



Places and Regions

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In this presentation, we'll take a look at the specific physical and human properties that make places the way they are. We'll learn about and discuss how and why the Earth is divided into regions and how regions change over time. We'll also consider why people of different backgrounds have different impressions and attitudes about places.



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(Geography Standard 4)

Physical characteristics of places include topography (mountains, valleys, plains, and other features of the landscape), vegetation, climate, animals, water, and soil.

What physical features do you notice in this and the next three slides? Compare and contrast the physical characteristics that you see in these slides.



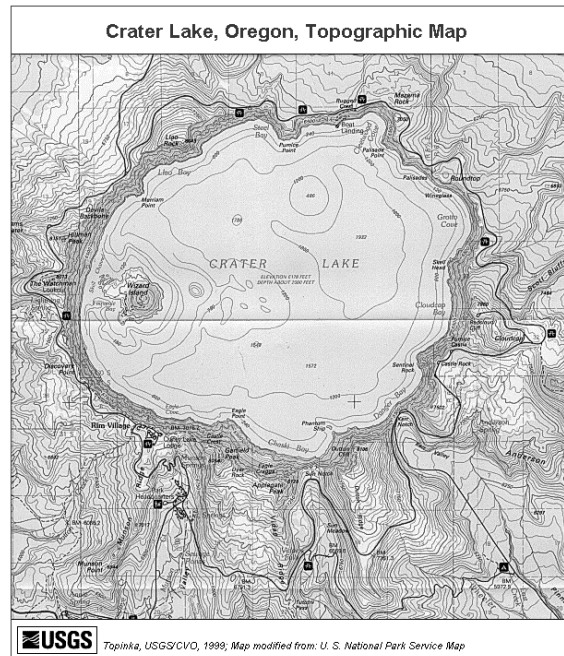
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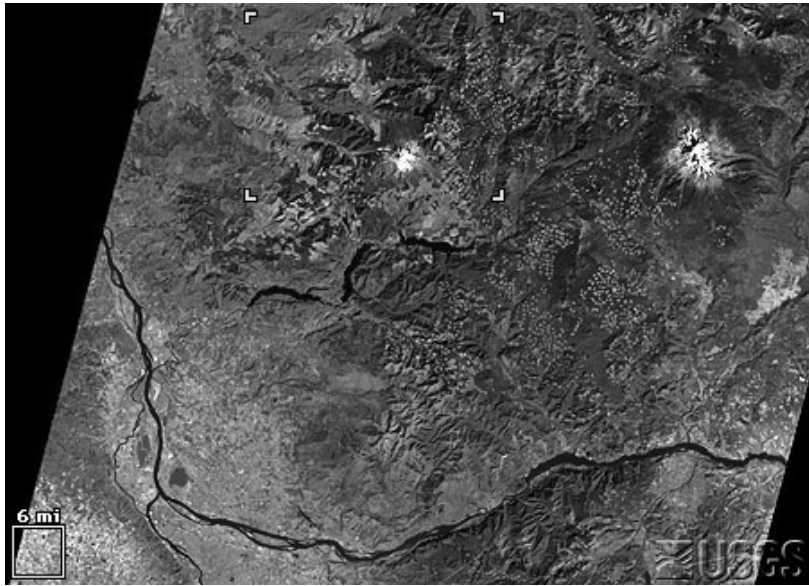
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The physical characteristics of places can be shown on topographical maps, such as this one of Oregon's Crater Lake. Topographical ("topo") maps show detailed features of land and water areas, including differences in elevation.

Look at this map, and then look at the photograph of Crater Lake on the next slide. Can you see the island on both slides? These are two examples of how the physical characteristics of a place can be represented.



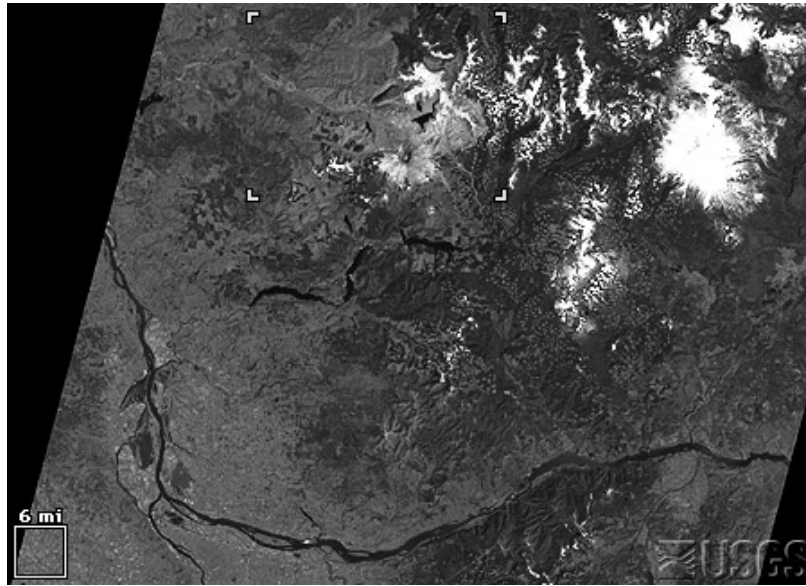
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Mt. St. Helens, 1973 (before the eruption)

