

## Wikipedia & Britannica: A Comparison

Criteria	Wikipedia	Britannica
Contributors	<p>Volunteers. Core group of 2,000. Characteristics of these volunteers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• they have on-line access,</li> <li>• skilled in using wiki's (implying a certain intelligence and "geekiness"),</li> <li>• time available for sustained participation.</li> <li>• motivated by open source projects offering the opportunity "giving back" to the community and helping the public interest.</li> <li>• may also be motivated because topic is of special interest to the contributor – but not in his/her professional area of expertise</li> <li>• like the idea of contributing to something of lasting value.</li> </ul> <p>Demographics are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 20 – 30 somethings</li> <li>• Some professionals</li> <li>• Some graduate students</li> <li>• Some professors</li> </ul> <p>Do not get paid for the work nor is the work "by-lined" (I call it psychic income)</p>	<p>Chosen for their professional expertise. Most are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authors</li> <li>• University Professors</li> <li>• Commentators</li> <li>• Museum curators</li> <li>• Scientists</li> </ul> <p>Britannica has about 4,800 contributors worldwide.</p> <p>Britannica has an editorial board that receives nominations and suggestions from outside scholars and experts in generating a list of contributors.</p> <p>Contributors are paid for their contributions and are given a by-line.</p>
Audience	<p>"Potentially everyone under the sun". Considered to be 'far more general audience than that of Britannica'. Wikipedia has versions in about 200 languages.</p>	<p>Britannica says their audience consists of people who "tend to be knowledge and information seekers, a broad group consisting of students, professionals, and lifelong learners. They tend to be better educated than the population as a whole".</p>
Mission	<p>Three different statements are made on the Wikipedia site re: Mission:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Free access to information – without commercial interference</li> <li>• Desire, by leader Jimmy Wales, to be valued for completeness as well as breadth and speed and usefulness.</li> <li>• Create a "free, democratic, reliable encyclopedia."</li> </ul>	<p>To be "the most authoritative source of the information and ideas people need for work, school and the sheer joy of discovery."</p>
Scope	<p>Short Answer: Large, diverse and diffused.</p> <p>Long Answer: Does not have to limit itself based on space considerations. It has some rules of verifiability. Their guidelines request the subjects of articles should be "notable" (a subject of controversy in and of itself!) and verifiable – meaning being able to find corroboration from reputable sources.</p>	<p>Short Answer: Finite and quite defined.</p> <p>Long Answer: Finite, well documented, well-researched, accurate articles written by scholars, academics, and experts in specific fields of study. Britannica chooses the subject matter covered by their encyclopedia with care, and would not</p>

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		try to cover the breadth of information available from Wikipedia.
Process	<p>New paradigm in reference works. Open to everyone to read, create, maintain and “governed” by community consensus.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contributors must register (but anyone can register) – offering some policing opportunity</li> <li>Changes are tracked. Those changes go on a list for easy spotting – but issues are only if the article has generated enough interest</li> </ul>	<p>Britannica does have a web-based version of its publication as well as a CD-ROM version. They use standard practices for publication of their works.</p>
Authority	<p>Difficult to ‘evaluate a moving target’. Some articles may rate high in terms of accuracy and reliability others may not – like playing roulette</p>	<p>Try to be as balanced as possible. Article contributors are selected based on demonstrated knowledge of a particular subject (do they teach? have they written articles for scholarly journals? have they won awards, etc.). Even then, others review articles at Britannica for revision and to identify any rhetorical ploys used to mask “an agenda”. Characterized as “doggedly serious” about the reliability of the information in its product.</p>
Final Comments	<p>While no byline (attribution), every change is linked to some kind of identifier – user name or IP address. Contributors must be registered (anyone can register) to offer an article.</p> <p>Note on Mission: More diffuse – to be many things to almost all people.</p> <p>Note on reliability: Some concern – even from former founders of Wikipedia – recognizing a weakness in subjects that are very specialized – and no contributors with that level of knowledge lending itself potentially to “articles suffering from ‘uneven’ quality.”</p>	<p>Note on Mission: Britannica knows EXACTLY what it is and does not aspire to exceed that.</p>

Berinstein, Paula. “Wikipedia and Britannica.” *Searcher* 14.3 (Mar. 2006). *Academic Search Elite*. EBSCO. Northwestern Michigan Coll. Lib. Traverse City, MI. 4 May 2006 <<http://search.epnet.com/>>.

Johnson, Cassie. “Watch out Britannica: Here Comes Wikipedia.” *Information Today* Feb. 2006: 26. *Academic Search Elite*. EBSCO. Northwestern Michigan Coll.Lib. Traverse City, MI. 4 May 2006 <<http://search.epnet.com/>>.