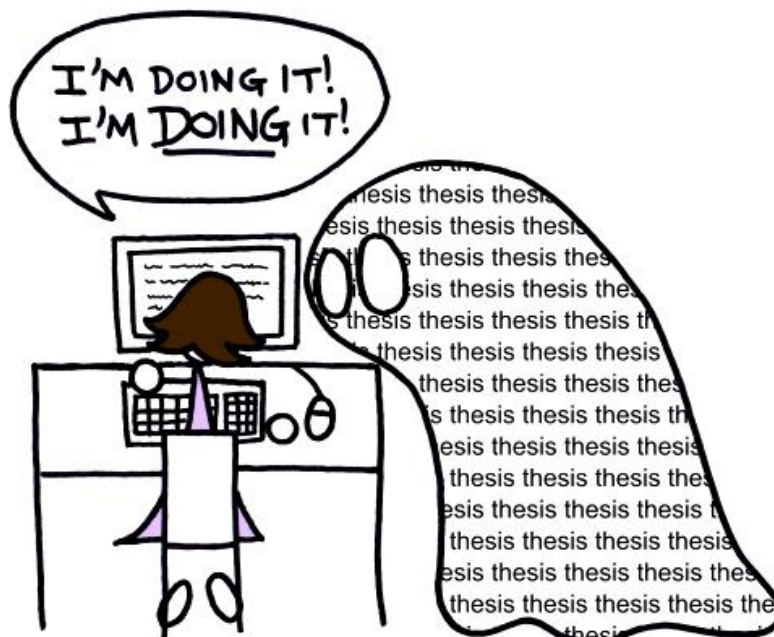


# GEOGRAPHY HONOURS THESIS HANDBOOK 2025-2026

## Contents

Thesis guidelines .....	1
Thesis layout example.....	9
Archival abstract guidelines.....	21
Archival abstract example.....	22
Poster guidelines.....	23
Short guide to good scholarly writing.....	26



## THESIS GUIDELINES

It is important to follow these guidelines in the preparation of your thesis. If you have a question that is not covered in this guide, ask the Thesis Coordinator and/or your Supervisor.

It is good practice to follow the correct formatting and style guidelines from the beginning. Reformatting your thesis or citations for the final draft and examinable copy is *very* time consuming.

Your Supervisor may ask you to follow a text layout commonly used in the field of research in which you are working. Note that there are some differences in the styles used by human and physical geographers. It is important that you discuss style preferences with your Supervisor *before* you write your first thesis draft. Note that this is a thesis by thesis, not a manuscript/article-based thesis.

Honours theses will be archived in the McGill Library system in electronic format (as .pdf files).

## LENGTH

The thesis must be less than both **15,000 words AND 50 pages at 1.5 spacing** (exclusive of the reference list and appendices). It should be prepared in a professional style according to this handbook, and must be free of typographical or spelling errors. Excessive word/page length over this regulation can result in a reduced grade.

## REQUIRED ELEMENTS

All geography honours theses must follow the basic format described in points (a)-(h) below.

- a. **Size of page and file format:** Undergraduate theses must be formatted for printing on standard 8.5 x 11 inch sheets, and be saved as .pdf documents.
- b. **Margins:** Leave margins of at least **2.5 cm** (1 inch) on the top and bottom, and on both sides.
- c. **Pagination:** Number pages consecutively throughout the paper (using Arabic numerals: 1, 2, 3) at the bottom centre of the page, counting from the first page of the *main text*. Except for the title page, all *front material* (pages before the body of the main text) should be numbered using lower case Roman numerals (i, ii, iii, iv) (table of contents, list of figures and tables, abstract, acknowledgements).
- d. **Title Page:** The title page comes first, and must have (a) the title of the paper; (b) your name; (c) reference to Honours requirement; (d) Department of Geography, McGill University; Montréal (Québec) Canada; (e) copyright symbol (©), year and your full

name. The title page is neither numbered nor counted. (See point (c) above and the example below.) Do not repeat the title on the first page of your text.

- e. **Abstract:** An abstract of no more than 150 words must appear on a separate page immediately preceding the first page of text. See point (c) above, and point (h) below (note that this is in addition to the 1 page separate abstract that you'll design for the Dept. webpage – the one in your thesis does not have an illustration).
- f. **Spacing and Paragraphs:** 1.5 line space the text of your thesis (but the limit remains 15,000 words/50 pages for body of text). Begin each new paragraph with either a) a new line - so there is a 1 line space between paragraphs; OR b) an indentation/tab of consistent spacing (1 cm indentation is a good standard). Do not do both a and b.
- g. **Chapters:** Start each chapter on a new page, and clearly label each with "CHAPTER XX: " followed by a short descriptive title.
- h. **Order of Pages:** The initial pages must be placed in the order below. An acknowledgements page is optional.

Title page – neither counted nor numbered  
Acknowledgements – the first numbered page of the front material (i)  
Table of Contents  
List of Figures and Illustrations (if any)  
List of Maps (if any)  
List of Tables (if any)  
Abstract – 150 words maximum  
First page of Chapter 1 – number pages from 1 using Arabic numerals  
Subsequent Chapters  
Reference List/Works Cited  
Appendices (if any)

## FORMAT

In the absence of any format suggested by your supervisor, you may follow the one described below (see I).

