



LESSON PLAN

Level:	Grades 7 to 9
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Duration:	2 hours (excluding assessment and evaluation tasks)

Taming the Wild Wiki

Overview

Students are introduced to Wikipedia, the user-edited online encyclopedia, and given an overview of its strengths and weaknesses as a research source. They are taught how to evaluate the reliability of a Wikipedia article and then attempt to improve an existing article.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- learn how to evaluate a Wikipedia article for reliability
- learn how to effectively use Wikipedia as a research source
- assess the reliability of sources
- state and defend an opinion
- research a topic and publish their research
- contribute to a public debate

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the following handouts:

- *Knowing What's What and What's Not: The 5 Ws (and 1 "H") of Cyberspace*
- *Wikipedia 101*
- *Wikipedia Reliability Worksheet*

Procedure

Background: What is Wikipedia?

Begin by asking students where they to look for sources when they're assigned a research project. List students' answers on the board, and use follow-up questions to get them to give more specific answers (for instance, if they say "library," ask them to specify which library they mean; if they say "Internet," ask them which sites or services they use).



Once you have assembled a list of sources, ask students which of them they use most often. Most likely you will find that Internet sources, and particularly Wikipedia, are the most popular with students. (Should this not be the case, you can tell the class that according to the MediaSmarts study *Young Canadians in a Wired World*, Wikipedia is the favourite research source of Canadian students nationwide.)

Ask students what they know about *Wikipedia*. How is it like, and unlike, other encyclopedias? (Similar: it collects articles about a wide variety of sources, is written by multiple authors, and is often used as a research source for people looking for general information. Dissimilar: it is only available online [some other encyclopedias are available online, but most originated in print], it is available for free, and anyone can edit an article.)

Make sure that the last point in that list – anyone can edit an article – is included in your list.

Reliable Sources

Ask students what they think it means to say that a source is *reliable*. With the class, develop a definition of the term *reliable* as it relates to information sources. Make sure that it includes the following ideas:

- *Accurate*: the information it gives you is correct.
- *Complete*: it gives you a full picture of the subject, not just one part or one side of the story.
- *Transparent*: it's not trying to convince you of a point of view (or if it is, it's open about it).
- *Trustworthy*: you can expect the above to be true for each article and each time you use it.

Distribute the handout *Knowing What's What and What's Not: The 5 Ws (and 1 "H") of Cyberspace* and go through it with the students.

Using the *Knowing What's What and What's Not: The 5 Ws (and 1 "H") of Cyberspace* handout, have the class evaluate Wikipedia for reliability. (If possible, do this with a live Internet connection; if not you can rely on your students' knowledge of Wikipedia.) The site will do well for "Why" (it's a very efficient way of getting information) and neutrally for "Where" (its address ends in .org, which says little or nothing). Evaluating it for "Who," "What," and "When," however, will be difficult: it should be quickly obvious to students that each article needs to be evaluated independently, and even in that case the three questions are problematic because Wikipedia articles have multiple authors and are constantly changing.

Wikipedia as a Research Source

Explain to students that this is why many teachers are reluctant to let students use Wikipedia as a source: it's difficult to judge an article by traditional standards, since each article has many authors and may have been altered any number of times by people who may or may not be experts in the topic.

Ask students if they think this means that Wikipedia is a generally unreliable source. (Most will likely say no – they still see it as being reliable overall.) Tell them that because of the issues around Wikipedia, they need to do a bit of work if they're going to use a Wikipedia article as a source – they need to show that each article they use is reliable.



Distribute the handout *Wikipedia 101* and go through it with the class:

Wikipedia Principles

Discuss the section on Wikipedia principles. What does Wikipedia mean when it calls itself an encyclopedia? What is meant by keeping a "neutral point of view," and how does it affect Wikipedia's reliability? How are the principles that Wikipedia is free content and that users should assume good faith relevant to the question of reliability?

Cleanup Banners

What issues do the cleanup banners generally deal with? Are cleanup banners a reliable guide to an article's accuracy? If there are no cleanup banners, does that mean you can assume the article is accurate?

