

chicago manual of style geographic naming practices

The Chicago Manual of Style geographic naming practices are essential for ensuring clarity, accuracy, and consistency in written works that refer to places. Navigating the complexities of geographical appellations requires a deep understanding of established conventions, from the precise spelling and capitalization of place names to the appropriate handling of disputed territories and historical designations. This article will delve into the core principles and detailed guidelines presented in the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) concerning geographic nomenclature, providing a comprehensive resource for writers, editors, and researchers. We will explore the nuances of identifying and naming geographical features, the rules for sovereign states, administrative divisions, and cities, and the specific considerations for bodies of water, mountains, and other natural landmarks. Furthermore, we will address the challenges of transliteration, the use of diacritical marks, and the proper citation of sources when dealing with uncertain or contested geographic names.

Table of Contents

Understanding the Fundamentals of Chicago Manual of Style Geographic Naming
Naming Sovereign States and International Territories
Handling Administrative Divisions and Political Subdivisions
Guidelines for Cities, Towns, and Settlements
Nomenclature for Geographical Features and Natural Landmarks
Specific Considerations for Bodies of Water
Mountain Ranges, Peaks, and Hills
Deserts, Forests, and Plains
Addressing Transliteration and Diacritical Marks
Handling Disputed and Unsettled Geographic Names
The Role of Authority and Official Sources

Understanding the Fundamentals of Chicago Manual of Style Geographic Naming

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) provides a robust framework for handling geographic names, prioritizing clarity, precision, and reader comprehension above all else. At its heart, the CMOS approach to geographic nomenclature emphasizes the importance of using the most current and widely accepted names for places. This means staying abreast of official designations and avoiding archaic or informal labels unless context specifically demands it. The manual recognizes that the world is constantly changing, with political boundaries shifting and place names being updated, therefore, a dynamic approach to verification is crucial for any writer employing these guidelines.

Consistency is another cornerstone of CMOS geographic naming practices. Once a particular convention for a place name is established within a work, it should be maintained throughout. This applies not only to the spelling and capitalization but also to the inclusion or exclusion of certain descriptors, such as "City" or "River." The goal is to create a seamless reading experience where the reader is not distracted by variations in how a place is referred to. This commitment to uniformity extends to the careful

consideration of subordinate clauses and appositives when they are part of a place name.

The Importance of Official Sources

The Chicago Manual of Style strongly advocates for the use of authoritative sources when determining the correct form of a geographic name. This typically includes official government gazettes, national mapping agencies, and international bodies like the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). Relying on these established authorities ensures that the names used are not only correct but also politically neutral and widely recognized. The CMOS encourages writers to cross-reference information from multiple reputable sources to confirm accuracy, especially when dealing with less common or historically significant place names.

Capitalization and Punctuation Conventions

Capitalization of geographic names in CMOS follows general English rules, with proper nouns being capitalized. However, there are specific nuances for compound names and terms that function as part of a name. For instance, in "New York City," all major words are capitalized. When a geographic name is preceded by a general noun that is not part of the official name, such as "the city of Chicago," the general noun is lowercase. Punctuation within geographic names, such as hyphens or apostrophes, should be retained as they appear in the official designation.

Naming Sovereign States and International Territories

When referring to sovereign states, the Chicago Manual of Style emphasizes using their official names as recognized by international consensus. This often means employing the short-form name commonly used in general discourse, rather than the full, formal name, unless the context requires such specificity. For example, "France" is generally preferred over "the French Republic." It is also important to note any established variations or commonly accepted alternative names that might be prevalent in certain fields or regions.

The manual also provides guidance on handling international territories and dependencies. In such cases, clarity about the political status is paramount. If a territory is disputed or has a complex administrative relationship with a sovereign state, this should be noted clearly and factually. The CMOS suggests using the name that best reflects the current political reality and is least likely to cause confusion or be perceived as taking sides in a political dispute, prioritizing neutrality and established international practice.

Official Names vs. Common Usage

A key consideration for sovereign states is the distinction between their official, full names and their common, short-form names. The Chicago Manual of Style generally advises using the common name for ease of reading and brevity, as long as it is unambiguous. For instance, "Canada" is typically used instead of "Dominion of Canada." However, if a specific context, such as a legal document or historical treaty, necessitates the use of the full official name, then that designation should be employed precisely as it is written.

