



## Lesson Plan

### Wikiality

#### **SUMMARY:**

“Please help me. I got an ‘F’ on my paper because I cited Wikipedia.” Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, recently [lamented](#) that he gets 10 e-mails of this sort every week. And yet, despite Wales’ own stated views that Wikipedia provides “good enough” knowledge, students keep using it – and teachers keep giving out Fs. This lesson illustrates the potential pitfalls of Wikipedia. Drawing on two controversies – Stephen Colbert’s on-air altering of his own entry and his call for viewers to alter a second entry, and the false biography of John Seigenthaler – students will discuss the ease with which false or misleading information can be added to Wikipedia, and they’ll search Wikipedia entries for inaccuracies.

#### **OBJECTIVES:**

In this lesson, students will:

- Examine the ease with which Wikipedia entries can be altered (either innocently or maliciously).
- Discuss the accuracy of Wikipedia as an encyclopedia and consider the usefulness of any encyclopedia as a source of information.
- Search Wikipedia for specific factual errors.

#### **BACKGROUND:**

One of the biggest errors in reasoning is accepting the word of others when you should be suspicious. These errors can be compounded when those making the statements are (allegedly, anyway) authorities on the subject. Often, it’s hard to determine what exactly makes something or someone count as an authority. Students (especially younger students) often assume that encyclopedias constitute a real authority. It’s not surprising, then, that many students assume that the ultimate Internet encyclopedia – Wikipedia – is authoritative.

When my physics teacher tells me that the speed of light is 299,792,458 meters per second, then I am probably justified in accepting that figure as accurate. Similarly, it’s very likely safe for me to cite the Encyclopedia Britannica as evidence that Charles Dickens died on June 9, 1870.

Reliance on the expertise of a source can be a booby trap for the unwary, of course – if the expert in question is not really an authority on the issue in question, or if there really are no established experts in the area. So citing Linus Pauling (winner of a Nobel Prize for inorganic chemistry and a Nobel Peace Prize for his campaign against nuclear testing) as a reason for consuming large quantities of vitamin C is inappropriate.

Similarly, the mere fact that the Pope claims that birth control is immoral is not a well-founded reason for thinking it true.

The problem with Wikipedia, however, is that it is impossible to determine whether an article has been written by Linus Pauling, nobel laureate or Linus Pauling, vitamin C flake. Indeed, Wikipedia editors can be extremely well-intentioned. But they can also be malicious and/or self-interested, as a new tool from CalTech graduate student Virgil Griffith shows. Griffith's search tool allows anyone to discover the IP address from which Wikipedia edits originate and then offers the additional step of identifying the organization or company that owns the particular IP address. Washingtonpost.com's Fact Checker identified some of the more egregious self-interested edits (the Post's chart is reproduced in student handout #2). Wired magazine asks users to vote on "the most shameful Wikipedia spin jobs." The current top vote-getters can be found at < <http://blog.wired.com/27bstroke6/2007/08/vote-on-the-top.html>>.

### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

Make a packet containing student handouts #1 and #2 for each student. Make a packet containing student handouts #3 and #4 for each student. Distribute the first packet at the beginning of Exercise #1. Distribute the second packet at the beginning of Exercise #2.

### **MATERIALS:**

1. The Colbert Report, "Wikiality"  
[http://www.comedycentral.com/motherload/?lnk=v&ml\\_video=72347](http://www.comedycentral.com/motherload/?lnk=v&ml_video=72347)
2. Student Handout #1: Wikipedia.org, "The Wikipedia Editing Model"  
<http://factchecked.org/Downloads/LessonPlans/Wikiality/wikiality.student.handout.1.reliability.pdf>
3. Student Handout #2: Washingtonpost.com, "Suspicious Wikipedia Edits"  
<http://factchecked.org/Downloads/LessonPlans/Wikiality/wikiality.student.handout.2.edits.pdf>
4. Student Handout #3: John Seigenthaler Sr., "A False Wikipedia 'Biography'"  
<http://factchecked.org/Downloads/LessonPlans/Wikiality/wikiality.student.handout.3.biography.pdf>
5. Student Handout #4: Wikipedia.org, "Seigenthaler Controversy"  
<http://factchecked.org/Downloads/LessonPlans/Wikiality/wikiality.student.handout.4.controversy.pdf>

### **EXERCISES:**

#### **Exercise #1 – Fun with Wikiality**

*To the teacher: One of the first tasks in learning to recognize good authorities is learning to recognizing where information actually comes from. A case in point is the ubiquitous Wikipedia. Although Wikipedia can be a useful source of information, it is not, and cannot be, authoritative. This exercise will assist students in learning the drawbacks to relying on Wikipedia.*

Show students the Colbert Report clip, “Wikiality.” Next ask students to read Wikipedia’s own description of its editing model. Then ask students to look at the Washington Post Fact Checker chart showing some Wikipedia edits along with the source of those edits. Divide the class into small groups of 3 to 5 students each and ask them to discuss the following questions:

1. Where does Wikipedia get its information?
2. Who is in charge of deciding what goes into an article and what gets removed from an article?
3. If there is some debate about whether a particular bit of information should or should not be included in an article, what is the process for deciding?
4. Is Colbert’s assessment that Wikipedia is “bringing democracy to knowledge” an accurate one?
5. If so, is that a good thing or a bad thing?
6. What does the Colbert clip lead you to think about the reliability of Wikipedia?

