Wikipedia Founder Discourages Academic Use of His Creation

Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia compiled by a distributed network of volunteers, has often come under attack by academics as being shoddy and full of inaccuracies. Even Wikipedia’s founder, Jimmy Wales, says he wants to get the message out to college students that they shouldn’t use it for class projects or serious research.

Speaking at a conference at the University of Pennsylvania on Friday called “The Hyperlinked Society,” Mr. Wales said that he gets about 10 e-mail messages a week from students who complain that Wikipedia has gotten them into academic hot water. “They say, ‘Please help me. I got an F on my paper because I cited Wikipedia’” and the information turned out to be wrong, he says. But he said he has no sympathy for their plight, noting that he thinks to himself: “For God sake, you’re in college; don’t cite the encyclopedia.”

Mr. Wales said that leaders of Wikipedia have considered putting together a fact sheet that professors could give out to students explaining what Wikipedia is and that it is not always a definitive source. “It is pretty good, but you have to be careful with it,” he said. “It’s good enough knowledge, depending on what your purpose is.”

In an interview, Mr. Wales said that Wikipedia is ideal for many uses. If you are reading a novel that mentions the Battle of the Bulge, for instance, you could use Wikipedia to get a quick basic overview of the historical event to understand the context. But students writing a paper about the battle should hit the history books.