Referencing on Wikipedia

Why do I have to include a source for information I add to Wikipedia?

Unlike traditional encyclopedias, which gain legitimacy through their brand or the academic credentials of their authors, Wikipedia must rely on the reliability of its information. Readers must be assured that the information is not "made up." One way of reassuring readers is by pointing them to the ultimate source of the information, where they could verify the information, if they so chose. Wikipedians are fond of saying that the threshold for inclusion in the encyclopedia is "verifiability, not truth." That is, we only include information that has been published elsewhere by reliable sources that readers can verify themselves. Our policy thus prohibits the publication of the opinions of individual Wikipedians.

Does every piece of information in a Wikipedia article have to be sourced?

The more information that is sourced, the more legitimate the article becomes. However, citing obvious facts that the average adult knows such as "William Shakespeare was a playwright" leads to overcitation and confusion for the reader. Wikipedia policy (WP:Verifiability) requires that "anything challenged or likely to be challenged…be attributed to a reliable source" using an inline citation. In practice, the best Wikipedia articles cite more information than traditional research papers. When in doubt, cite! All quotations, statistics, contentious statements about living people, and extraordinary claims, must be cited. Statements claiming that a person was "the first" or "best," for example, demand a source. Thus, while the statement "William Shakespeare was a playwright" does not require a citation, the statement "William Shakespeare is the best playwright in the English language" does. A good rule of thumb to follow is that every paragraph should have at least one citation.

What counts as a reliable source on Wikipedia?

Reliable sources are, as Wikipedia's guideline on sourcing explains, "third-party, published sources with a reputation for fact-checking and accuracy." Choosing sources for an article largely depends on the topic. As the guideline points out, "the appropriateness of any source depends on the context." However, the best sources are generally academic, peer-reviewed publications, followed by university-level textbooks, books published by respected publishing houses, magazines, journals, and mainstream newspapers. Any electronic media that meet the same stringent criteria may also be used.

In general, Wikipedia articles should be based on secondary sources and, to a lesser extent, on tertiary sources. Secondary sources provide analysis of primary sources and it is this analysis that Wikipedia offers to the world. Primary sources, which are accounts very close in time to the event and often written by actors in them, should be used sparingly and care should be taken to avoid interpretation and analyses. As a general rule of thumb, any primary source material must also have a secondary source to interpret the material for the reader. Tertiary sources are compendia such as encyclopedias that summarize secondary sources and are thus sometimes useful as a broad summary of a topic.

While there are vast treasure troves of information on which to draw for Wikipedia articles, there are also many sources that are inappropriate for Wikipedia articles. For example, anyone can create a website or pay to have a book published, then claim to be an expert in a certain field. For that reason self-published media, such as books, newsletters, personal websites, open wikis, personal or group blogs, Internet forum postings, and tweets, are largely not acceptable as sources. There are some exceptions to this, but it is best to begin by looking elsewhere for the information.

Can I combine information from more than one source?

Wikipedia has a policy of "No original research," meaning that it only publishes what has already been published and that it does not synthesize already published work. To write an article about a topic, however, one must summarize the existing information—editors must learn the difference between synthesis and summary. Combining material from multiple sources to imply a new conclusion not explicitly stated by any of the sources cited is synthesis. If one reliable source says A, and another reliable source says B, do not join A and B together to imply a conclusion C that is not mentioned by either of the sources. This would be a synthesis of published material to advance a new position, which is original research. For example,

> ✘ **The UN's stated objective is to maintain international peace and security, but since its creation there have been 160 wars throughout the world.**

Both parts of the sentence may be reliably sourced, but here they have been combined to imply that the UN has failed to maintain world peace. *If no reliable source has combined the material in this way, it is original research.* It would be a simple matter to imply the opposite using the same material, illustrating how easily material can be manipulated when the sources are not adhered to:

> ✘ **The UN's stated objective is to maintain international peace and security, and since its creation there have been only 160 wars throughout the world.**

How can I add the source information as an inline citation?

Most editors use footnotes. One easy way to write them is to add this to the end of the relevant sentence or paragraph:

- <ref>Smith, Jane. ''Name of Book''. Cambridge University Press, 2010. p. 1.</ref>
- <ref>Sanger, David E. [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/24/world/24prexy.html?_r=1&hp "With Warning, Obama Presses China on Currency"], ''The New York Times'', September 23, 2010.</ref>

Then add this to the end of the article:

==Notes==
{{reflist}}

Where can I find more information about these topics?

- [Verifiability policy](#)
- [No original research policy](#)
- [Reliable sources policy](#)
- [Citing sources guideline](#)