

chicago manual of style citing geographic databases citation

The Chicago Manual of Style citing geographic databases citation is a crucial aspect of academic and professional writing, ensuring proper attribution and enabling readers to locate the sources used in research. Accurately citing these complex digital resources, from geospatial data repositories to online mapping platforms, requires a nuanced understanding of Chicago's guidelines for electronic and non-traditional sources. This article delves into the intricacies of referencing geographic databases, offering a comprehensive guide for writers navigating this often-challenging citation landscape. We will explore the fundamental principles, essential components of a citation, and specific examples tailored for various types of geographic data. Understanding these elements is vital for maintaining scholarly integrity and providing transparency in research.

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Understanding Geographic Databases in Citation

Geographic databases, also known as geospatial databases, are collections of information that describe and locate features on the Earth's surface. These can range from large-scale governmental repositories of census data and satellite imagery to more specialized datasets focusing on specific environmental, social, or economic phenomena. The complexity and dynamic nature of these databases present unique challenges for citation, as they often differ significantly from traditional print sources. Writers must consider not only the origin of the data but also its format, accessibility, and versioning.

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) provides a framework for citing a wide variety of sources, and its principles can be adapted for geographic databases. The core idea remains to provide enough information for the reader to find and verify the data. This involves identifying the author or creator, the title or description of the dataset, the date of publication or access, and the source or location where it can be found. For digital resources like geographic databases, the URL or DOI (Digital Object Identifier) becomes paramount.

The Importance of Specificity in Referencing Geospatial Data

When citing geographic databases, specificity is key. Unlike a book, a geographic dataset might have multiple versions, updates, or licenses. Failing to be precise can lead to a citation that is either unusable or misleading. For instance, citing a general website for a particular shapefile

without specifying the exact version or date of access can hinder a reader's ability to reproduce your findings or understand the exact data you utilized. This level of detail is what distinguishes a robust citation from a superficial one.

Moreover, understanding the nature of the data itself is important. Is it a static snapshot of information, or is it a regularly updated service? Is it raw data, or has it been processed or analyzed? These distinctions can influence how you frame your citation to accurately reflect the source.

Core Components of a Chicago Style Citation for Geographic Databases

While the exact format may vary slightly depending on the specific type of geographic database, several core components are consistently required for a Chicago Manual of Style citation. These elements ensure that readers have the necessary information to identify and access the data you have used.

Author or Creator

Identifying the author or creator of the geographic database is the first crucial step. This could be an individual researcher, a government agency, a university department, a private company, or an open-source collaborative. If no specific individual or entity is credited, you may use the name of the organization responsible for its creation or dissemination. For example, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) would be credited for its widely used topographic datasets.

Title or Description of the Database

The title should be descriptive enough to clearly identify the dataset. Often, geographic databases have specific names assigned to them. If there isn't a formal title, you should create a descriptive phrase that accurately represents the data. This might include the type of data (e.g., "Land Cover Dataset"), the geographic area it covers (e.g., "Chicago Metropolitan Area"), and the time period it represents (e.g., "2020"). Enclosing descriptive titles in quotation marks is common practice in Chicago style.

Publication Date or Version Information

Determining the correct date is essential. For published datasets, this would be the year of publication. However, many geographic databases are continually updated or exist as ongoing projects. In such cases, you should cite the most recent update date available or the date of the specific version you accessed. If only an access date is available, that should be used, often in conjunction with a version number if provided by the source.

Publisher or Disseminating Organization

This component identifies the entity that makes the database available. This could be the organization that created it, hosted it, or distributed it. For instance, if you accessed data from Esri, that would be listed as the publisher. This is distinct from the creator if the data was developed elsewhere and then distributed by another entity.

Access Information (URL or DOI)

Since most geographic databases are accessed electronically, providing a stable and direct link is critical. A URL is the most common form of access information. If the database has a DOI, that is generally preferred as it is a persistent identifier that will lead to the resource even if the URL changes. Ensure the URL is direct to the dataset or the download page, not just the homepage of the organization.