Handling of Colonies and Protectorates

For territories that are or have been colonies or protectorates, the CMOS guidelines suggest using the names that reflect their historical or current status accurately. This may involve using former colonial names if they are still widely understood or the contemporary names designated by the governing power. When clarity is an issue, adding a brief explanatory phrase to denote the political relationship can be beneficial, ensuring the reader understands the context without resorting to overly complex nomenclature.

Handling Administrative Divisions and Political Subdivisions

The nomenclature for administrative divisions, such as states, provinces, cantons, and counties, requires careful attention to the specific terminology used within a given country. The Chicago Manual of Style advocates for using the official terms that prevail in the region. For example, in the United States, these are typically "states" and "counties," while in Canada, they are "provinces" and "territories." Consistency in using these terms throughout a document is vital for maintaining clarity.

When referring to these subdivisions, the CMOS suggests a straightforward approach. The name of the subdivision should be presented clearly, often followed by its type, if that aids comprehension. For instance, "California, United States," or "Ontario, Canada." This format helps readers immediately identify the geographical and political context. For historical contexts, the manual advises using the names and divisions that were in effect at the time being discussed, even if they have since changed.

Subnational Entities and Their Designations

Subnational entities can encompass a wide range of classifications, from federal states within a federation to autonomous regions within a unitary state. The Chicago Manual of Style guides writers to use the most appropriate and officially recognized designation for each. This might include terms like "federal state," "autonomous community," "constituent country," or "special administrative region." The key is to accurately reflect the political structure and the entity's place within it.

Consistency in Referring to Divisions

Maintaining consistency in referring to administrative divisions is crucial for avoiding reader confusion. If a work discusses multiple countries, it is important to use the correct terminology for their respective subdivisions. For instance, if discussing both France and Germany, one would refer to "regions" in France and "Länder" in Germany. Deviating from these established terms without a compelling reason can undermine the credibility and readability of the text.

Guidelines for Cities, Towns, and Settlements

When naming cities, towns, and other settlements, the Chicago Manual of Style prioritizes the official and most commonly used name. This typically involves using the name that appears on modern maps and in official directories. If a city has undergone a name change, the current name should be used, with a note about the former name if it is significant for historical context or to avoid ambiguity. The manual also addresses the use of prefixes and suffixes, such as "Saint" or "Ville," ensuring they are spelled and formatted correctly as per the official name.

For larger metropolitan areas, the CMOS provides guidance on how to refer to the broader urban region versus the central city. This might involve using terms like "metropolitan area," "greater [city name]," or specific regional designations. The goal is to distinguish clearly between the administrative boundaries of a city and the sprawling urban environment that surrounds it, preventing misinterpretations of geographic scope.

Proper Spelling and Form of City Names

The correct spelling of city names is of utmost importance. The Chicago Manual of Style emphasizes consulting authoritative sources to ensure accuracy. This includes verifying the presence of any diacritical marks or special characters that are part of the official name. For cities with multiple common spellings or transliterations, the manual advises choosing one and sticking to it consistently, ideally the one most widely recognized or officially sanctioned.

Distinguishing Cities from Metropolitan Areas

A frequent point of confusion in geographic writing is the distinction between a city and its encompassing metropolitan area. The Chicago Manual of Style recommends being precise in this regard. If referring to the administrative entity of a city, use its name alone. If referring to the broader urbanized region, including suburbs and exurbs, use phrases like "the metropolitan area of [city name]" or "greater [city name]." This clarity is essential for accurate demographic and economic discussions.

Nomenclature for Geographical Features and Natural Landmarks

The Chicago Manual of Style offers specific guidance for naming natural geographical features, encompassing a wide array of formations. When dealing with mountains, rivers, lakes, deserts, and forests, the manual stresses the use of established, recognized names. This often means relying on national and international geographical surveys and gazetteers. The principle of using the most current and widely accepted nomenclature applies here as rigorously as it does for political entities.

