

Just Wiki It



Often used to having people tell you to just Google it? Well, now there's another weird verb with similar potential for enlightenment—to *wiki*. It's a noun also because "A wiki is a type of website that allows users to add, remove, or otherwise edit all content very quickly and easily." This definition is from perhaps the most famous wiki, Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia that lives online at www.wikipedia.org.

Wiki is Hawaiian for something that's quick, and the *pedia* part is from *encyclopedia*. Wikipedia's slogan, "The free encyclopedia that anyone can edit," explains how the articles get written and edited. That's right, this encyclopedia is written by its readers.

If you're thinking this must be a pretty comical mess, with misinformation mixed with misspellings and poor writing, go to the site. Search *Denis Diderot*, one of the fathers of the modern encyclopedia. Not a bad article; good sources; now look at the history tab at the top. Those hundreds of changes were made by the readers, evolving the article into its present state. See a misplaced comma? Go to the edit function and fix it.

But how reliable is the information? Well, in December 2005, the scientific journal *Nature* compared 42 scientific articles from Wikipedia and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. They found 123 errors in the Britannica articles (average 2.92 per article) and 162 errors in the Wikipedia articles (average 3.86 per article). Joi Ito, founder of PSINet Japan, explains the process this way: "The question is whether something is more likely to be true coming from a source whose résumé sounds authoritative or a source that has been viewed by hundreds of thousands of people (with the ability to comment) and has survived."

Consider some of Wikipedia's amazing numbers—one million articles in English (registered this year, March 1) and one million user accounts. There are articles in 229 languages, 150 of which are still active. The project offers proof that Stewart Dalzell was right when he called the Internet "the most participatory form of mass speech yet developed."

Don't be surprised if "just look it up" soon changes for many to "just wiki it." ■



Some Wikipedia entries. Breaking the sound barrier (above), computer-generated model of Purine Nucleoside Phosphorylase (below, left), and how to tie a bowtie (below, right).

