

The Five Themes of Geography

A HUMAN PERSPECTIVE Between 1838 and 1842, Captain Charles Wilkes led an American expedition to the South Pacific and Antarctica. At one stop at a South Sea island, a friendly islander drew a map on the wooden deck planks of the ship. To Wilkes's amazement, the map accurately showed the location of the Tuamotu Archipelago—a chain of about 80 coral islands that stretches more than 1,000 miles across the South Pacific. The islander relied on personal experience sailing in the area and a mental map to accurately show the positions of the islands.

The Geographer's Perspective

Maps like the one that the islander drew are important tools in geography. The word *geography* comes from the Greek word *geographia*, which means “to describe the earth.” Geographers study the world in a different way than do other social scientists. Historians look at events over time. Geographers, on the other hand, view the world by looking at the use of space on the earth and the interactions that take place there. They look for patterns and connections between people and the land that they live on. **Geography**, then, is the study of the distribution and interaction of physical and human features on the earth.

METHODS OF GEOGRAPHY Geographers use a variety of tools to study the use of space on earth. The most common one is a map. Maps are visual representations of a portion of the earth. Maps do not have to be written down to be useful. Since people began roaming the earth, they have created mental maps—maps that they carry in their minds. You use a mental map every day as you go to and from school.

The maps that you are probably most familiar with appear in printed form, such as in road atlases and books. In recent years, more maps have appeared in electronic media such as CD-ROMs and on the Internet.

Geographers also use photographs to gain visual evidence about a place. They organize information into charts, graphs, or tables to learn about geographic patterns and to understand changes over time. They may also construct scale models to make study of the real world easier. Sometimes they use graphic models to illustrate an idea.

Other basic tools used by geographers are the five themes of geography, which also describe patterns and connections in the use of space. These themes organize information about geography into five distinct categories, shown at right. These themes are important to geographic study. They help the geographer to describe the use of space.

Main Ideas

- Geographers view the world in terms of the use of space.
- Geographers study the world by looking at location, place, region, movement, and human-environment interaction.

Places & Terms

geography

absolute location

relative location

hemisphere

equator

prime meridian

latitude

longitude

The Five Themes

Location

Where is it?

Place

What is it like?

Region

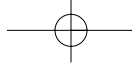
How are places similar or different?

Movement

How do people, goods, and ideas move from one location to another?

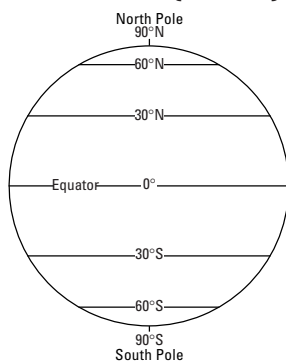
Human-Environment Interaction

How do people relate to the physical world?

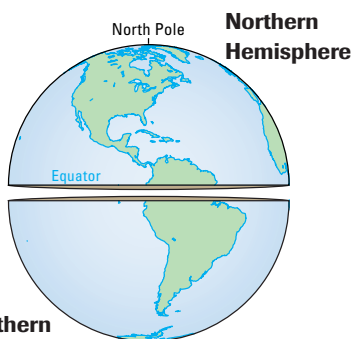
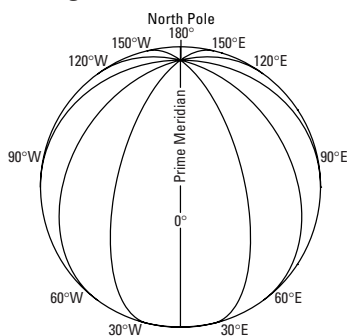


The Geographic Grid

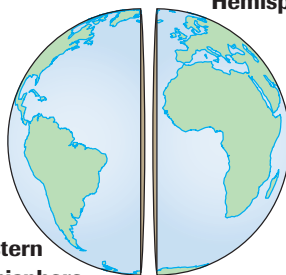
Latitude Lines (Parallels)



Longitude Lines (Meridians)



Northern Hemisphere
Southern Hemisphere



Western Hemisphere
Eastern Hemisphere

SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Graphics

- LOCATION** In which two hemispheres is the United States located?
- LOCATION** How many degrees of latitude are there?