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Satellite images also represent the physical characteristics of places. This is a satellite image of Mt. St. Helens, a volcano in Washington State that erupted in 1980. Mt. St. Helens is the small white spot in the center of the image (not the one on the right).



Mt. St. Helens, 1983 (3 years after the eruption)

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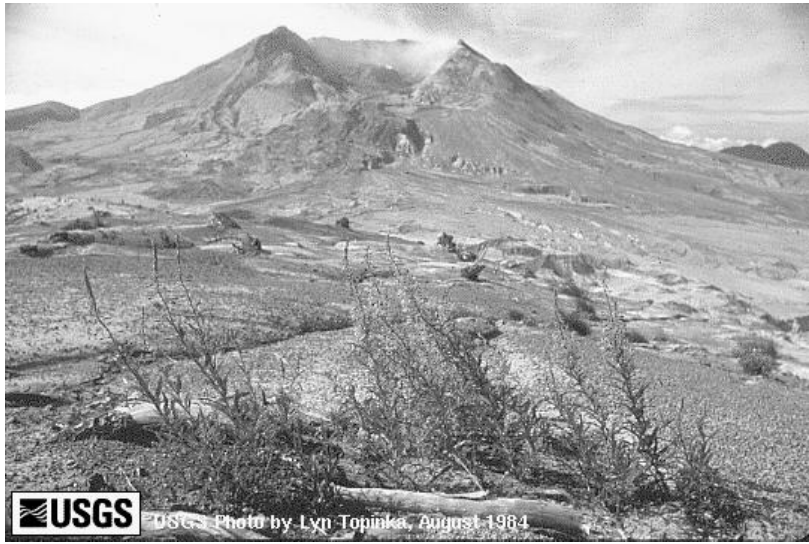
In this picture, taken three years after the eruption, Mt. St. Helens (still in the center of the image) now contains much more white and green. In satellite images, red represents vegetation. What does this image tell you about how Mt. St. Helens changed between 1973 and 1983? Can you picture what the mountain might have looked like before and after the eruption? What physical characteristics might it have had before and after 1980?



Mt. St. Helens, April 1980 (early eruption)

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The physical features of Mt. St. Helens before and in the early stages of the 1980 eruption included evergreen forest and snow.



Mt. St. Helens, August 1984 (4 years after the eruption)

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Forests and snow were not part of the mountain's physical features four years later, but fireweed had begun to grow.

You can see from these images of Mt. St. Helens that a place's physical characteristics change over time. In this case, the characteristics changed rapidly due to a cataclysmic event, but changes can also be much more subtle and take many years to become apparent.

Can you think of any physical changes you've noticed near your home or in a place you have visited more than once?



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A place's physical characteristics are in large part determined by its climate. How do you think this rainforest is affected by climate? How do you think it might look different if the climate were to change?



