

The five themes of geography help explain how we learn about Earth

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Image 1. The bridge over the Zambezi River at Victoria Falls separates the countries of Zimbabwe and Zambia. Photo by Diego Delso, delso.photo, License CC-BY-SA via Wikimedia Commons.

To better understand our place in the world, we use the five themes of geography. These are location, place, human-environment interaction, movement, and region. Each is a different way of discussing or describing an area.

Location

Most geographic studies begin with learning the location of places. Location can be relative or absolute.

Relative Location: Relative location refers to locating a place relative to other landmarks. For example, you could give the relative location of St. Louis, Missouri as being in eastern Missouri. It is along the Mississippi River southwest of Springfield, Illinois.

As one drives along most highways, there are mileage signs. These show the distance to the next town or city. This information expresses your current location relative to the upcoming place. For

example, say a highway sign states that St. Louis is 96 miles away from Springfield. In this instance, you would know your relative location from St. Louis.

Relative location is also a term that is used to show a place's location within a larger context. For example, one could say that Missouri is bordered by Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa. That is the relative location of Missouri based on its location within the United States.

Absolute Location: Meanwhile, absolute location references a place's exact spot on the Earth's surface. This is based on specific geographic coordinates. These are also known as latitude and longitude. It is a system of imaginary lines. They are used to find the location of any place on the surface of the Earth. Based on the previous example of St. Louis, the absolute location of St. Louis is 38°43' North (latitude) 90°14' West (longitude). Some computer programs, like Google Maps, use data from coordinates to give us directions to places.

One can also give an address as an absolute location. For example, the absolute location of St. Louis City Hall is 1200 Market St., St. Louis, Missouri 63103. By providing the full address you can pinpoint the location of St. Louis City Hall on a map.

Place

Place describes the physical and human characteristics of a location.

Physical characteristics: These include a description of such things as the mountains, rivers, beaches, climate, and animal and plant life of a place. A place might be described as hot, sandy or forested. These terms all paint a picture of the physical characteristics of the location.

Human characteristics: These include the human-designed features of a place. These features include languages, religions, government systems and common foods. For example, a location could be described as a French-speaking democracy.

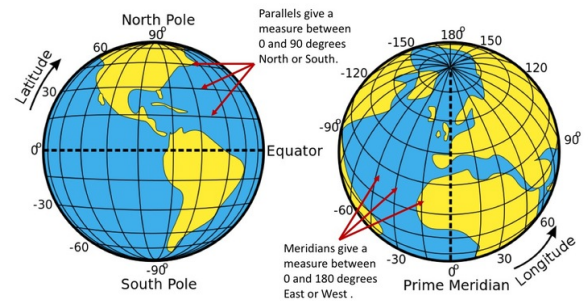
Human-Environment Interaction

Humans shape the landscape through their interaction with the land. This has both good and bad effects on the environment.

For example, people living in cold climates have often mined coal or drilled for natural gas in order to heat their homes. Another example is that during the 1700s and 1800s, the city of Boston had huge landfill projects. In other words, they filled in water with land to make more places for people to live. This helped humans, but may have hurt the ocean life.

Movement

Humans move, a lot! In addition, ideas, goods, resources and communication all travel distances. This theme studies movement across the planet. The emigration of people from Syria to other countries during war is an example of such movement. So would be the growth of cell phone reception around Earth.



Regions

We use regions to divide the world into helpful units, so we can study their geography. Regions have some sort of characteristic that unifies the area. Regions can be formal, functional or vernacular.

Formal regions are those that are created with official boundaries. Cities, states, counties and countries are examples. For the most part, they are clearly marked and publicly known.

Functional regions are defined by their connections. For example, the area where a newspaper is delivered in a city is a functional region.

Vernacular regions have no official boundaries. Vernacular regions are often named because of shared history, culture or identity in an area. People name them to understand a place. Think "The South," "The Midwest" or "Silicon Valley."

However, some region names came from biases. For example, the "Middle East," "Near East" and "Far East" were created by European geographers hundreds of years ago. They only make sense geographically for someone standing in the middle of Europe.



Quiz

1 Read the section "Place."

Select the sentence from the section that shows what the place theme of geography represents.

- (A) Place describes the physical and human characteristics of a location.
- (B) A place might be described as hot, sandy or forested.
- (C) These terms all paint a picture of the physical characteristics of the location.
- (D) For example, a location could be described as a French-speaking democracy.

2 Read the following paragraph from the section "Location."

Absolute Location: Meanwhile, absolute location references a place's exact spot on the Earth's surface. This is based on specific geographic coordinates. These are also known as latitude and longitude. It is a system of imaginary lines. They are used to find the location of any place on the surface of the Earth. Based on the previous example of St. Louis, the absolute location of St. Louis is 38°43' North (latitude) 90°14' West (longitude). Some computer programs, like Google Maps, use data from coordinates to give us directions to places.

Which sentence from the paragraph supports the conclusion that we use absolute locations in our daily lives?

- (A) Meanwhile, absolute location references a place's exact spot on the Earth's surface.
- (B) They are used to find the location of any place on the surface of the Earth.
- (C) Based on the previous example of St. Louis, the absolute location of St. Louis is 38°43' North (latitude) 90°14' West (longitude).
- (D) Some computer programs, like Google Maps, use data from coordinates to give us directions to places.

3 How is the structure of the section "Location" similar to the structure of the section "Place"?

- (A) Both sections explain a cause and its effect.
- (B) Both sections are in chronological order.
- (C) Both sections present a problem and its solution.
- (D) Both sections are organized using compare and contrast.

4 The section "Regions" is mostly organized using compare and contrast.

WHY do you think the author chose to organize the information this way?

- (A) to explain the different types of regions into which the world can be divided
- (B) to describe how particular regions around the world got their names
- (C) to present the different types of regions in order of importance
- (D) to highlight some of the world's most important regions