Date of Access

For electronic sources that may be updated or changed frequently, it is good practice to include the date you accessed the information. This allows readers to understand the state of the data at the time of your research. This is typically formatted as "Accessed [Month Day, Year]." This is particularly important for live web services or frequently updated datasets.

Citing Specific Types of Geographic Databases

The broad category of "geographic databases" encompasses a diverse range of digital resources. Tailoring your citation to the specific type of resource will enhance clarity and usability for your readers. Understanding these nuances is crucial for a precise Chicago manual of style citing geographic databases citation.

Online Mapping Platforms and Web Services

When citing interactive online maps or geospatial web services (like Google Maps, ArcGIS Online, or specific API data), you'll need to focus on the provider and the specific layer or map you utilized. The author is typically the company or organization that provides the platform. The "title" might be the name of the map service itself, or a specific named map layer if applicable. The date would be the most recent update or the date of access. A URL to the specific map or service is essential.

For example, if you used a specific satellite imagery layer from a platform, you would cite that layer and its provider. If you are referencing a general service like Google Street View, you would cite Google as the author and the platform name as the title, along with the date of access and the URL.

Geospatial Data Repositories and Archives

These are digital archives where researchers and the public can download raw or processed geospatial data. Examples include national geological surveys, environmental data centers, or university-affiliated data repositories. The citation should clearly identify the dataset by its specific name or description, the organization hosting it, the version or date of the data, and the URL where it can be downloaded.

A typical citation might look like this: Author (Organization). Year. "Dataset Title." Version Number (if applicable). Publisher (if different from author). Accessed [Month Day, Year]. URL.

GIS Software and Associated Data

If you are citing data that comes bundled with Geographic Information System (GIS) software, the citation needs to reflect this. The author would be the software developer, and the title would be the name of the software package along with a description of the data included. The version of the software is also important. If you are using specific datasets within the software that are not part of the core package, you would cite those separately as described above.

For instance, if you used a global elevation dataset provided with ArcGIS, you would cite Esri as the author, the dataset name as the title, and the specific version of ArcGIS as part of the publication details.

- Creator/Author
- Title of the Database/Dataset
- Version Information (if applicable)
- Year of Publication or Last Update
- Publisher/Distributor
- Access Method (URL, DOI, etc.)
- Date of Access

Frequently Encountered Challenges and Solutions

Citing geographic databases can present unique challenges that require careful consideration. Understanding these common issues and their solutions will help ensure your citations are accurate and effective.

Lack of a Clear Author or Title

Sometimes, geographic data is released without a clearly designated author or a formal title. In such cases, you will need to create a descriptive title and attribute the work to the most logical entity responsible for its creation or dissemination. For example, if a university research lab produces a dataset but doesn't formally title it, you might use a phrase like "Urban Heat Island Data for Phoenix, Arizona." The author would then be the university or the specific lab group.

Dynamic and Constantly Updated Data

Many geographic databases are live services or are updated frequently. For these, the date of access becomes critical. Instead of a publication date, you will rely on the date you last viewed or downloaded the data. Ensure you are citing the most recent available version unless your research specifically requires an older one. Clearly stating "Accessed [Month Day, Year]" is crucial for transparency.

Proprietary vs. Open-Source Data

The citation format might subtly differ depending on whether the data is proprietary (requiring a license or purchase) or open-source. For proprietary data, you might need to include licensing information if it significantly impacts usability or if required by the terms of use. Open-source data citations generally focus on providing clear access information so others can freely obtain it.

Data Transformations and Modifications

If you have significantly processed or modified the original geographic database data, Chicago style generally recommends noting this in your text or in a footnote. The citation should still point to the original source of the data, but your own modifications should be transparent. You might add a phrase like "Data modified by author" to your descriptive citation or in the accompanying text.

