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# Writing in Geography and Urban Planning

## What is Geography?

Geography integrates the study of **people, places, and environments** to better understand the world and improve decision-making in sustainable development, urban and regional planning, and geospatial science.

Geography is literally and figuratively a worldview—exploring space, place, landscape, region, and environment—to better understand our changing planet, communicate that understanding, and apply it to decision-making. The geographical perspective is integrative, but is focused through specialized subfields like urban geography, cultural/development geography, biogeography, and physical geography, among others. These differ in their object of study, methodology, regional focus, and application, and align with professional fields like urban planning, sustainable development, and environmental science.

Geographical research methods are also integrative yet diverse. They can be qualitative or quantitative (or a mix), including: field measurement and landscape interpretation; surveys and interviews; remote sensing, archival research, and content analysis; and geospatial analysis and mapping. Data sources or methods depend on the kind of research questions asked and who the intended audience is.

People are surprised both by the interdisciplinary breadth of geographical thinking and its relevance to understanding and impacting the world through fields like planning, sustainable development, and geospatial science. While geographers and planners are diverse, they share an emphasis on some key ideas (or threshold concepts):

- **spatial processes and patterns are interdependent and linked across scales;**
- **landscapes and environments are dynamic across time and space;**
- **places reflect and reinforce patterns of unevenness and inequality; and**
- **individual actions have the power to transform the world.**

But each geographical subfield also has its own threshold concepts. Human/social geographers emphasize the social production of space, development geographers the unevenness of development, physical geographers the dynamism of environmental processes and change, and urban geographers the mutually reinforcing link between transportation and land use.

Geographers and planners are united by many core values like the importance of curiosity and exploration, integrative thinking about interconnected phenomena, reflexivity and self awareness, engaging diverse people and places and the problems they face, and the power of the visual and graphical communication. Geographical thinking values synthesis over reductionism. And while many use laboratory or archival methods, field research is a priority. Because geography is so diverse, debates inevitably arise around differences in theories and methods as well as relative merits of different approaches (physical sciences vs. social science vs. humanism, etc.). But we value such diversity and debates, and pride ourselves in our ability to communicate across sub-disciplinary boundaries.

## What Do Geographers and Planners Value in Writing?

Our values, goals, threshold concepts, and methods of study are all embodied in what and how we write.

We communicate—textually and often graphically—in genres like:

- **place-based description/field reporting**, including site reports, landscape interpretations, map and geovisual description and interpretation, travel writing and journalistic reporting, or existing conditions analysis;
- **graphical thinking and communication**, including maps, visual renderings, multimedia website, video, and diagrams, etc.;
- **independent research**, including literature reviews, research papers, scholarly articles and monographs;
- **professional, collaborative reports**, which include policy analyses/white papers, reports, and plans; and

- **public communications**, including presentations, posters, social media posts, and written correspondence.

The writing processes within each genre can vary:

- When **reviewing literature** we identify a topic scope, keywords, and research question. Searching for relevant sources by keyword is followed by a summary of individual sources and synthesis—seeing connections and contrasts, putting individual sources in context. We construct a narrative about the state of current knowledge and ongoing debates.
- **Analyzing geographic phenomena** entails identifying a research question; synthesizing relevant literature; systematically applying an appropriate research method to gather data; and presenting, analyzing, and summarizing findings.
- When **writing plans or reports** we define a problem and goals, review existing literature and knowledge (typically including best practices), evaluate alternative problem-solving strategies, and suggest policy solutions.
- **Communicating graphically** includes the visual depiction of spatial data or analysis through tools like mapping, artistic rendering, or diagramming. This involves choices about symbolic representation, and information to help viewers interpret them (e.g., map descriptions and keys).
- When **presenting to wider audiences** we make careful choices about how to concisely organize complex information for particular audiences, including choices about appropriate media and presentation styles.

## What Makes Good Writing in Geography and Urban Planning?

In general, geographers and planners value writing that is clear and understandable. We look for logical structure, active voice, a sense of place, carefully framing and contextualization, support through visually rich (where relevant) evidence, and demonstration of methodical analysis and communication rooted in evidence. We also want to see authors acknowledge the limitations of their individual perspective.

As an integrated social and natural science, professional writers in our field must provide evidence for their claims. We gather data from across the world—whether that be field measurements or archived texts—to draw conclusions and develop recommendations. Professional writers in our field are credible when they:

- outline a compelling and relevant topic;
- acknowledge and cite current knowledge and debates;
- outline a clear methodology, whether qualitative and/or quantitative;
- communicate concisely and illustrate their claims with evidence; and
- draw conclusions or make recommendations grounded in evidence.

They are often not seen as credible when they do not or are not able to include supporting evidence.

The citation practices we use in our field also embody our goals, values, and conventions. In the Department of Geography, we primarily use author-date in-text citation style(s), which puts authors more front-and-center than in other fields. Often we chose the American Psychological Association (APA) citation style, simply because it is widely used and documented.

In some cases, plan and report writers will use note-based styles like footnotes. This places the bibliographic information below the cited information on the same page, so that it's easy for the reader to refer to. We discourage the use of endnote-based styles, since they place key bibliographic information at the end where it is slower to access.

Whatever the citation style, whenever you make written claims that depend on outside information, you *must* cite the source(s) of that information. Readers must be able to quickly understand where you are getting information from. This requires:

- citing the source immediately upon first reference to that data;
- using textual cues in the same paragraph to make clear that information that follows also comes from the same source, but otherwise not repeating the same citation multiple times in the same paragraph;
- and including the page numbers if quoting material from a text with pages.

Keep in mind, however, that geographers and planners cite a wide range of data, including:

- demographic or economic development statistics from the United Nations, World Bank, or US Census Bureau;
- maps and geovisual representations of data;
- arguments from scholars and other experts about the state of knowledge that frames our work conceptually;
- interviews, portions of which we will often incorporate as quotations in social scientific and humanities-based work;
- various kinds of documents (including historical) that more humanities-oriented geographers in particular will incorporate, often as quotations to evaluate more subjective ideas, opinions, and reflections.

When deciding when to paraphrase versus directly quote information, generally you should only quote if the source of the quote is particularly significant and the specific wording strengthens the clarity of your claims. Like most disciplines, we prefer you explicitly specify in the text the quotation source, rather than to use “blind” quotes.

We follow all of these guidelines because this is how we document the evidence that supports strong arguments, and without it, we have no real basis for our claims.

## How Do We Incorporate Writing in Our Courses?

Because writing styles and genres vary across Geography and Urban Planning, students develop different writing skills across the curriculum. Our major curricula prioritizes good written and graphical communication, but developing those skills happens in different ways in different classes.

- **Undergraduates taking Miami Plan or electives in the Department of Geography** should recognize the interdisciplinary and space/place grounding in our writing and try to understand this when they write for us. We think this will be useful to them later even if they are not our majors because this framing will help to broaden their world view.
- **Undergraduate majors in Urban and Regional Planning or Geography and Sustainable Development** should recognize spatial reasoning and evidence-based arguments and try to practice integrative thinking and analytical reasoning when they write. Over time they will need to become skilled at posing, answering, and communicating geographic research questions to prepare them for career success, lifelong learning, and informed civic engagement.
- **Graduate students in Geography** should recognize the disciplinary and scholarly underpinnings of our writing and must learn to articulate geo-spatial relationships when they write for us. By graduation, they need to be able to design and carry out an independent thesis-driven research project to prepare them for professional advancement and career success.

Overall, when students are learning to write and read in our field, they will benefit from a better understanding for the dynamism of human and physical relationships over time and space.