The CMOS also addresses the inclusion of generic terms as part of a feature's name. For example, "Rocky Mountains" uses "Mountains" as part of its proper name and is capitalized accordingly. In contrast, if one were referring to a range of mountains generally, it might be written as "the Rocky Mountains" or simply "the Rockies." The distinction between a proper noun phrase and a descriptive phrase is critical for maintaining grammatical correctness and clarity.

Specificity in Naming Natural Features

When naming natural features, specificity is key. A particular mountain peak will have its own name, distinct from the mountain range it belongs to, which in turn is distinct from a broader geographical region. The Chicago Manual of Style encourages writers to be as precise as the context allows. For instance, "Mount Everest" is a specific peak, while "the Himalayas" refers to a vast mountain range. Using the most precise name ensures that the reader understands the exact geographical entity being discussed.

Handling of Historical and Local Names

In some instances, historical or local names for geographical features may persist alongside or in place of official designations. The Chicago Manual of Style advises using such names judiciously. If a local name is widely understood and serves a specific purpose in the narrative, it may be appropriate to use it, often with a note clarifying its relationship to the official name. However, for formal or scholarly writing, prioritizing officially recognized names is generally preferred to maintain a standard of clarity and universality.

Specific Considerations for Bodies of Water

Bodies of water, including oceans, seas, lakes, rivers, and canals, have their own set of naming conventions that the Chicago Manual of Style addresses. The general principle of using official and widely accepted names applies here. For major bodies of water like the Pacific Ocean or the Mediterranean Sea, the names are well-established. For smaller or less commonly known bodies of water, consulting detailed topographical maps and geographical databases becomes even more crucial.

The CMOS also guides writers on how to refer to these features when they form boundaries or are part of a larger geographical context. For example, "the border between France and Germany lies along the Rhine River." The inclusion of the generic term, such as "River" or "Lake," is often integral to the proper name and should be capitalized as such. Consistency in how these features are presented, whether as "Lake Michigan" or "the Great Lakes," is essential for a cohesive document.

Rivers, Lakes, and Oceans

When referring to rivers, lakes, and oceans, the Chicago Manual of Style advocates for using their standard, recognized names. For instance, one would write "the Nile River," "Lake Superior," and "the Atlantic Ocean." The definite article ("the") is typically used when referring to these features, unless they are part of a possessive construction or a proper name that omits it. The capitalization of the generic term (River, Lake, Ocean) is maintained when it is considered part of the proper name.

Canals and Other Waterways

Canals and other man-made or modified waterways also fall under the purview of geographic naming. The Chicago Manual of Style suggests using their official names, such as "the Panama Canal" or "the Suez Canal." Similar to natural bodies of water, the generic term "Canal" is usually capitalized as part of the proper name. If a waterway has alternative or historical names, the manual advises choosing the most current and recognizable one for clarity, or providing context if a historical name is necessary.

Mountain Ranges, Peaks, and Hills

Nomenclature for mountainous terrain, including ranges, individual peaks, and hills, requires precision according to the Chicago Manual of Style. The names of major mountain ranges, such as the Andes or the Alps, are well-established and capitalized accordingly. For individual peaks, the use of "Mount," "Peak," or "Pinnacle" as part of the proper name is common and should be retained and capitalized. For example, "Mount Kilimanjaro" or "Denali Peak."

When referring to multiple peaks within a range, or simply discussing mountains in a general sense, the Chicago Manual of Style guides writers on appropriate phrasing. This might involve using the plural form of the range name or employing descriptive terms. The key is to distinguish between specific named entities and general geographical descriptions to maintain accuracy and reader understanding throughout the text.

Distinguishing Ranges from Individual Peaks

It is crucial to differentiate between a mountain range and an individual peak. The Chicago Manual of Style emphasizes that "the Rocky Mountains"

refers to the entire system, while "Mount Rainier" refers to a specific, prominent peak within that system. The use of prefixes like "Mount," "Pike," or "Summit" as part of a peak's name warrants capitalization. When referring to mountains generally, the lowercase term "mountains" might be appropriate, depending on the context.

Naming of Hills and Plateaus

While ranges and peaks often have prominent, widely recognized names, hills and plateaus can be more varied in their nomenclature. The Chicago Manual of Style advises using local or official names where they exist and are clear. If a hill or plateau is significant to the narrative, it should be identified as precisely as possible, often with a descriptive qualifier if its name is not universally known. For instance, "the rolling hills of Tuscany" or "the Colorado Plateau."

