

chicago manual of style geographic data

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) offers comprehensive guidance on a multitude of writing and citation practices, and its treatment of geographic data is no exception. Navigating how to accurately and consistently represent locations, distances, and other spatial information within scholarly and professional works can be a complex undertaking. This article delves into the nuances of employing the Chicago Manual of Style for geographic data, covering everything from basic formatting conventions to more specialized considerations. We will explore the standard practices for naming places, specifying coordinates, and handling units of measurement, ensuring your work adheres to established academic and publishing standards. Furthermore, we will examine how CMOS addresses common challenges such as the use of abbreviations, the distinction between formal and informal geographical references, and the importance of clarity and precision when presenting any form of geographic data. Understanding these guidelines is crucial for any writer seeking to produce clear, credible, and well-documented content.

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Understanding Geographic Data in CMOS

The Chicago Manual of Style, in its extensive coverage of editorial and citation practices, provides clear directives for writers dealing with geographic data. This encompasses a broad spectrum of information, from simple place names and addresses to more complex geographical coordinates and measurements. The primary goal of CMOS in this regard is to ensure clarity, consistency, and accuracy for the reader. When writers meticulously follow these guidelines, they enhance the credibility of their work and facilitate easier comprehension, particularly for those who may not be intimately familiar with the subject matter.

Geographic data, in the context of CMOS, refers to any information that pinpoints a physical location or describes spatial relationships. This can include country names, state or provincial designations, city names, street addresses, geographical features like rivers and mountains, and even astronomical or geological coordinates. The Manual emphasizes that the specific context of the writing will often dictate the level of detail required and the most appropriate way to present this information. For instance, a historical document might require precise historical place names, while a scientific paper might demand exact latitude and longitude figures.

Formatting Place Names

The accurate and consistent formatting of place names is a cornerstone of clear geographic data

presentation within the Chicago Manual of Style. Generally, CMOS advocates for the use of full, unambiguous place names to avoid confusion. This means spelling out country names, state or provincial abbreviations when necessary, and using standard designations for cities and towns.

Standard Place Name Conventions

When referring to a location, the convention is typically to move from the most specific to the most general, or vice versa, depending on the context and intended emphasis. For example, in a formal citation or detailed reference, one might list the city, then the state or province, and then the country. In narrative text, the order might be more fluid, but clarity remains paramount. CMOS advises against relying on implicit understanding and encourages explicit naming, especially when dealing with locations that might be ambiguous or less commonly known.

Addressing Ambiguity in Place Names

Ambiguity in place names can arise from common names shared by multiple cities or regions. CMOS suggests disambiguating such instances by including additional identifying information, such as the state, province, or country. For example, instead of just "Springfield," one might specify "Springfield, Illinois" or "Springfield, Massachusetts," depending on the relevant context. This principle extends to historical place names or those that have changed over time, where providing both the historical and current name, or a clear identifier, is recommended.

Use of Abbreviations for Geographic Designations

The Chicago Manual of Style generally prefers spelling out terms like "state," "county," or "territory" in narrative text. However, in specific contexts, such as tables, figures, or bibliographies, standard abbreviations may be permissible if they are clearly defined or universally understood. For US states, the two-letter postal abbreviations are widely recognized, but CMOS often advises against their use in prose unless space is severely constrained or a specific style guide dictates otherwise. For international locations, it is crucial to use the full, recognized name and avoid regional or informal abbreviations.

Specifying Coordinates and Elevations

When precise geographical positioning is necessary, such as in scientific research, cartography, or detailed historical accounts, CMOS provides guidelines for specifying coordinates and elevations. Accuracy and a consistent format are essential to ensure that this data is interpretable and verifiable.

Latitude and Longitude Formatting

Latitude and longitude are typically expressed in degrees, minutes, and seconds, or in decimal degrees. CMOS prefers a clear and unambiguous format. For example, 41°52'45"N latitude and 87°37'30"W longitude is a standard representation using degrees, minutes, and seconds. When using decimal degrees, it should be presented with appropriate precision, such as 41.8792° N and 87.6250° W. Consistency in the format used throughout a document is key.