New Mexico, USA

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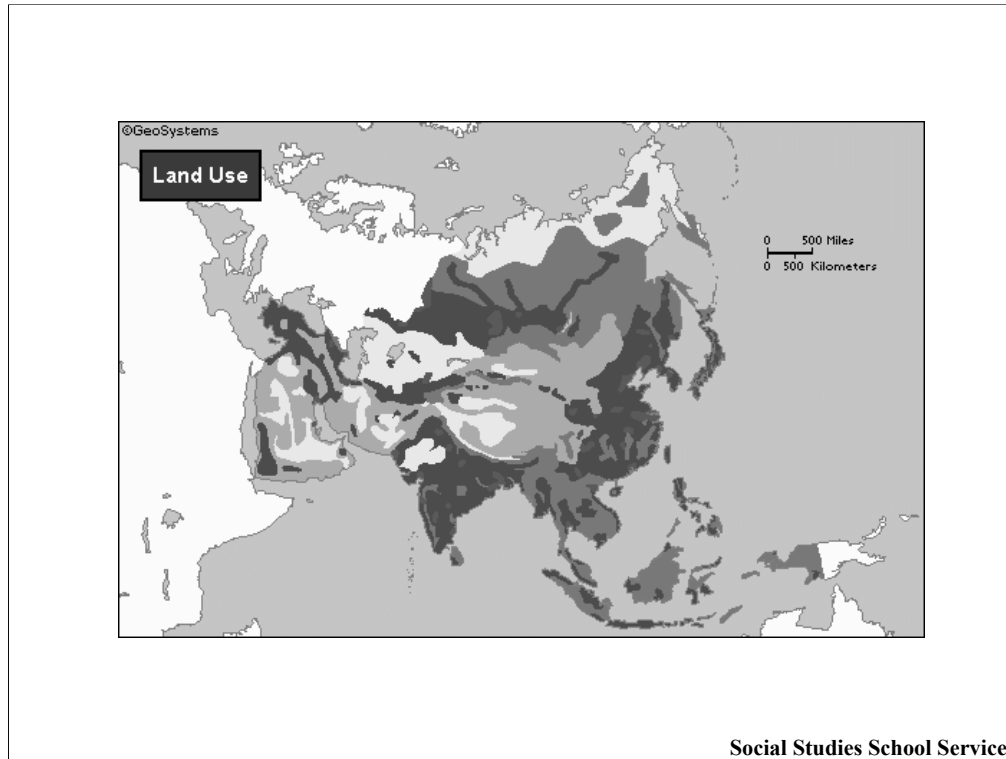
A place's physical characteristics affect whether people can live there and determine how people will build homes, make a living, and spend their free time.

Look at the places shown on this slide and the next. How do you think the physical characteristics of these places might impact the lives of people who decide to settle here? How might Native Americans have made the best use of the landscape and natural resources in these places? How might people today use these resources? How might people today be limited by the physical characteristics shown in these photos?



Southeastern United States

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Any place that's inhabited by people has human as well as physical characteristics. Human characteristics of places include housing styles, land use, language, religion, political and economic systems, population distribution, and any other factors that are related to how people live in an area.

Thematic maps such as this land use map can be used to show human characteristics of places (land use maps actually indicate both human and physical characteristics). By using maps to represent human aspects of places and regions, we can easily compare different parts of the world and see patterns and trends of human activities on the Earth.

This map and the one on the next slide show land use in Asia and North America, respectively. What do these maps suggest about the human characteristics of the places the maps portray? For example, how do people live in the areas represented by each color? How do they make use of the natural resources in their area? What types of benefits and hardships might they experience as a result of the primary economic activities where they live?

Use this map legend as a guideline to understanding these maps:

