

A GUIDE TO WRITING GEOGRAPHY PAPERS

The purpose of this guidebook is to aid students in writing research papers in introductory college-level geography courses. Consult instructions provided by your Geography professor for guidelines concerning individual assignments.

Choosing a Topic:

Choose a topic narrow enough to find specific information, but not so narrow that you cannot find enough information. Before committing to a topic, scan a database to see if you will be able to find enough information on that topic.

Example from Physical Geography:

Too broad: Volcanoes

Too narrow: The Effect of the Eruption of Mt. St. Helens on the regeneration of plant species

Appropriate: The Geographical Impact of the Eruption of Mt. St. Helens

Example from North American Regional Geography:

Too broad: Deindustrialization

Too narrow: The Effect of Downsizing on Detroit's Manufacturing Labor Force, 1970-1980

Appropriate: The Changing Distribution of the American Automobile Industry

Gathering Information:

Start early! The SVSU library collection may not have all the information you need. Many books and articles must be ordered through ILLIAD.

Your objective in writing a geography research paper most often is to assemble information from a variety of sources of data into a coherent argument to demonstrate to your instructor that you understand the material. Often you want to add a different perspective for looking at the data, one which has not been introduced by a previous writer. Therefore, when searching for materials, don't expect to find a book or article with the exact title of your topic. If you find such a book or article, there is probably little that you can add to the subject.

Take advantage of online sources for finding articles. Articles can be found through searches by subject, title, and author. The SVSU library has the following databases appropriate for geography:

- 1) WilsonSelect - this social science database has full text articles dating back to the early 1990s. Students can immediately print these articles.
- 2) Geobase - this database is used mostly for physical geography papers; it has articles pertaining to geography and geology (1980-present).
- 3) Social Science Abstracts – this contains some full text articles, but mostly you will have to order these articles through ILLIAD
- 4) World Cat – this database contains books and dissertations

Helpful hint: Look for an up-to-date book or article on your subject, and scan the bibliography. This is a great technique to gather additional sources for your paper.

Acceptable Sources- Journals, books, edited chapters in books, and government documents are the most widely accepted sources for a research paper in Geography. Encyclopedias, newspapers, and textbooks usually are not considered adequate sources for a research paper, although they may be used as supportive material.

Materials on the Internet may or may not be appropriate. One of the problems with the Internet is that much of the material has not undergone the process of peer review. Through peer review, materials are examined by other specialists on the subject and judged for their worthiness for publication; this, however, does not mean that the material is without criticism from others. Government documents accessed through the Internet are acceptable sources of information; check on the website address to see if it has a .gov suffix.

Students may assume that *National Geographic* is a geographical journal. However, it is a popular magazine. Although you may refer to an article from *National Geographic* in your paper, it has not undergone a rigorous peer review process and is more geared for general information.

Some Noted Geographical Journals:

1. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*
2. *The Professional Geographer*
3. *Geographical Review*
4. *Progress in Human Geography*
5. *Progress in Physical Geography*

Geography's interrelationship with other physical and social sciences should not be forgotten. Geological, biological, sociological, and economic journals may also be of benefit to your paper.

Writing the Paper:

Introduction: In your introduction you will need to provide your thesis statement, the argument you will pursue throughout the paper. You will probably also want to inform your reader why this is an important issue to examine. The introduction should also provide the reader with an overview of the topics and the order in which they will be covered within the paper.

Think carefully about how you begin your paper. Simply stating your topic is not likely to generate much interest from your reader.

Examples of Thesis Statements from Physical Geography:

Not Acceptable: In this paper I will discuss global warming and the increased incidence of hurricanes in the Southeastern U.S.

Appropriate: The frequency and intensity of hurricanes in the Southeastern U.S. has risen dramatically since the 1990s (source). Scientists have noted that some of the warmest average global temperatures over the past 100 years have also occurred since the 1990s, suggesting that there is a causal link between global warming and hurricane development (source). This paper will examine the connections between human-induced global warming and the increased incidence of hurricanes, and the impact that future warming may have on the Southeast United States.

