

Elements of Style in Geocaching

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The "Elements of Style" in writing are those rules that remind you when a comma is appropriate, how to use quotation marks, and what is that semicolon for anyway!?!? Many a student has dog-eared copy after copy of Strunk and White or The Chicago Manual of Style, memorizing page after page of writing rules in order to score an "A" for style on their term paper. The elements of style can be frustrating and annoying, but they are still essential for clear communication.

As I was putting together an article on placing caches, I came to realize what I was really describing was the "Elements of Style in Geocaching." Just as the English language has a proper place for a period and rules for formatting endnotes and footnotes, there are proper places for micro-caches and considerations that need to be made for multi-caches if they are to be properly communicated.

However, far from being hard and fast rules, these are simply suggestions to help clarify what your vision for your cache is all about. The various elements of location, challenge and containers cause us to look at each cache differently. This article simply draws attention to certain norms within caches and attempts to categorize them. You especially might find the grid towards the end of the article helpful in determining what kind of container your cache deserves.

Jake and the others busied themselves around their small camp as Lonn sorted through his supplies for the next year. He divided everything into three packages, two of about equal size, and a third much smaller. One each of the larger bundles would go on each packhorse, the third into his saddlebags. He'd been taught to never put all of anything in any one place. Later, in the mountains near where he would be trapping, he would divide everything again, caching at least half in some hidden place. Jake watched with approval until Lonn began packing the canvas panniers that would hang on the packsaddles.

"Rendezvous Of '29,"
William Wolpert

WHEN the game of geocaching first started, it was referred to as "The GPS Stash Game." However, those early players realized that the word "stash" carried certain connotations that were less than respectable, so they looked for a different term to better convey the idea of what they were doing. Recalling the practice that mountain men had of "caching" goods in hiding spots for later use, they settled on "Geo-cache" as a suitable name for their new obsession.

A lot has changed since those early days. I doubt anyone then could have envisioned the myriad of websites or the variations that the game has taken on. Micro-caches, multi-caches, mystery caches and all the other varieties would appear later. In those early days it was all about stuff hidden in the woods, harkening back to the pioneers and mountain men who made their livelihoods in what became our playgrounds. Great Caches

So what does it take to make a great cache? If you ask 100 cachers you'll probably get 100 answers. There are those for whom hiding a geocache is a painstakingly slow project involving research into the environment, dozens of sample waypoints, and just the perfect containers and goodies. Then there are others who keep their trunks full of Gladware, McDonald's toys and notepads for when they come across that spot that "really needs a cache." Both are probably extremes and you will likely find yourself somewhere in the middle.

When I first started geocaching, the best advice I got on hiding a cache was to wait until I had fourteen finds under my belt before trying to hide one. Please understand, this was just advice, not a rule, not a guideline—just a suggestion that I happen to really see the merit of. There's every chance in the world that a cache hidden by a person with one or even no finds will be a good cache but there's an even better chance that after a little more experience it will be even better. Waiting until you've got a dozen or so finds under your belt certainly can't hurt, and can only serve to make your own cache better.

Once you're ready to hide your first cache, you need to make some considerations of what you're asking the finder to invest their time in. After all, this cache isn't for you—in fact, it's for everyone but you. A cache hidden in your backyard might be easy for you to maintain, but unless there's a particularly memorable feature to the cache, what's the point of asking someone to come there?

(On the other hand, I have seen at least one of these that was a lot of fun to find)

Again, none of this should be interpreted as rules or requirements for a cache hide. Rather, I present it as reflection on a lot of great caches and what made them great. Three Elements & Three Questions

A good cache experience boils down to how you work with three elements and answer three questions.

Element 1: Location

Question: Where are you taking them?

Element 2: Challenge

Question: What are you taking them through?

Element 3: Container

Question: What are they going to find?

The first two elements are your most important while the third will either accentuate the others or be defined by them.

{mospagebreak title=Locations} Location

Where are you taking them?

Real estate agents will tell you that success boils down to three things: location, location and location. Similarly, an outstanding cache usually begins with an outstanding location. That being said, it's next to impossible to define what makes for a great cache location-there are simply too many variables.

