INFORMATION SKILLS	**Wikipedia**
University Library	

When using information from the Internet it is important to evaluate the material you find. It is easy to remember this for stand-alone sites, but harder when using a large, seemingly-comprehensive, reference site such as Wikipedia.

What?	*What is the purpose of this work? Is the piece factual or theoretical? At what audience is this aimed? Is the level of the work appropriate to your purpose?*

Wikipedia is a free, collaborative encyclopedia that anyone can author or edit.
- Do you normally reference encyclopaedia articles in your work? By their nature they give broad overviews of subject areas rather than in-depth analysis.
- They may include basic definitions, but are these appropriate to your purpose?
- Wikipedia itself excludes original research, and draws attention to the fact that an encyclopedia is not necessarily the best source for an academic paper.

Remember, Wikipedia aims to be written from a neutral point of view, but this does not always happen. You may wish to use extreme or biased information to make a particular point, but to offer some analysis or a balancing viewpoint, you must be aware of exactly why you are using a particular source and what value it has in constructing your argument.

Who?	*Who is the author, an individual or an organisation? Are they writing on behalf of a recognised institution? Do they have a reputation as an expert? Is there a responsible editorial body? Is the authorship verifiable? Are adequate contact details given? Is the author or the sponsor known for a particular viewpoint?*

Check individual pages by using the history tab, which gives both the original author and later editors.
- Wikipedia authors may be contactable via talk pages, but their academic credentials may not be immediately available to you, or may not exist. This type of project often attracts enthusiasts who have a particular interest in a subject, which may not relate to their formal qualifications.
- Wikipedia articles have in the past been subject to "edit wars". This has led to some authors being blocked, and some sensitive pages being especially protected from editing by all but those with administrator rights. Remember, Wikipedia is founded on trust, which may on occasion be abused by contributors.
- The page's history may alert you to particular controversies or sensitivities, but the editing and re-editing of a basic text are not going to provide you with coherent arguments for different views on a topic.
- Wikipedia has no mechanism to check claims, except to establish they have been published in reputable sources. If an article has no references, be wary about the content and look for **independent** confirmation from another source – preferably one which has been through a clear editorial or peer-review process.

If you follow supporting references given in articles they may lead you to more traditional sources, which are worth exploring.

Where?	*Where geographically was this written?* *Does it show a specific cultural bias?* *Where is this published? Has it been edited or censored?* *Is the site stable or likely to disappear quickly?*

Wikipedia is accessible internationally via the internet and therefore is likely to reflect a wide variety of cultures. There are also Wikipedias in other languages.

- History tab shows who has written/edited a page, and may provide links to pages about individual authors/editors, which may or may not reveal their geographic origins and cultural or philosophical background.
- History tabs will also show how stable the page content has been in the past, but remember Wikipedia is constantly evolving.

Why?	*Why do you want to use this source? Does it demonstrate your wide academic research? Is it a balanced statement of a particular theory or view? Does it provide links to other useful sources? Is it an authoritative statement of fact? Is it unique and original? Is it accurate and appropriate?* *Has it been recommended?*

You need to put your research into context and be aware of the range of views taken. Relying on one source is never wise. In any case of doubt, look to find other **independent** confirmation of facts, e.g., statistical statements can be checked in official sites.

- Obvious factual, spelling or grammatical inaccuracies may alert you to problems with the quality of the information itself.
- **Do not discount other sources available to you. Your lecturer offers recommendations in reading lists and any of these readings may lead you to further useful information**.
- If you are having problems finding particular items from reading lists, or information on specific topics outside of Wikipedia ask the library staff for help.

When?	*When was this written?* *Has the date of writing influenced the content in any particular way?* *Is there evidence when and by whom it has been revised and or updated?* *How far back does the data go? Is the coverage comprehensive?*

Again you can check the history tab for any Wikipedia page.

- Wikipedia maintains that content gains validity by constant editing. This means it can reflect the latest news or trend. However be cautious on very recent news as this changes very rapidly and may reflect not only official sources but also rumor.

In case of doubt, facts should be checked with other **independent** sources such as traditional news agencies.

How?	*How are you going to use this in your work - to establish a fact, to summarise a view, or to provide evidence for/against an argument?* *How are you going to credit the contribution of this work to your own?*

As with any source you use, Wikipedia should be cited in text and included in your reference list. e.g.
Diana, Princess of Wales. (2006, November 9). Retrieved from the Wikipedia website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Princess_Diana
However, due to some of the factors listed above **some departments do not accept Wikipedia as a reliable source.** Check with your lecturer if they accept Wikipedia references or not.
You may still find a Wikipedia article a good starting place for a quick overview.

- In the majority of cases you will easily be able to find more academic sources for your argument. Start with your unit reading list.

If you have problems locating academic sources, please ask library staff for help.