Body:

The body of your geography paper is basically going to be a literature review. Thus, you are presenting data or providing evidence from other specialists in a clear and logical fashion that will eventually lead to the drawing of conclusions from that data. Personal opinions are usually not relevant in this type of paper. (Avoid the use of pronouns such as I, me, and you.)

Make sure that you connect all evidence to your thesis. Do not present a collection of facts, theories, etc. which the reader must fumble through on his/her own.

Make sure you provide clear transitions from one idea to another. Depending on the length of your paper, you may want to subdivide the body into smaller segments with headings.

Students often forget that papers written for geography classes need to have a solid connection with geography. This is easy to forget, given that geography overlaps with other disciplines. Connecting your paper with ideas from the course is an excellent way to demonstrate understanding of concepts learned in the course. Just adding a map to the end of the paper is not sufficient to declare your paper geographical. Many other disciplines use maps to express a certain idea.

Conclusion:

Restate your thesis and link the conclusions drawn from your research back to the thesis. Be sure to state the applications or implications of your argument. Suggest future areas of research.

Citations:

All information taken from sources must be cited, as shown below. Even if a student puts a source's thoughts into his/her own words (paraphrasing), the student must still give credit to the author. Plagiarism is the stating of facts or ideas without giving proper credit to the original source of the statement or idea. Some students try to circumvent this process by quoting long sections by an author; this often comes across to the reader as the writer simply filling space.

Often students have trouble deciding when citations must be used. Some general rules can guide you:

1. If an idea is completely original, then no citation is necessary.
2. Statements of common knowledge need no citation.
3. Specific statements, ideas, or data not commonly known must be cited.

Example from North American Regional Geography:

1. After reviewing numerous sources on the motives for migration of Mexicans to the United States, the student proposes a new model to explain this process. (*Since this is an original idea of the student, no citation is necessary.*)
2. Mexico is a major source of immigrants to the United States. (*This is common knowledge and no citation is required.*)
3. In 2000, 1.5 million Mexicans crossed the border into the state of California. (*This is very specific data unlikely to be known by most people, and therefore needs to be referenced.*)

Citations within the Text and Bibliography:

Students should consult the course syllabus to determine which style is expected from specific Geography professors. The following material has been adapted from the APA documentation style, and is based upon the author-date system of citation. More information on APA style can be found in *A Writer's Resource: A Handbook for Writing and Research* by Maimon, Peritz, and Yancey or on the Writing Center website (<https://www.svsu.edu/writingcenter/studentresources/>).

Journal Article:

MacLachlan, I. and R. Sawada. (1997). Measures of inequality and social polarization in Canadian metropolitan areas. *The Canadian Geographer*, 41(1), 377-97.

In-text citation should appear like this: (MacLachlan and Sawada, 1997)

Article from electronic journal-accessed through a database:

De Sousa, C.A. (2005). Policy Performance and Brownfield Development in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. *The Professional Geographer*, 57 (2), 312-327. Abstract retrieved August 22, 2007, from WilsonSelect database.

In-text citation should appear like this: (DeSousa, 2005)

Website:

National Weather Service. (2004). *Thunderstorm, tornadoes, lightning: A preparedness guide*. Retrieved from <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/brochures/ttl.pdf>

In-text citation should appear like this: (National Weather, 2004)

Book:

Cutter, S. (1993). *Living with risk: The geography of technological hazards*. New York: Routledge.

In-text citation should appear like this: (Cutter, 1993)

Chapter from an Edited Book:

Furley, P.A. (1998). History and destiny of Middle American forests: The inheritors of the Maya landscape. In B. Maloney (Ed.), *Human activities and the tropical rain forest: Past, present, and possible future* (pp. 101-32). Amsterdam, Holland: Kluwer.

In-text citation should appear like this: (Furley, 1998)

Charts, Tables, Photos, and Maps:

If you include a chart, table, photo, or map reproduced from some other source, you must also include the source for this material. If you include supplemental resources, make sure that you make a reference to them in the paper (e.g. See Figure 1). An instructor is usually more impressed with supplemental material that requires the student to compose or manipulate the data, instead of cut and paste from some other source. If you construct a chart, table, or map using Excel, Word, GIS, or some other program, you must provide the source for the data. Photos included in a paper that are taken by the author must say so in the paper.