The location you choose for your geocache is likely going to fit into one of three categories:

Remote. These locations will require a fairly long hike that not everyone will be up to. It will be a challenge of determination and stamina for anyone who comes looking for this cache. Some of these locations might be deep in forests while others might be in more challenging state parks and recreation areas.

Recreational. These locations are ones that are familiar to most people. They include state parks, city parks, even cemeteries. They are designed for public access and usually have well marked trails, public areas, and (thankfully) restrooms.

Routine. Street corners, business places, college campuses, places where people routinely gather all fit into this category. There are special challenges to placing, finding and maintaining a cache in these areas and those challenges need to be carefully considered before the cache is placed.

The location you choose is more than just a place. You need to also consider why you want to bring them here? What is it you're hoping they get from the location alone? The View

One of my favorite caches took me on a long hike through the woods, fighting spider webs and mosquitoes until I finally got to the location—a beautiful ridge overlooking a lake. I would have never found the spot on my own. There would have been nothing to draw me to it, or even let me know it was there, and I certainly wouldn't have willingly subjected myself and my daughter to the bushwhacking we had to do to get there. But, because someone else found it and hid a cache there I was able to see an absolutely stunning sight.

Not all views have to be that difficult to get to, of course. One cache in our area is in a cemetery that simply has a beautiful view of the sunset. I haven't done the cache yet because I'm waiting for the perfect day to get there and experience exactly what the hider had in mind.

There are probably one or two locations you know about that very few others do, or some places you've seen at certain times that are well worth the hike for others to see as well. The Significance

Sometimes a good cache location is easy to get to, but carries certain significance that makes it worth sharing with others. Those little well-hidden cemeteries are often like this. I've had people return to one of my own caches over and over again to bring people out to see the grave of the Revolutionary War veteran that is buried there. The cemetery itself is in a great location and has a stunning view, but by calling attention to the significance of that particular grave, I've added to the experience for the hunters who come.

Maybe the significance is more personal. A multi-cache in our area called "Trail of Engagement" leads you through a park where the hider proposed to his wife. A virtual cache along the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, DC takes you to the name of the hider's father. Everyone's got at least one story in their life that they'd like to share. If that story revolves around a particular location it might be possible to keep it alive through a geocache. The Fun Of It

Let's face it, not every cache is hidden because of the stunning view or the significance of the location. There are plenty out there that are hidden just for the fun of it. An urban micro hidden on a busy street corner is an invitation to cacher to retrieve and replace it without being noticed. A quick read of logs from caches of this type will turn up several references to James Bond, and other spy games. Obviously there are some people who love this kind of cache simply because of the fun they bring.

HannahWCU searches for Luminos Choo Choo. Can you see it?

One local cacher who's also a farmer simply dropped a cache in the middle of his empty field. Sounds easy, right? Well, except that he did it during the muddiest time of the year! During my own find for this cache the fun was all for him—as he drove by and saw me tracking through the mud!

Keep in mind, though, it's very unlikely that everyone shares your definition of "fun." Just as not everyone will be up to the challenge of a great view that is difficult to get to, not everyone is going to respond well to a cache that's hidden in

plain sight. You're probably better off maintaining a good variety of locations in your personal cache collection.
 {mospagebreak title=Considerations} Considerations about Locations

Before you place the cache there are several considerations you have to take into account for your own sake as well as the sake of the cachers who will come looking for it and also for the sake of Geocaching.com. How well you handle these issues can determine whether or not your cache gets listed and whether or not your finders will have an enjoyable experience.

The three categories of locations with standard examples of each. Permission

Geocaching.com's guide to placing a cache states:

If you place it on private land, please ask permission before putting it there! If you place the cache on public lands you need to contact the managing agency to find out about their rules. You will be in violation of federal regulation by placing a cache in any area administered by the National Park Service (US). The National Park regulations are intended to protect the fragile environment, and historical and cultural areas found in the parks.

By complying with these guidelines you insure a healthy relationship between geocachers and land managers and you have also taken steps to insure the safety of the cache hunters.