Standard reference guides for thesis and dissertations available in the library are listed below. In cases where the advice given in these guides conflicts with advice in this handbook, follow the handbook.

Allison and Race (2004) is a general "nuts and bolts" guide for thesis format and preparation, and is available as an ebook from the McGill Library catalogue. Miller (2004) will be useful for

those of you with extensive quantitative data. Turabian (2007) is an authoritative source for concerns regarding style, format, grammar, and the like.

Allison, B. and Race, P. 2004. *The student's guide to preparing dissertations and theses*. London; New York: Routledge. [ebook]

Miller, J. E. 2004. *The Chicago guide to writing about numbers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Turabian, Kate L. (2007). *A manual for writers of research papers, theses, and dissertations: Chicago style for students and researchers*. Revised by Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, Joseph M. Williams, and University of Chicago Press editorial staff. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## I CHAPTERS, HEADINGS, AND SUBHEADINGS

### *The Order of Chapters*

The type and order of chapters typically follow a relatively set form, although there are several possible variations:

1. Introduction
2. Theoretical Framework/Literature Review/Conceptual Framework [discuss the format with your supervisor]
3. [for Human Geography theses there might be a Context Chapter here]
4. Methodology
5. Empirical/Results Chapter(s)
6. Conclusion

Although one can simply title chapters “Introduction,” “Theoretical Framework,” and the like, more sophisticated theses will use descriptive titles for each chapters. (“Methodology” is, however, a fairly standard chapter title.)

### *Titles*

Each chapter, section, and subsection (if used) should be indicated by a chapter title, heading, and sub-heading, respectively (i.e. give them a succinct title, not just a number). If you use sections in a chapter, use two or more; likewise if you use subsections within a section, use two or more. Use sections and subsections to divide chapters into logical parts that address distinct elements, themes, regions, *etc*, but not to replace chapters.

Use the following format for chapters, headings, and subheadings. Place one double-spaced line before a heading or subheading.

**CHAPTER XX:** (Capitalized, bold, flush left)

Put one double-spaced line before the next line of text.

**Heading** (Bold, flush left)

Start text on the next line.

*Subheading* (Italics, flush left)

Start text on the next line.

Most supervisors will want these to be numbered as well:

## **1. CHAPTER**

### **1.1. Heading**

#### *1.1.1. Subheading*

## **II CITATIONS AND REFERENCES**

Obviously, acknowledge all material quoted directly (including the page number)!

*You must also acknowledge all paraphrases and summaries of the work of another author, and all ideas, theories, or points of view borrowed from the work of another author.* This is done with author name and date (or 'online') and without page number (unless your supervisor asks for a different style).

Use in-text (author-date) citations (not footnotes or endnotes for citations), and list all cited works in a Reference List at the very end of the thesis text.

In general, you should use the **APA style** for citations and bibliographic references. See the guide prepared by the McGill Libraries at <http://libraryguides.mcgill.ca/citation/socialsciences>

*Alternatively, you can follow the citation and reference list format used in a major journal in your subfield.* In all cases, however, your reference style must be **consistent** throughout your document. It is very easy for examiners to pick up on errors with this, so cite and create your reference list carefully.

### *Citation software*

McGill provides the software package *EndNote* free of charge to students for both Windows and Macintosh computers. The program combines with MS Word to organize your references, to insert citations directly into your documents, and to automatically generate a reference list. It will also import references directly from the Web of Knowledge database (for articles), as well as the library's electronic catalogue (for books).

The library also offers training workshops free of charge to teach you how to use the software. It is *highly recommended* that you attend at least one workshop before you start using *EndNote*. Library Endnote webpage: <http://libraryguides.mcgill.ca/citation/endnote>

Alternatively, you might use Zotero, a popular, free, open source citation management package, although McGill does not provide the same training and support as for Endnote. <https://www.zotero.org>

### III QUOTATIONS

Quotations must correspond exactly with the original text in wording, spelling, and interior punctuation. If you omit material within a quoted sentence, indicate the omission by an ellipsis (...). If you omit material at the beginning of a new sentence, indicate the omission by an ellipsis in addition to the preceding sentence's period. If you wish to insert some comment of your own within the quotation – such as *sic*, a capitalized letter, or a conjunction -- place it within square brackets [ ] *not* parentheses.

If your quote is from the web, without a page number, then you should add 'online' instead. E.g. (Scott, 2025: online).

Quotations of 3 typed lines or *less* should be incorporated directly within the text and identified by quotation marks. Quotations of 4 or *more* lines should be single-spaced without quotation marks, and set in a paragraph or paragraphs with indented margins on both sides:

    Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Aliquam hendrerit, neque vitae tempor egestas, tellus ... neque, ac egestas justo nulla vel magna. Quisque sem enim, placerat sed, imperdiet a, eleifend et, mi....iaculis scelerisque massa. Cras tincidunt, sapien vitae [integer mauris] egestas placerat, nunc lectus convallis nibh, vel pharetra dui massa eget dui (Nguyen, 2024: 13).

