

Citing Wikipedia

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Students sometimes ask whether it is ok to cite Wikipedia as a source in their work. Some professors reply with a simple “No”. In my opinion, however, this question deserves a more complicated answer. Sometimes citing Wikipedia is not only ok, but is actually necessary. In other cases, it is a bad idea. The reason is that citations serve *several different functions* in academic writing, and it is important to consider those specific functions when deciding whether or not to cite a particular source in a particular context. This applies to all sources, and to Wikipedia in particular.

Getting support

Citations can provide support for your claims. A citation can point out that what you say is not just something that *you* believe — rather, there are other people who say things that support your argument. Citations used for support, however, are really only effective when you cite a source that has *authority*. You must consider what sources have authority and why. Some sources have authority because they contain words of a person who is known to be very knowledgeable on the topic. For example, what Linus Torvalds says about the design of Linux carries a lot of weight. Alternatively, a text can have authority because it has gone through a selection process. For example, an article in a academic journal usually carries weight because such articles are critically read by several scholars before they are published and rejected if they are found lacking. Newspaper articles usually carry a lot less authority — we know they can be written in haste, by people who are only somewhat familiar with the topic.

Sources on the web may or may not carry much weight. It really depends on who is the author and how the content is selected. What Linus Torvalds says about Linux has authority regardless of whether he prints it on paper or writes it on a mailing list. A journal article available on the web is still a journal article. A newspaper article is still a newspaper article. One thing to consider with web sources, though, is how much authority a particular author meant to transfer to the text. When a well-known academic writes something in a journal article, the article carries much authority because we usually assume that they wrote it after much thinking and really meant what they said. When the same person writes something in a blog, we consider that they might have meant it as a spur-of-the-moment comment.

Generally speaking, a Wikipedia article carries close to no authority. We usually do not know who inserted a particular claim. (It may well have been written by someone who knows a lot *less* than you about the topic.) We also know in general that Wikipedia articles can sometimes be right and sometimes be quite wrong. Also, think of it this way: one purpose of citing a source is to convince the reader that you did not just read this on Wikipedia but have some better reason for believing it.

Note that even credible sources can be wrong and your reader knows this. For this reason, if you want to support your argument with a citation, it often helps to point out not just that someone else said something like this, but to briefly summarize how they got to those conclusions. For example, instead of saying “XYZ is very popular (Smith 2009)” consider writing “A 2007 survey of Java developers in France found that 57% use XYZ (Smith 2009).”

It is important to note, though, that while texts vary in how much authority they have in regards to different topics, each text is usually the ultimate authority on itself. If you want to make a claim *about*

a text, citing a specific passage in that text is usually a good idea. This applies to Wikipedia too. For example, if you want to argue that Wikipedia contain numerous inaccuracies, you can support your argument by pointing to one of those inaccuracies. You might write: “For example, as of October 3, 2010, the Wikipedia article ‘Open Source Software’ claimed (incorrectly) that the Internet was created in 1969.” This statement would be much stronger, however, if you give the reader a way to verify that the Wikipedia really did contain this claim by looking at the relevant passage themselves. In case of Wikipedia, the best way to do this is by referring to a particular revision of a particular article:

http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Open_source&oldid=388233956

It also helps to point to a specific section: “History,” third paragraph.

Giving credit

Citations also provide credit to other people for their ideas. From the perspective of credit, you should always cite sources to which you owe your knowledge. This includes sources that do not really serve well as far as providing support for your argument. As I said above, citing Wikipedia usually does not strengthen your argument very much. However, as a matter of *credit*, you should cite Wikipedia if this is where you got your information. For example, in the course of my own research, I once needed a good definition of the word “nerd.” It turned out that Wikipedia provided a definition that was both succinct and insightful. I used this definition in my work, in quotes, and cited Wikipedia as its source. Note that in this case, I did not use a citation to Wikipedia’s to argue that the definition was correct, but rather to give Wikipedia contributors’ credit for providing a definition that I found very fitting.

Providing additional information

A citation can serve as way of *not* talking about something. Instead of including information in your own text, you can sum it up very briefly and then direct the reader to the source. For example, if you are writing about Project X and discover that someone else has already done a good job of describing its history, there may be little point in you repeating the same information. Pointing the reader to the source may make more sense. When doing this, though, you must think carefully whether particular information is optional or central to your argument. Generally speaking, you should not send your readers to other sources for information that is central to your own text. (In particular, you should not send your professor to external sources for information that you are asked to provide as a part of your answer!) Information that is crucial to your argument needs to be at least summarized.

In general, you should not cite Wikipedia just as a source of more information on a topic. Most people would know that Wikipedia contains additional information on almost any topic.

Showing your familiarity with the topic

Finally, you may sometimes use citations to simply show your reader that you know what you are talking about. Your reader may know what the relevant sources are, but they may wonder if you do. By citing a source you are usually implicitly claiming that you are familiar with it. (For this reason, citing sources that you have *not* actually familiarized yourself with can be an academic violation.) Citations can also demonstrate how familiar you are with the sources. An author-year citation shows that you know that a particular source contains relevant information. A citation with a page number shows that you also know *where* exactly the relevant information is. From this point of view, citing Wikipedia can make sense if you want to demonstrate familiarity with Wikipedia. In a homework assignment designed to probe your knowledge of the assigned readings, however, citing those readings (and being very specific about them) would make more sense. Citing non-assigned readings may also make sense – it depends on whether your professor expects you to go and familiarize yourself with additional readings.