Deserts, Forests, and Plains

The Chicago Manual of Style extends its principles of accurate and consistent naming to vast terrestrial features like deserts, forests, and plains. These large-scale geographical areas often have well-established names that are used in both general and academic contexts. For example, "the Sahara Desert," "the Amazon Rainforest," and "the Great Plains." The definite article is typically used, and the generic term (Desert, Rainforest, Plains) is capitalized as it forms part of the proper name.

When referring to these areas, the CMOS encourages clarity regarding their extent and significance. If a particular part of a larger desert or forest is being discussed, it is important to use the specific name if one exists, or to provide sufficient descriptive context. The goal remains to provide the reader with unambiguous information about the geographical location being described.

Naming of Extensive Land Areas

The naming of extensive land areas such as deserts, plains, and forests follows the same principles as other geographical features. The Chicago Manual of Style emphasizes using the officially recognized and most commonly used names. For instance, "the Gobi Desert" or "the boreal forest." The capitalization of the generic descriptor, such as "Desert" or "Forest," is maintained when it is considered an integral part of the proper name.

Regional Designations and Subdivisions

Within these vast regions, there may be smaller, distinct areas with their own names. The Chicago Manual of Style suggests using these subdivisions when they are relevant and when their names are clear. For example, if discussing a specific section of the Serengeti, one might refer to "the Ngorongoro

Conservation Area," which lies within the larger ecosystem. This level of detail enhances precision without sacrificing readability, provided the names are handled consistently.

Addressing Transliteration and Diacritical Marks

Transliteration and the use of diacritical marks are significant challenges in geographic naming, especially when dealing with names from languages that use different alphabets or phonetic systems. The Chicago Manual of Style provides clear guidance to ensure consistency and accuracy. The primary principle is to follow the established system of transliteration used by reputable sources in the relevant field. This often means adhering to guidelines set by international bodies or national geographic societies.

When diacritical marks are part of an official name, they should generally be retained. This includes accents, umlauts, and other markings that are essential to the correct pronunciation and spelling of the name. If a font or digital platform does not support these characters, the manual suggests using the closest English equivalent and perhaps including a note explaining the deviation, though this should be done sparingly. The goal is to represent the name as faithfully as possible.

Systems of Transliteration

Different languages and writing systems have various established methods for transliteration into the Latin alphabet. The Chicago Manual of Style recommends adhering to the most widely accepted and authoritative system for the language in question. For example, the Library of Congress system is often a benchmark for many languages. Consistency in applying a chosen transliteration system throughout a document is paramount to avoid confusion.

Retaining Diacritical Marks

Diacritical marks, such as accents (é, à), umlauts (ü, ö), and tildes (ñ), are crucial for the accurate pronunciation and meaning of many place names. The Chicago Manual of Style strongly advocates for retaining these marks whenever they appear in the official name and when the publishing medium allows for their display. Omitting them can lead to mispronunciation, ambiguity, or even misidentification of a place.

Handling Disputed and Unsettled Geographic Names

Dealing with disputed territories or names with contested spellings presents a significant challenge for geographic nomenclature. The Chicago Manual of Style advises a cautious and neutral approach. When a territory is subject to

political dispute, the manual suggests using names that are least likely to be perceived as taking a side. This often means employing the name that is most widely recognized in international discourse or that is used by major international organizations.

In cases where there are multiple widely used names for the same place, or where the official name is contested, the CMOS recommends providing context. This might involve acknowledging the different names and explaining the situation briefly. The aim is to inform the reader accurately without introducing bias or confusion into the text. Verifying the status of a name and territory through reliable, neutral sources is essential in such situations.

Neutrality in Disputed Territories

When a geographic area is subject to political dispute, the Chicago Manual of Style emphasizes the importance of neutrality. This means avoiding language that implicitly favors one claim over another. The manual suggests using the most common and least politically charged name for the area. In some cases, it may be necessary to use a descriptive phrase or to note the existence of competing claims, depending on the context and the purpose of the writing.