red: manufacturing

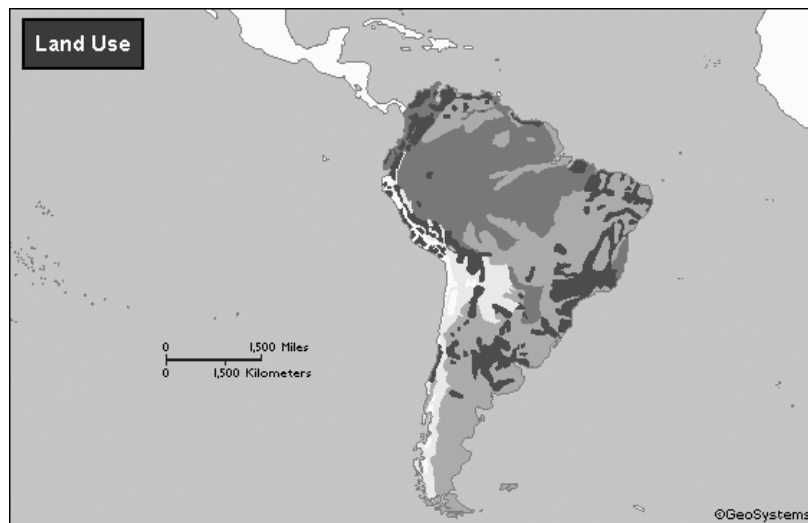
light orange: grazing

darker green: farming

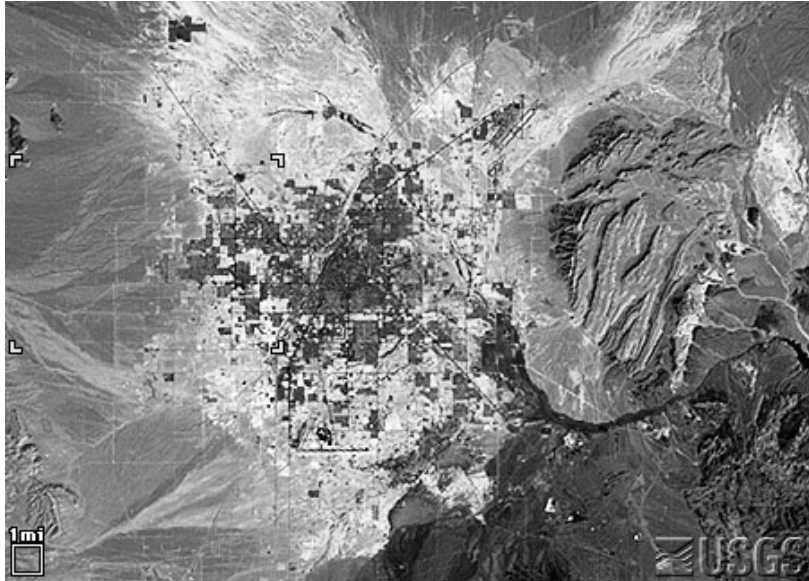
lighter green: forestry

lightest green (South America only)

beige: little-used land



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Las Vegas, 1972

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Satellite images can clearly show changes to a place caused by human use. Here is a satellite image of Las Vegas, Nevada in 1972, when the city's population was about 273,000. The red areas are places with vegetation, and the green areas are places where few people and plants live. Compare this image to the one on the next slide, taken in 1992, when the city's population was about 863,000.



Las Vegas, 1992

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You should notice that this 1992 image has more developed space, including more red areas representing golf courses, parks, and landscaping.

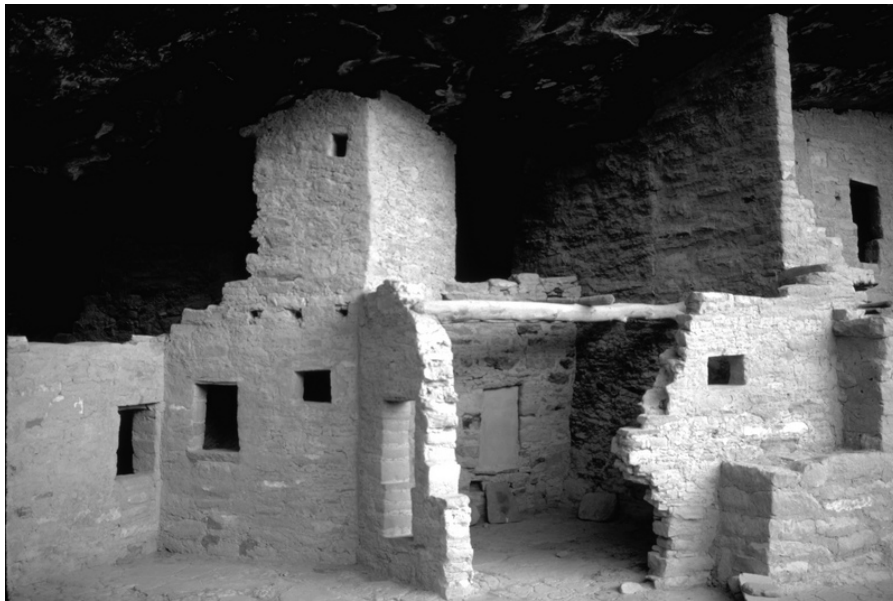
How do you think this population change has impacted the lives of people who live in Las Vegas? What positive and negative consequences might there be for this rapid population growth?



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Housing is one of the most visible human characteristics of any particular place. The type of housing people inhabit depends on a variety of factors, including population density, climate, available materials, and wealth.

Consider the types of housing shown on this and the next four slides. How does each type of home reflect the physical landscape where it's situated? How do you think these homes were built? What types of technology were required to build them?



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The human characteristics of places can be greatly influenced by specific economic activities that occur in those places. For example, the presence of a major medical center might attract a large number of senior citizens to an area or town, especially if there aren't other medical centers nearby.



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Likewise, a university attracts not only students and faculty, but often people who aren't affiliated with the university who appreciate the access to cultural events, cultural diversity, academic opportunities, and good medical care that a university typically provides.



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Think about how technology affects places. How have human inventions and developments changed places in the past, and how do they continue to create change?

For example, how did the development of the railroad across the United States affect the characteristics of the places the railroad went through? Think about how a town might have changed once a railroad was built through or near it. Similarly, what happened to towns that the railroad builders decided to bypass?