References

Why would the references in a Wikipedia article be assumed to be more accurate than the article itself? Which is better to use in a research project, the Wikipedia article or the sources it refers to? (Remind students that the sources themselves have to be assessed for reliability using the 5Ws.)

Rating Scale

What criteria does the *rating scale* use for evaluating an article? Is the *rating scale* enough to judge if an article is reliable?

Discussion Page

What information about the reliability of a Wikipedia article can be obtained from the *Discussion page*?

Edit Page

What information about the reliability of a Wikipedia article can be obtained from the *Edit page*?

Assessment Task: Evaluating a Wikipedia Article

Have students:

- Select a Wikipedia article. It must not be a *Stub* or a *Start*-class article.
- Evaluate the article using the *Wikipedia Reliability Worksheet*.
- Submit the completed *Wikipedia Reliability Worksheet*.



Evaluation Task: Improving a Wikipedia Article

This task may be completed solo or in groups, at your discretion. In order to complete it, students will need a Wikipedia login; they may do this at <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:UserLogin>. If you prefer, you may create a single login for the entire class to use (an e-mail address is required to create a user account).

Have students select a Wikipedia article. It must not be an *A* or *FA*-class article. It should be on a topic with which they are already familiar.

Using the *Wikipedia Reliability Worksheet* and *Wikipedia 101* handouts, have students identify what problems the article may have.

Have students research the topic of the article (using sources other than Wikipedia!) to try to improve it. Remind students to keep track of where they found their information so they can provide sources.

Have students make edits to the article to improve it.

Have students submit to you:

- The original article
- Their research on the topic
- The article with their revisions
- A paragraph or two identifying the changes they made and explaining why they made them.

Optional: Have students return to their article a week or a month later and see what the reaction to their changes has been: Have they been reverted? Have they been altered? Have they been added to?

Optional: Have students submit their article to a relevant *Assessment Team* (a list is available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:WikiProject_assessments) to see if it has been improved enough to increase its status.



Knowing What's What and What's Not: The Five Ws (and One "H") of Cyberspace

The old formula used by police, journalists, and researchers – Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How – can be applied in cyberspace to help identify credible online information sources.

Ask yourself:



WHO is the source of the information?

- Has someone taken responsibility for the content of this Web site?
- Is information about the author or organization clearly stated?
- Are there any links to in-depth information about the author or organization?
- Can you contact the company or author through a real world postal address or phone number?
- Can you confirm that the company or author is a credible, authoritative source of information?
- Can you verify the authority of any of the site's content that is attributed to other sources?



WHAT are you getting?

- Is the information biased in any way?
- Does the site rely on loaded language or broad, unsubstantiated statements?
- Is emotion used as a means of persuasion?
- Does the site offer more than one viewpoint?
- Are there links to other or alternative viewpoints?
- Does the site's information seem thorough and well organized?
- Does the site clearly state the topics it intends to address?
- Does it follow through on the information it has promised?
- Does the information seem complete and consistent?
- Is the information well written and easy to understand?
- Does the site offer a list of further in-depth resources or links to such resources?
- What is the copyright status of material found on the site?





WHEN was the site created?

- Is it important that the information you're looking for be absolutely current?
- Is a reference date provided to show when the material was put online, or when it was last updated?
- Do the links work?



WHERE are you?

Learn to deconstruct a Uniform Resource Locator (better known as a URL, or "site address"). Let's use the Media Awareness Network URL as an example:

<http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/teachers/index.cfm>

<http://www>.

The "http" notation indicates that this is a hypertext document (as most online documents are). The "www" is short form for "World Wide Web," where all Web sites reside.

[media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca)

The second part of a URL contains the domain name of the person or organization hosting the Web site – in this case, media-awareness. The ".ca" which follows indicates that the site is hosted by a Canadian organization.

[english/teachers/index.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/teachers/index.cfm)

The last section maps out the pathway of directories and sub directories leading to the page you are on. For this particular page on the Media Awareness Network site, "english/" indicates that you are on the English part of the site. The final URL entry ("teachers") indicates the name of the page or document you have arrived at. "cfm" indicates the code or format the page was created in (in this case, Cold Fusion Markup).