Best Practices for Citing Geographic Data

Adhering to best practices in citation ensures that your work is credible and that your sources are easily verifiable. For geographic databases, this means being thorough and consistent.

Consult the Latest Edition of The Chicago Manual of

Style

Citation styles, including Chicago, evolve. Always refer to the most current edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* for the most up-to-date guidelines. While the principles for electronic sources are generally stable, specific formatting or recommendations can change.

Be Consistent in Your Formatting

Once you establish a format for citing a particular type of geographic database, maintain that consistency throughout your document. Whether you are using footnotes and bibliography or notes only, ensure that all your citations follow the same structure. Inconsistency can detract from the professionalism of your work.

Use DOI Whenever Available

Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) are persistent identifiers that are designed to resolve even if the URL of the resource changes. If a geographic database or dataset has a DOI, always use it in your citation instead of a URL. This greatly enhances the reliability and longevity of your citation.

Keep Records of Your Data Sources

As you conduct research, meticulously record all the details for each geographic database you use. This includes the author/creator, title, version, date, publisher, and URL/DOI. This proactive approach will save you significant time and effort when you reach the citation stage of your writing process.

Consider the Audience and Publication Requirements

While Chicago style offers broad guidelines, specific journals, publishers, or instructors might have particular requirements or preferences regarding the citation of digital sources. Always check if there are any specific instructions for citing geographic databases that you need to follow in addition to or instead of the general Chicago style rules.

Properly citing geographic databases within the framework of *The Chicago Manual of Style* requires attention to detail and an understanding of the evolving nature of digital information. By following the core principles of attribution, accurately identifying key components, and adapting to various types of geospatial data, writers can ensure their research is both credible and accessible. The commitment to clear and precise citation practices is fundamental to scholarly integrity and the advancement of knowledge.

The following FAQs address common inquiries regarding the Chicago Manual of

Style citing geographic databases citation, aiming to provide clarity on specific scenarios and best practices.

Q: How do I cite a shapefile downloaded from a government website?

A: You would cite it similarly to other geographic data repositories. Identify the government agency as the author, the specific name of the shapefile (or a descriptive title if no formal name exists) as the title in quotation marks, the year of publication or last update, the name of the website or portal where it was found, and the direct URL to the download page. Include the date of access.

Q: What if a geographic database has no discernible author or publisher?

A: In such cases, you would create a descriptive title for the database and attribute it to the most logical entity responsible for its creation or dissemination, such as the institution or project under which it was developed. If no such entity can be identified, you might use the title itself as the first element of the citation, followed by other available information.

Q: Should I include the software used to create or access the geographic data in the citation?

A: Typically, you do not need to cite the GIS software itself unless you are citing data that is bundled with the software as part of its core offering. If you are using separate datasets within the software, you cite the datasets as described in the main article. If the software is crucial for understanding the data's context or origin, you might mention it in your text or a footnote.

Q: How do I cite a live web map service that is constantly updated?

A: For live web map services, the author is the provider (e.g., Google, Esri), and the title is the name of the map service or a specific named map layer you used. Crucially, you must include the date of access (e.g., "Accessed October 26, 2023") and the URL of the specific map or service you viewed, as the content can change.

Q: Is there a difference in how I cite proprietary geographic data versus open-source data?

A: While the core citation elements remain the same, for proprietary data, you may need to consider including licensing information or details about how you obtained access if it is relevant to your research and its reproducibility. For open-source data, the focus is on providing clear access

information so others can easily obtain the same data.

Q: What is the best way to cite a dataset that has multiple versions?

A: If the geographic database has distinct versions with version numbers, include the version number in your citation, usually after the title or publication date. This ensures readers can locate the precise version of the data you used for your research.

Q: Do I need to cite the metadata associated with a geographic database?

A: While the metadata itself is not typically cited directly as a separate source, its presence and content are crucial for understanding the geographic database. Ensure your citation of the database provides enough detail to guide readers to the data, and if the metadata is critical for context or understanding limitations, you can refer to it within your text or footnotes.

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