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How does the presence of a factory or refinery affect a place's human characteristics? What effect does this type of industry have on the workforce and the economy? Who tends to live near factories and refineries? What do you think happens to a town's population when a factory or refinery is built there?



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Computers have had a significant impact on places. Before people owned personal computers, it was much harder for them to work from home or “on the road.”

Today, many people work in home offices, take their laptops to coffee houses or other places out of the office, and rely on computers for much of the information and many of the products that they once had to get at the library or store.

How do you think these changes have affected the characteristics of the places where people work and live? How have they affected communities?



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How does technology affect land use? Look at this picture and the next one, and compare the types of “technology” that are used on each farm. How does the advent of new technologies change the lives of people who work on a farm? How does farm technology change the economics of agriculture, such as the ability of farmers to produce a surplus and sell their goods at reasonable prices? How does technology affect the physical landscape in an agricultural region?



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Technology can have a major impact on isolated communities. This small fishing community in Newfoundland, Canada has electricity and television. How do you think the arrival of these amenities might have changed the town? How do you think computers with Internet connections might affect the town and its inhabitants?



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If you live in or near a large city, you are probably familiar with smog. Smog is just one example of how population growth and urbanization affect the characteristics of places. It's easy to see how smog affects the physical characteristics of a place by obscuring views, polluting the air, and even changing the climate. Can you think of ways in which smog affects the human characteristics of a place? For example, how do people react to living in smoggy environments?



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In what other ways does urbanization affect the physical and human characteristics of places? How does increasing population density alter people's lives? In what ways does the physical landscape change?



Immigrants on an Atlantic liner.

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What other factors change the physical and human characteristics of places? Consider the impact of things such as migration, economic development, climate change, and earthquakes. How has immigration changed the U.S.? How has it changed other countries? How does an influx of capital investment (money) into a region change the way people live and alter the environment? How do physical factors (such as climate change and seismic activity) affect the way people live and change the physical environment?

Regions

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(Geography Standard 5)

Regions are “used to identify and organize areas of Earth’s surface for various purposes.” (*Geography for Life: National Geography Standards*, 1994). In other words, regions are divisions on the Earth’s surface that people create to help them make sense of different things that exist and occur on the planet.

What comes to your mind when you think of a region? The next few slides will show you some examples.



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When we think of regions of the country, we generally think of areas such as the Midwest, Southeast, New England, and Pacific Northwest.



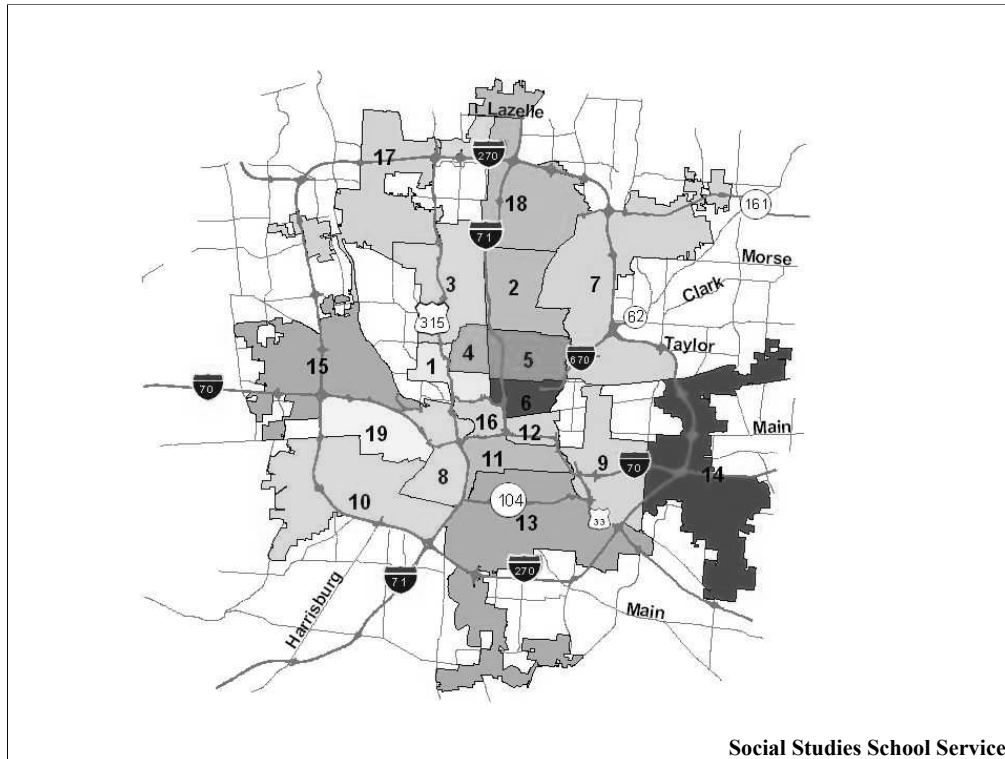
Regions can be smaller or larger than these major regions into which we divide the country. For example, the Midwest region can be divided into many smaller regions.