~ Sometimes you might see a "user" reference or tilde (~) symbol in a subdirectory, followed by a name. This indicates that you may be on a personal Web page that is hosted by an ISP (Internet Service Provider).



The type of organization behind a Web site can give some clues to its credibility.

- .gov** In the US, .gov applies to federal departments. In Canada, provincial governments use .gov followed by a provincial or territorial abbreviation and .ca.
- .gc** The federal government in Canada uses .gc in its domain name and in the domain names of many of its departments, such as Industry Canada and Canadian Heritage. However, some government Web sites, such as the Canadian Human Rights Commission (www.chrc-ccdp.ca), opt for just .ca.
- .ca** The Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA) is the non-profit corporation responsible for overseeing and keeping a registry of the “.ca” Internet country code domain for Canada. Schools, educational organizations, libraries, museums, and some government departments may be registered under a 2-digit country-of-origin code, such as .ca, .uk or .au. However, it’s important to remember that any Canadian organization can obtain a .ca domain.
- .edu** The United States originally created .edu to indicate American colleges and universities offering 4-year degree programs. Most Canadian universities tend to use .ca.

.org .com .net

Back in the early days of the Web, .org indicated a wide assortment of groups, including non-profit organizations; .com indicated commercial organizations; and .net was intended for organizations directly involved in Internet operations, such as Internet service providers.

Now, anyone can apply for and use these letters in their domain names. For example, the YWCA Web site in Oakville ends with .com, in Vancouver, it ends with .org, and in Montreal it ends with .ca.



WHY are you here?

Before you saddle up and ride out into cyberspace, it’s a good idea to stop and consider whether or not the Internet is even the best place to go. Ask yourself:

- Can I get the information faster offline?
- Does the online material I’m finding suit my needs?
- Am I able to verify this information?





HOW can you tell what's what?

- When in doubt, doubt. Scepticism should be the rule of thumb on the Net.
- Apply the *Five Ws* of cyberspace to the Web sites you visit.
- Double-check your facts and sources – and then check them some more!
- Use Meta-Web information searches to assess the credibility of Web sites. This can be done by entering the author's name into a search engine to conduct a quick background check. Or you can find which sites link to a specific site by going to a search engine like *Alta Vista* and entering a "link": command in the "Search" box, followed by the page's URL.



Wikipedia 101

Wikipedia Principles

Wikipedia has a number of rules and policies which are summarized at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five_pillars as the *Five Pillars of Wikipedia*:

- **Wikipedia is an encyclopedia:** it collects existing information, instead of reporting on new discoveries or research, and tries to be as accurate as possible. As an encyclopedia it's meant to be an introduction on each subject, so articles should provide references to more detailed sources.
- **Wikipedia has a neutral point of view:** it does not take sides in an issue. It tries to give as full a picture of each topic as possible, providing multiple points of view when necessary.
- **Wikipedia is free content:** anyone can edit a *Wikipedia* article, and anyone can copy a *Wikipedia* article so long as what they're using it for non-commercial purposes.
- **Wikipedia has a code of content:** users should respect each other even when they disagree. Users should assume "good faith" in dealing with other users; in other words, assume that other people sincerely believe in their point of view and aren't just trying to start an argument, and assume that other people might have a point, even if they disagree with you.
- **Wikipedia has few rules, and users are encouraged to be bold:** it's easy to track and reverse changes, so if you think you can improve an article, go for it.

Cleanup Banners

Cleanup banners are placed at the top of *Wikipedia* articles to show that there may be a problem with the article. Any user can place a banner if they think there is an issue that should be addressed.

Common banners include:

- **The neutrality of this article is disputed:** the article may not take a *neutral point of view*.
- **The factual accuracy of this article is disputed:** some or all of the article may be untrue.
- **This needs copy editing for grammar, style, cohesion, tone or spelling:** there are problems with the writing of the article.
- **This may contain material not appropriate for an encyclopedia:** most often this means that it contains opinions or "original research" (a new theory or discovery).
- **This article only describes one highly specialized aspect of its associated subject:** the article is too specific, covering only part of the topic.
- **This article requires authentication or verification by an expert:** the article needs to be verified by someone who's an expert in the subject.
- **This article or section needs to be updated:** the article is out-of-date.
- **This is missing citations or needs footnotes:** not everything in the article is supported by references to other sources.
- **This article does not cite any references or sources.** Nothing in the article is supported by references to other sources.