### IV FOOTNOTES AND ENDNOTES

Footnotes and endnotes should not be used unless agreed upon with the supervisor. They should not be used for citation purposes under any circumstances.

### V APPENDICES

An appendix contains supplementary material, and does not count toward the 15,000-word limit. It should not be used to include material that belongs properly within the thesis itself, in avoidance of this word limit. Proper uses would include, for example, the syntax of a program or routine used in the analysis, the text of a survey administered for the research, or other such information that is too detailed for inclusion in the main text, but which would be useful for subsequent researchers.

Appendices come at the end of the thesis, following the Reference List.

## VI GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Consult official gazetteers for proper geographical names in English or French.

a. **Use of Capitals in English**

The St. Lawrence River  
The St. Lawrence and Ottawa rivers  
The St. Lawrence valley  
Death valley

b. **English Form of Names**

Use the English form of a name if this form is better known to English-speaking people than the original. For example, use Naples rather than Napoli, and Munich rather than München.

For names in Québec consult the Répertoire toponymique du Québec.

c. **Directions**

south  
southeast  
south-southeast  
Do not abbreviate directions except as in latitude and longitude.

d. **Distances and Numbers**

Standard abbreviations may be used for units of length, volume, weight, time, *etc.*

Write numbers up to ten inclusive, in full. Write numbers of more than ten in Arabic numerals. If a series of numbers includes some less than and some greater than ten, write them all in Arabic numerals.

## VII MAPS, FIGURES, ILLUSTRATIONS AND TABLES

All *tables*, *textboxes*, and *figures* (diagrams, maps, or illustrations) need a title and should be numbered consecutively by chapter. Thus the first figure in Chapter 3 would be Figure 3.1; the third table in Chapter 4 would be Table 4.3 and the third figure in Chapter 4 would be Figure 4.3. Number figures, tables, and textboxes separately. Thus if the first table in Chapter 4 is preceded by five graphs, it would still be Table 4.1. Each category of figures used (i.e., diagrams, maps, illustrations) should be listed on a separate page, after your main Table of Contents.

Maps, diagrams, charts, figures, and the like, should be placed at the appropriate place within chapters, rather than at the end of chapters or at the end of the thesis. Do not wrap text around figures, maps etc.

Note that all maps, figures and diagrams must be referred to in the body of your text BEFORE the actual map, figure, etc. Otherwise the reader has no idea why they are looking at that diagram.

Examples:

(see Figure 2.2).    *or*    ...blah, blah, as shown in Figure 2.2.

Tables have their title at the top of the table, and the source underneath. For figures, charts, maps and the like, the title and source is below.

See examples below.

All figures, and maps in particular, should be neatly drawn or computer generated using the following elementary rules. All should be prepared by the student with sources clearly stated.

- A map needs the standard elements of a title, scale, compass direction, and legend.
- Names should be printed horizontally if possible. Names that must follow curving lines, *e.g.*, rivers, should be printed to appear correctly orientated on the page.

### Use of Colour

Because your thesis will be deposited in an electronic format (a .pdf file), this allows the rich use of colour. However, if you use colour in maps, figures, or diagrams, remember that someone may print your thesis. Design your graphics so that they are legible if they are printed in greyscale.

## VII    **FORMAT AND ORDER OF PAGES IN AN HONOURS THESIS**

An example follows using generic titles and nonsense text.

- Note: the page border appears only to distinguish the example from the rest of the handbook; an actual thesis *should not* have a page border.
- Title page: The measurements assume Times New Roman, 12-point font.
- Table of Contents: Note how sections and subsections are offset.
- Note that your lists of figures, tables, and maps can be on one page, but with a clear heading for each.

## VIII ORGANIZATION AND “SIGN POSTS” - please note!

In your Introduction Chapter – typically at the end of it – you should provide a concise outline of the rest of your thesis. For example [the underlining is just to highlight points to include]:

In Chapter 2, I first review the literature on *camellia sinensis* cultivation, and on organic farming techniques. Then, in Chapter 3, I explain my methodology, including the use of a multiple plot comparison to evaluate agricultural production. This is followed in Chapters 4 and 5 by the results of my five field trials. Using ANOVA analysis, I show that organic techniques do not increase *c. sinensis* yields compared to non-organic methods, but demonstrate that they may increase crop quality. I conclude, in Chapter 6, that organic techniques may therefore be most appropriate for high-end tea cultivation.

Note how this paragraph summarizes each of the sections (literature review, methodology, results/analysis, and conclusion) in a single sentence or phrase.

You should have a similar outline in the introduction to *each* thesis chapter, for that chapter’s content, so that the reader has a good idea of what will be covered in that chapter.