Acknowledging Multiple Names

For places known by more than one name, or where naming conventions are fluid, the Chicago Manual of Style permits acknowledging these variations. If a historical name is still in common use, or if there are distinct local and official names, it may be helpful to mention both, perhaps with the primary name being the one that is most current or officially sanctioned. This approach ensures accuracy and caters to readers who may be familiar with different designations.

The Role of Authority and Official Sources

Throughout its guidelines on geographic naming, the Chicago Manual of Style consistently underscores the paramount importance of authoritative sources. These sources serve as the bedrock for ensuring accuracy, consistency, and neutrality in how places are referenced. Relying on official government agencies, international cartographic bodies, and established academic gazetteers provides a verifiable standard that minimizes ambiguity and subjective interpretation.

The manual does not merely instruct writers to consult these sources; it implicitly advocates for a critical engagement with them. This means understanding that even authoritative sources can evolve, and that the process of naming and categorization is ongoing. Therefore, a commitment to verifying and updating geographic information is a continuous requirement for anyone adhering to the Chicago Manual of Style's practices. This diligent approach is what ultimately upholds the integrity and clarity of written communication concerning the world's geography.

Consulting Reputable Geographic Resources

The Chicago Manual of Style places significant emphasis on consulting reputable geographic resources. This includes, but is not limited to, national mapping agencies (such as the U.S. Geological Survey), international organizations (like the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names), and well-established atlases and gazetteers. These sources provide the most accurate and up-to-date information on place names, spellings, and official designations.

Verifying and Updating Geographic Information

Geographic information is not static; political boundaries change, and place names are sometimes updated. The Chicago Manual of Style implicitly encourages a proactive approach to verification. Writers and editors should be prepared to consult the latest editions of authoritative sources to ensure that the geographic names used in their work are current and accurate. This commitment to updating information is crucial for maintaining the credibility and relevance of the content.

FAQ

Q: What is the primary principle guiding Chicago Manual of Style geographic naming practices?

A: The primary principle guiding Chicago Manual of Style geographic naming practices is to prioritize clarity, accuracy, and consistency by using the most current and widely accepted names for places, as determined by authoritative sources.

Q: How does the Chicago Manual of Style advise handling disputed territories?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style advises a neutral approach for disputed territories, suggesting the use of names that are least likely to be perceived as taking sides, often employing the most common international name or noting competing claims if necessary for context.

Q: Should I always use the full, official name of a sovereign state?

A: Generally, no. The Chicago Manual of Style advises using the short-form, commonly accepted name for sovereign states (e.g., "France") unless the context specifically requires the full, formal name (e.g., "the French Republic").

Q: What is the rule for capitalizing generic terms like "River" or "Mountain" in geographic names?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style capitalizes generic terms like "River," "Mountain," or "Lake" when they are considered an integral part of the proper name, such as "the Nile River" or "Mount Everest."

Q: How should I deal with place names that have diacritical marks?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style strongly recommends retaining diacritical marks (accents, umlauts, etc.) as they appear in the official name, provided the publishing medium supports them, to ensure accuracy and proper pronunciation.

Q: What are considered authoritative sources for geographic names according to CMOS?

A: Authoritative sources include national mapping agencies (e.g., U.S. Geological Survey), international cartographic bodies (e.g., UNGEGN), and established academic gazetteers and atlases.

Q: Is it acceptable to use historical names for places?

A: It is acceptable to use historical names if they are still widely understood and necessary for context, but the Chicago Manual of Style generally prefers current, official names for clarity and consistency.

Q: How does CMOS address variations in spelling for the same geographic location?

A: When multiple spellings exist, the Chicago Manual of Style advises choosing one that is most widely recognized or officially sanctioned and using it consistently throughout the document.

Q: Should I include administrative division types, like "state" or "province," in geographic references?

A: Yes, the Chicago Manual of Style suggests including the type of administrative division (e.g., "California, United States," or "Ontario, Canada") when it aids in clarity and helps readers immediately identify the geographical and political context.

Chicago Manual Of Style Geographic Naming Practices

Related Articles

- [chicago manual of style formatting guidelines for reports](#)
- [chicago manual of style guide book formatting](#)
- [chicago manual of style for literary explanation](#)

[Back to Home](#)