



# Tip of the Week:

Napa Valley College - McCarthy Library

## Wikipedia:

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly



Tip #2

November, 2011

Wikipedia Can Be Wrong

Wikipedia's notices:

- [We may be wrong](#)
- [Use at your own risk](#)
- [We are not doctors](#)
- [We can't help with law](#)
- [You may disagree with what we include](#)

**Watch Video:**

**[Wikipedia Beneath the Surface](#)**

(by North Carolina State University)

## Brought to you by Librarians @ McCarthy Library

### The Good:

- ▶ Wikipedia is one of the most popular sites that students go to for their information. There are lots of good aspects to Wikipedia, but also some things to be cautious about.
- ▶ There are few places better to go to than Wikipedia for **trivia type information**. Want the roster of the San Francisco Giants? Need a list of every episode of the Simpsons? How about a biography of Tupuk Shakur?
- ▶ One of the best uses of Wikipedia is to get background information and gain an overview of a topic. After reading the Wikipedia entry, you'll have an idea where to begin your research. Is there a lot of historical information? Then you'll probably need a book. Is this a hot and current topic? Then you'll probably need a journal article. Also, look for keywords and spelling.
- ▶ Pay attention to references at the bottom of entries. Most Wikipedia articles cite their sources. You can investigate those sources and potentially use them for your research if they are authoritative.

### The Bad: Why Wikipedia is not a credible source to use for a research paper:

- ▶ The biggest problem with Wikipedia is that anyone can add, edit and delete entries. Remember: when you do research for your paper, you want *scholarly* sources — those written by experts in their fields. Wikipedia entries are not scholarly. We know nothing about the people who write them or their credentials.
- ▶ Wikipedia often contains bias. It is common for people to alter the entries of topics they don't agree with and change them to reflect their beliefs. They might change an entry to discredit a topic, or alter an entry so that the topic appears more favorably than it should. Sometimes people vandalize entries.
- ▶ Because Wikipedia can be edited by anyone, it is prone to errors. For this reason, you will want to check to verify the information in at least three other sources. This is called "triangulating the source" to make sure the information on Wikipedia is accurate.
- ▶ **The Ugly:** For a [great archeological screencast](#), watch Jon Udell describe how a Wikipedia page changes and morphs over time for the umlaut over the letters in the name of a heavy metal band. A must-see!

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**We hope you found this tip helpful!  
Nancy McEnergy & Stephanie Grohs**

**Ask a Librarian**