Have the students report their findings back to the class.

### **Exercise #2 – Spotting Errors**

*To the teacher: In the first exercise, students learned just how easy it can be to insert false information into Wikipedia. The deeper lesson to be learned is that while inserting false claims is easy, detecting those false claims is much, much harder. This exercise will require students to comb through Wikipedia in order to find some false claims.*

In October 2005, John Seigenthaler Sr., a journalist and one-time aide to Robert Kennedy, discovered that his Wikipedia biography contained false and potentially libelous information. That information had been posted as a prank and had remained undetected and unaltered since May 2005. Eventually Seigenthaler had the entry corrected, and Wikipedia editors took the unusual step of hiding the faulty information. The prankster eventually came forward and apologized, and Seigenthaler graciously accepted the apology.

If you have not already done so, pass out student handouts #3 and #4. Ask the students to read Seigenthaler’s original complaint as well as Wikipedia’s entry on the controversy. Divide the class into small groups of 3 to 5 students each. Ask the students to discuss the following:

1. How reliable do you think Wikipedia actually is?
2. How would you know whether a particular article really is accurate?
3. How would you go about discovering whether an article contains inaccurate information?

Once students have constructed their method for discovering inaccuracies in Wikipedia, have them put their theories to the test. Each group should go find an inaccuracy in Wikipedia. It doesn’t have to be a current inaccuracy; it can come from the history pages. If students are having difficulty locating false information, suggest that they look

through the history pages on various controversial subjects. Evolution, global warming and stem cells are all good places to start. The page on Christopher Columbus was the subject of a rather infamous round of revisions, in which revisionists inserted the claim that Columbus was a slave trader, editors removed the claim (based on a total lack of evidence) and then revisionists reinserted it. Eventually editors had to lock the article.

After students have found an example of an error, have them report their findings back to the entire class. Students might then discuss the pluses and minuses of Wikipedia. Bottom line: It provides an excellent starting point to examine a subject about which one knows very little, but it should not be taken as definitive. Facts in Wikipedia always require corroboration.

### **CORRELATION TO NATIONAL STANDARDS (SUMMARY):**

For a more detailed version of these standards, please click [here](#).

#### ***National Social Studies Standards***

**X. Civic Ideals and Practices** Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.

#### ***Essential Skills for Social Studies***

##### **Acquiring Information**

###### *A. Reading Skills*

1. Comprehension
2. Vocabulary

###### *B. Study Skills*

1. Find Information
2. Arrange Information in Usable Forms

###### *C. Reference & Information-Search Skills*

2. Special References

###### *D. Technical Skills Unique to Electronic Devices*

1. Computer

##### **Organizing and Using Information**

###### *A. Thinking Skills*

1. Classify Information
2. Interpret Information
3. Analyze Information
4. Summarize Information
5. Synthesize Information
6. Evaluate Information

###### *B. Decision-Making Skills*

###### *C. Metacognitive Skills*

##### **Interpersonal Relationships & Social Participation**

###### *A. Personal Skills*

### *C. Social and Political Participation Skills*

#### **Democratic Beliefs and Values**

*B. Freedoms of the Individual*

*C. Responsibilities of the Individual*

#### **National Educational Technology Standards**

*Performance Indicators:* All students should have opportunities to demonstrate the following performances.

2. Make informed choices among technology systems, resources, and services.
7. Routinely and efficiently use online information resources to meet needs for collaboration, research, publication, communication, and productivity.
8. Select and apply technology tools for research, information analysis, problem solving, and decision making in content learning.

#### **Information Literacy Standards**

##### **Information Literacy**

*Standard 1* accesses information efficiently and effectively.

*Standard 2* evaluates information critically and competently.

*Standard 3* uses information accurately and creatively.

##### **Social Responsibility**

*Standard 7* recognizes the importance of information to a democratic society.

*Standard 8* practices ethical behavior in regard to information and information technology.

*Standard 9* participates effectively in groups to pursue and generate information.

#### **English Language Arts Standards**

**Standard 1** Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary work.

**Standard 3** Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

**Standard 5** Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

**Standard 6** Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

**Standard 7** Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their

discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

**Standard 8** Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

**Standard 12** Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

*Joe Miller received his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Virginia. He is a staff writer at FactCheck.org, a project of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center. Prior to joining FactCheck, he served as an assistant professor of philosophy at West Point and at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, where he taught logic, critical thinking, ethics and political theory. The winner of an Outstanding Teacher award at UNC-Pembroke and an Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant award at the University of Virginia, Joe has more than 10 years of experience developing curriculum. He is a member of American Philosophical Association and the Association for Political Theory.*