

Five Themes of Geography

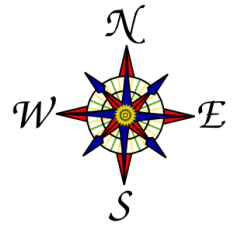
Geography is more than memorizing place names. Geographers organize space in much the same way that historians organize time. A study of Geography begins with knowing *where* things are located on a map. But more important, it requires an understanding of *why* things are located in particular places, and *how* those places influence people's lives. No one theme can be understood without the others; they are all connected.

No part of our world can be understood in isolation. By using the Five Themes as a basis for understanding geographic information, one can gain a better appreciation of cultural and environmental changes around the world.

Theme 1: Location

This theme answers the question "*Where is it located?*" Location refers to the *position* of something on the Earth's surface. Absolute and relative locations are two ways of describing the positions and distributions of people and places on the Earth's surface.

Absolute location refers to the specific location of something by using the grid system of latitude and longitude. Latitude lines called parallels run north and south from the Equator at 0° to the North Pole 90° N and the South Pole 90° S. Longitude lines or meridians run east and west of the Prime Meridian 0° to the International Dateline at 180°. **Relative Location** is the location of a place relative to other places.



Since many places on the Earth are inhabited, an easy way to describe a particular location is by its place name or **toponym**. Two other ways to describe a place's location is its site and situation. **Site** refers to the physical characteristics of a place like, climate, water sources, topography, soil, vegetation, latitude, and elevation. **Situation** refers to the location of a place relative to another place.

Maps are the best way to show location. All maps contain some distortion since you cannot perfectly represent a three-dimensional object (globe) on a two-dimensional surface (map). The scale of a map reveals how much the real world has been reduced to fit on the page/screen on which it appears. **Scale** is the ratio between an actual distance on the ground and the length given to that distance on the map, using the same measurement. A large-scale map actually shows less area than a small-scale map. A large scale map shows large details while a small scale map shows small details.



Theme 2: Place

This theme addresses the question of "*What is it like there?*" All places have features that distinguish them from other places. The theme of place considers characteristics that make one location different from all other locations on Earth. Geographers describe a place by two kinds of characteristics: physical and human.

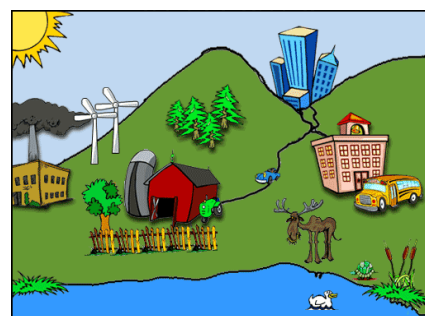
The physical characteristics of a place make up its natural environment and include landforms, bodies of water, climate, soils, natural vegetation, and animal life. The human characteristics of a place come from human ideas and actions. They include cultural attributes, structures, land use patterns, density of population, and political systems just to name a few.

The theme of place with its human characteristics deals heavily with culture. **Culture** refers to people's lifestyle, values, beliefs and traits. Culture can be viewed in two ways: what people *care about* (language,

religion, ethnicity, etc.) and what people *take care of* (daily necessities of survival like food, clothing and shelter as well as leisure activities). Culture is complex and made of interconnected parts. A **culture trait** is a single element of culture. For example, an aristocrat wearing a wig is a single culture characteristic. Cultural traits are not necessarily confined to a single culture. More than one culture may exhibit a particular culture trait. This shared combination of culture traits is referred to as a **culture complex**. Eating with utensils or having the same dress codes are examples of a culture complex. The third component is a **culture system**, which is culture complexes that are grouped together, such as ethnicity, language, religion and other cultural elements. The final component is a **cultural region**, the area within which a particular cultural system prevails. Cultural regions may be expressed on a map, but many geographers prefer to describe these as geographic regions since their definition is based on a combination of cultural, locational, and environmental traits. A **cultural realm** is an assembly of culture or geographic regions, the most highly generalized regionalization of culture and geography. Two examples of cultural realms are sub-Saharan Africa or Western Europe.

