

THE WHY AND HOW OF WRITING ESSAYS IN GEOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

This handout suggests ways to simplify and ease the job of writing research essays—organizing, quoting, and citing of reference sources plus presenting, using, and citing sources for tables and maps—so that none of the work you put into them will be wasted. As a start, notice that this paragraph gives a preview of all the content to follow: that is, it functions as an introduction. A quick look at Appendix A might be of use, too.

THE STRUCTURE OF AN ESSAY

Organization

Somewhere, somehow, every thought you write should be organized. Some people do it without conscious effort; the rest of us do it as an *outline* on paper. Yet no matter how carefully you have outlined, the topics you use and the logic of their sequence is **not** automatically obvious to every reader. Fortunately, clear signposts can be added at very little cost in time or paper: they are called *headings* and *sub-headings*.

If you have two or more quite distinct parts in a paper (such as review of others' work vs. your own synthesis and conclusions, or the landforms vs. climate vs. vegetation of a region) then each deserves a heading of its own. That is: a word or phrase of identification, underlined or all in capital letters, centred on the page and on a line to itself. For examples, look carefully at this handout.

Lesser 'changes of horse' in your progress from paragraph to paragraph may deserve sub-headings: as above, but starting from the left margin and in underlined, mixed-case form. Sub-headed blocks of text will have from one to several paragraphs; their indented first sentences are the markers for the next lower level of organization in your writing—but notice that first paragraphs often do not get indented.

Each paragraph should advance your presentation by one point of evidence, one logical inference from earlier paragraphs' evidence, a summation of what has been said up to that point, or an overview of what is about to be discussed. The sentences that make up a paragraph (note that plural: one sentence does not a paragraph make!) may be built in whatever way you choose—long or short, complex or plain, spare or florid—so long as respect for the rules of grammar keeps your meaning clear, and so long as your sentence-building style is not at odds with your topic or your readers' expectations.

The simple matter of white space on each page deserves a final mention. Although typing to the very edges of each sheet, single-spaced, may seem to save paper it is a saving that will

usually cost you marks. Not only is a type-blackened page hard to read, it leaves no room for editorial comments. The intent of those scribbles, by the way, is not (or *shouldn't* be) to depress your spirits but instead to show you in detail how to write a better paper or report next time. So be courageous and a bit generous: double-space your text and leave around an inch (2.5 cm) margin on all four sides ... but stop short of obviously boosting your page count with blank paper.

Quotations

To give credit where credit is due, *cite* (with references: see below) the writers whose ideas you have re-phrased, *quote* the expressions you choose not to improve on, and *block-quote* those passages that go on for more than two or three lines of your text. Note that, in text that is double-spaced, block quotes should be one-&a-half or single-spaced and indented about an additional ¼ inch (0.5 cm) from each margin.

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

(Strunk & White, 1979: 23)

References

The purpose of footnotes and bibliographies in research essays is to give interested readers (including yourself, at some later date) the keys to carry forward research on related topics without having to repeat your search for existing work in print. There are many formats to meet this purpose—compare a few academic books and journals—and it matters very little to me which one you use. What will matter to *you* is the extra time and typing that some formats take. Choose one, then **stick with it** through any one paper.

All reference formats provide, in one way or another:

- a) full name(s) of author(s), editor(s), or other parties that actually produced the published words;
- b) date when publication happened, giving a clue to how current (or classic) the content is;
- c) title of the basic block of relevant content—article, chapter, whole book—and the larger unit into which it fits (if any): journal, symposium, monograph series, etc.;
- d) name and location of publishing organization, i.e. the outfit responsible for taking text from rough draft to printed form (the actual printers, if other than the publishers, get no mention at all).

Some reference systems are easier than others for the reader, the typist, the editor, or the typesetter. At best this part of writing should be tolerably easy for you, the writer-student. Since repeated typing of the same names and titles is no fun to do or to read, and a pack of *ibids* is scant improvement, the choice narrows to systems that insert author surname, date, and page(s) into text (as in the Strunk & White reference above) saving the complete details for an alpha-

betized bibliography at the end of the paper. A similar scheme, only a little harder on the reader, numbers each entry in the bibliography and replaces author and date, above, with the appropriate number [e.g.(1:23-25)].

Note that it is my particular quirk to regard use of the course textbook as a research reference source as ILLEGITIMATE. Don't do it! The main point to a research essay assignment, as I see it, is to direct you out into the world of information beyond the 'pre-canned' content of any and all textbooks.

