

Wikipedia vs. Britannica

So which is a more accurate or reliable resource: Wikipedia or Britannica? Is wisdom of the crowd better than wisdom of the experts? To help make up your mind it is useful to know how both systems work.

SOME FACTS ABOUT WIKIPEDIA

- Founded in 2001
- It is open source and free meaning anyone can access it
- It has the largest amount of material ever assembled on the web. There are over 500,000 articles in English
- It is free of advertising
- It is compiled by enthusiasts
- The idea of Wikipedia is that information is compiled by collective intelligence

HOW ARE ARTICLES EDITED

- Wikipedia has no formal editorial review.
- Wikipedia articles are edited by the general public. Everyone can contribute whether they are expert or not but it does mean from time to time inaccuracies may be present in articles. Users can make contributions or corrections to articles on a continuous basis.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Timing of when a person reads a Wikipedia article is very important. From time to time inaccuracies or bias does occur, which could remain for a few days until the article is edited
- Some articles are protected to prevent vandalism which is depicted by a lock in the upper right hand corner of the article

- Wikipedia is more about the content than who wrote it. A reader can check the history of an article to see how many contributions were made, and who the contributors were. Contributors may or may not provide details of their qualifications or area of expertise.
- Wikipedia has a [grading system](#) that can display the quality of the article. It is sometimes represented by a symbol on the upper right corner of the article. For example the highest quality article is a featured article which is represented by a ★
- Due to the lack of a formal editorial process, many educators question the accuracy of Wikipedia. Nonetheless, in 2005 one study found that when scientists were asked to compare scientific articles from Wikipedia and Britannica the results showed a similar number of errors between both sets of articles. Another study found that Wikipedia had the same level and depth in its articles concerning 10 types of cancer as the Physician Data Query, a professionally edited database maintained by the National Cancer Institute.

(<http://www.livescience.com/32950-how-accurate-is-wikipedia.html>)

SHOULD YOU USE WIKIPEDIA OR IGNORE IT?

It is recommended not to use Wikipedia as a reference because

- A. Teachers may not consider it a reliable resource
- B. You may not know who the author is
- C. Any inaccuracies may not have been corrected at the time you are reading the article

However, it could be a good resource to use as a starting point to familiarise yourself with the topic. Just make sure and check the references at the end of the page and compare the article with at least 3 other resources.

SOME FACTS ABOUT BRITANNICA

- Encyclopaedia Britannica is the oldest English language reference book
- In 1981 the first digital edition was created for the LexisNexis Service.
- In the 1990's it became available electronically via CD-ROM
- In 1990 Britannica.com was launched
- Britannica.com can be accessed for free but it includes ads otherwise readers will need to subscribe
- Irish students can access it for free via www.scoilnet.ie or <http://school.eb.com/levels>

HOW ARE ARTICLES EDITED

- Britannica's editorial staff are responsible for approving the content
- Each editor oversees subject area in which they have extensive knowledge. They can write new content, or select, verify and edit content received from contributors
- The editorial staff work with advisors, contributors and readers for content development. If an article needs to be revised the changes are displayed alongside the article

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- The names of contributors and their qualifications are attached to each article
- A reader can check the history of an article to see what changes have been made
- Despite the expertise of the contributors and the strict editing process, information can still be subjective which brings a potential risk of bias

SHOULD YOU USE BRITANNICA OR IGNORE IT?

- Britannica can be used as a reference resource
- Since information can be subjective, it is advised to check the information with other resources