There are many different kinds of wikis. Some are general, and some focus on very narrow subjects. Wikipedia is probably the most well known wiki. It includes a collection of articles on every subject imaginable and is written and edited by volunteers. Your instructors may have told you that it’s a horrible place to get information. This is not completely true. If you’re careful and evaluate content, Wikipedia can be a useful place to look for topics, get useful background information, and find references and sources, especially Web sources.

Similar to other encyclopedias, you can use Wikipedia for research, facts and figures, and background information. You’ll need to pay closer attention to the quality of the article than in a regular encyclopedia. In a regular encyclopedia, editors check the articles; in Wikipedia, you have to do the work of evaluating the article. (While Wikipedia does have editors, it is much more difficult for them to keep up with everything.) Keep in mind that, while it can be useful for background information, many instructors will not allow you to use Wikipedia as one of your sources.

Signs of a quality Wikipedia article:

• It agrees with other information you’ve found from accurate and authoritative sources.
• It was a featured article (these are checked by Wikipedia editors and are indicated by a small star in the upper right corner).
• It has a good list of references and external links. There should be a variety of sources on the reference list. With the exception of very specialized subjects, the use of just one or two sources means the author didn’t do his or her homework.
• Check out the discussion by clicking on the Talk tab. There are often clues to the quality of the article in the discussion about it. Sometimes you’ll see ratings, other times a lot of argument. If you see a lot of posters disagreeing, be very careful about using the page.
• If there’s a banner across the top or within the article, this is a clue you may need to avoid using the article. Banners usually say something like: “the neutrality of this article is disputed” (Wikipedia articles are supposed to be neutral, not support one side or another). A banner might also point out the article is lacking references or citations or doesn’t meet Wikipedia’s quality standards.

This video provides an overview of Wikipedia features:

This video discusses some of the things to watch out for when deciding to use Wikipedia for research:
https://library.weber.edu/researchandteaching/lib1704/Videos/InternetResearch