Theme: Location

The geographic question “Where is it?” refers to location. Geographers describe location in two ways. **Absolute location** is the exact place on earth where a geographic feature, such as a city, is found. **Relative location** describes a place in comparison to other places around it.

ABSOLUTE LOCATION To describe absolute location, geographers use a grid system of imaginary lines for precisely locating places on the earth’s surface. (See the diagram at left.) Earth is divided into two equal halves. Each half of the globe is called a **hemisphere**. Because the earth is round, a hemisphere can be north and south, or east and west. The **equator** is the imaginary line that divides the north and south halves. The **prime meridian** is the imaginary line dividing the earth east and west. Sometimes this line is called the Greenwich meridian (GREHN•ich muh•RIHD•ee•uhn) line because the line runs through Greenwich, England. ▶

LATITUDE LINES To locate places north or south, geographers use a set of imaginary lines that run parallel to the equator. These lines are called **latitude** lines. The equator is designated as the zero-degree line for latitude. Lines north of the equator are called north latitude lines, and lines south of the equator are called south latitude lines.

LONGITUDE LINES To complete the grid system, geographers use a set of imaginary lines that go around the earth over the poles. These lines, called **longitude** lines, mark positions in the east and west hemispheres. The prime meridian is the zero-degree line for longitude.

Each site on the earth can have only one absolute location. To find an absolute location using the grid system, you need to find the point where the latitude and longitude lines cross. For example, the absolute location of Melbourne, Australia, is 37° South latitude, 145° East longitude. To see how latitude and longitude lines cross and to learn more about absolute location, see page 17 in the Geography Skills Handbook.

RELATIVE LOCATION Relative location describes how a place is related to its surrounding environment. For example, you may tell a person that the library is three blocks west of the park. This helps the person find the library—if he or she knows where the park is located. Using relative location may help you become familiar with the specific characteristics of a place. Learning that Cairo, Egypt, is located near the mouth of the Nile River in Africa, for example, tells you something about Cairo, the Nile River, and even Africa itself.



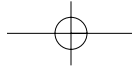
Making

Comparisons

▶ How is the equator different from the prime meridian?

A. Answer

Equator divides the earth north and south; the prime meridian divides east and west.



Place: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Overlooking the entrance to Guanabara Bay, Sugarloaf Mountain is a prominent landform in the skyline of Rio.

Leisure boats rest in the harbor of Botafogo Bay. There is a large commercial shipyard industry in Rio.

Headquarters of corporations and expensive housing compete for space in the scenic part of the city.



Theme: Place

The question “What is it like?” refers to place. Place includes the physical features and cultural characteristics of a location. All locations on earth have physical features that set them apart, such as climate, landforms, and vegetation. Other features are the product of humans interacting with the environment, such as by building dams, highways, or houses. Still others are the result of humans interacting with animals or with each other. In the photograph above, you can see place features of Rio de Janeiro. Since a location’s culture and its use of space may change over time, the description of a place may also change.

PLACE Rio de Janeiro, once the capital of Brazil, lies on the western shore of Guanabara Bay. **How would location on a bay affect the economy of a city?**

Theme: Region

The question “How are places similar or different?” refers to region. A region is an area of the earth’s surface with similar characteristics. Regions usually have more than one characteristic that unifies them. These may include physical, political, economic, or cultural characteristics. For example, the Sunbelt in the southern United States is a physical region. Geographers categorize regions in three ways: formal, functional, and perceptual regions. ◀

FORMAL REGIONS A formal region is defined by a limited number of related characteristics. For example, the Sahel region of Africa is a desert area characterized by specific climate, vegetation, and land use patterns. In this textbook, the regions you’ll explore generally are defined by continental area and by similar cultural styles. The following are considered formal regions:

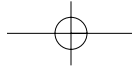
- The United States and Canada
- Latin America
- Europe
- Russia and the Republics
- Africa
- Southwest Asia
- South Asia
- East Asia
- Southeast Asia, Oceania, and Antarctica



Using the Atlas

▶ Refer to the U.S. map on pages A8–A9. What states might be included in the Sunbelt?

