

The Five Themes of Geography

Geography is more than memorizing names and places. Geographers organize space in much the same way that historians organize time. To help organize space, geographers are concerned with asking three important questions about things in the world:

- Where is it?
- Why is it there?
- What are the consequences of its being there?

The five themes of geography help answer these questions:

- Location: Where is it located?
- Place: What's it like there?
- Human/Environment Interaction: What is the relationship between humans and their environment
- Movement: How and why are places connected with one another?
- Regions: How and why is one area similar to another?

No one theme can be understood without the others. The themes are connected with one another, as are all components of our world. No part of our world can be understood in isolation.

I. Location: Position on Earth's Surface

Absolute and relative location are two ways of describing the positions and distribution of people and places on the earth's surface.

Absolute location answers the questions: Where is it?

Absolute location is nothing more than a simple dot--often identified as a grid coordinate on the surface of the earth. Latitude and longitude can be used to pinpoint a location. For example, the absolute location of New Orleans, Louisiana, is 30 degrees north, 90 degrees west. Finding absolute location is the starting point for geographic research.

Relative location is the relationship of a place to other places.

For example, New Orleans is located at the place where the Mississippi River empties into the Gulf of Mexico, which gives it easy access to ocean and river shipping. Your home has a relative location. Where is it located in relation to schools, stores, and convenient transportation?

Location is only one piece of the framework of geography, yet it is an important theme because it helps us know and express where things are.

Discuss answers to these questions about your **location**:

- What are the latitude and longitude coordinates of your absolute location.
- What is your relative location and the relationship of your location to other locations?
- How does the importance of your location change over time?

II. Place: Physical and Human Characteristics

The theme of place addresses this question: What's it like there? This theme considers the characteristics that make one place different from all other places on earth. Geographers describe a place by two kinds of characteristics; physical and human.

The physical characteristics of a place make up its natural environment and are derived from geological, hydrological, atmospheric, and biological processes. They include land forms, bodies of water, climate, soils, natural vegetation, and animal life.

The human characteristics of a place come from human ideas and actions. They include bridges houses, and parks. Human characteristics of place also include land use, density of population, language patterns, religion, architecture, and political systems.

The theme of place helps flesh out information about location. Taken together, the themes of location and place provide a basis for observation in geography. These themes can be used to help answer the first two questions of geography: Where is it? and Why is it there? With a sense of physical and human place, we can read the landscape around us and make observations about what we see. we'll explore more about physical and human places when we look at the theme of region.

Discuss answers to these questions about your place:

- How would you describe where you live physically? Is your place flat or hilly, hot or cold, wet or dry? What natural resources are found there?
- What are some of the human characteristics that describe your place? For example, what types of houses are there? Are patterns of land use different from those in other parts of the country? What types of industry are found, and how might they be different from industries in other parts of the country?

III. Human/Environment Interaction: Shaping the Landscape

The physical and human characteristics of a place provide keys to understanding the interrelationships between people and their environments. This geographic theme addresses this question: What is the relationship between humans and the environment? Three key concepts underlie human/environment relationships:

- **Humans depend on the environment:** The natural environment is made up of living things and non living things. Humans depend on the natural environment for their basic needs; food, shelter, and clothing.
- **Humans modify the environment:** People modify the natural environment to meet their needs. For example, they build dams, plow and irrigate fields, and dig mines. They build houses, schools, and shopping centers on land.
- **Humans adapt to the environment:** Humans have settled in virtually every corner of the world by successfully adapting to various natural settings. For example, people who live in the northeastern United States use heating units to keep their homes warm in winter. People in the southern part of the country use air conditioning much of the year to stay cool in the heat. The ways people choose to adapt to their settings reflect their economic and political circumstances and their technological abilities. Studying geography furthers appreciation of our natural environment and of our cultural differences.

Discuss answers to these questions about the **human/environment interaction** where you live:

- What examples of human/environment interaction do you see in your area?
- Do you see evidence of exploited resources?

- Do you see changes in the landscape in animal habitats? Are there changes in the air, water, and soil?

IV. Movement: Humans Interacting on the Earth

The theme movement addresses this question: How and why are places connected with one another? Relationships between people in different places are shaped by the constant movement of people, ideas, materials, and physical systems such as wind. Our world is in constant motion, constantly changing. Like blood flowing through our bodies, movement brings life to a place.

Discuss answers to these questions about **movement** where you live:

- What examples of movement of people, goods, or ideas do you see in your area?
- Has immigration had an impact on your area? If so, what has happened?
- What are the transportation routes in your area?

V. Regions: How they Form and Change

A region is a basic unit of geographic study. It is defined as an area that has unifying characteristics. The study of regions helps us answer these questions: How and why is one area similar to another? How do the areas differ? Most regions differ significantly from adjoining areas.

Some regions are distinguished by physical characteristics. Physical characteristics include land forms, climate, soil, and natural vegetation. For example, the peaks and valleys of the Rocky Mountains form a physical region.

Some regions are distinguished by human characteristics. These may include economic, social, political, and cultural characteristics. The highly urbanized Northeast Corridor between Boston and Washington, D.C. can be considered a human region. Other regions are combinations of physical and human characteristics, for example, the South, Scandinavia, and the Midwest.

Boundaries between regions can be vague. Regions are generally thought of as large areas, such as the Corn Belt in the midwestern United States or sub-Saharan Africa. Overhead transparencies will help the teacher demonstrate that a region can be as small as a classroom learning center, a neighborhood, an industrial park, or a recreational area.

Discuss answers to these questions about regions where you live:

- How many different regions can you identify within your area?
- How many larger regions does your area belong to?