Using Wikipedia

1. Introduction

You may have heard people say different things about Wikipedia.

For some it is their first port of call when they come across an unfamiliar topic. However, if you are doing academic studies of any kind, it's likely you have been warned not to use it.

So should you use Wikipedia, and how far can you trust it?

Learning outcome

By the end of this activity you should be able to judge the trustworthiness of information you find in Wikipedia.

2. How to evaluate a Wikipedia article

Below is a link to a short article from Wikipedia. Select the link to view the article. Alternatively, you may prefer to search Wikipedia for an article on a topic of your own choosing.

[Android lawn statues](#)

How far do you trust what it says? The questions below will help you decide. Have a look at each question and read our comments.

Can you identify the authors?

Select the 'View history' tab to see who has edited it. You will notice contributors use pseudonyms. If you click on the pseudonym you are taken to a page where the author may have written about themselves. Sometimes this information is sparse or non-existent. This restricts following up their credentials, establishing their background knowledge on any topic and understanding their motives behind contributing to any article.

When was it published or recently updated?

The 'View History' tab shows the dates of the latest revisions to the article. These appear before the author's pseudonym and are links which take you to the page as revised by the author.

Even though Wikipedia articles can be updated at any time, changes to content may be for minor things, so that revision dates shown may not be an indication of up to date content.

Do the authors give the sources they used to write the article?

View the list of references at the bottom of the article. These give you the option to verify anything said in the article. Being able to find and read a source will help you to decide if the authors correctly interpreted the information used to support the entry.

In addition, a quick web search for information will allow to verify, from other sources, what's been said. For the article we linked to, we quickly researched the company and individuals mentioned. This way we verified that the company mentioned does create foam props and sculptures, including ones for Android. We also found out about the individuals mentioned and verified that one of them is a software engineer for Google who has written about Android mascots.

3. Wikipedia: the questions to ask

Keeping a few questions in mind can help you make a judgement about whether to trust what you find on Wikipedia.

Purpose

- What do you need the information for?
- How important is it that what you find is accurate and reliable?

If you are just getting a quick overview of something unfamiliar that has come up in conversation, it may not matter if specific details are in question. However, for academic research or decision-making at work, it is essential to verify the information carefully.

Author

- Do you know who put the information there?
- Is the author qualified to write on this subject?
- What are their motives?

Editors

- Who has edited the information and what can you find out about them?
- Is there any evidence of different conflicting agendas on the part of the editors?
- How recently has the information provided been edited?

Sources

- What references are listed at the end?
- Do these references seem reliable?

- Have the sources that were used to support the entry been interpreted correctly?

Double-check

- What else can you find out about the topic?

Be wary of taking facts at face value and use other sources to double-check accuracy.

4. Summary

Summary

In this activity we had a look at Wikipedia as a source of information, as well as a few questions to keep in mind when deciding whether to trust what we find on Wikipedia.

Further reading

Below, you can find some suggestions for further reading.

Bateman (2012) Why scientists should be publishing on Wikipedia

Coomer (2013) Should university students use Wikipedia?

Jordan (2014) British people trust Wikipedia more than the news