But what are these smaller regions? This question can be answered in a number of ways. Since people create regions by “drawing” imaginary lines around places, it’s reasonable to expect that different people will have different definitions of regions. Similarly, regions can be defined differently for different purposes.

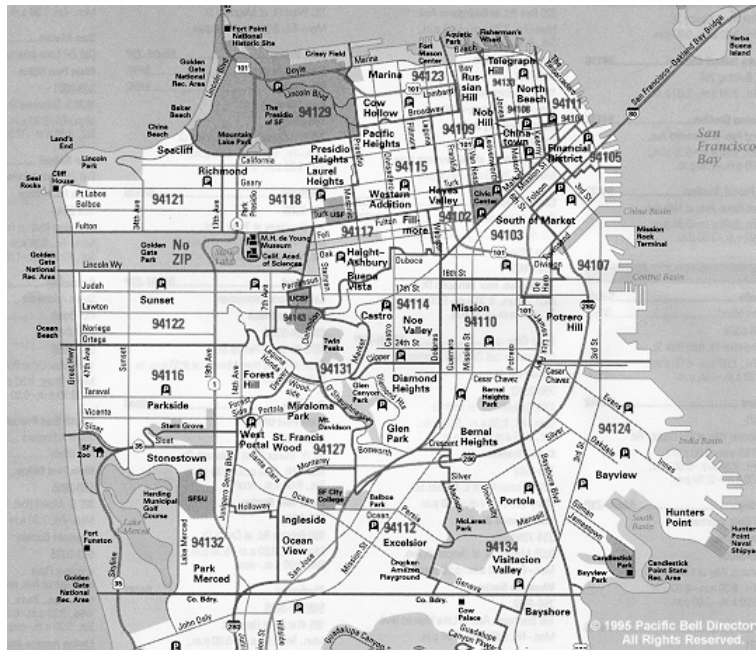
Here are two examples:

Individual Midwestern states can be considered separate regions of the Midwest. The main differences are political: Ohio has a different governor, legislature, constitution, and set of laws than Indiana or the other states in the Midwest.

Southern Ohio has a very similar physical landscape to southern Indiana. Thus, another region within the Midwest could be defined as “southern Indiana/southern Ohio” or “the Ohio River Valley.”

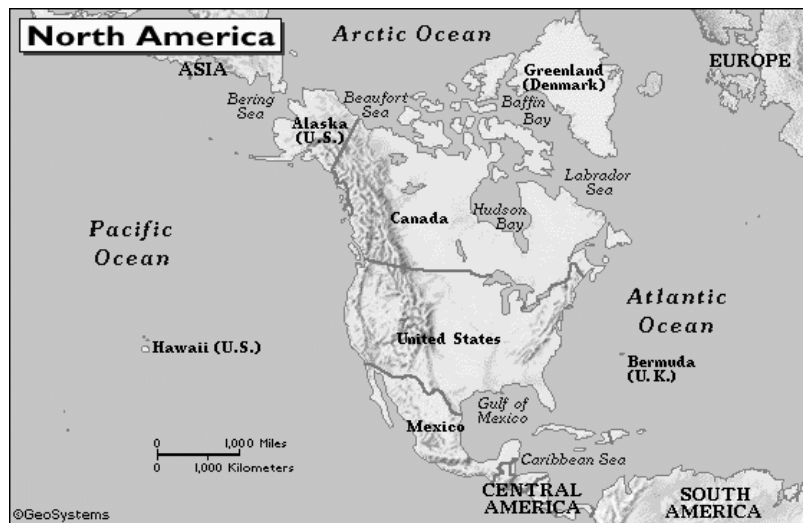


This is a map of police precincts in Columbus, Ohio. Each precinct can be considered a region of the city. If you spent time in one of these precincts, you would probably be able to determine different regions within that precinct. Regions can therefore be much smaller than the typical national regions (e.g., Midwest, Southeast) with which we are familiar.



