



The Five Themes of Geography

THEME 1: LOCATION

Every point on Earth has a specific location that is determined by an imaginary grid of lines denoting latitude and longitude. Parallels of latitude measure distances north and south of the line called the Equator. Meridians of longitude measure distances east and west of the line called the Prime Meridian. Geographers use latitude and longitude to pinpoint a place's absolute, or exact, location.

To know the absolute location of a place is only part of the story. It is also important to know how that place is related to other places—in other words, to know that place's relative location. Relative location deals with the interaction that occurs between and among places. It refers to the many ways—by land, by water, even by technology—that places are connected.

Activity Ideas

1. Present the math terms “grid” and “coordinates” to the students. Explain that latitude and longitude lines are like an imaginary grid across the globe and that the coordinates on that grid tell us exactly where something is located.

Using latitude and longitude lines on a world map, have students locate the following:

- the highest mountain on our continent
- the capital cities of three foreign countries
- the national park nearest your town
- the mouths of three major rivers
- three major cities in Canada

Include examples in the Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western Hemispheres.

2. Have students list four ways their hometown is connected to a nearby town or city that they have located on a map.

THEME 2: PLACE

All places have characteristics that give them meaning and character and distinguish them from other places on earth. Geographers describe places by their physical and human characteristics. Physical characteristics include such elements as animal life. Human characteristics of the landscape can be noted in architecture, patterns of livelihood, land use and ownership, town planning, and communication and transportation networks. Languages, as well as religious and political ideologies, help shape the character of a place. Studied together, the physical and human characteristics of places provide clues to help students understand the nature of places on the earth.

Activity Ideas

1. Give each student a folded piece of paper on which you have written the name of a place that is known and easily described by the students. Ask each student to write a description of the place without naming it, then exchange descriptions with another student. How many students can identify the place from its description alone? What makes one description easier or harder to guess than another?

2. Have students learn the words and sing “Home on the Range.” Discuss how the song describes a particular place. What kind of place is it? What are its physical and human characteristics? What other songs do the students know that describe particular places?

Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam
And the deer and the antelope play
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day

Home, home on the range
Where the deer and the antelope play
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day

How often at night when the heavens are bright
With the light from the glittering stars
Have I stood there amazed and asked as I gazed
If their glory exceeds that of ours

3. Make a list of common phrases that include the word “place” (for example, “to put someone in her place,” “a place for everything and everything in its place,” “if I were in your place,” “caught between a rock and a hard place”). Have students analyze how these phrases help define the word “place.” Do the phrases imply physical and human characteristics? If so, how? Why are we comfortable in some places but not in others? Ask the students to describe literal and figurative places in which they have found themselves and to describe whether they have been comfortable or uncomfortable in such places.

4. Take the students for a walk around your home and have them observe the physical and human characteristics of the place. What makes it different from other places? Make a list of all the physical and human characteristics that the students observed.

THEME 3: HUMAN/ENVIRONMENT INTERACTION

The environment means different things to different people, depending on their cultural backgrounds and technological resources. In studying human/environment interaction, geographers look at all the effects—positive and negative—that occur when people interact with their surroundings. Sometimes a human act, such as damming a river to prevent flooding or to provide irrigation, requires consideration of the potential consequences. The construction of Hoover Dam on the Colorado River, for example, changed the natural landscape, but it also created a reservoir that helps provide water and electric power for the arid Southwest. Studying the consequences of human/environment interaction helps people plan and manage the environment responsibly.

Activity Ideas

1. Have students list ways that people affect their environment every day (for example, driving cars, using water, disposing of garbage, smoking cigarettes). Make a second list of ways that people affect their environment through seasonal activities (for example, watering lawns, burning leaves, fishing and hunting). Make a comparison chart of the two lists and have students discuss which activities are more harmful or more helpful to their environment. Discuss the findings and have students suggest ways that people can change their behavior and improve their environment.

2. Take a field trip to the local library or title office. Collect representative photographs, both old and new, of your town or city, and photocopy them. Compare all of the photographs, and have students articulate their observations of how places and people have changed over the years. Are

there more buildings? Different kinds of buildings? What are the differences in kinds of transportation? Are there just as many trees in the older photographs as there are in the newer ones? Have students list ways in which the people of your town or city have changed their environment over the years.

