What Is Geography?

Many people do not really know what geography is. Some people think geography is just memorizing lists of countries and state capitals. Other people think it is the study of rocks. Still others think geographers just look at maps and pictures of faraway places. However, there is much more to geography!

Geography is the study of everything on Earth, from rocks and rainfall to people and places. Geographers study how the natural environment influences people, how people's activities affect Earth, and how the world is changing. To do this, geographers look at many different things, including cities, cultures, plants, and resources. Geographers focus on where these things are or where related events happen.
Perspective—or the way a person looks at something—is an important part of learning about geography or any other subject. Geographers use a spatial perspective to study the world. That is, they look for patterns in where things are located on Earth and how they are arranged. Geographers then try to explain these patterns. They also look at a world that is shaped by landscapes. A landscape is the scenery of a place, including its physical, human, and cultural features. Geographers look at landscapes and try to explain what they see. For geographer the word *landscape* is almost magical. Each of us lives in a landscape. When studying world geography, we discover the amazing diversity of our world’s landscapes.

Geography has two main branches—human geography and physical geography. Those who study human geography look at the distribution and characteristics of the world’s people. They study where people live and work as well as their ways of life. They also look at how people make and trade things that they need to survive. The study of physical geography focuses on Earth’s natural environments. These include Earth’s landform water features, atmosphere, animals, plants, soils, and the processes that affect them. The interaction of people with their environment links human and physical geography together.

In this textbook you will use both human and physical geography to study the world. First, you will study an area’s natural environment. Then you will learn about the area’s human aspect and how it relates to the physical setting.

✓ **READING CHECK:** The Uses of Geography What are the two main branches of geography?

**INTERPRETING THE VISUAL RECORD**

Indonesian women sell fish at their local market. What might the photo indicate about the physical and human landscapes in which these women live?

**INTERPRETING THE VISUAL RECORD**

Mount McKinley, the highest peak in North America, rises over Denali National Park and Preserve. Fireweed blooms in the foreground. What questions might physical and human geographers ask about this place?
Who Uses Geography?

Now that you know what geography is, you might be wondering, who uses geography? You do. In fact, people all over the world use geography every day. We use it when we find our way to school or work and go on trips. We also use it when we watch the news on television and read about other countries. We think geographically every time we decide where to go and how to get there.

Most jobs require an understanding of geography. For example, a restaurant owner must find a good location for his or her business. Politicians need to know the geography of their districts. They must also understand the issues that are important to people there. In addition, a number of professions rely heavily on specially trained geographers.

Subfields of Geography  Geography has many different subfields. One of the most well known is cartography—the study of maps and mapmaking. Maps are important because they help geographers study locations. Although some maps are still drawn by hand, computers have completely changed mapmaking. Computers store information from satellite images, photographs, and other sources. A cartographer then creates a map on a computer. Cartographers work for companies that publish maps, atlases, newspapers, magazines, and books. They also work for city planning agencies and other areas of government.

Another subfield of geography is meteorology—the study of weather. Meteorologists forecast how the weather will develop so that people know what to expect. You have probably watched these meteorologists, or weather forecasters, on local television.

Geographers at Work  Many geographers work for governmental agencies. In fact, one of the largest employers of cartographers in the United States has been the United States Geological Survey (USGS). The USGS produces detailed maps of the whole country. Other agencies that hire geographers include the offices of most city, county, and state governments.

Many businesses hire geographers. Those geographers decide where to place new stores and plan shipping and trucking routes. They also help identify new markets. Geographers work in many different areas of business, such as tourism and travel and international sales.

Schools also hire geography teachers, who help people learn about the world. This knowledge is becoming more important as the different areas of the world become more closely linked. Geographic knowledge is also needed for good citizenship. Citizens who feel strongly about important geographic issues can try to influence public policies and decisions. Should we allow suburbs to be built over good farmland? Where should we put our garbage and dangerous materials? Helping citizens and governments find answers to these questions is the job of geographers.

✓ READING CHECK: What are some organizations and companies that employ geographers?
How Do We Study Geography?

An important concept in geography is the idea of a region. A region is an area with one or more common features that make it different from surrounding areas. Cities, states, countries, and continents are examples. Organizing Earth's surface into smaller regions makes it easier to study our complex world.

Regions are defined by their physical and human features. Physical features include the kinds of climate, river systems, soils, and vegetation you find there. Human features include the languages, religions, and trade networks of an area. Sometimes the boundaries of a region are clear. For example, the United States is a political region with clear boundaries. In other places, the boundaries are harder to set. For example, the Corn Belt is a farming region in the midwestern United States. However, the Corn Belt does not have clearly set boundaries. It stretches across a number of states. Exactly where the Corn Belt begins and ends is not clear.

Regions can be any size. Countries, deserts, and mountain ranges are examples of large regions. Smaller regions include suburbs and neighborhoods. Regions can also be divided into smaller areas called subregions. For example, the Great Plains is a subregion within North America.

