LESSON PLAN

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

Taming the Wild Wiki

This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & CREATE: A Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools: http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework.

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:

- *Reliable Sources*
- *Wikipedia 101*
- *Wikipedia Reliability Worksheet*

Procedure

Background: What is Wikipedia?

Begin by asking students where they 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 *Reliable Sources* and go through it with the students.

Using the *Reliable Sources* handout, have the class evaluate Wikipedia for reliability. 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?

Talk Page

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

View History Page

What information about the reliability of a Wikipedia article can be obtained from the *View History 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 email 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.

Reliable Sources

The Internet has plenty of places to find information, but not all of them are created equal. A website's purpose may be:

- to give information

- to entertain or persuade you about something

- to sell you something

- to make you laugh

One way to find out is to do some research on the source. Go to a search engine like Google, or an online encyclopedia like Wikipedia, and search for the site.

If a search for the site's name gives you too many different results, you can search for its web address instead.

This search will also help you find out if the source is reliable. Once you've found some information about the source that *isn't* from its own website, ask these three questions:

1. Do they really exist?

It's easy to make fake pictures, fake websites and fake social network profiles that look just as real and professional as anything out there.

"About Us" pages and profiles are easy to fake, so do a search find out if other people say they really exist. Pay attention to things that are hard to fake: for example, it's easy to make a fake website, but if other websites you know are real and reliable link to it then it's a sign *they* think the source is real.

2. Are they who they say they are?

It's easy to pretend to be someone else online, so once you know the source really exists, you need to find out if what you're looking at really came from them.

To find out if you're on an organization's real website or social network profile, do a search for them and compare the top result to the site you're on.

3. Are they trustworthy?

For sources of general information, like newspapers, that means asking if they have a process for making sure they're giving you good information, and a good track record of doing it. How often do they make mistakes? If they do make mistakes, do they admit them and publish corrections? Are they willing to publish things their owners, or their readers, wouldn't agree with?

For more specialized sources, you want to do a search to find out whether they're experts or authorities on that topic. Being an expert is more than just being a doctor, a scientist or a professor: make sure they are an expert in the area that they are talking about. (For common names or people who aren't particularly famous, you may need to add the name of the website or the topic they claim to be an expert on.)

You also want to make sure their position isn't *biased*, but don't mix up bias and authority. A biased source starts with what they believe and then chooses or interprets the facts to fit those beliefs. Someone who is actually an expert on something will probably have stronger opinions about it than someone who isn't – but they'll be better-informed opinions.

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.

- **Editors should treat each other with respect and civility**: 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 no firm rules**: 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 article possibly contains original research:** Like any encyclopedia, Wikipedia articles should only be based on existing sources, not the editor's own research or opinion.

- **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 article needs additional citations for verification**: 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 *Talk page* (click on the "Talk" 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.

Talk Page

The *Talk 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.

View History Page

The *View 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 article possibly contains original research.* ☐
   - *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 article needs additional citations for verification.* ☐
   - *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 **Talk** 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?

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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 us 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.

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Assessment Task: Improved Article

	Learning Expectations	*Achievement*
Use Skills and competencies that fall under "use" range from basic technical know-how – using computer programs such as word processors, web browsers, email, and other communication tools – to the more sophisticated abilities for accessing and using knowledge resources, such as search engines and online databases, and emerging	compare, contrast and synthesize information from diverse sources (triangulates information) before it is used in a knowledge-making process gather relevant digital information, e.g. other users' experiences, and assesses the quality of goods based on that information use digital technology to identify and define authentic problems and significant questions for investigation	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)
Understand Understand includes recognizing how networked technology affects our behaviour and our perceptions, beliefs and feelings about the world around us. Understand also prepares us for a knowledge economy as we develop information management skills for finding, evaluating and effectively using information to communicate, collaborate and solve problems.	judge the validity of content found on the Internet, how to find appropriate material and what sources can be trusted use overt and implied messages to draw inferences and construct meaning in media texts express opinions about ideas, issues, and/or experiences presented in media texts and give evidence from the texts to support their opinions identify whose point of view is presented or reflected in a media text, citing supporting evidence from the text and suggest how the text might change if a different point of view were used	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)
Create Create is the ability to produce content and effectively communicate through a variety of digital media tools. It includes being able to adapt what we produce for various contexts and audiences; to create and communicate using rich media such as images, video and sound; and to effectively and responsibly engage with user-generated content such as blogs and discussion forums, video and photo sharing, social gaming and other forms of social media. The ability to create using digital media ensures that Canadians are active	participate in society through online engagement in democratic actions (e.g. lobbying, petitions, parliament) identify conventions and techniques appropriate to the form chosen for a media text they plan to create and explain how they will use the conventions and techniques to help communicate their message produce a variety of media texts for specific purposes and audiences, using appropriate forms, conventions, and techniques	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)