3. Design a garden. What kind of vegetation—flowers? trees? vegetables? fruits?—would grow in your area? Is it possible that flowers or vegetables grew on this same land before your home was built? What is the natural vegetation in your area? How could you make sure the garden gets enough water and sunlight? What effects—positive or negative—would your garden have?

4. Read aloud paragraphs or chapters from stories about people who struggle to survive in an unexplored environment (for example, *The Swiss Family Robinson*). Discuss ways in which the characters learn to adapt to their environment. How and where do they find food? clothing? shelter? How does their environment change as they begin to create a home for themselves? Compare ways in which they adapt successfully or unsuccessfully. Identify areas in the world where people must adapt to a harsh environment if they are to survive.

THEME 4: MOVEMENT

People interact with other people, places, and things almost every day of their lives. They travel from one place to another; they communicate with each other; and they rely upon products, information, and ideas that come from beyond their immediate environment.

Students should be able to recognize where resources are located, who needs them, and how they are transported over the earth's surface. The theme of movement helps students understand how they themselves are connected with, and dependent upon, other regions, cultures, and people in the world.

Activity Ideas

1. Have students look under "Churches" in the phone book's yellow pages and make a list of the different religious groups represented there. Look up some of the groups in an Encyclopedia and determine their origin before coming to North America. Plot the origins of each group on a map of the world.

2. Make a list of 12 items in the classroom that have been manufactured in Canada, including items of clothing, pencils, books, etc. How many of the items in the classroom can students name that have been manufactured in another country? Choose several items (desks, light fixtures, articles of clothing) and discuss the raw materials needed to make them, the most likely place of production or manufacture, and the most likely form of transportation from the place of manufacture to the classroom.

3. Discuss different ways that ideas travel from one place to another. (Examples might include music, literature, folk tales.) How do people react—personally, professionally, politically, technologically—when they are able to freely communicate with one another? In what ways are people prevented from experiencing the movement of ideas? (Examples might include censorship, geographic barriers, language barriers.) What happens when people are not able to communicate?

4. Explore and compare different types of movement. For example, compare the movement of blood and nutrients through the body with the movement of people and resources across bodies of land and water. What happens to the movement of blood when we stand on our heads? How does a person feel when food isn't moving properly through the digestive system? What happens to the movement of traffic in a city when traffic lights are broken? (Examples might include traffic jams, short tempers, etc.) Note that we use the word "congested" to refer to people with colds as

well as locations with heavy traffic. How do ideas move? What would happen if goods, ideas, or people stopped moving?

5. Make a comparison chart of human-made transportation systems (cars, planes, communication systems, etc.) and natural movement systems (weather, erosion, tides, etc.) List the different “passengers” that are transported by the two different kinds of transportation systems (tangible goods like foodstuffs, intangibles like sound and light, ideas).

THEME 5: REGIONS

A basic unit of geographic study is the region, an area on the earth's surface that is defined by certain unifying characteristics. The unifying characteristics may be physical, human, or cultural. In addition to studying the unifying characteristics of a region, geographers study how a region changes over times. Using the theme of regions, geographers divide the world into manageable units for study.

Activity Ideas

1. Introduce students to physical regions on earth (grasslands, deserts, rain forests, mountains, polar regions). Assign groups of students to different regions. Have students list items that they would need to adapt to the environment when visiting their assigned regions. (Items might include food, clothing, insect repellent, ice ax, etc.) How many of the items do they have to buy? What kinds of items do people who live in rain forest regions have in common with people who live in mountainous regions? What items are unique to one region? What items are manufactured in their region? What items are imported? What items are absolutely essential?

2. Have students use a city map to divide their town or city into regions (political, residential, recreational, ethnic, commercial, etc.). How many regions can they name? What are the unifying characteristics that make up the regions? Into how many different regions can the students divide their town or city?

3. Have students use an almanac or atlas and an outline map of North America to divide the continent into climatic regions. How do people from different climatic regions dress? What different foods do they eat? Name some overlapping characteristics among the regions.

[Full Article Found at National Geographac “Five Themes of Geography”](#)

