

THE WORLD IN SPATIAL TERMS

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What Is Geography?

Geography is the study of Earth and its people. When you study geography, you look for answers to two major questions: How do people use Earth? How does Earth influence the way people live? In other words, geography looks at the relationship between people and their environment—or everything that surrounds people and affects their lives. The environment includes both living things, such as people, plants, and animals, and nonliving things, such as air, water, and soil.

Geographers may study a small area, such as a town, or large areas, such as a country or Earth as a whole. They often divide their studies into physical geography and cultural geography. Physical geography focuses on the natural world with its different landforms, weather conditions, plants, and bodies of water. Cultural geography looks at how human beings relate to their environment and to one another.

People everywhere draw on the cultural and natural resources of their environment. A resource is anything that people use to help them obtain what they need or want. People themselves are cultural resources. Their own creativity, skills, and knowledge make them valuable resources. Over the centuries they have developed farming methods, building techniques, machines, literature, scientific methods, governments, and countless other achievements that make their lives more secure and comfortable. Natural resources, as the name suggests, are those things that people find in nature and use for their own special purposes—for example, soil, forests, and oil.

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Tools of Geography

Picture the United States in your mind. You probably see a map. A map is a flat drawing of all or part of Earth's surface. Picture Earth. You probably see a globe. A globe is a model of Earth.

Maps and globes are both important tools of geography. When using either of these tools, however, it is important to remember several differences between them. A globe is round and is shaped like Earth. Therefore, it represents Earth's major land areas and bodies of water in their accurate sizes and shapes. Because it tries to show Earth's curved surface on a flat surface, a map cannot represent land and water accurately. The larger the area a map shows, the more inaccurately it will represent true sizes and shapes. Compare the shapes and sizes of Greenland and Antarctica on a map and on a globe. They will look much larger than they actually are on the map. Maps, however, can show small areas of Earth—such as a town or a state—in great detail. No globe could show as many cities, highways, and other details of Earth's surface and still be useful enough to carry around.

Did you ever notice that a map of the world has lines that divide it in half horizontally and vertically? These lines are called the equator and the prime meridian. The equator is an imaginary line around Earth halfway

between the North Pole and the South Pole. The equator divides Earth into two halves, or hemispheres, called the Northern Hemisphere and the Southern Hemisphere. The prime meridian runs from the North Pole to the South Pole on one side of Earth. It meets another line, the 180° line, on the other side of Earth. The prime meridian and the 180° line divide Earth into its Eastern and Western Hemispheres.

What about the other lines on a map? They are usually numbered with degree symbols (°). The prime meridian and the equator are both 0°. Lines running parallel with the equator are lines of latitude. They show distances measured in degrees north or south from the equator. The southern tip of Greenland, for instance, is at about 60°N latitude, or 60° north of the equator. The lines running north and south, like the prime meridian, are lines of longitude. They measure degrees east or west of the prime meridian. The eastern edge of Australia, for example, is at about 150°E longitude, or 150° east of the prime meridian.

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Geographic Regions

Geographers often speak of regions. A region is an area of the world with one or more significant characteristics that make it stand out from surrounding areas. A region may take in a certain section of a country, the entire country, or a group of countries.

The characteristics that distinguish a region may be physical characteristics or cultural characteristics. The Amazon Basin of South America and the Sahara of northern Africa both have outstanding physical characteristics. Thick forests grow in the Amazon Basin; the region is drained by the Amazon River and the smaller streams that flow into it. These characteristics form a distinct physical region. The Sahara, marked throughout by conditions of extreme dryness, is also a physical region. On the other hand, the Boston metropolitan area and the nation of Mexico are cultural regions. The life of the people and the boundaries people have established set off both places. Physical characteristics have little to do with defining either region.

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