Theme 3: Human-Environmental Interactions

The physical and human characteristic of a place provide keys to understanding the interrelationships between people and their environment. This geographic theme addresses this question: "*What is the relationship between humans and their environment.*" Three key concept underline human-environment interactions:



- a. *Humans depend on the environment.* The natural environment is made up of living things and non-living things. Humans rely on the natural environment for their basic needs: food, shelter and clothing.
- b. *Humans modify the environment.* People change the environment to meet their needs. For example, they build dams, plow and irrigate fields, dig mines, and build structures on the land.
- c. *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 US use heating units to keep their homes warm in the winter. 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.

The theme of human-environment interactions focuses on the relationship between the environment and the population, often referred as **cultural ecology**. The **cultural landscape** includes all human-induced changes to the surface of the earth; it is the human imprint on the Earth's surface. In 1927, the renowned geographer Carl Sauer described the cultural landscape as "the forms superimposed on the physical landscape by the activities of man."

Three theories focus on the theme of human-environment interactions. The first theory is **Environmental Determinism** which states that human behavior is strongly affected by and even controlled (determined) by the environment. The second theory of **Possibilism** contends that while the natural environment may limit human behavior, people have the ability to make adjustments to nature. Regardless of how one views the environment, one thing definitely rings true – the influence of the natural environment declines with increasing technological sophistication. That is to say, as a society gains more technology, the impact of the environment on them decreases and their ability to change the environment increases. This leads to the third theory of **Environmental Modification** which states that people and societies are constantly making positive and negative environmental alterations on their environment.



Theme 4: Movement

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

Part of the theme of movement is **cultural diffusion**, which is the spread of innovations and ideas from its source area to another area and culture. One type of cultural diffusion is **Expansion diffusion**, which is when an innovation or idea develops in a source area and remains strong there while also spreading outward. Another type of cultural diffusion is **Relocation diffusion** which is the spread of an innovation or idea through the migration of a population from one area to a new area.

There are two forces that work against diffusion or the movement of ideas and innovation. One force is **Time-distance decay**, which states that the longer and farther something or someone has to go, the less likely it will get there. The other force that works against movement is **cultural barriers**, which are prevailing attitudes or taboos that prevent attributes of a foreign culture from being adopted by the main culture.

Theme 5: Region

The last theme is region. A region is a basic unit of geographic study. It is defined as an area that has unifying characteristics. Regions are important for identifying and/or classifying the areas of unique characteristics. The study of regions helps to answer these two questions: "*How and why is one area similar to another?*" and "*How do the areas differ?*"



While most regions differ significantly from neighboring areas, all regions have certain characteristics. They all have an **area** and a **location** because the regions lie somewhere on the Earth's surface. Regions also have boundaries, which can be clearly or vaguely defined.

There are three types of regions. A **Formal region** is an area that has definite borders and shares cultural homogeneity (sameness); it is uniform in nature. For example, an area that follows the same laws or speak the same language or follows the same region would be a formal region. A **Functional region** is an area that has a core/center and a surrounding area or hinterland. The hinterland is dependent on the core for some reason (usually a service or function) and there is movement between the two. For example, an area that listens to a certain radio station is a functional region. The third type of region is a **perceptual or vernacular region** which exists primarily in the minds of people and is usually based on people's knowledge about culture and physical geography. These types of regions can be based on reality or stereotypes. An example of a perceptual region would be that all cowboys live in Texas.

Name _____ Period _____ Date _____

Five Themes of Geography

Directions: Read and annotate the "Five Themes of Geography" article and then complete this assignment by describing your **own neighborhood** using the Five Themes of Geography. You need to give **specific examples** that relate to the neighborhood you are describing.

Case Study	a. What neighborhood are you describing?
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1. Location:	a. Relative Location: Describe your area's nearness to other places using directions (North, south, etc.)
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2. Place:	a. Physical Place: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give 2 examples of physical place by identifying the land and water features, the climate and the natural resources of your area 	b. Human Place: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give 2 examples of human place by identify how humans have made an imprint in your areas (e.g. structures, activities, etc.)
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3. Human-Environment Interactions	a. Humans depend <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify 2 ways how people in the your area depend on the environment 	b. Humans modify <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify 2 ways how people in your area modified the environment 	c. Humans adapt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify 2 ways how people in your area adapted to the environment
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4. Movement	a. What are 5 different methods used to move people, goods, and ideas in your area?
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5. Region	a. Name of a Formal Region this area is located in:	b. Name of a Functional Region this area is located in:	c. Name of a Vernacular Region this area is located in:
Give example			
EXPLAIN why it is this type of region:	a.	b.	c.

