How to use encyclopedias

to Focus

your research topic

An encyclopedia is an easy-to-use **reference tool** found in all libraries. It may be one volume and have a very specific topic as its subject, or an encyclopedia may have multiple volumes that cover a wide range of topics. Because encyclopedias are so easy to use and so accessible, many people use them as their **first choice** for a reference tool. These types of resources are located on the **second floor** of the library.

Sample topic: Michelangelo

An art history paper is assigned, but you know little or nothing about this artist. You can start with a general multi-volume encyclopedia like *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Here's the beginning of the entry for Michaelangelo:

From this brief excerpt, you now know a few basics about the artist: his full name, when/where he was born and died. You might begin to see *KEYWORDS* you can search for elsewhere:

The rest of the article will provide more general and biographical information. Note that this small excerpt also refers you to another source of information:

> **Michelangelo,** in full MICHELANGELO DI LODOVICO BUONARROTI SIMONI (b. March 6, 1475, Caprese, Republic of Florence—d. Feb. 18, 1564, Rome, Italian Renaissance painter, sculptor, architect, and poet who exerted an unparalleled influence on the development of Western art. He is sometimes called the father of the Baroque era for the voluptuous, contorted male figures of his Sistine Chapel frescoes, the pinnacle of his achievement in painting.
>
> A brief account of the life and works of Michelangelo follows; for a full biography, *see* MACROPAEDIA: Michelangelo.
>
> In 1488 Michelangelo was apprenticed to the

There are also **subject-specific encyclopedias** you can consult, and they will generally provide greater depth of information. Rouquette Library has the ***Encyclopedia of World Art,*** among others; volume 9 contains an entry on Michelangelo.

Can you use Wikipedia?
Yes and No

Here's what Wikipedia has to say for itself on this subject:

Wikipedia:Academic use

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Wikipedia is not considered a credible source. It is increasingly used by people in the academic community, from freshman students to professors, as an easily accessible tertiary source for information about anything and everything. **However, Wikipedia is not considered a credible or authoritative source.** This is especially true because the information on wikipedia can be edited at any time by anyone.

Follow this simple advice:

Do your research properly. Remember that *any* encyclopedia is just a **starting point** for research, not an ending point.

- An encyclopedia is great for getting a general understanding of a subject before you begin to seriously do your research. Using scholarly books and journal articles will provide more credible and reliable information on your topic. These will be the sources that you actually cite in your paper, not wikipedia.

- Some details, such as the population of Canada, can be found on Wikipedia, but it is best to verify the information using an authoritative source, such as the *CIA World Factbook*.

- A very obscure detail, such as the name of the first self-identified philosopher in the Arabic tradition, Abu Yusuf Yaʿqub ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi (ca. 800–870 CE), might be very hard to find without the aid of an encyclopedia like Wikipedia, but you would not cite Wikipedia in your works cited page. Instead, you could cite the article on Al-Kindi in the online edition of the **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** <plato.stanford.edu>. You can cite subject-specific encyclopedias, if the articles are signed by an authority in the field, or just use the citations at the end of the article to move on to more indepth scholarly books and journal articles.
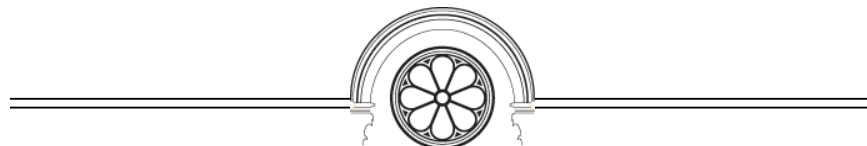
References

1. New Age judge blasts Apple | The Register
2. Avoid Wikipedia, warns Wikipedia chief | The Register

External links

- *Wikipedia Founder Discourages Academic Use of His Creation* Chronicle of Higher Education, June 12, 2006.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Academic_use accessed 2/2/12

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