Place Your Title Here  
Use Proper Capitalization and Do Not Use Boldface or Italics  
(6.5 cm -- starting on the 9<sup>th</sup> line -- from top of page)

by  
(10 cm or 16 lines from the top of the page)

First [Middle] Family Name [or as it is correct in your native language]  
(12.5 cm or 21 lines from the top)

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of B.A. [Joint] /B. Sc. in Geography [and other Subject for Joint  
Honours]  
(first line starts 16 cm or 28 lines from the top)

Department of Geography  
McGill University  
Montréal (Québec) Canada

Month Year  
(20.5cm or 35 lines from the top)

© Year Name (last line on page, centered)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Finally, thank you to [www.lipsum.com](http://www.lipsum.com) for generating the *Lorem ipsum* text for this thesis.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .....	iii
List of Maps .....	iv
List of Tables .....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2: Theoretical framework .....	8
2.1 Regional research.....	9
2.2 Global perspective .....	12
Chapter 3: Methodology and Data.....	16
3.1 Field sites .....	16
3.2 Sampling protocol.....	18
3.3 Laboratory technique .....	21
3.4 Data sets .....	23
3.4.1 Description of data set one.....	24
3.4.2 Description of data set two .....	25
Chapter 4: Empirical chapter alpha.....	26
4.1 Context and description .....	30
4.2 Quantitative Analysis.....	35
4.3 Qualitative Analysis.....	38
Chapter 5: Empirical chapter beta.....	43
5.1 Context and description .....	47
5.2 Quantitative Analysis.....	52
5.2.1 Outliers.....	54
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	55
Reference List .....	61
Appendix A: STATA analysis routine syntax .....	69

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet.....	10
Figure 2.2: Consectetur adipiscing elit .....	13
Figure 3.1: Pellentesque vulputate .....	17
Figure 4.1: Nulla vehicula porta lobortis .....	31
Figure 4.2: Suspendisse ornare .....	36

## LIST OF MAPS

Map 3.1: Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet.....	17
Map 3.2: Consectetur adipiscing elit .....	18
Map 5.1: Pellentesque vulputate .....	55

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1: Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet.....	23
Table 3.2: Consectetur adipiscing elit.....	24
Table 4.1: Pellentesque vulputate .....	39
Table 4.2: Nulla vehicula porta lobortis .....	39
Table 5.1: Suspendisse ornare.....	52

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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### Heading 1.1: Vestibulum bibendum?

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### *Subheading 1.1.1: Nulla auctor vestibulum*

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*Subheading 1.1.2: Aliquam egestas*

Nam eu pharetra orci. Aliquam egestas accumsan ante, consequat placerat justo condimentum eget. Pellentesque feugiat nisi sit amet felis tristique eget commodo orci convallis. Curabitur sapien orci, placerat id rutrum a, laoreet vitae erat. Vestibulum ante ipsum primis in faucibus orci luctus et ultrices posuere cubilia Curae; Cras ante leo, volutpat eu condimentum at, varius sed turpis. Proin et erat nunc. Maecenas congue velit ac orci elementum sit amet pretium mauris adipiscing. Maecenas eros erat, consectetur at vehicula in, pellentesque non neque. Aenean vestibulum purus a leo hendrerit blandit. Sed lectus nulla, semper et mattis a, interdum placerat metus. Vestibulum non est neque. Duis sodales, justo eu porttitor sollicitudin, nisi massa