Usually getting permission involves a simple call or letter to the owner or land manager. Sometimes the most difficult part can be finding out who this person is, but asking the right questions and doing the right research always seems to help. Other times the difficult part is explaining to them exactly what geocaching is! I recommend handing them a brochure like "Let's Go Geocaching!" which is available on this site. Giving them the brochure rather than just explaining caching to them through conversation adds an air of credibility to what we do and also leaves them with something they can reference again in the future if they should have more questions.

Also be aware that different areas have different policies and regulations about the placement of caches. Familiarizing yourself with these before asking permission will show the land manager that you're willing to meet his or her organization's concerns about cache placement. Geocachingpolicy.info may be helpful when looking for cache policies (it's also a great site to contribute to when you find policies that aren't listed there yet).

Asking for permission might seem like a difficult step, especially in the face of the excitement of placing a new cache. But like my mom always told me, "It's always easier to ask for permission than for forgiveness." By taking this step and respecting the authority of those who care for the land you're helping all geocachers by upholding our reputation. Safety

Most remotely hidden geocaches are far enough off established trails that hikers won't accidentally stumble across them. However, many trails are established where they are to keep people away from potentially dangerous locations. Maybe there's a cliff nearby or an old abandoned well or other structure that could prove to be unsafe to anyone in the area.

Sometimes safety is a matter of "who else is around?" Is a particular park known as a place frequented by people buying and selling drugs? Are there issues with animals in the area (either predatory or poisonous)? Some of these issues should cause you to rethink your hide, others simply need to be noted on the cache page so the finder can be aware of them. Environmental Impact

Sometimes trails aren't there to protect us from dangers in other areas, but rather to protect those other areas from us. Delicate plant life or wildlife habitat might be just a few feet away from the trail and a cache placed in the area could cause problems with either. If you're placing a cache in a state park or other such recreational area, land managers will likely point out such "off-limits" areas to you.

Another issue of environmental impact is the establishing of new "social trails" after a few visits to your cache. Land managers often look down on such unauthorized trails and curious hikers who notice them might wonder where they might lead. Also, other geocachers often see them as obvious markers telling them exactly where the cache is.

Fortunately, nature is very forgiving when it comes to trails like this and will often reclaim the path fairly quickly (some regions will vary). Still, being aware of the impact can help you plan for it and do your part to keep your cache well hidden. {mospagebreak title=Challenge} Challenge

What are you taking them through?

I was still very new to the game when I encountered "A Nice View of Water." In fact, I had tried for it on my first day out but was still so new to using a GPS that I wasn't sure if I was 30 feet or .30 miles away from the cache. I came back a second and third time and continued to be stumped by how exactly to get to this cache. This was before I had a GPS with maps on it, but even with paper maps, finding the location proved to be difficult.

Finally frustration and determination took over and I pushed myself down one deep ravine and back up the other side. Somewhere in the midst of the hunt I scared up a heron and dropped my compass. However, I finally found the cache

and saw that very nice view of the water. I also saw what was a very obvious trail leading away from the cache and a nice flat path back to a parking area I had never noticed before. It was only about 300 feet from where I had parked my car.

I'm not sure whether the person who placed the cache did it intentionally or not, but that particular cache has an unusual challenge that has puzzled many cachers, veteran and newbie alike. Since it's on the banks of a finger lake, you're never sure which finger is the right one and a wrong choice will land you a mere hundred feet or so from the cache with a lake and high ravines between you and it.

A Nice View of Water was exactly that, and it felt like it might be my last view!

The very word "game" implies some kind of challenge, and the game of geocaching should fit that bill somehow. However, as anyone who has found more than one cache can tell you, every challenge is a little different, and some are very different. Physical Challenges

Even the most basic cache requires you to go somewhere and do something; therefore it offers some physical challenge. However, many caches are specifically designed as a physical challenge. They may include elements like rock climbing, scuba diving, rappelling or extreme hiking, or they might simply push the finders beyond their normal level of physical activity. Whatever the case, proper planning on your part will help prepare your cache seekers for the challenge and make it more enjoyable and safe for them.

It is essential that you use the Cache Rating System appropriately—that's why it's there. There are some people who have enough physical challenges just with daily life and need to be aware of what you're going to be putting them through. A cache with a terrain rating of one star ought to be somewhat handicap accessible.