References

Because *Wikipedia* is an encyclopedia, everything in it should be based on information from other sources. These sources should be listed at the bottom of the article, linked to the part of the article; if they're online sources there should be links to them.

Remember that a *Wikipedia* article is only as good as its sources, so if you're going to trust an article you have to be sure you can trust the sources as well.

Rating Scale

Each *Wikipedia* article is given a *rating*, which you can see on the *Discussion page* (click on the "Discussion" tab at the top of the page). A complete explanation of this rating scale can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Version_1.0_Editorial_Team/Assessment. The ratings are based on the evaluation of *Wikipedia* users, most often those involved in *Assessment teams* dealing with a particular topic. A list of these teams can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:WikiProject_assessments. The rating tells you something about how complete and reliable the article is:

- *Stub*: covers only the most basic information.
- *Start*: an incomplete article, without external sources.
- *C*: a reasonably complete article with some major issues such as gaps or incomplete sources.
- *B*: a complete article with reliable sources but where the writing or structure can be improved.
- *GA*: an article that is broad enough to be complete, has many reliable sources, is entirely neutral and has gone a fairly long time without major edits.
- *A*: a GA-class article that is also well-written in terms of style and structure.
- *FA*: an article that is good enough in terms of accuracy, completeness, sources, structure and writing to be held up as an example of what a good *Wikipedia* article should be.

Discussion Page

The *Discussion page* (click the tab at the top of the article) is where users record their opinions about what changes should be made to an article. If there are any problems with the article, they'll usually be discussed here.

History Page

The *History page* (click the tab at the top of the article) records all changes that have been made to the article and who made them.



Wikipedia Reliability Worksheet

Article title:

Answer the following questions to see how reliable a *Wikipedia* article is.

- 1) Start with the main page. Does it have any **cleanup banners** that have been placed there to indicate problems with the article? (A complete list is available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Template_messages/Cleanup.)

Any one of the following cleanup banners means the article is an **unreliable** source:

- *This article or section has multiple issues.*
- *This article may require cleanup to meet Wikipedia's quality standards.*
- *The neutrality of this article is disputed.*
- *The factual accuracy of this article is disputed.*
- *This needs copy editing for grammar, style, cohesion, tone or spelling.*
- *This may contain material not appropriate for an encyclopedia.*
- *This article only describes one highly specialized aspect of its associated subject.*
- *This article requires authentication or verification by an expert.*
- *This article or section needs to be updated.*
- *This article may not provide balanced geographical coverage on a region.*
- *This is missing citations or needs footnotes.*
- *This article does not cite any references or sources.*

- 2) Read through the article and see if it meets the following requirements:

- Is it written in a clear and organized way?
- Is the tone **neutral** (not taking sides)?
- Are all important facts **referenced** (you're told where they come from)?
- Does the information provided seem **complete** or does it look like there are gaps (or just one side of the story)?



- 3) Scroll down to the article's **References** and open them in new windows or tabs. Do they seem like reliable sources? (For help in determining the general reliability of a source, check out the *Knowing What's What and What's Not: The 5 Ws (and 1 "H") of Cyberspace* handout.)

Reliable references:

Possibly unreliable references:

Definitely unreliable references:

- 4) Click on the **Discussion** tab. How is the article rated on the **Rating Scale** (Stub, Start, C, B, GA, A, FA)? What issues around the article are being discussed? Do any of them make you doubt the article's reliability?

- 5) Based on the above questions, give the article an overall **ranking** of *Reliable*, *Partially Reliable* or *Unreliable*.
- You may use a *Reliable* article as a source (but remember that even if a *Wikipedia* article is reliable, it should never be your only source on a topic!)
 - You may use a *Partially Reliable* article as a starting point for your research, and may use some of its references as sources, but do not use it as a source.
 - You should not use an *Unreliable* article as a source or a starting point. Research the same topic in a different encyclopedia.

How did you rank this article (Reliable, Partially Reliable or Unreliable)? Give at least three reasons to support your answer.

