



Using Wikipedia: Crash Course Navigating Digital Information #5

Crash Course: Navigating Digital Information

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=ih4dY9i9JKE>

<https://nerdfighteria.info/v/ih4dY9i9JKE>

Hello, and welcome to Crash Course Navigating Digital Information.

I'm John Green. According to my Wikipedia page, I'm an American author, vlogger, writer, producer, actor, editor, and educator. I've released some books, won some awards, got married, had kids, and I have a brother named Hank. There's also a photo of me from VidCon in 2014, in which I'm wearing a football scarf, which is very on-brand.

Now, you could've learned a lot of that stuff from my personal website, but, then again, I have a certain bias in how I present myself. For instance, I would never write about Hank on my website. He can start his own website if he wants that free promo.

Also, as we've discussed through this series, you shouldn't use one single site as a definitive source. When evaluating new information, we have to read laterally; that means looking to other sources to provide context. Now, it's not always easy to find sources to consult, but, when used correctly, Wikipedia can be a great place to start.

Right, I know that Wikipedia can also be unreliable. My own Wikipedia page once briefly said that I was a professional lacrosse player, and I am an actor only in the sense that I was cut from the one movie I appeared in. But, I do think we can use Wikipedia for good.

[Intro]

So, many of us have been told by teachers, librarians, parents, peers, coworkers, friends, pen pals, babysitters, nieces and nephews, celebrity spokespeople, Instagram-famous dogs, our favorite baristas, particularly cogent toddlers, religious leaders, Jeff Goldblum, long lost cousins, and anonymous Twitter trolls never to use Wikipedia. You've probably heard that Wikipedia is full of totally unusable, unreliable information that was written by random internet users. I'm here to dispel that myth. Well, me and my friends at MediaWise.

Now, it's true that Wikipedia is editable by almost anyone and its content is created by a community of mostly volunteer Wikipedians. The whole network is owned and supported by a non-profit, called the Wikimedia Foundation. And, Wikipedia has become the internet's largest general reference work, with over 40 million articles in 301 languages, including over 5.7 million articles in English.

While you're there, you can learn about anything from the *Gothic Bible* to Whitney Houston's 1985 hit "How Will I Know" to the absolutely terrifying star-nosed mole. I don't know what it is about the star-nosed mole, but it freaks me out so bad. I've had dreams about it. Anyway... it's got a great Wikipedia page.

Now, you can't learn everything about a single topic from its Wikipedia page. The universe is, of course, much more complicated than even an endless online encyclopedia could account for. But, what makes Wikipedia useful to citizens of the internet is its breadth. It provides information on more topics than any print encyclopedia could. And, a top-notch Wikipedia page can provide a solid overview of a topic, and also provide citations to sources for its claims.

It's kind of like a tour guide: it gives you a general lay of the land and shows you where to discover more. Even fact checkers use Wikipedia to familiarize themselves with unknown topics.

Now, when Wikipedia first launched in 2001, it got a bad reputation because of how easy it was to create and edit articles. Essentially anyone with an internet connection could log on and update their high school's notable alumni to include their own name. You could

also delete your brother's Wikipedia page on the grounds that he wasn't a notable person, not that I ever did that. I mean, that, that would be terrible.

That flexibility, to put it diplomatically, is likely why teachers and others have warned you against it, but Wikipedia has grown up a lot since 2001. It's nearly 18. Wikipedia is almost an adult, and it's starting to act like it.

Today, anyone with an internet connection can still edit most pages on Wikipedia, but there are much more rigorous content policies in place and more Wikipedian, and even bots, around to prevent and correct bad edits. Like, if you repeatedly add yourself to your school's notable alumni section, you can bet an editor will be close behind to keep you humble.

You also now have to be a registered user to create an article, and article topics have to meet a standard of notability before they can even be created. Wikipedians also adhere to a set of rules when editing and writing content. Their core content policies are summed up by three key phrases. One, a neutral point of view, meaning content must be represented fairly, proportionately, and without bias. Two, no original research, meaning all material must come from a published, reliable source. And three, verifiability, meaning people reading and editing articles must be able to check that the information comes from a reliable source.

