

The big ideas in geography



Location

Location tells us where a point is on the Earth's surface and why it is there. It also tells us how far a point is from other points.



The town is two miles away.

Place

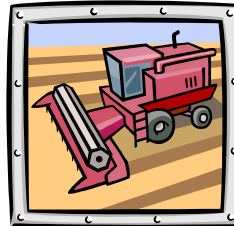
Place tells us special features an area might have, such as climate, people and landforms.



The sunny islands of Hawaii have beaches, tourists and volcanoes!

Human/Environment Interaction

Interaction tells us how people react and sometimes change their environment.



We grow crops to feed ourselves.

Movement

We travel and communicate with one another. We depend on each other for products and ideas.



My ball was made in China, and my shoes were made in Korea.

Regions

Regions are areas of the Earth that are alike in some way or another.



mountain regions
Cumberland
Plateau

cultural regions
New
England

LOCATION: Position of the Earth's Surface

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

Absolute Location: From one perspective we can identify locations as precise points on the earth's surface by using an arbitrary, mathematical grid system of latitude and longitude. The coordinates of latitude and longitude are widely accepted and useful ways of portraying exact locations. This locational system aids us in measuring distances and finding directions between and among places on the earth's surface. The absolute position of Louisville (38° 15' N; 85° 45' W) and Lexington (38° 05' N; 84° 30' W) can be expressed in geographic coordinates but 2217 Old Scottsville Road also provides an absolute location for the ambulance driver leaving the Bowling Green Hospital on an emergency.

Relative Location: Knowledge of locations and their characteristics is a key aspect of understanding interdependence at local, regional, national, and global scales. For example where are schools located and why? Do the locations anticipate population growth or decline? What is happening to the population growth of Georgetown or Nicholasville due to their relative locations with respect to the Toyota Motor Company or to urban Lexington land values?

The multitude of locations linked by the flows of oil in pipelines, ocean tankers, and trucks demonstrates how continued operation of the world's factories, farms, and cities depend upon global energy interdependence. Discovery or development of radically different energy sources would alter the relationships among oil producers and oil users. Changes in the relationships between locations would soon follow.

Each human group depends upon people and things from distant locations. The ways we perceive our own and other locations will deeply influence our lives. Thus in learning to differentiate between sites (locations) and situations (places) we come closer to understanding the significance of their differences and similarities around the world.

PLACE: Physical and Human Characteristics

All places on the earth have distinctive tangible and intangible characteristics that give them meaning and character and distinguish them from other places. Geographers generally describe places by their physical or human characteristics.

Physical Characteristics: The physical characteristics derive from the geological hydrological, atmospheric, and biological processes that produce landforms, water bodies, climate, soils, natural vegetation, and animal life.

Human Characteristics: Human ideas and actions shape the character of places. Places vary in their population composition, as well as in their settlement patterns, architecture, kinds of economic and recreational activities, and transportation and communication networks. One place also can be distinguished from another by the ideologies and philosophical or religious tenets of people who live there, their languages, and by their forms of economic, social, and political organization.

Observed Characteristics: Few places on the earth have been untouched by human contact, even sparsely settled or largely uninhabited areas such as the ice sheets of Antarctica, the Grand Canyon of Arizona, and the seemingly impenetrable tropical rainforests of the Amazon Basin. All have landscapes shaped in part by human activity. In contrast, cities represent the most intensive human modifications of the physical environment. But the predominant physical or natural characteristics often mask a history of intensive human use. For example, the development of the race horse industry of the Bluegrass demonstrates the interaction of soil, topography and historic settlement patterns that give this “place” of white and black board fences a distinctive character.

Taken together, the physical and human characteristics of places provide keys to identifying and interpreting the simple to complex interactions and interrelations between people and their environments.

HUMAN/ENVIRONMENT INTERACTION: Relationships within Places

All places on the earth have advantages and disadvantages for human settlement. High population densities have developed on food plains, for example, where people could take advantage of fertile soils, water resources, and opportunities for river transportation. By comparison, population densities are usually low in deserts. Yet flood plains are periodically subjected to severe damage, and some desert areas, such as Israel, have been modified to support large population concentrations.

