Introduction to the course

As a geography graduate student at UWM, one of your responsibilities is to become familiar with geography as an academic discipline. That is to say: while you are busy becoming a specialist in some particular aspect of geographic study—whether soils or phenology or urban social movements or parks or brownfields or GIS or something else—you are also expected to gain some understanding of what it means, more generally, to think geographically. How is geography related to other disciplines? What sets it apart? Does it have a distinctive object? Or is it simply a different set of perspectives on the world?

Geography is an exciting discipline; it's also a fragmented one. Human, physical, and techniques specialists often go their own separate ways, and although we've been in dialogue for years about how we can bring the different fields together, it can be difficult to detect progress in that direction. Why so little progress? In part, it's because of increased specialization in narrow empirical topics (substantive or topical difference). In part, it's because the methods we use are so different (methodological difference). But it's often also because of deeper philosophical differences, pertaining to such "big questions" as what the world is made of (ontology) and how we can come to know anything about it (epistemology). This class will focus on the third of these: what does it mean to "think geographically"? What are the key concepts that geographers share? What philosophies and theories do geographers bring to their research? What are the strengths, weaknesses, and basic assumptions of these philosophies? What kinds of questions do they allow us to ask? What kinds of questions do they foreclose?

Our “way in” will be an exploration of some of the key concepts that have animated geographic research since its establishment as an academic discipline in this country: space and time, scale, place, nature, structures and systems, landscape, and others. Although you will learn about the history of geographical thought along the way, the course is not organized chronologically, and the emphasis is on contemporary approaches to geographic research, rather than those that are no longer prominent. Some of our reading, by necessity, will be rather abstract and philosophical. Some of our reading will consist of empirical studies that we can use to help us understand the philosophy and theory informing them. The following
will be one of our guiding questions for the semester: Can human, physical, and techniques-oriented geographers work together to conceptualize and research the world? If so, how? If not, why not?

There are no specific course prerequisites for this class, but priority for enrollment goes to geography graduate students. Geography 870 is a required course for the master’s and Ph.D. degree programs in geography at UWM.

**Required and recommended materials**

(1) The following book is *required* for this class:


Copies are available in the UWM virtual bookstore, but you may want to search the Internet for used or discounted copies. Please make sure to order the *Second Edition*. Other required readings will be available via the class D2L site.

(2) The following books are *strongly recommended* for this class, but not required.

**Essential reference books for geographers:**


**Standard guides to Anglo-American human and physical geography:**


**Recommended resources on academic reading and writing:**

Course learning objectives and assignments

By the end of the course, you should be able to do the following:

1. Discuss and explain the basic arguments, assumptions, and premises of dominant contemporary approaches to geographic concepts, research, and theory.

2. Compare, contrast, and critically evaluate these approaches, both in general and in relation to a particular substantive area of research.

3. Work with others to facilitate productive discussions of geographic thought, with a focus on discussions across subdisciplines (physical, human, GIS, etc.).

The components of your class grade are linked closely to these learning objectives. Your final grade will be determined by the following:

1. **Regular class participation (30%)** [All objectives]

This class will operate primarily as a discussion-oriented seminar, and regular attendance and participation are crucial to the success of this course. By class participation, I mean the following: showing up regularly, being prepared for every class (i.e., having carefully read the assigned readings, reaction papers, etc.), and participating actively and productively in discussions. “Participating actively” does not mean talking constantly—in fact, dominating discussions is a problem—but it typically requires at least speaking up in each class session.

That said, participation is notoriously difficult to evaluate, and grades should not simply reflect personality or cultural differences. In this seminar, your grade will be determined by a combination of self-evaluation (50%) and instructor evaluation (50%), and it will be based on your progress in reaching goals that we’ve set early in the semester. You won’t be graded by your classmates, but I will solicit anonymous peer feedback at least once during the course of the semester to help us evaluate your progress.

2. **Two classes as discussion co-facilitator (10%)** [Objective 3]

You will be required to co-facilitate two discussions during the course of the semester, in consultation with the instructor. You and your partner(s) should arrange to meet before the class to talk about the format; I will also help you identify formats for leading discussions. You will prepare outlines / reaction papers for the two weeks in which you lead discussion (see the assignment instructions). As with participation, part of the discussion co-facilitation grade will be based on self-evaluation.
3. **Four outlines / reaction papers (30%)** [Objectives 1 and 2]

You will be required to prepare four outlines of assigned readings, along with brief “reaction papers” (500-750 words). You will be responsible for distributing your outlines and papers to your instructor and your classmates via the D2L site, **no later than 5:00 pm on the Tuesday before the class session**. Discussion leaders for a session will be required to review the outlines and reaction papers submitted each week; we’ll use these as launching points for discussion. Everyone else should make an effort to review these as well if time permits. You will receive your assignments, along with further instructions for preparing the outlines and reaction papers, in a separate handout (also on D2L).

