Wikipedia: 21\textsuperscript{st} century oracle or 21\textsuperscript{st} century minefield?

**Q: What exactly is “Wikipedia”?**

**A:** Wikipedia is a free, open access encyclopedia which includes over 2 million articles. The content is provided by interested volunteers who are not credited in the articles. There is no authorial ownership since content is freely editable and may therefore be the work of many contributors. It has become a worldwide phenomenon and is probably the most accessed and controversial reference source on the web.

**Wikipedia and coursework**

Wikipedia is not a legitimate source of reference for academic work. If you are determined to consult Wikipedia, its use should be restricted to the initial stages of your research. Indeed, it can sometimes be useful for getting an overview of a large, sprawling subject or for providing a basic introduction to a complex topic.

When you have read your chosen entry, **close it down and move on to a more scholarly source.** You will take away a basic understanding but this must be verified and supplemented by more authoritative sources. Here are some important facts of which you should be aware:

**Six good reasons why you should be wary of Wikipedia!**

1. **Anyone can contribute / edit an article.** There is some overarching editorial control but the measures in place are far from infallible.
2. **There is no guarantee that the information is accurate** and can be relied upon.
3. **There is no guarantee that the information has been provided by an authority** in the subject area. In most cases it is not!
4. Since the information is not subject to 'peer-review' there is a greater danger of bias.

5. Sources of reference are not always made explicit or are incompletely identified.

6. Your tutor will justifiably be unimpressed if you reference a Wikipedia article in a piece of academic work. It is not an academic source.

Exercise

The aim of this exercise is to compare and contrast an article from Wikipedia with one from Encyclopedia of Life Sciences (ELS). You will need to browse the articles identified below then answer the questions which follow.

- Examine the Wikipedia article on brain death:

- Now access the Encyclopedia of Life Sciences.
  This is accessible via the Library. Click on the resource record from LINUS, the Library Catalog (http://linus.lmu.edu/record=e1000088~S1).

- Locate and browse Brain Death and the Vegetative State by Bryan Jennett
Questions

1. How does the Wikipedia article compare to the ELS article in terms of the authority of its authors? (Click the History tab at the top of the Wikipedia article to get some idea on who has contributed to the content)

2. Both articles are designed to be concise introductions to the topic. However, which in your opinion achieves this more effectively and why?

3. Compare the references at the end of each article. Is the referencing adequate? Can you pinpoint an example of poor referencing?
4. Can you suggest three reasons why the ELS article may be considered superior to the Wikipedia article?