Now, policies and rules are all well and good, but they're only as good as the people who enforce them. So, volunteer Wikipedians act as writers and editors, and also they keep each other in check. There are also administrators who have a higher level of authority, and they can do things like delete pages, or respond to vandalism, or even lock a page so only certain people can make changes. But, they're not, like, all-knowing gods. They're regular Wikipedians in good standing with the community, because they've proven themselves to be responsible editors who use accurate, documented information.

As of the day we filmed this video, there are 1,206 administrators for the English Wikipedia site. In contrast, there are over 34.8 million registered Wikipedians, about 134,000 of whom have edited in the past month.

The good thing about this giant buddy system is that it has to be pretty transparent in order to function. At the top of a Wikipedia article, you'll see little tabs. One says article, that's pretty self-explanatory, and then there's talk. That's where you can see the conversation Wikipedians have had about editing that article. One the American Civil War page, for instance, there's even a frequently asked questions section. And, under a page's view history tab, you can see how and when an article has been edited and by whom.

Some pages are especially prone to vandals who alter their content by adding inaccuracies or violating Wikipedia policies. This most frequently happens to sensitive or controversial topics. And so, if an article is contentious or prone to vandalism, it may be locked for protection. There are different levels of protection under which certain users might be able to edit a partially locked page. Like the pages of the Quran and the Big Bang, for example, are both semi-protected. That means no new or unregistered users can edit it.

But, there are also other kinds of protection. To find out if a page is locked, look to its upper right hand corner for a little padlock icon. Locks appear in many different colors, with gold denoting the highest protection, only administrators can edit those pages.

On Wikipedia, you might also come across different notes and warning labels at the top of a page. Some sub-standard pages have problems with their structure or their sourcing or even their tone. So



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Wikipedians add attention-grabbing notes to alert readers to any problems. For instance, the page for the National Aerospace Laboratory of the Netherlands has been flagged. It warns: "This article contains content that is written like an advertisement." Wikipedia pages are supposed to have a neutral points of view, so that note gives readers a heads up that this one might not. The freestyle (monster trucks) page also has a warning: it doesn't cite any sources. That certainly breaks the verifiability rules, although now I really want to know what a freestyle monster truck show is.

Anyway, thanks to these policies and warning, Wikipedia can be a really useful place for getting a bird's eye view of a topic or starting more thorough research. But, and you knew there was a but coming, that's not permission to use Wikipedia as a one-stop shop for conducting in-depth research, nor is it permission to cite it in your work. Honestly, citing an encyclopedia of any kind just isn't a great look for research projects.

And Wikipedia isn't perfect. It's not always accurate. As we've said before in this series, when navigating digital information, there is no magic bullet. There is no one perfect or objective source, partly because everything was made by fallible humans, and partly because the people using sources are also fallible. That said, Wikipedia does have real power, and I think its biggest power lies in its ability to help us read laterally by harvesting its citations. Let's try it out in the thought bubble.

So, imagine your friend shares the following post in your feed: "Thanks to this site I know exactly what's good for my body and, more importantly, WHAT ISN'T." I links to a website, called Natural News, that you've never heard of. When you visit NaturalNews.com and check the about page, they call themselves a science-based natural health advocacy organization. And, the site is jam-packed with words and pictures.

But, since you're an excellent lateral reader, the next thing you do to evaluate this information is open a new tab to conduct a search. Pro-tip: search the website's URL and the word "Wikipedia" to surface its Wikipedia entry. Wikipedians call Natural News a website for the sale of various dietary supplements, promotion of alternative medicine, controversial nutritional and health claims, scientific fake news, and various conspiracy theories. That is, you know, a significantly different characterization than their own about page.

