



Writing Geography at University

GUIDES FOR WRITING IN SPECIFIC DISCIPLINES



1 What is Geography?

Geography is a scientific activity that describes, analyses and explains the differentiation of space on the earth's surface and the relations between society and the environment. Geography aims to describe the world we live in based on the interrelationship between human and social sciences (anthropology, economics, history, politics), natural sciences (botany, climatology, geology) and methodological disciplines such as cartography, statistics and quantitative and qualitative methods. So that geography is not limited to one or more of these other disciplines, it must include the study of the earth's surface, which may take any of a number of names: *region*, *space*, *territory*, *landscape* and *place* are some of the more usual terms but, *environment*, *ecosystem* and *geosystem* are also used, among others.

In the mid-1980s, geographers Lluís Casassas (1922-1992) and Peter Gould (1932- 2000) published very similar definitions of the discipline, which we can paraphrase here as follows: geography is the discipline which studies the movement of people on the earth over time.

2 General features of writing in Geography

Geographical information is presented in a number of different formats. Apart from speaking and writing, cartographic information is presented in the form of maps and diagrams, alphanumerical information in tables, and images such as photographs and drawings are also used. Most geography texts use a combination of all four formats.

Writing in geography can cover a very diverse range of topics and styles from classical romanticism to cold technical details. So it is important to know who we are writing for. It is not the same thing to write about a specific place for a travel publication as it is for a scientific geographical journal, or a government or company report.

In 1977, winner of the Award of Honour for Catalan Arts, geographer Pau Vila (1881- 1980) was interviewed by Montserrat Roig (1946-1991). She said to him “when you describe Catalonia, you talk like a poet [...] you make the reader want to go and see what you have described”. Pau Vila replied “you have to write as clearly as possible; I get an image in my head and the words flow, often in a literary style [...] writing should be subtle, winged, nimble”. This kind of writing has not always received a good reception from the scientific community. When Albert Demangeon (1872-1940) published *Les Iles Britanniques* in 1927 (volume I of the *Géographie universelle* coordinated by Paul Vidal de La Blache and Lucien Gallois), the main criticism by the British geographers was that it was too well written!

Academic geographical texts have changed over time. If at the beginning and up to the middle of the twentieth century they were descriptive, or *literary*, offering an understanding of relations between society and environments inhabited by people, which could also identify with historicism, from the 1950s the English-speaking world

began to “do”, and write about geography differently. The new geography was more scientific and so many of the journals adopted the classic schemes of scientific positivism for their writing: introduction, specific objectives, state of the question, methodology, results, discussion and conclusions. This is a type of science that leads to specialisation, probing deeply into a topic, providing evidence in numerical tables, which are used to create diagrams and maps – and it is one where there is little room for *literary* writing.

More recently there has been a return to historicist geography from a critical, humanist, postmodern and post-structural approach. The main characteristic of modern geography is that it is a marriage between historicist and positivist approaches.

As a last word to this introduction, we also have to remember that people working on geographical matters in governmental organisations or companies, and need technical reports to base their decisions on, use a language that is as far from literature as it is from academic scientific language.

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In all cases, however, the texts must be clear, well-structured and with a clear idea of who they are written for, what they are written about and how they should be written.

3 Typical texts assigned in Geography

The first thing to bear in mind when looking at geography texts is that they are subtly different depending on the writer and the reader: students, lecturers, researchers in universities or other research centres, or people in non-academic settings. There are some kinds of text that might reflect more than one of these groups – or even all four – but the level of the text in terms of quality or scientific content will be different according to the author and the target reader.

Typical texts that have to be produced in the field of geography are scientific texts, whether scientific articles for publication in journals, academic papers for presentation at conferences or scholarly research works in the form of end of degree projects, dissertations and theses. There are also reports from field visits and book reviews.

In general, scientific writing in geography tends to follow the IMRAD structure – Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion or Conclusion. The structure may vary depending on the individual publications or universities and may also include a summary or abstract before the introduction and a review of the literature or theoretical framework.

In the Introduction section you should outline the purpose of your study – why you did what you did, why you chose a particular place or population, for example, and what you hoped to find out from your research.

The Methods section may vary considerably depending on the nature of the research, but in general in this section you should describe the methodology you have selected as being the most appropriate for your study.

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The Results section should be just that – the findings of your research reported strictly as facts without any analysis at this stage. You will probably need to present your findings in different formats such as maps, tables, figures or photographs. For guidance on how to present these, see section 5 in this guide.

The Discussion section offers a space for analysing and commenting on your findings in relation to your own research question and the previous work carried out, which should be correctly cited according to the citation style e.g. APA, MLA, Chicago. For further guidance on citation formatting and style, see the [Purdue Online Writing Laboratory website](#).

The Conclusions section offers you the opportunity to reflect upon your results and identify possible improvements and directions for future research.

University degrees in geography tend to include field visits with the aim of learning to interpret the environment from a geographical point of view. Generally students are expected to write up the visit in a report, which usually includes information about what they did so that those who were unable to attend on the day can go back to the site with the report. The report also usually contains maps (for example, the itinerary map), photographs of the places visited and a bibliography on the place and the topics under study. These kinds of report are also produced by lecturers and researchers, albeit with greater scientific rigour, and are commissioned by travel publications of varying circulation. The latter are not easy to write as the author needs to find the appropriate register for a public interested in science that probably has not either attended or taught at university.

