

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 time. Using the theme of regions, geographers divide the world into manageable units for study.