Elevation and Depth Conventions

When indicating elevation or depth, CMOS suggests clearly stating the reference point, if not standard. For example, "100 meters above sea level" or "50 feet below the surface." Units should be clearly specified (e.g., meters, feet) and conversions provided if necessary for an international audience. The use of positive and negative numbers can also denote above or below a reference plane, but textual clarification is often preferred for maximum clarity, especially in non-technical writing.

Representing Geographic Grids and Systems

For more complex geospatial data, writers may need to refer to specific geographic grid systems or projection methods. While CMOS may not detail every specialized system, it emphasizes the importance of identifying the system being used. For instance, if a study relies on data from the Universal Transverse Mercator (UTM) grid, this should be stated clearly. Similarly, if data is based on a particular geodetic datum, such as WGS84, this information should be provided to ensure the reader understands the spatial reference framework.

Units of Measurement and Scale

The accurate and consistent use of units of measurement and scale is vital for presenting geographic data effectively. CMOS provides guidance to ensure that readers can properly interpret distances, areas, and dimensions.

Standard Units for Distance and Area

CMOS generally recommends using standard metric units (meters, kilometers) or imperial units (feet, miles) depending on the audience and discipline. For international publications or scientific contexts, the metric system is usually preferred. If a mix of units is unavoidable, or if a specific historical context uses a particular system, it is good practice to provide conversions to a more universally understood unit. For example, "a distance of 10 miles (approximately 16 kilometers)."

Representing Scale in Maps and Diagrams

When geographic data is presented visually, such as in maps or diagrams, the scale must be clearly indicated. CMOS suggests using a graphic scale bar as well as a representative fraction (e.g., 1:10,000) or a verbal scale (e.g., "1 inch represents 1 mile"). The scale should be prominently displayed and easily legible to ensure that the visual representation of geographic information is accurately understood in terms of real-world dimensions.

Handling Different Measurement Systems

In historical documents or in specific regional contexts, one might encounter older or less common units of measurement. CMOS advises that if such units are used, they should be clearly defined for the contemporary reader. This might involve providing a modern equivalent or a brief explanation of the unit's value. The goal is to prevent misinterpretation and to allow the reader to grasp the intended spatial information accurately.

Abbreviations and Special Cases

Certain situations in the presentation of geographic data require specific attention regarding abbreviations and unique circumstances. CMOS offers guidance to maintain clarity and consistency even in these less common scenarios.

Abbreviations for Cardinal Directions and Orientations

Abbreviations for cardinal directions like N (North), S (South), E (East), and W (West) are often used, particularly in conjunction with coordinates or compass bearings. CMOS permits these abbreviations when space is limited or in technical contexts, but advises that in narrative prose, spelling them out might be clearer. When abbreviations are used, they should be consistent throughout the text. Similarly, abbreviations for intermediate directions (NE, SW, etc.) follow the same principle.

Handling Names of Bodies of Water and Landforms

When referring to major bodies of water, such as oceans, seas, lakes, and rivers, as well as significant landforms like mountains and deserts, CMOS emphasizes using their full, recognized names. For example, "the Atlantic Ocean," "Lake Superior," or "Mount Everest." Abbreviations or informal names should generally be avoided unless they are widely established and clearly understood within the specific context of the writing.

Geographic Designations in Addresses

For formal addresses, CMOS follows standard postal conventions, which typically include abbreviations for states and sometimes for street types (e.g., St., Ave., Rd.). However, in body text, it is generally preferred to spell out these terms for clarity. For instance, instead of "1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW," one might write "1600 Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest" in a descriptive paragraph. The context dictates the appropriate level of formality and abbreviation.

Digital and Geospatial Information

In the digital age, geographic data often extends into the realm of digital formats and geospatial technologies. While CMOS primarily focuses on textual and print conventions, its principles of clarity and precision extend to how such data is referenced and presented.

