

Wikipedia & Information Literacy

What is Wikipedia?

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that anyone can edit. As of April 2009, there are approximately 2.8 million encyclopedia articles in English and nearly 13 million in total.

Why is Wikipedia relevant to libraries and librarians?

Wikipedia is a new generation research tool that many students utilize. It is often in the top 10 results in a Google search. Since students use Google a lot, often before they use a library's online catalog or one of its databases, Wikipedia has become a big part of student research. Because of this, some in higher education (librarians, professors, and administrators) discourage its use and/or ban it.

What should librarians do with Wikipedia?

We should be educating students on the proper use of all information sources, including Wikipedia. Becoming an information literate student is more than just knowing how to find resources in an online catalog or a database. Because we live in the information age, students encounter information almost every minute they are awake. They get text messages & email; read books, blogs, and news on the web; watch videos on YouTube; go to class and hear a professor's lecture; and talk to their friends. If we want to help students go out into the world today, they need to be able to sift through all of the information that they are bombarded with. By interacting with them on a level that they understand instead of scolding them or telling them that they cannot or should not use a certain resource, I believe that we can help instill in them the tools necessary to be a lifelong learner.

Using Wikipedia to Teach information Literacy

- Determine the extent of information needed
 - Use Wikipedia to help students understand a topic or idea.
- Access needed information effectively and efficiently
 - Wikipedia and other encyclopedias are good ways to find citations
 - Use Wikipedia to brainstorm keywords
- Evaluate information and its sources critically
 - Talk about the pros and cons of using an encyclopedia edited by anyone
 - Use Wikipedia as a starting point to a discussion on how to evaluate a resource and its usefulness
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
 - Wikis are becoming used more frequently – this is another tool that students may need to familiarize themselves with when they graduate
 - Talk about how different media suit different needs
- Using information ethically and legally
 - Wikipedia encourages people to cite material
 - Describe different citation styles and how to cite material

Further Information

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*See <http://www.nature.com/nature/britannica/index.html>, for links to Encyclopedia Britannica's response to the Nature study, Nature's formal response to Encyclopedia Britannica, an editorial on the subject, and a point-by-point response to Encyclopedia Britannica's criticisms of the Nature article. Also, see <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v438/n7070/extref/438900a-s1.doc>, for information on how data was collected for the original article.