

Wikipedia vs. Encyclopedia

The first step of the research process is to gain background knowledge of your topic. This step can be critical to the development of your thesis. However there is a difference in the type of background information you can utilize and this assignment will pit two popular resources: Wikipedia and an Encyclopedia by the scholarly publisher Gale.

Assignment: Compare and Contrast a Wikipedia article and an article from a subject specific Encyclopedia owned by the library, using the RADAR framework*.

Learning Objectives: At the end of this assignment, you should be able to

1. Recognize how Wikipedia and scholarly encyclopedias differ in content, authority and relevance to academia.
2. Learn how to check a Wikipedia article's quality "grade".
3. Use the RADAR framework to critically evaluate a background source.

Instructions:

Pretend you are interested in writing a research paper on Brain Death for a biology course. To start your paper you need more background information on the definition, diagnosis and prognosis of brain death. You do not need the cultural or religious significance of the topic.

You have two resources you can use for this paper, a Wikipedia article and an article from the *The Gale Encyclopedia of Neurological Disorders, Second Edition* entitled: "Brain Death" by Margaret Alic.

Start by opening the Wikipedia article and the Encyclopedia article in two windows.

Wikipedia Article: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_death

Gale Encyclopedia article:

This Encyclopedia is available online from the library homepage: <http://linus.lmu.edu/record=b1517477~S1> Be sure to click on the second edition link.

Once you are in the encyclopedia, search for "brain death" in the search box on the left side of the screen.

PART I: WIKIPEDIA

There are a few tools on Wikipedia that can be used to help you evaluate your article. For example, many articles on Wikipedia are given grades by contributors. You can access its grading scheme here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Grading_scheme. To access the Brain Death Wikipedia grade, click on the TALK link on the upper left hand side of the screen.

You can also see an article's revision history (I.E. How many times an article has been edited) by clicking on "View History". This is a good way to see if your article has been vandalized recently, since you will see if it has undergone a lot of changes in a short amount of time. You can also see how many people contributed to the article on its history page.

SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS

Read the Brain Death article carefully. Then answer the following questions:

1. What is the Brain Death article's Wikipedia grade?
2. When was it last edited?
3. Look to see how many editors have contributed to the article. Has the article been created by only one or two people, or has it been a collaborative effort among many editors?
4. Does the article provide any in-line citations or References? Do you think the sources are appropriate for the information in the article? Please explain why or why not in three or more sentences.

PART II: WIKIPEDIA VS ENCYCLOPEDIA

In this next section you will critically evaluate the Gale Encyclopedia using the RADAR framework. RADAR stands for

- R**everance : Your resource should fill in a knowledge gap or support your argument. You should ask yourself the following questions:
- How well does the article answer your research question?
 - Does the source give you the information you need or does it go off topic?
 - Is the source from the same discipline as your course?
 - Does the article address the requirements of your research prompt?
- A**uthority Authority is important in judging the creditability of the information. Ask yourself:
- Can you identify the author(s)? What are their credentials? How many authors are there?
 - Are the author(s) affiliated with an educational institution?

- Is the publisher of the source creditable or have a good reputation?
- Is there a way for the article to be vandalized by a user?

Date The date an article is published is important because information (especially in the sciences can become obsolete quickly).

- When was this published and will this affect the quality of the information?
- How often is the resource updated?

Accuracy Providing an inaccurate fact can derail your entire paper. To avoid this, ask yourself:

- Are there any statements in the article you know to be false?
- Does the article have any citations? Do they appear creditable?
- Are there any graphs or figures of data given to support the article?
- Is the article peer reviewed?

Reason for Writing: Articles can be written for the general public or for serious researchers. You should consider the following:

- Did someone write this article as a hobby? For fun?
- Who is the audience for this article? (Students? Professionals?)
- Is this a controversial sociopolitical issue where an author might be taking a side?
- Is this article balanced or does it favor one viewpoint over another?

Short Answer Questions

Consider each of the questions posed in the RADAR section and answer the following in at least three or more complete sentences.

1. Which resource is more *relevant* to your research paper, the Wikipedia Article or the Encyclopedia and why?
2. Identify at least 3 main differences between the authors of the Wikipedia article and the Encyclopedia article. Why would your professor prefer one source to the other?
3. Who is the reading audience for the Wikipedia article? For the Gale Encyclopedia article? Which one is more likely to be considered 'balanced' and why?

4. Doing background information is only the very start of the research process and an encyclopedia article is meant to serve as a jumping off point for further research. Are there specific things within the Gale encyclopedia article that would help a student further their research? (Hint: Pay close attention to the References section)

*RADAR adapted from:

Mandalios, J. (2013). RADAR: An approach for helping students evaluate Internet sources. *Journal Of Information Science*, 39, 470-478. doi:[10.1177/0165551513478889](https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551513478889)

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