Citing Digital Maps and Geographic Databases

When referencing digital maps, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data, or geospatial databases, CMOS suggests providing sufficient information for the reader to locate and understand the source. This typically includes the name of the dataset or map, the source organization, the date of access or publication, and a URL if applicable. The format should be consistent with other bibliographic entries in the work.

Representing Geospatial Coordinates in Digital Contexts

In digital environments, coordinates are often used in specific formats, such as GeoJSON or KML. While CMOS does not prescribe these formats directly, it underscores the importance of clearly stating the coordinate reference system (CRS) and the units used. If embedded within text, the principles of clear formatting for latitude and longitude discussed earlier still apply. The goal is to ensure that the digital geographic data is accurately interpreted outside of its native digital environment.

The application of the Chicago Manual of Style to geographic data ensures that writers can present spatial information with both accuracy and clarity. By adhering to these guidelines, whether detailing place names, coordinates, or units of measurement, authors can enhance the readability and credibility of their work. The emphasis on consistency and unambiguous representation serves to bridge potential gaps in a reader's familiarity with specific locations or geographical concepts, making the information accessible and reliable. Ultimately, mastering the CMOS approach to geographic data empowers writers to communicate spatial details effectively across a wide range of disciplines and contexts.

FAQ

Q: How should I format city and state names when using the Chicago Manual of Style for geographic data?

A: Generally, the Chicago Manual of Style recommends spelling out city and state names in narrative text. When disambiguation is necessary due to common city names, include the state. For instance, "Springfield, Illinois." In formal lists or tables, state abbreviations might be permissible if clearly defined or standard within the context.

Q: What is the preferred method for indicating latitude and longitude in Chicago style?

A: Chicago style prefers clarity and consistency. Latitude and longitude can be presented in degrees, minutes, and seconds (e.g., 41°52'45"N latitude and 87°37'30"W longitude) or in decimal degrees (e.g., 41.8792° N and 87.6250° W). Ensure the format used is consistent throughout the document, and always include the direction (N, S, E, W).

Q: Does Chicago Manual of Style have specific rules for using imperial versus metric units for geographic measurements?

A: CMOS generally allows for the use of either imperial or metric units, depending on the context and audience. For international or scientific contexts, the metric system is often preferred. If a mix of units is used, or if a less common unit is employed, it is advisable to provide conversions to a more standard unit for clarity.

Q: How should I handle abbreviations for geographic features or locations in my writing according to CMOS?

A: For major geographic features like oceans, seas, lakes, rivers, mountains, and deserts, CMOS advises using their full, recognized names (e.g., "the Pacific Ocean," "Mount Rainier"). Abbreviations for these should generally be avoided unless they are universally understood and space is a significant constraint.

Q: What guidance does CMOS offer on citing digital maps or geospatial data?

A: When citing digital maps or geospatial data, CMOS suggests providing enough information for the reader to identify and locate the source. This typically includes the title of the map or dataset, the responsible organization, the date of publication or access, and a URL if available, formatted consistently with other citations in your work.

Q: Is it acceptable to use US state postal abbreviations (e.g., CA, NY) in text following Chicago style?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style generally prefers spelling out state names in narrative text for clarity. Two-letter postal abbreviations are typically reserved for contexts like tables, bibliographies, or specific address formats where they are standard and space is limited.

Q: How do I represent elevations or depths according to Chicago Manual of Style guidelines?

A: When indicating elevations or depths, CMOS recommends clearly stating the reference point if it's not standard. For example, "500 meters above sea level" or "20 feet below the water table." Specify the units used (meters, feet) and consider providing conversions if necessary for a broad audience.

Q: What if I'm referencing historical geographic data that uses outdated place names or units?

A: If you are referencing historical geographic data with outdated place names or units, CMOS suggests providing context for the contemporary reader. This might involve stating the historical name and its modern equivalent, or providing the value of an outdated unit alongside its modern equivalent to prevent misinterpretation.

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