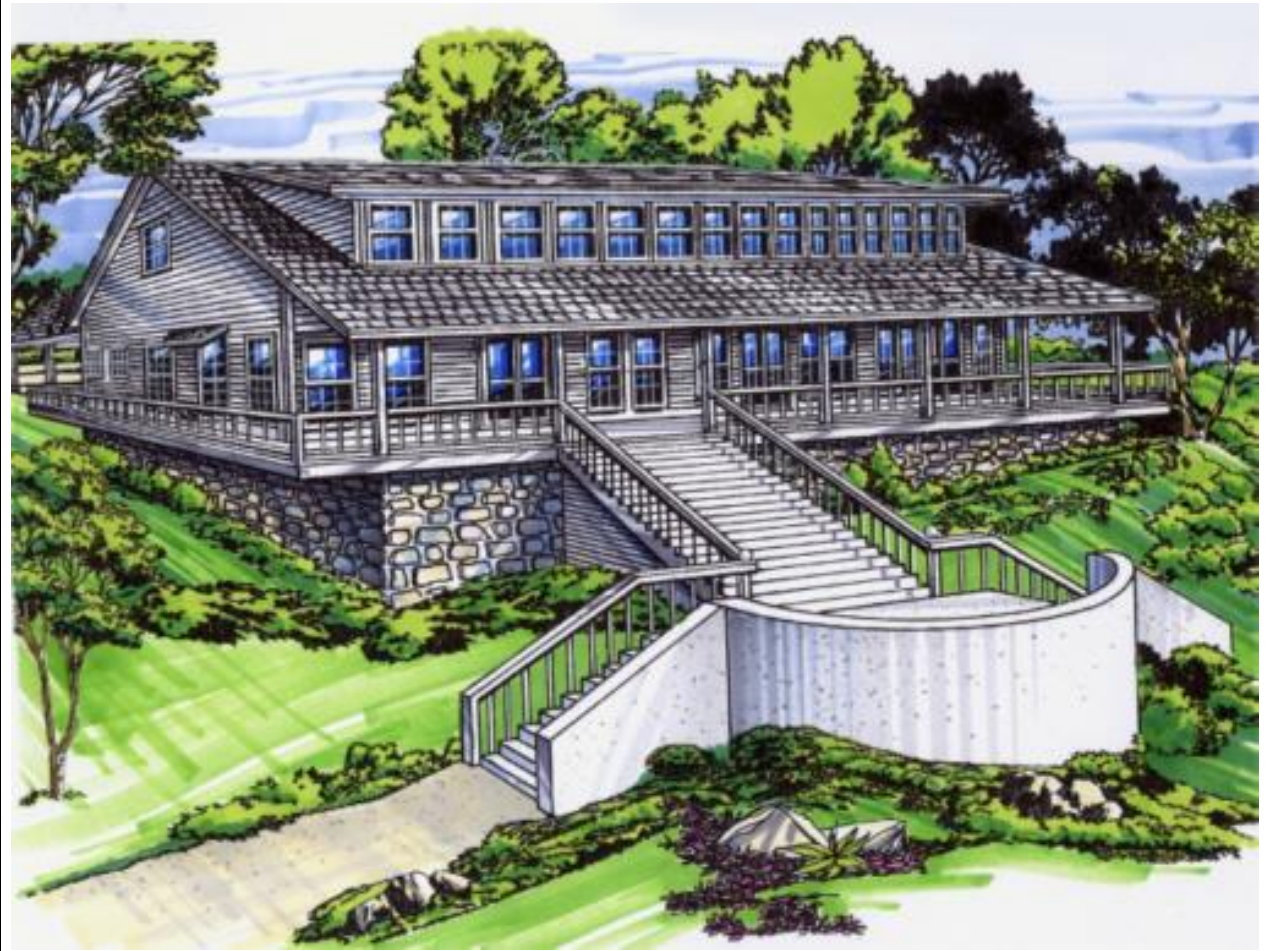
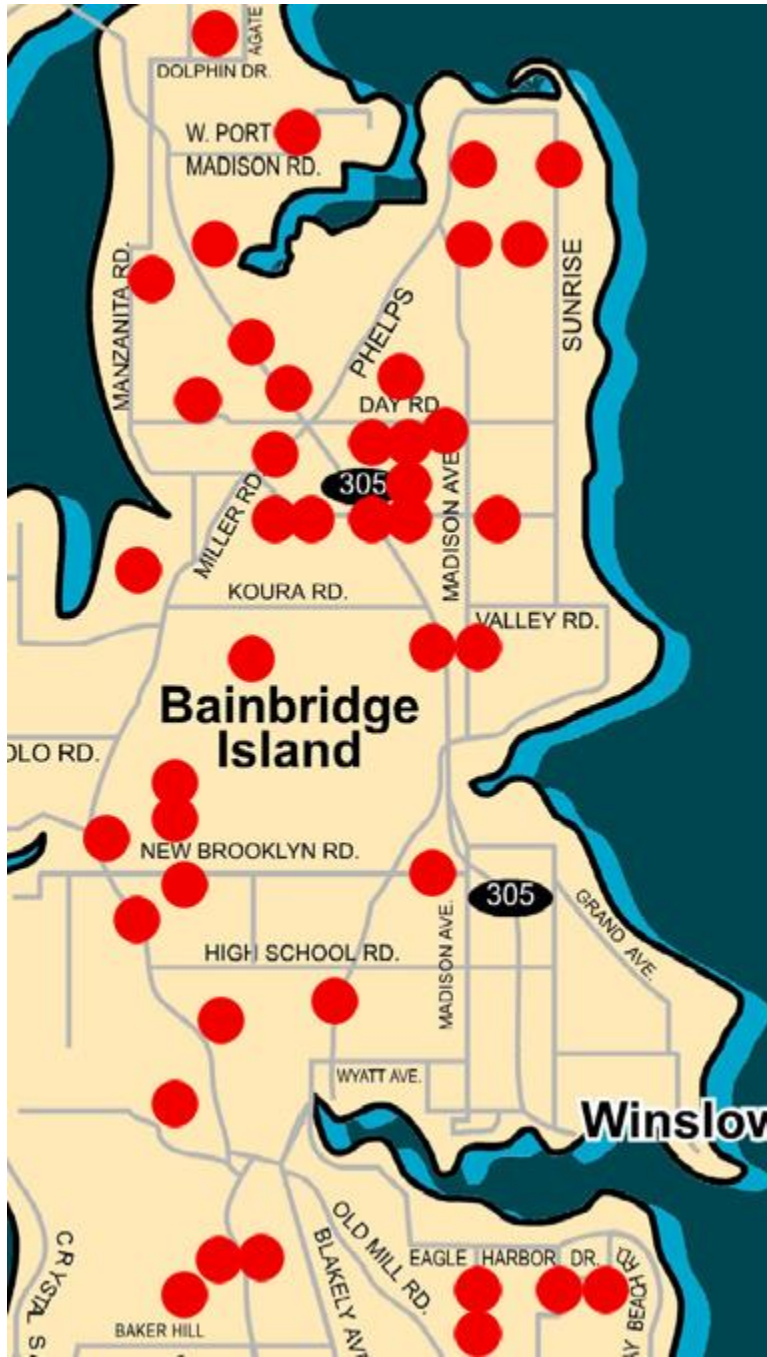


Figure 2.1: Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Vivamus id arcu nulla,  
(Source: [www.dcdconstructioninc.com/current-projects.html](http://www.dcdconstructioninc.com/current-projects.html))



Map 3.2: Consectetur adipiscing elit eros erat, consectetur at vehicula in.  
 (Source: [kitsap.wsu.edu/ag/farm\\_map\\_bainbridge.htm](http://kitsap.wsu.edu/ag/farm_map_bainbridge.htm))

**Table 4.2: Nulla vehicula porta lobortis**

<b>Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet</b>	<b>Integer elementum sem</b>	<b>Suspendisse id ante</b>
25	17	108
35	99	4
56	308	215

(Source: consectetur adipiscing elit, 2025: 23).