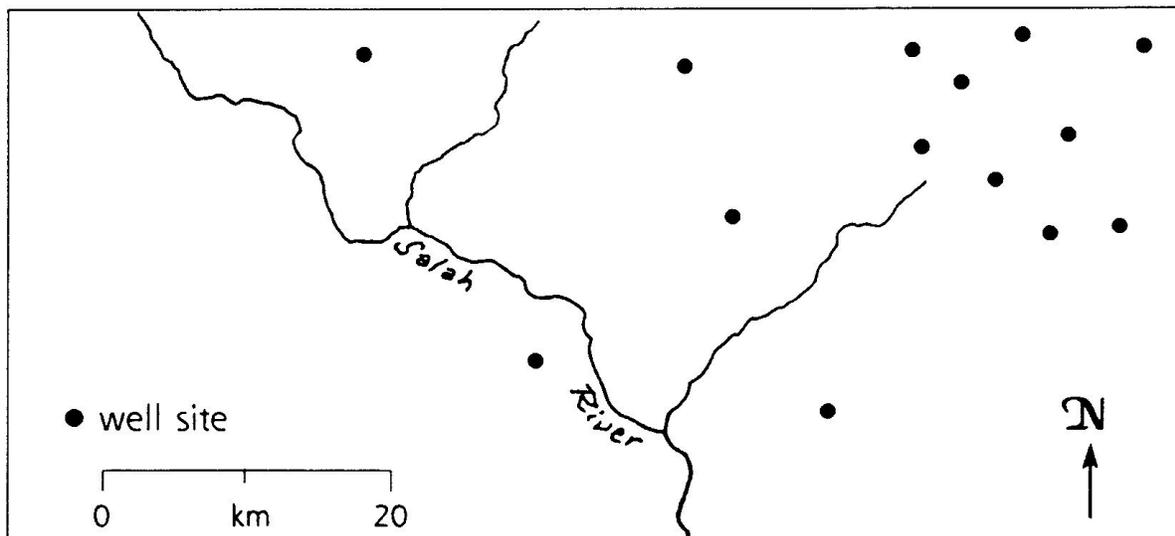
MAPS AND TABLES: THE NON-TEXT CONTENT

Maps

Only in geography will you find maps in the list of requirements for an essay or report. So: you include a copied map and that's that? Of course not. The point of a map's presence is the *information* it carries, and that is lost unless you make explicit reference in your text to each map you include. To you it may seem obvious where and for what the reader should seek out your cartographic contribution, but that is **not** the case!

Having tied your map(s) to an appropriate part of your text you can get yet more mileage with a little analysis. For a fictitious example: "The concentration of wells in the northwest part of the study area (refer to Map 6), though related to shallow depth of the Gullah aquifer there, is also a product of Hogo settlement in the 1890s. Diffusion of well use can be expected throughout the area in coming decades as Hogo farmers displace Panap herders".

MAP 6. Well site distribution in the study area



source: Wilson, 1995: 35

Tabular data

Tables, like maps, are worthless if not put to clear use in the body of your writing. This means that the contents of each table will be mentioned in a context of comments, e.g. “The relationship between income and number of house-moves per decade is clearly positive (see Table 4 and Graph 3)”. The sources of tables’ contents will be cited in your chosen reference format, of course.

As for the choice of where to place tables, graphs, and maps—whether within text or gathered into an appendix—the main criterion is **size**. Anything that fits on a page or less can be kept close to the place where it is discussed, while a many-paged series of tables is awkward to read past and would be better placed in a numbered or lettered appendix, beyond the end of text. In that case it is doubly important to direct the reader’s attention appropriately, as in “See Table 3 in Appendix B”.

Proofreading

No matter how good the organization, writing and referencing of your text, it is nearly certain that some ‘finger trouble’ on the keyboard will have happened. Uncorrected typos (and other silly, catchable mistakes) in your text tell the reader that you (a) were in a big hurry to hand the paper in, and/or (b) don’t give a *&7^% about the quality of your paper. Neither possibility helps your mark.

CONCLUSION

The writing of report-like papers is a fate you will escape only by choosing to train and work where writing is not part of the job. Few of us have the gift of writing with ease, but anyone can write well enough, with just a little attention and self-editing. This handout offers a few tips about writing in general and about topics peculiar to geography, with the intention of promoting better writing.

REFERENCES

Strunk, William Jr., and E. B. White

1979 *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. Macmillan, NYC.

Wilson. M. R.

1995 *Out of Africa and Off the Top of My Head* [unpublished].

APPENDIX A.

“Some Rules for Writers”

Remember to never split an infinitive. The passive voice should never be used. Do not put statements in the negative form, and don't use no double negatives. Verbs has to agree with their subjects. Proofread carefully to see if you any words out. If you reread your work, you can find on rereading a great deal of repetition can be avoided by rereading and editing. A writer must not shift your point of view. And don't start a sentence with a conjunction (remember, too, a preposition is a terrible word to end a sentence with). Don't overuse exclamation marks!! Use apostrophe's correctly, and don't use commas, which, aren't necessary. Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences, as of 10 or more words, to their antecedents. About those sentence fragments. Writing carefully, dangling participles must be avoided. If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is. Take the bull by the hand and avoid mixing metaphors. Avoid trendy locutions that sound flaky. Everyone should be careful to use a singular pronoun with singular nouns in their writing. Always pick on the correct idiom. The adverb always follows the verb. Corect speling is essential. Last but not least, avoid trite cliches like the plague.

[William Safire combined with *Newsman's English* by Harold Evans. *The Operational Geographer*, No. 17 (Vol.6, No.3), Dec. 1988, p.69]

APPENDIX B.

TABLES

Table 1. [nothing here, but in your paper there would be]

Table 2.

Table 3.

Table 4.

[text version as of last GEOG.804.3 Development of Geographic Thought course I offered, Spring 2001]

references

Strunk, William Jr., & E.B. White

1979 *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. Macmillan, NYC.

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APPENDIX B.IMAGINARY TABLES

Table 1. [nothing here, but in your paper there would be]

Table 2.

Table 3.

Table 4.

version of 1-dec-98