B. Answer Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California



FUNCTIONAL REGIONS A functional region is organized around a set of interactions and connections between places. Usually a functional region is characterized by a hub, or central place, and links to that central place. For example, a city and its suburbs may form a functional region. Highways, commuter railroads, subways, and bus lines move people from the suburbs to the city for jobs and other activities. Because the city and its suburbs are connected by a great deal of movement back and forth, they form a functional region. ▶

PERCEPTUAL REGIONS A perceptual region is a region in which people perceive, or see, the characteristics of the region in the same way. However, the set of characteristics may not be precisely the same for all people. For example, although many people are familiar with the region called the American Midwest, they sometimes differ on how that region is defined. Some people believe the Midwest begins in Ohio. Others believe the region begins in the middle of Illinois.



Seeing Patterns

◀ How might areas within a city form a functional region?

C. Answer Parts of the city are linked to and interact with each other.

Theme: Human–Environment Interaction

The question “How do people relate to the physical world?” refers to the relationship between humans and their environment. People learn to use what the environment offers them and to change that environment to meet their needs. They also learn to live with aspects of the environment that they cannot control, such as climate.

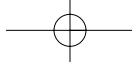
People living in similar environments do not respond to them in the same way. For example, some people view a hot, sunny climate near a body of water as ideal for recreational activities. Others may see this as an opportunity for raising citrus, olives, or grapes. Human beings work to alter their environments to make them better places or to provide needed goods. People may drain swamps or dig irrigation ditches to grow crops in a particular environment. Sometimes the alterations create new problems, such as pollution. As you study geography, you will learn about many ways humans interact with their environment.

HUMAN–ENVIRONMENT INTERACTION

Neighbors and friends use sandbags to hold back floodwaters during the Great Mississippi Flood of 1993.

In what ways do floods alter the landscape?






Theme: Movement

The question “How do people, goods, and ideas move from one location to another?” refers to movement. Geographers are interested in the ways people, goods, and ideas move from place to place. Think about the clothing you wear, the music you listen to, or the places you go for entertainment. All of these things involve movement from one place to another. Geographers analyze movement by looking at three types of distance: linear distance, time distance, and psychological distance.

LINEAR DISTANCE AND TIME DISTANCE Linear distance simply means how far across the earth a person, an idea, or a product travels. Physical geography can affect linear distance by forcing a shift in a route to avoid impassable land or water.


Time distance is the amount of time it takes for a person, an idea, or a product to travel. Modern inventions have shortened time distances. For example, in the 1800s, pioneers traveled up to six months to reach California. Today you can get there by airplane from almost any U.S. location in under six hours. With the use of the Internet, ideas can travel around the world in seconds. 

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE Psychological distance refers to the way people view distance. When you were younger, some locations seemed very far away. As you grew older, the distance to these locations probably seemed to shrink. Studies show that, as we become familiar with a place, we think it is closer than it actually is. Less familiar places seem to be further away. Psychological distance may influence decisions about many different human activities.

Across the world, people make important choices based on linear distance, time distance, and psychological distance. These choices make up patterns that geographers can study. In the next section, you’ll read about the tools they use to study these patterns.



Seeing Patterns

 How do interstate highways affect linear distance and time distance?

D. Answer They move large volumes of traffic rapidly. Time distance may be reduced, or in the case of traffic jams, increased between destinations.



Assessment

1 Places & Terms

Explain the meaning of each of the following terms.

- geography
- hemisphere
- equator
- prime meridian
- latitude
- longitude

2 Taking Notes

REGION Review the notes you took for this section.

5 Themes:

- What is a region?
- What are three types of regions?

3 Main Ideas

- a. What are the five themes of geography?
- b. How is place different from location?
- c. Why do geographers study human-environment interaction?

4 Geographic Thinking

Making Generalizations

How is the study of geography different from the study of history? **Think about:**

- use of space on earth
- relationships between people and the environment

 See Skillbuilder Handbook, page R6.



EXPLORING LOCAL GEOGRAPHY Using the five themes of geography, develop a **brochure** describing your community. Use pictures or sketches, maps, and other data to complete your descriptions.