## REFERENCE LIST

Cras vestibulum, M. (2021) *Condimentum arcu*, sit amet sollicitudin turpis imperdiet congue.

Etiam, S. (2005) *Varius neque, sed viverra augue egestas eu*. Integer a purus placerat lectus venenatis luctus.

Pellentesque, P. (2024) Quis massa a augue tristique consectetur, “Aliquam varius quam” id lectus aliquet vulputate.

Praesent, S. (2011) “Lectus at neque adipiscing eu imperdiet” orci bibendum.

Suspendisse, S. (1999a) Eu tellus ac, “Libero tempor suscipit eget ac dui.” Curabitur ut erat quam, et dapibus arcu.

Suspendisse, S. (2019b) *Imperdiet fringilla nisl, eu fringilla elit lacinia sit amet*. Nunc vel libero nunc, ac lacinia nisl.

Suspendisse, S. (2025) *Molestie condimentum urna*, eget scelerisque metus molestie eu. Quisque mattis mi nec arcu aliquam laoreet.

Vestibulum, T. and P. Pellentesque (2024) *Nulla in magna malesuada tincidunt*. Aliquam accumsan eleifend sapien, ac convallis erat vulputate a.

## APPENDIX A: STATA ANALYSIS ROUTINE SYNTAX

The thesis analyzed the data in Chapters 4 and 5 using the following STATA syntax.

```
program myprog
  version 10.1
  syntax varlist [if] [in] [, DOF(integer 50) Beta(real 1.0)]
  (the rest of the program would be coded in
  terms of `varlist', `if', `in', `dof', and `beta')
  ...
end
```

(Source: Original code by Auis Massat, modified by author. [www.stata.com/help.cgi?syntax](http://www.stata.com/help.cgi?syntax)).

## ARCHIVAL ABSTRACT GUIDELINES

Once your thesis has been graded, you should prepare an archival copy of your thesis, and an archival website abstract (i.e. there is one abstract *in* your thesis, and another that is *separate* on the Department website).

The **archival thesis** will be held electronically by the McGill library system and should be prepared according to the guidelines above.

The **archival abstract** will be available on the Geography Department's website in the Honours Thesis Archive as a .pdf file. The text should be the same as the abstract of your thesis, but the archival abstract should be prepared according to the following guidelines.

- a. **Materials:** An archival abstract must be a .pdf file, a single page, and formatted for printing on a standard 8.5 x 11 inch sheet.
- b. **Margins:** Leave margins of at least **2.5 cm** (1 inch) on the top and bottom, and on both sides.
- c. **Title header:** The title header should be centered on the page at the top, and must have (a) the title of the thesis; (b) your name; (c) Department of Geography, McGill University; Montréal (Québec) Canada; (d) year; and (e) the Supervisor's name.
- d. **Options:** The title may be in larger font (>12 point) if desired, and the Reader's name may appear after the Supervisor's name.
- e. **Abstract text:** The abstract text should be a maximum of 150 words (same as thesis abstract).
- f. **Figure:** Try to include one figure (map, graph, photo, etc.) under the abstract text. Preferably, this figure should be of your own creation, but if it is taken from another source, you must give proper credit.

Although the format of the archival abstract is less regimented than theses title pages, you should create a professional looking document.

The archival abstract *should not* have a page number.

The page border below appears only to distinguish the example from the rest of the handbook; an actual archival abstract *should not* have a page border.

### File names

*Thesis:* Name your thesis file using your 'last name, first name, honoursthesis.pdf'.  
For example, "Smith\_Julia\_2026\_honoursthesis.pdf."

*Abstract:* Name your abstract file using your 'last name, first name, honourabstract.pdf'.  
For example, "Smith\_Julia\_2026\_honourabstract.pdf."