Writing reviews is an exercise that university students carry out as part of their course, but they also appear in other contexts. Most scientific journals in geography have a

reviews section and the texts may be written by young researchers or prestigious academics. Reviews have their own rules: they must mention the author of the book and way it is related to the state of the question; there should be a clear, well-structured and brief summary of the book; the writer of the review should give their own opinion of the work based on the focus and originality of the subject, methodology, presentation of cartographic material and tables, and the works consulted.

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Finally, geography books nowadays tend to be the result of the type of research mentioned above and are therefore considered specialised texts for a specialist readership. In that sense they adopt the same kind of formal writing conventions as the other kinds of geography texts i.e. clear and concise but with a formal register and a preference for the use of Greek and Latin-root words over Anglo-Saxon. For example it might be preferable to use the verb ‘examine’ rather than ‘look at’.

4 Writing conventions in Geography

The conventions of writing geography in general do not differ greatly from other scientific disciplines. However different styles and rules may be set out by publishers and these will need to be taken into account. Some general guidelines for writing in geography include:

- Use Latin names for species, e.g. *Ulex europaeus* for the species included in the Fabaceae family, which may be commonly known as gorse, common gorse, furze or whin. Note that the name of the species is italicised, whereas the name of the family is not.
- Spell out the names of organisations the first time they are used with the abbreviation in parentheses; e.g. International Monetary Fund (IMF). The abbreviation can be used for subsequent reference.
- Use gender neutral language; e.g. not “The researcher should present his results in graph form”, but “Researchers should present their result in graph form”.
- As mentioned above, all works mentioned should be properly cited using the system selected. All sources cited, including online sources, should appear in the final bibliography in alphabetical order.

Use of non-textual elements

Writing geography texts almost always involves the use of elements to support the text. These may be in the form of maps, figures, tables or photographs. All of these elements should satisfy the same conventions as the text in terms of what they aim to do and who the readership is, but there are some additional elements to be considered in the use of each.

Maps should give an indication of distance or scale and most, but not all, maps show the orientation with north pointing towards the top of the paper. Maps should also include a legend indicating the symbols, lines or colours used and what they depict. Maps should also include a title or caption summarising what it represents and a source, even if it is the author's own. It is sometimes also useful to provide the date when the map was made. Maps should be numbered as Figures.

Tables are useful for presenting quantitative data simply. They are made up of columns and rows of information both of which should carry a descriptive heading. They should also include the unit of measurement. Tables should be numbered with a title that summarises their content. The source should be cited the same way as maps, above.

Photographs and other images are very efficient for transmitting visual information. They should be large enough to show the object of the information clearly and numbered as Figures with a descriptive title. Like maps, it is sometimes useful to include the date the photograph was taken and a source must be provided.

All units of measurement should be expressed according to the International System of Units (SI). Non-SI units which are also accepted and may be useful in writing geography are tonne, litre, hectare, minute, hour, day and degree of arc. The official symbols should also be used e.g. km for kilometre or kilometres and ha for hectare or hectares.

All non-textual elements should be explicitly mentioned within the text.

5 Useful works and websites for writing Geography

1. HAY, IAIN. (ed.) (2012) *Communicating in Geography and the Environmental Sciences*. Oxford University Press: South Melbourne, Vic.

A practical guide mainly aimed at undergraduate and postgraduate geography and environmental science students on how to communicate effectively in an academic setting. It includes chapters on writing reports and reviews, using tables and figures and making maps.

2. PARSON, TONY; KNIGHT, PETER G. (2006). *How to do your dissertation in geography and related disciplines*. Oxford: Routledge.

A similarly instructive guide to writing scholarly work, specifically the dissertation, with helpful examples for clearly presented information.

3. *Dictionary of Geographical terms.*
[<https://resources.collins.co.uk/Wesbite%20images/KS3Geography/TB2/Dictionary%20of%20geographical%20terms.pdf>]

A comprehensive monolingual illustrated dictionary of geographical terms.

4. *Termcat Online Dictionaries.* Barcelona: TERMCAT, Centre de Terminologia.
[<https://www.termcat.cat/ca/diccionaris-en-linia>]

TERMCAT is the centre for terminology in the Catalan language and contains a number of online multilingual dictionaries in different disciplines. While there is no single dictionary for geography, there are separate dictionaries for cartography, photogrammetry, GIS and remote sensing; physical geography; environmental management; migrations; and strategic planning.

5. *Treballs de la Societat Catalana de Geografia.*
[<https://scg.iec.cat/Scg8/Scg81/S812.htm>]

The journal published by the Societat Catalana de Geografia. It offers publication guidelines.

6. *Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica.*
[<https://dag.revista.uab.es/about/submissions#authorGuidelines>]

The journal of the Geography Departments of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and the University of Girona.

7. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers.*
[<https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14755661>]

Publication guidelines for scientific journals in geography offer a good idea of how the article in geography should be, in both content and form. The three references here have been chosen because they show different ways of approaching geographical studies. Most journals have their guidelines published on their websites.

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