Tuesday’s Tidbits

Wikipedia — What You Need to Know

Most students know that Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia containing millions of articles on topics of all kinds and that it almost always comes up on the first page of results when searching in Google. While it can be a good source of overview information on a topic, it isn’t generally considered to be a credible source, and most college professors do not allow students to use and cite articles from it when doing a research paper. Do you know why? Moran (2011) and Cohen (2011) listed these as some of the reasons why students shouldn’t cite and rely on the information found in Wikipedia:

• You shouldn’t rely on information that has no author. Anyone can contribute to an article or write one themselves regardless of their knowledge of the topic, and most do so anonymously, so there is no way to check the author’s credentials (Moran, 2011, para 5).

• The diversity among editors is questionable. Based on a study done in 2010, barely 13% are women, and the average age of a contributor was in the mid-20s (Cohen, 2011, para.3). Even if this has improved over time, this kind of uniformity can limit the perspective or viewpoint of the information.

• It’s not a good idea to rely on any one source for important information, especially when the information it provides is an overview of the topic. (Moran, 2011, para 3).

• False information may not be corrected for months after it’s posted (Moran, 2011, para 12).

Even Wikipedia admits these issues with its contributors and editors. According to its “About Wikipedia” page, this is what it says about itself:

Wikipedia is written collaboratively by largely anonymous volunteers who write without pay. Anyone with Internet access can write and make changes to Wikipedia articles, except in limited cases where editing is restricted to prevent disruption or vandalism. Users can contribute anonymously, under a pseudonym, or, if they choose to, with their real identity. (“Wikipedia,” n.d., para. 2).

Additionally, Wikipedia (n.d.) says this:

Wikipedia is a work-in-progress, with articles in various stages of completion. As articles develop, they tend to become more comprehensive and balanced. Quality also improves over time as misinformation and other errors are removed or repaired. However, because anyone can click "edit" at any time and add stuff in, any article may contain undetected misinformation, errors, or vandalism. (para. 4).

The bottom line is this: If you use Wikipedia when doing research for a paper or project, limit its use to overview information, and do not cite Wikipedia in your paper. Find the original source of the information, and cite this source in your list of references instead.

References