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John Smith

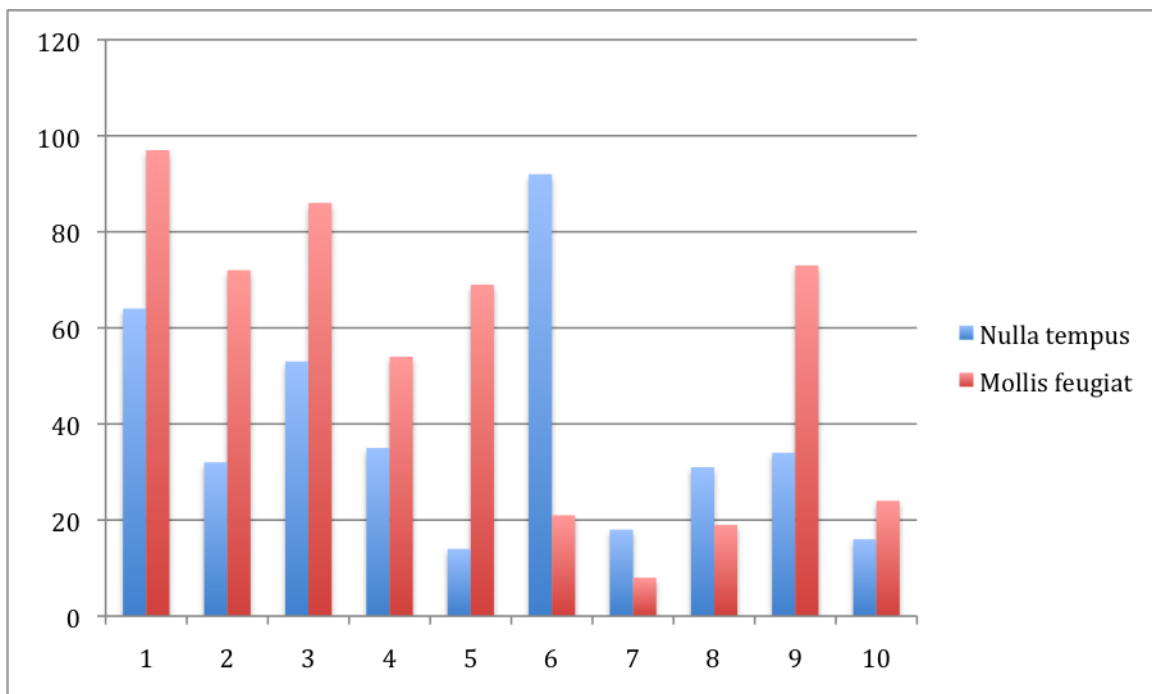
Department of Geography, McGill University, Montréal (Québec) Canada

2026

Supervisor: Professor Fleur d'Lys

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## Justo enim dictum neque



(Source: Author's own analysis).

## **POSTER GUIDELINES**

*Adapted and compiled from a variety of Web sources*

Review the following guidelines in the preparation of your poster for the Honours Poster Presentation session in early-April

If you have a question about poster design that is not covered in this guide, ask the Thesis Coordinator and/or your Supervisor.

A poster should serve as both a vehicle for you to present your research interactively to viewers, and as a document that can stand on its own to explain your project.

## **PREPARATION AND PRINTING**

You should design a large poster to be printed on a single 3 x 4 foot piece of paper. There are many ways to do this but one simple method is to use *PowerPoint* (or an equivalent program such as *Keynote*) to layout your poster as if it were a single slide.

The text boxes, tables, images, and color schemes may be customized to your liking. To view the entire slide as it will appear as a poster, change the view percentage value to “Fit Page.” To work on details (text, precise placement of images, *etc.*) you will need to zoom in by changing the view to a large percentage (200%, 400%, *etc.*).

You can also use *Microsoft Publisher* to prepare your poster. This program is available in the GIC library – ask for guidance there as to where to find this.

*How to get your poster printed may differ from year to year.*

Usually we try to get the posters printed in the Department and the Thesis Co-ordinator will explain the steps in a meeting in the early winter.

The department will pay for printing ONE poster for each student, so please proofread and edit your poster carefully before printing. If you need to print it twice, you must pay for it yourself the second time (~\$80.00).

NOTE: All images on your poster need to be *high resolution* (300 dpi minimum). Otherwise they will be grainy or illegible when printed in poster size.

If you wish to get your poster printed yourself outside the University, please tell the Thesis Co-ordinator(s) in advance, so they are aware.

## POSTER SPECIFICATIONS

Include *your name*, the name of your *Supervisor*, and the name of your *Reader*. Your name should be in a larger font.

*Posters should be 4 x 3 feet (121.92 cm x 91.44 cm)*. The 4 x 3 ratio is the default setting in PowerPoint for “On-Screen Show.” Either horizontal (4x3) or vertical (3x4) orientation is acceptable.

Prepare all diagrams and charts neatly and legibly in a size sufficient to be read at a distance of 6 feet (2 meters) or more.

*Paragraph and figure caption text* should be at least **24-point font** and *headers* at

least **36 point font.**

### ADVICE: LAYOUT

A serif font (*e.g.* Times) is often easier for reading main text, and a non-serif font (*e.g.*, Arial or Helvetica) for headers and figure labels.

Organize the poster so that it is clear, orderly, and self-explanatory. You have complete freedom in displaying your information in figures, tables, text, photographs, *etc.*

Use squares, rectangles, circles, *etc.* to group similar ideas. *Don't clutter your poster with too much text!* Label different elements to make it easier for a viewer to intuitively follow your display.

### ADVICE: CONTENT

Include the *background* of your research followed by *results* and *conclusions*. A successful poster depends on how well you can convey your information to an interested audience.

Written material should be *concise*. Save unessential but helpful or interesting secondary points for *discussion with your viewers* (*i.e.*, during and after a ~5 minute presentation).