Be prepared to adapt your terrain rating to the changing seasons. Your two star terrain in summer could easily become a three or four star with snow on the ground. It's also important to listen to your finders. I've appreciated those who make suggestions to my cache ratings. Many people are likely coming to your cache with different levels of ability than you possess, so listen to their suggestions and adapt accordingly.

Another great tool at your disposal is the Edit Attributes section of your cache page. With this handy form you can create a visual guide to different elements found in and around your cache (everything from equipment needed to whether or not the park allows dogs to whether or not there are restrooms nearby). Simply check the boxes that apply to your cache, click the "Update Attributes" button, and the selected icons are added to your cache page. It's very quick, very easy, and very helpful in preparing others to hunt for your cache.

You can make someone's first cache experience a memorable event by paying careful attention the physical challenge of your cache. The youngest member of lazyCachers hit the trails at three days old.

Mental Challenges

One of the most appealing facets of geocaching is that it not only exercises your body, but your mind usually gets a decent work out too. I've often given the advice to someone stumped by a cache location, "Stop following the GPS and think like a geocacher." This is a skill that comes with practice and experience on various kinds of caches.

Multi-caches usually offer some kind of mental challenge. Often times it's a matter of observation—notice a certain set of numbers on a monument—and then assembling them in the right order. Or it might be a matter of some intricate compass work (shooting a bearing from one location to another). Whatever the challenge, make sure you've worked it out plenty of times yourself and are confident in the results before you put someone else through it. In one of my own multis, I discovered that one word could be interpreted completely differently than I had intended and gave at least one seeker an erroneous result.

Puzzle caches take the mental challenge to a whole new level, often requiring a code to be decrypted in order for the cache to be found. One of the first I ever did actually used a code from a book on World War II encryption. To break the code I had to do a little research on the Internet and find the proper key. Thankfully, someone had written a java-based decoding program that helped quite a bit. Other people probably arrived at the solution differently, but that's part of the fun of a puzzle cache.

As with puzzling multis, be sure to work your puzzle through several times to make sure your answers are consistent. What seems like the only logical answer to you might actually be only one of many right answers to the finder. It might be best to have a few area cachers serve as guinea pigs before releasing the puzzle cache to the general public.

Another kind of mental challenge caches provide is through the camouflage technique used by the hider. Some of my favorite caches have been in unique hiding spots that required a bit of problem solving and deduction to find the prize. In these instances, the hunt becomes more of a challenge to understand the mentality of the hider (sometimes the greatest puzzle). Where could the cache have been hidden? What kind of camouflage could have been applied in this area? What is there that it absolutely could NOT be?

Cranna Lake Trail lies in wait for its next victim.

You will find yourself applying Sherlock Holmes' old axiom, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." Trust me, some of your fellow cachers specialize in the improbable!

Stealth Challenge

Geocaching has always been about "hidden treasure," but it wasn't until the advent of the urban micro that stealth really entered in as an element to the game. The likelihood of someone accidentally stumbling over a container hidden deep in the wood is completely different than the likelihood of a container hidden on a street corner being spotted by a casual observer.

Stealthy stashes present challenges both to the hider and the seeker. To the hider, the challenge is making the container accessible enough without making it too obvious. To the seeker the challenge is retrieving the container, signing the logbook and replacing the container without arousing the suspicion of onlookers. Both challenges require a lot of planning and careful thought to successfully pull off.

One thing that must be stressed when it comes to stealth challenges is that you need to search responsibly. The cache hider went to a lot of trouble to place that cache. They likely invested some time in searching out the proper location and may have also spent some time and effort designing a container that flawlessly blends in with the surroundings. If your search is not done with great care and with one eye out for onlookers you could cause the container to be stolen by someone who has witnessed you find it. Urban micro cache logs are filled with notes and "did not finds" from cachers who closed in on the container only to discover the area crowded with "muggles." There's no shame in taking a "did not find" and you will likely even receive a thank you note from the cache hider.

Three types of challenges and the caches that are defined by them. {mospagebreak title=Containers} Container
What are they going to find?

The standard mantra of the geocacher is, "It's not about what you find; it's about getting there." More often than not this is true, though there are exceptions. Maybe you've come up with an especially cool container or you're offering some very nice prizes to your finders, but on the average the type of container you choose will hinge upon the type of location and challenge you are taking the finders through. Understanding this from the start will make your hide all the more enjoyable to find.