4. **Term paper and peer review (30%)** [Objective 2]

Your final assignment for the semester will be to prepare a term paper of 4000-5000 words in length. The purpose of this term paper is to help situate your dissertation, thesis, or internship project (or a possible research project, if you are still undecided) with respect to specific, relevant, and contemporary geographic concepts, approaches, debates, research programs, and/or traditions. To put it another way: this assignment is designed to help you answer the common question, “But how is what you’re doing geography?”

What this will mean in practice is writing a *critical review of geographic literature* on or related to your topic, focusing on one or more of the concepts and themes discussed in this course. For instance, you might examine how recent geographic research on immigration (or forest ecology, or tourism, or water quality, or whatever your topic happens to be) has addressed the concept of *place* (or *scale*, or *landscape*, etc., or a combination of themes). What are some of the key *debates* in your area of substantive interest? Are there competing *approaches* to researching your topic? If so, what are they, which do you propose to use, and why?

This will be a *critical* literature review in the sense that it will evaluate the merits of different approaches and take a clear side in relevant debates. Ideally, this literature review will help you develop your thesis or internship topic and help prepare you to connect your empirical analysis productively with one or more geographic literatures. In some cases, it may wind up as part of a thesis—or even as a separate publication.

Note: this is *not* an empirical research paper – that is, it is *not* one in which you will analyze data you have gathered. The purpose of the paper is to enable you to review and engage with geographical scholarship relevant to your topic, and in greater depth than we can in the seminar meetings themselves. You will receive more information about the term paper assignment, including the peer review of a classmate’s first draft, in a separate handout.

**Timeline:**

- **Working** topic, question, and thesis due by 11:59 pm **Thursday, September 15** (1%)
- **Working** outline, bibliography, and “zero draft” due by 11:59 pm **Thursday, October 27** (2%)
- First complete draft, ready for peer review, due by 11:59 pm **Tuesday, November 22** (5%)
- Peer review due by 11:59 pm on **Tuesday, November 29** (2%)
- Final draft due by 11:59 pm on **Tuesday, December 20** (20%)
Estimated time for course components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated time for course components</th>
<th>Hours</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time in the classroom* (14 sessions)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent reading seminar materials</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time completing outlines and reaction papers</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time preparing discussion facilitation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time preparing term paper</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total for semester (@3 credits x 48 hrs/credit hour)</td>
<td>144</td>
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University policies

For the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s official policies on disabilities, religious observances, active military duty, incompletes, discriminatory conduct, academic misconduct, complaint procedures, and grade appeal procedures, please see the following web site:  
http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/SecU/SyllabusLinks.pdf. Geography 870 adheres to all of these policies.  

If you have questions or concerns about the class, please do not hesitate to contact the instructor.

Schedule of required readings

* = Textbook reading or overview

All readings that are not in your textbook will be available on D2L as PDFs or as links to online PDFs.

NOTE: Readings are subject to change, especially later in the semester. Sometimes I make changes as I get to know the particular interests of the class. However, I will warn you at least one week in advance when I make changes.

1) Introducing academic geography – September 7

http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Acknowledging_Sources.pdf


2) Geography's traditions – September 14

Introducing geography’s traditions


3) Space (-time) in geography – September 21

Introducing space in geography


Space, time, and representation in human geography


**Space, time, and representation in physical geography**


**4) Time (-space) in geography – September 28**

**Introducing time in geography**


**Time-space in human geography, physical geography, and GIS**


**5) Place in geography – October 5**

**Introduction**


**Place in human and environmental geography**


**6) Scale in geography – October 12**

**Overviews of geographical concepts of scale**


**Debating scale in human and environmental geography**


7) Systems in geography – October 19

Introduction


Geographies of identity, power, and resistance


Modeling complex systems in (and beyond) geography


8) Landscape in geography – October 26

Introduction


Cultural geographies and landscape


**Landscapes in physical geography and ecology**


**9) Nature in geography – November 2**

**Introduction**


**Humans and nature: Troubles with wilderness**


10) Globalization and global change in geography – November 9

Introduction


Approaching globalization and global change


11) Development in geography – November 16

Introduction


Geographic approaches to development


**Sustainable development**


12) November 23 – No class (Thanksgiving holiday)

13) Risk in geography – November 30

**Introduction**


**Risk and hazard in geography**


14) Relevance in geography – Dec 7

Introduction


Reflections on relevance in human and physical geography


15) Wrap-up – Dec 14

TBD