Typically, a poster should include citations and references that are essential to the thesis work, or which appear on the poster (but try to limit these to 5-6 max). Nonetheless, a poster should be *principally* a statement of your research findings, not a literature review.

Your printed conclusions should permit observers to *focus on a concise statement* of your central findings that *lends itself to informal discussion*.

## **ADVICE: PRESENTATIONS**

Poster sessions are more interactive and informal than lecture-style presentations. You should be prepared to offer a ~5 minute summary of your research, but think of this summary as a way to start a conversation with those viewing your poster rather than as a formal presentation. Viewers will often interrupt and ask questions (or may start the discussion with you by asking questions), so you may seldom give the summary from beginning to end uninterrupted.

You should have a good idea, however, of the essential elements that you want to convey to a viewer in the course of your discussion.

## **MORE ADVICE**

Posters from previous presentations are hanging throughout the Department. Please look at these examples carefully; note which elements work well, and which ones are less effective, and use these as a guide to design your own stunning poster.

\*\*There are also posters from the 2020 Honours cohort online. Go to the Honours Abstract Archive on the Dept website and look for '[2020 Virtual versions of Honours posters and videos](#)'. Link is also on MyCourses.

# Short Guide to Good Scholarly Writing

## GENERAL PRINCIPALS

Good writing is clear, direct, and simple.

Few people are good writers, but one can become a good *re-writer*. Good writing requires *multiple drafts, editing, and proofreading*.

Good writing, like any skill, requires practice. Try to write something every day, and cultivate good writing habits even when writing email and the like.

Use as few words and sentences as necessary to convey your arguments.

Write in the active voice.

Avoid jargon, and learn to recognize the difference between jargon and necessary technical terms.

Organize your thesis chapters (and poster sections) so that each element of your argument follows logically from the previous one.

Provide “sign posts” and explain the organization of your thesis in its introduction.

Find and use a standard manual of style, such as the classic *Elements of Style* by Strunk and White.

## SPECIFIC TIPS AND EXAMPLES

### Be concise

Writing multiple drafts is typically the key to eliminating wordy constructions and unnecessary phrases. Consider the sentence below and the three successive revisions. Any of the revised sentences are acceptable, but note that the last version is **one-quarter** the length of the original.

**Wordy:** I seek to show that a demonstration of Smith’s theory can be found in the data collected for this study. (20 words.)

**Concise:** This study demonstrates the validity of Smith’s theory. (8 words.)

**Concise:** I demonstrate support for Smith’s theory. (6 words.)

**Concise:** The data support Smith’s theory. (5 words.)

### Active vs. passive voice.

Students often confuse the active voice with use of the first person (“I”), but they are not the same (see next tip).

The passive voice typically uses a form of the verb “to be” combined with an **action verb**, typically in the past tense. The classic example is:

**Passive:** The dog **was kicked** by the boy.

**Active:** The boy **kicked** the dog.

In scholarly writing, the passive voice often obscures cause and effect relationships, and produces excessively wordy prose. Consider the differences below:

**Passive:** Many students **have been told** not to use the first person in formal writing.

**Active:** High school teachers **tell** students not to use the first person in formal writing.

**Passive:** The increase in erosion **was caused** by greater runoff due to deforestation.

**Active:** Deforestation led to **increased** runoff, which caused more erosion.

**Passive:** As **is shown** by Table 1...

**Active:** Table 1 **shows**...

Note that in the first example the passive construction eliminates the active agents – high school teachers – from the cause and effect relationship described by the sentence.

In the second example, the passive sentence includes all of the causal agents, but the relationship between them is much clearer in the active sentence.

In the third example, the active construction takes half as many words as the passive sentence.

### **Science writing and the passive voice**

Some journals and some disciplines (particularly in the physical or laboratory sciences) prefer the passive voice because it emphasizes the receiver of action (the object of study) rather than the agent (the researcher). This is a matter of disciplinary convention and should be respected when appropriate. If given a choice, however, write in the active voice.

Consider the following two examples, either of which would probably be acceptable in a scientific journal.

**Passive:** The plants were administered four different levels of nitrogen fertilization, in addition to a control, in a multiple plot experiment.

**Active:** The research design used a multiple plot method with a control and four different levels of nitrogen fertilization.

### **Use of the first person.**

Some journals forbid the use of the first person (“I”), and that often requires convoluted and/or passive constructions (see above). When you have the choice, the first person allows you to write more clearly and directly. We encourage you to use the first person (unless your supervisor says otherwise).

Consider the examples below:

**Third person:** The research involved interviewing 50 students.

**First person:** I interviewed 50 students.

**Third person:** It is argued that...

**First person:** I argue that...

**Third person:** This paper concludes that...

**First person:** I conclude that...

The first person should seldom be used to give a personal opinion or perspective except in **extremely** rare circumstances. Avoid the use of the first person that merely adds words to your sentences.

**Inappropriate:** I think that the evidence demonstrates...

**Appropriate:** The evidence demonstrates...

**Inappropriate:** I feel that the methodology is appropriate because...

**Appropriate:** The methodology is appropriate because... (followed by citations or evidence).

## **ALL THE BEST FOR WRITING UP!**

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Front cover comic: <http://www.twolofbees.com/comics.php?cid=5&page=15>