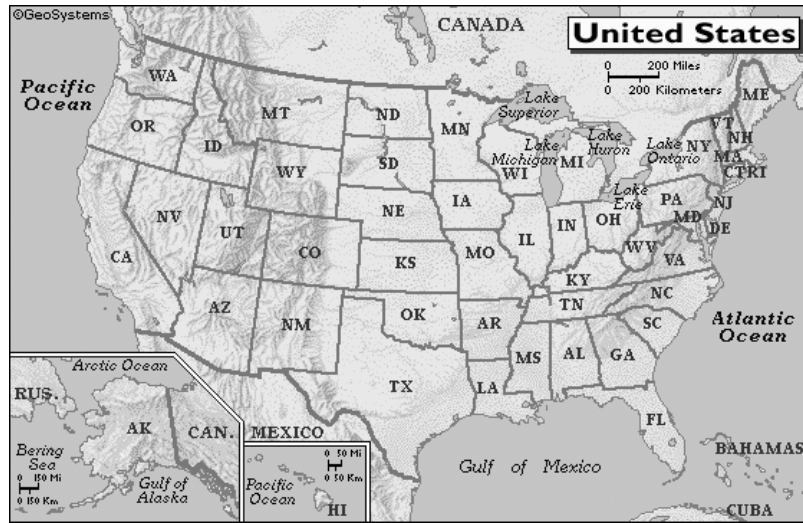
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How is your city or town divided into regions? Think of as many divisions as you can. What are the reasons for these divisions? What purposes do they serve? How do they impact your life?



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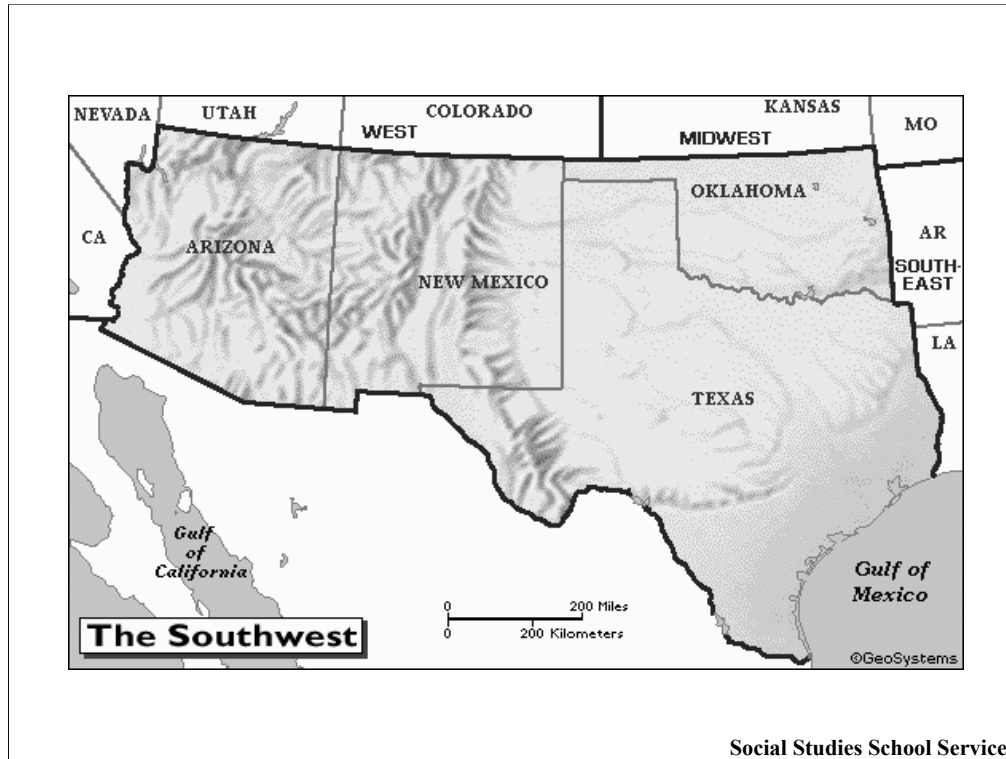
Regions can also be larger than the areas of the country. For example, North America can be considered a region of the world.



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How do you divide the United States into regions? There are several ways to do this, and you will see different methods in different places. One common method segments the country into these very broad regions: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Rocky Mountain, Southwest, Pacific Northwest, Alaska, Hawaii. Each of these regions can be divided into several other commonly-defined regions. The Southwest, for example, can be divided into desert, Rocky Mountain, and coastal California portions.

California, in fact, is hard to place into a region. It's often divided into northern and southern sections, but sometimes the entire state is considered its own "West Coast" region. As you can see, regions can be tricky to define, and the definitions are not "set in stone" but rather vary according to who does the defining and their reasons for defining regions.



