research papers, the facts are only as reliable as the sources. Unless Wikipedia can certify that the information is factually correct, then teachers worldwide should view the data therein with a jaundiced eye.

The Internet may be the information superhighway, but the image of the '90s as a series of billboards and road signs delivering content has been replaced by whole communities of data with clearinghouses and distribution centers for not only facts, but also half-truths, exaggerations, hyperbole, and out-and-out disinformation. And there's a lot of it. Separating the factual wheat from the patently absurd chaff may be easy, but contrasting a truth and a half-truth is a skill that we as educators need to be instilling in our students now.

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So why discard Wikipedia just because it may have half-truths and disinformation? I don't claim to have never quoted from research papers, master's theses, and doctoral theses replete with those same half-truths, opinions, and editorializing while writing research papers of my own, so I am not condemning Wikipedia as a poisoned well. But I do pay careful attention to the citations at the bottom of the article, or the lack thereof.

And as an educator, I am concerned with not just content, but good, truthful, and factual content. If I teach my students that Wikipedia articles all come with disclaimers of questionable veracity, they can learn to use such a data bank not as truth itself, but as a road by which they can seek the truth.

Nonetheless, Wikipedia would not be on my list for the classroom unless it undergoes some major credibility checks. If we keep Wikipedia on top of the information heap, we may encourage dangerous amateur history that, like a bad Oliver Stone film, may be entertaining but is hardly factual.

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