The Wikipedia entry also has a section for criticisms and controversies, which talks about scientists, writers, and journalists who have called out factual inaccuracies on Natural News. Throughout this section, you'll see superscript numbers in brackets in between words and at the end of sentences. Those link to citations; hover over them to find either direct links or references to where the corresponding information came from. Citation 22, for example, leads to a peer-reviewed journal article calling Natural News a website that spreads irresponsible health information. And, citation 35 links to a post from climate change site, the Grist, titled, literally, "Don't believe anything you read at Natural News."

Thanks thought bubble.

So, now you have a clear understanding that this website and its content are very controversial and considered unreliable by other outlets. And, whenever you are interested in a fact on a Wikipedia page, look for the embedded citation. You can then check in on those sources, and follow up to confirm the information you find.

I've been using this in my own life. For instance, I recently reviewed the Taco Bell breakfast menu for my podcast, *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, and I started at the Wikipedia page for Taco Bell, which, through the citations, led me to the amazing biography of Taco Bell founder, Glen Bell, *Taco Titan: The Glen Bell Story*.

So, if you click any of the superscript numbers on a Wikipedia page, you'll find the full list of references for that page at the bottom. And, those also link back to their locations in the text, like an index. Now, not all pages have citations, and not all citations are reliable, but this is a place where you can quickly look for more information from authoritative sources.

The main criticism of Wikipedia concerns the reliability of its information. As we discussed earlier in the episode, the community does have policies in place to regulate its articles. They have ways of letting readers know about inaccuracies or incomplete articles, too, which are certainly helpful. But, plenty of bad information does slip through. It sometimes even leads to editing wars between Wikipedians who edit back and forth to try to set the record straight.

Over the years a variety of studies have evaluated how Wikipedia measures up to similar reference works or examined the accuracy of selected articles. And, the results of these have been mixed, with some finding Wikipedia is comparable to commercial encyclopedias and others finding pretty serious errors of omission.

And accuracy isn't Wikipedia's only weakness. Its community has also been criticized for gender and racial biases, both for the kind of community it fosters and for the topics it covers. The content on Wikipedia is a product of those who get to participate, so it will inherently reflect any inequalities in its community. One example of this is that the article about Toilet Paper Orientation is incredibly carefully written and cited, whereas the English-language article on the Indus Valley Civilization city of Harappa is much less detailed.

Wikipedia is also dependant on published sources, which have their own gender and racial biases and contribute to what is and is not verifiable on Wikipedia. But, as we know from our last episode, it's possible to use sources that are systematically skewed towards one group's perspective, as long as we take that perspective into account when evaluating its information. In this case, that means treating Wikipedia as a launchpad, not a finish line. It's not where you should do all of your research and lateral reading, but it's a good place to start.

One last note, some researchers skip the body of a Wikipedia article entirely and head straight for the citations to look for trustworthy sources. After all, some pages have hundreds of references to primary sources, scholarly journals, and other strong publications.

We should think of Wikipedia as another tool in your information evaluation tool kit. You go there for a general overview of a topic or a stepping stone to more references, or to use as one lateral reading source among several. And, as long as you know how and when to use it appropriately, Wikipedia can be a great friend. But, it shouldn't be your only friend. And, actually, now that we're talking about it, I feel like all your friends, really, they should probably be people. Or dogs. Or a cat, if you're that kind of person.

Anyway, thanks for watching. We'll see you next week.

[Outro]

Thank you for watching Crash Course, which is filmed here in Indianapolis, Indiana with the help of all these nice people.

For this series Crash Course has teamed up with MediaWise, a project out of the Poynter Institute that was created with support from Google. The Poynter Institute is a non-profit journalism school. The goal of MediaWise is to teach students how to assess the accuracy of information they encounter online.

The MediaWise curriculum was developed by the Stanford History



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Education Group based on civic online reasoning research they began in 2015. If you're interested in learning more about MediaWise and fact-checking, you can visit [@MediaWiseTips](#) on Instagram.

Thanks again for watching, and thanks to MediaWise and the Stanford History Education Group for working with us on this project.