Before you rush out to the Army Surplus store or host your own Tupperware party, ask yourself a few questions about your hide:

First of all, what kind of container will the environment support? This is a question of location. If you're placing your hide in a remote location, chances are you can use a much larger container than in either a recreational or routine location. Do you really want people to endure a 5-mile hike into the woods, fighting bugs, creeks and signal-dampening tree cover only to find a micro with only a log sheet? Again, there are no rules about these kinds of things, but there are issues that need to be thought through in these situations.

Secondly, does the container properly reflect the effort put into finding it? This is a question of challenge. If the cache is in an obvious urban setting, no one is going to be disappointed to find a 35 mm film canister. However, if it is a much more remote and more difficult to get to setting then the container should reflect the effort that has been put into finding it.

So, while we cannot apply any hard and fast rules to this element of the game (nor should we), we can see that when the three categories of location (remote, recreational and routine) and the three categories of challenge (physical, mental and stealth) are taken into consideration, the type of container you choose is reflected as in the chart below.

The chart forces us to look carefully at what we're taking a finder to (location) and what we're taking them through (challenge) and calls for the container at the end to reflect both the effort we're calling for and the expectation of the finder. By paying attention to these "Elements of Style" the cache goal becomes clearer and much of the frustration and disappointment that could accompany the search is alleviated.

We've also taken steps to insure the longevity of the hide. Matching the container to the location is an important step in preventing accidental discovery. One thing I've observed about caches that have survived the long-haul: they're either in locations where the average "muggle" isn't going to go, or they're hidden so well that they seem to be a natural part of the environment. The cache placer has either stumbled over principles similar to those outlined in this chart or has carefully considered what container will match the cache setting. Final Questions

There are a few final questions that cache hidens should take into consideration for themselves.

1. Does this hide benefit the greater geocaching community?

I once spent a single day visiting nearly 20 geocaches searching for one that I could leave a travelbug in. After encountering many micros, decons and small Gladware containers, I finally found one container that was big enough to house the bug. Considering the prevalence of small caches in the area, a few caches big enough to support travelbugs and larger items would be a huge asset to the community.

Take a good look at the caches in the area and ask, "What does this area need?" Does it need some urban micros for those lunch hour grabs? Does it need some caches in small city park settings where it might be easier to take children? Are there good traditional caches in the area that would provide excellent examples for new cachers? Is there an historical area that would make an excellent multi-cache tour? If variety is the spice of life it's at least the condiment of caching.

2. How much maintenance will the hide need?

Fake rocks are never as sturdy as real rocks. Most fake logs I've seen tend to start falling apart fairly quickly. It's incredibly difficult to reproduce the durability of nature and still make a container that's convenient and light enough for most people to use. Make sure your cache is tough enough to stand the test of time.

Urban micros are notorious for turning up missing because some cacher carelessly replaced the container wrong. Even the slightest misalignment can cause a clever urban camo job to stick out like a sore thumb (and even the wind and other elements can cause that). It may just be that your really cool hide is going to need a lot of maintenance runs to insure that it stays hidden correctly.

3. Would you want to find this cache?

Ultimately you have to ask yourself this question. If this was the first cache you ever found would you want to find a second one? Does it present enough of a challenge, enough of an adventure, and enough of a reward that someone might just catch the itch and join you in your obsession? Not every cache has to be stellar, but how much effort would it take to turn a cache into more than just another smiley face? Finding Your Own Style

Back in college, when I was writing term papers and creative writing assignments, my old copy of "The Elements of Style" became both a friend and a fiend. I found myself constrained by the rules of grammar and composition and freed by them at the same time. However, it wasn't Strunk & White or Kate Turabian that flavored my papers with the writing style that became my own. Rather, they equipped me to release that style and make it more understandable to those who read (and graded) what I wrote.

In the same way, these Elements of Style for Geocaching are simply guidelines to clarify and communicate exactly what that devious hide you have in mind is all about. In the end, the signature in your logbook and the smile on the cache page and the finder's face will be your grade. Here's hoping for an A!