قراءة: "Places and Regions" What are some physical and human features that can define a region?

Types of Regions  Geographers define regions in three basic ways. The first is a formal region. A formal region has one or more common features that make it different from surrounding areas. An example is the Sahel in Africa. This dry region lies between the Sahara, a vast desert to the north, and wetter forested areas to the south.

Formal regions can be based on almost any feature or combination of features. Those features might include population, income levels, crops, temperature, or rainfall. Physical features might define a formal region, such as the Rocky Mountains in the western United States. Economic features also might define such a region. For example, an industrial area in the northeastern and midwestern United States is also a formal region. This region was once called the Rust Belt because so many old factories there had shut down. Today new industries have revived the region's economy.

The second type of region is a functional region. These are made up of different places that are linked together and function as a unit. For example, a city transit system is a functional region. It includes many different places. However, the flow of people, trains, and buses link those places together.

Many functional regions are organized around a central point. Surrounding areas are linked to this point. For example, shopping malls are centers of functional regions linked to surrounding neighborhoods. Cities are also examples of these centers. They connect to suburbs, areas in the country, and industry, which all function together.

The third type of region involves human perception—our awareness and understanding of the environment around us. People view regions very differently. Our views are influenced not only by what is in a region but also by what is in us. Our ways of life and experiences influence how we perceive the world. Therefore, perceptual regions are regions that reflect human feelings.
The Amazon River system in South America, at the left, is a functional region. Places within it are linked by the river’s flow. For many Americans, southern California, at the right, is a perceptual region. What elements of southern California as a perceptual region are illustrated in this photo of the beach at Venice?

and attitudes. For example, “back home” is a perceptual region for most people. However, it may be hard to define exactly. The U.S. Midwest may be easier to define. The South—a region sometimes called Dixie—is another example. Many people perceive these areas to be distinct regions. These areas have their own special features that make them different from anywhere else. Yet people may view—or perceive—those features in differing ways.

READING CHECK: Places and Regions What are the three types of regions?

The Five Themes and Six Essential Elements The study of geography has long been organized according to five important themes. One theme, location, deals with the exact or relative spot of something on Earth. Another term for something’s exact location on Earth’s surface is its absolute location. Something’s relative location is its position on Earth relative to other locations. Place includes the physical and human features of a location. Human-environmental interaction covers the ways people and environments interrelate with and affect each other. Movement involves how people and things change locations and the effects of these changes. Region organizes Earth into geographic areas with one or more shared characteristics.

By the early 1990s, some geographers felt that the 5 Themes were too broad. They created 18 Geography Standards and grouped them under 6 Essential Elements. The 18 Geography Standards include more detailed information about what geography is. The 6 Essential Elements serve as a bridge between the 5 Themes and the 18 Standards. The 6 Essential Elements will be used throughout this textbook.

Look at the chart below. It shows how each of the 5 Themes connects to the Essential Elements and the Standards. For example, the theme of Location is related to The World in spatial Terms and the first three Standards.

The last Essential Element—The Uses of Geography—covers the last two Standards. These key parts of geography were not covered by the 5 Themes. Essential Element 6 will help you see how geography has influenced the past, present, and future.
### 5 Themes of Geography

- **Location**
- **Place**
- **Regions**
- **Movement**
- **Human-Environment Interaction**

### 6 Essential Elements

- **The World in Spatial Terms**
- **Places and Regions**
- **Physical Systems**
- **Human Systems**
- **Environment and Society**

### 18 Geography Standards

1. How to use maps and other tools
2. How to use mental maps to organize information
3. How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments
4. The physical and human characteristics of places
5. How people create regions to interpret Earth
6. How culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions
7. The physical processes that shape Earth's surface
8. The distribution of ecosystems on Earth
9. The characteristics, distribution, and migration of human populations
10. The complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics
11. The patterns and networks of economic interdependence on Earth
12. The patterns of human settlement
13. The forces of cooperation and conflict
14. How human actions modify the physical environment
15. How physical systems affect human systems
16. The distribution and meaning of resources
17. How to apply geography to interpret the past
18. How to apply geography to interpret the present and plan for the future

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**Section 1 Review**

**Define** geography, perspective, landscapes, cartography, meteorology, region, formal region, functional region, perception, perceptual regions

**Reading for the Main Idea**

1. **Places and Regions**: What are examples of functional, formal, and perceptual regions?
2. **The Uses of Geography**: What six essential elements are used to organize the study of geography?

**Critical Thinking**

3. **Contrasting**: How is the study of human geography different from the study of physical geography?

4. **Making Generalizations and Predictions**: What do you think a "geographical approach" to studying an issue might be?

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**Organizing What You Know**

5. Create a graphic organizer like the one shown below. Use it to identify some of the jobs that geographers have.