Cultural and Physical Relationships: People continue to modify or adapt to natural settings in ways that reveal their cultural values, economic and political circumstances, and technological abilities. The Cumberland River Valley has seen a series of land-use changes from the early Indian use of the river for a food and coal source. Today people perceive the natural setting of the area as a major recreation source including Lake Cumberland, Dale Hollow, and Cumberland Falls. All who have lived in that area have responded to the natural environment, but each group has adapted to and modified it in vastly different ways.

Geography focuses on understanding how such human-environment relationships develop and what their consequences are—for people and for the environment. Studying geography furthers our appreciation of the natural environment and of our cultural heritage. It also shows that our actions produce both intentional and unintentional consequences. Consider, for example, the effects of strip mining for coal on the landscape of eastern and western Kentucky. The more rugged topography of the Cumberland Plateau makes land reclamation more difficult resulting in permanent scars on the hillsides that are visible for many miles.

Studying the complex nature of such modifications provides an important foundation for promoting responsible environmental attitudes and behavior. It is also critical in training the professionals to whom we entrust environmental planning and management.

MOVEMENT: Humans Interacting on the Earth

Human beings occupy places unevenly across the face of the earth. Some live on farms or in the country; others live in towns, villages, or cities. Yet these people interact with each other: that is, they travel from one place to another, they communicate with each other or they rely upon products, information, and ideas that come from beyond their immediate environment.

The most visible evidences of global interdependence and the interaction of places are the transportation and communication lines that link every part of the world. These demonstrate that most people interact with other places almost every day of their lives. This may involve nothing more that Kentuckians eating apples grown in the state of Washington and shipped to Louisville by rail or truck. On a larger scale, international trade demonstrates that no country is self-sufficient.

Relationships Between and Among Friends: Spatial interaction can be as simple as a child's morning bus trip from home to school or as complex as assembling wood from Oregon, natural rubber from Malaysia, graphite from Mexico, tin from Bolivia, and paint produced in factories around the United States to manufacture pencils in Pennsylvania.

In practical ways, geography helps to explain varied patterns in the movement of people, ideas, and material. From the journey to work patterns on I-64 between Frankfort and Lexington, to the shipment of coal down the Green and Ohio rivers, to the TV reception of over one hundred channels on the satellite dish on the roof of a Martin County home, geographers analyze and plan for more effective movement.

Interaction continues to change as transportation and communication technologies change. We need to anticipate these changes and to examine their geographical consequences.

REGIONS: How They Form and Change

The basic unit of geographical study is the region, an area that displays unity in terms of selected criteria.

We are all familiar with regions showing the extent of political power such as nations, provinces, countries, or cities, yet there are almost countless ways to define meaningful regions depending on the problems being considered. Some regions are defined by one characteristic such as a governmental unit, a language group, or a landform type, and others by the interplay of many complex features. For example, Kentucky as a state is a governmental region, Latin America as an area where Spanish and Portuguese are major languages can be a linguistic region and the Rocky Mountains as a mountain range is a landform region. A geographer may delineate a neighborhood in Paducah by correlating the income and educational levels of residents with the assessed valuation of property and tax rate, or distinguish others by prominent boundaries such as freeway, park, or business district. On another scale we may identify the complex of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and environmental features that delineate the Arab World from the Middle East or North Africa.

Geographers have developed regions as tools to examine, define, describe, explain, and analyze the human and physical environment. Geographers can delimit regions for specific purposes. Geographers in Kentucky interested in the future of the Commonwealth define areas of recent foreign manufacturing investment as the “Golden Triangle,” a REGION of economic and population growth lying within the Louisville, Lexington, and Cincinnati area. Geographers and environmentalists also have delimited wilderness areas such as Red River Gorge to be protected as much as possible from change by human activity.

Uses of Regions: Regions perform a multitude of functions in geographic education. They decline both convenient and manageable units upon which to build our knowledge of the world. They provide a context for studying current events. We may view regions as an intermediate step between our knowledge of local places and our knowledge of the entire planet. Eventually they help us to see the earth as an integrated system of places that we can comprehend as a planetary ecosystem.