

What's the Matter with Wikipedia?

George: Welcome to the Weinberg Memorial Library's ongoing podcast series on Information Literacy. In each Podcast, a student will be asking one of the University's librarians a specific question. My name is George Aulisio, and I am a Public Services Librarian at the Weinberg Memorial Library, and this week Allen Zelno is here to try and stump me. Hi Allen, what question do you want answered?

Allen: Hi George, my professors are always giving me a hard time about using Wikipedia in my research papers. What's the big deal?

George: Well Allen, that's an excellent question. The reasons professors and librarians can be up-in-arms over the use of Wikipedia and other similar resources are that the content of these websites cannot be trusted. Any person with an internet connection could log in to Wikipedia and add incorrect information. So, possibly someone who failed history in high school writes in Wikipedia that the United States of America was founded in 1492. Even if this entry is corrected a minute later, there's still a chance you could be using this faulty information.

Allen: Wait, George, America wasn't founded in 1492?

George: Ahh, well, that is a tricky statement and an excellent example of why you need to be vigilant when doing research. Christopher Columbus landed on the shores of North America in 1492. At that time there was no United States of America. The United States of America declared itself an independent nation in 1776, but the USA wasn't officially its own independent nation until the British surrendered in 1781.

Allen: Oh, okay, I get it. You are saying any misplaced word could lose me points on my paper?

George: That's right! Your teachers in high school probably drove you up a wall about grammar. Here at the college level, we will drive you up a wall about semantics, or the study and meaning of words and language. Learning to evaluate resources is an extremely important part of strong research practices. In fact, it's one of four steps to becoming Information Literate.

Allen: Well, gee whiz, George! What do you mean by Information Literate?

George: Well Allen, Information Literacy is a library initiative to teach students the skills they need to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information effectively.

Allen: Find, retrieve, analyze... Could you elaborate on that for me?

George: Sure, Allen! Let's take your question on Wikipedia and relate it to the four steps toward becoming Information Literate. The four steps are: "Identify when you need information," "Locate information," "Evaluate the information," and "Use the information effectively."

First, you identified that you needed outside information. Great job. Then you located information. You were able to find relevant information on Wikipedia. The next step is to evaluate the information.

Allen: I don't think Wikipedia passes my evaluation in terms of being information literate.

George: Yes, very good!

Allen: So, if I can't use Wikipedia, what can I use? You mean to tell me there are other sources out there?

George: Well Allen, here are a couple shortcuts to becoming Information Literate. To start with, always have the assumption that you need information, unless you are absolutely sure that what you are writing is commonly known to everyone as fact. Otherwise, it needs to be researched and then cited. The next step would be to go to the Library or to log onto the Library's website.

As college students, you have access to a world-class library right on campus. When looking for a general topic, go to an encyclopedia. If you have a more defined topic, then go to a subject specific encyclopedia, or go to one of the websites that are linked on the Library's web pages.

Once you have a more defined and narrower understanding of what you are looking for, then you can turn to scholarly journals and current research articles. If you are having trouble navigating these resources at first, Ask-A-Librarian for assistance. We are always happy to help.

Lastly, take those previous steps and write a killer term paper. Cite all your information and make sure your paper makes sense! A strong logical argument is necessary to have a good grade. So, if you aren't sure, have someone else read your paper to get their opinion.

Allen: So is that all it takes?

George: Well, that and a minimum of 5 years in grad school.

Allen: Hold on, George, I meant to write a good research paper, not become a professor.

George: Oh, well, in that case. Yeah, I guess that's basically it. Complete those four steps, and you could graduate Summa Cum Laude.

Allen: I'll hold you to that one, George.

George: Fair enough, Allen, but sadly we are out of time for this episode. I appreciate you coming in and helping us out.

Allen: No problem George, thank you for all of your help, and I'll be sure to refer people to you and the rest of the friendly librarians of the Weinberg Memorial Library.

George: Wow Allen, that means a lot to me. As a librarian, I live to serve. To all you listeners at home, thank you for your time, and I hope you will join us again next time for another look into how to be a Grade A college student.