

Wikipedia is broadly misunderstood by faculty and students alike. While *Wikipedia* must be approached with caution, *especially with articles that are covering contentious subjects or evolving events*, it is often the best source to get a consensus viewpoint on a subject. Because the *Wikipedia* community has strict rules about sourcing facts to reliable sources, and because authors must adopt a neutral point of view, its articles are often the best available introduction to a subject on the web.

The focus on sourcing all claims has another beneficial effect. If you can find a claim expressed in a *Wikipedia* article, you can almost always follow the footnote on the claim to a reliable source. Scholars, reporters, and students can all benefit from using *Wikipedia* to quickly find authoritative sources for claims.

As an example, consider a situation where you need to source a claim that the Dallas 2016 police shooter was motivated by hatred of police officers. *Wikipedia* will summarize what is known about his motives and, more importantly, will source each claim, as follows:

Chief Brown said that Johnson, who was black, was upset about recent police shootings and the Black Lives Matter movement, and “stated he wanted to kill white people, especially white officers.”^{[4][5]} A friend and former coworker of Johnson’s described him as “always [being] distrustful of the police.”^[61] Another former coworker said he seemed “very affected” by recent police shootings of black men.^[64] A friend said that Johnson had anger management problems and would repeatedly watch video of the 1991 beating of Rodney King by police officers.^[85]

Investigators found no ties between Johnson and international terrorist or domestic extremist groups.^[66]

Each footnote leads to a source that the community has deemed reliable. The article as a whole contains over 160 footnotes. If you are researching a complex question, starting with the resources and summaries provided by *Wikipedia* can give you a substantial running start on an issue.