The process of defining regional boundaries is a subjective one that depends on people's perspectives and their reasons for identifying regions in the first place. For example, Texas is sometimes considered part of the "Southwest," along with New Mexico and Arizona, but at other times, it is considered part of the "South" or "Southeast" with Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and other states in that region.

Where Texas is placed in the structure of America's regions depends on a variety of factors, including what a person thinks of when he or she thinks "Texas," what part of Texas someone focuses on, and why the region is being defined in the first place. If the country is being divided into regions based on water needs, Texas is generally placed with the arid Southwest. On the other hand, if the country is being divided into regions based on dialects and accents, it's more likely to be placed with the southeastern states. Since Texas is so large, it might be best to split it into two general areas—West Texas and East Texas—and then put each area into a different region. Most of the time, however, Texas as a whole gets lumped into one region or another as an entire state.

What region is your state in? Is there more than one region into which your state could conceivably be placed? Do you think your state can be easily divided so part of the state is in one general region and another part is in another region?



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What comes to your mind when you think of the regions of the United States? For example, what do you think of when you hear the term “Northern California”? Why do you think you have these impressions?

Why are people attracted to Northern California as a travel destination or a place to live? How does this region differ from other parts of the country?



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What do you think of when you hear “New England”? Why do you think you have these impressions?

Why are people attracted to New England as a travel destination or a place to live? How does this region differ from other parts of the country?

You could ask these questions for other regions of the United States or the world. Each region has certain characteristics that some people find attractive and others dislike.

Keep in mind that some of these characteristics are based more on stereotypes and preconceived ideas than on reality. For example, most people in New England do not eat lobster and clam chowder at every meal and do not live in quaint fishing villages. Some people do fit this stereotype, but not the majority.

Are you aware of the stereotypes associated with your region of the country? In what ways are these stereotypes true? In what ways are they untrue or exaggerated?



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Regions can be formal, functional, or perceptual.

A formal region is one whose parts all have a noticeable set of common characteristics, such as a desert climate or a common religion practiced by people in the region. Regions defined by political boundaries—such as states or cities—are also considered formal regions.



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A functional region involves a central “node” (like a metropolitan area) linked to other areas. For example, the Chicago Metropolitan Area consists of the city of Chicago (the “node”) and numerous suburbs. Some of these suburbs are in Indiana—outside of the boundary of the formal region of Illinois, but within the functional region of “Chicago.”

Another example of a functional region is a banking system that has a main bank and many branches. Together, the main bank and all its branches form a functional region.



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As the name implies, a perceptual region reflects people's perceptions of and feelings about what an area is like. As discussed previously, we often have stereotypes and generalizations about regions. Some of these stereotypes contain elements of truth, but many do not reflect reality. To talk about the "South" is to talk about a perceptual region that means different things to different people and that does not have precise boundaries on which everyone agrees.

Can you think of other examples of formal, functional, and perceptual regions?



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Regions are not static entities; they change over time. For example, many places in the United States were at one time primarily agricultural but have now been converted to suburban areas. Thus, a region of a state or county that at one time was considered farmland might today be considered suburbia or even part of the city.



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Houston, Texas

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One region of the country that has experienced a good deal of change over the past few decades is the South. As discussed earlier, the definition of “the South” is subject to debate: some people define it as including the entire southern portion of the United States west to New Mexico, while others see it as only including the southeastern part of the country. However you define it, the South has seen the rapid growth of many of its cities and the suburbanization that accompanies urban growth.



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Transportation networks and systems have a major impact on regional change. This is true in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Think about the ways that a region might change once new interstates or rural highways are built. How does transportation development contribute to other types of development? How do these developments in turn contribute to overall changes to regions, such as the changes that have occurred in the South?



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Think also about how the development of the railroads in the 19th century altered regions of the country. How might the increased communication, trade, and travel that the railroads allowed have affected the character of specific regions such as New England or the Upper Midwest?



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(Geography Standard 6)

We all have impressions of places. Some of these impressions form when we actually visit and have experiences in these places; other impressions come from things we've heard other people say, things we've learned in school or from the media, or other sources. Think of a place you've never been to, and then consider what you think it would be like there. Why do you have this impression of a place you've never actually visited?

Our personal experiences and cultural backgrounds play an important role in our impressions of places. For this reason, people of different cultures, races, ages, genders, socioeconomic status, occupations, and educational levels often have very different ideas about what places are like.

Consider this picture of a North American farm. What might each of these people think when viewing this picture or visiting this farm: a farmer from the United States, a farmer from China, a child from New York City, a fashion designer, a vegetarian, a 90-year-old man? What does this picture make you think about?



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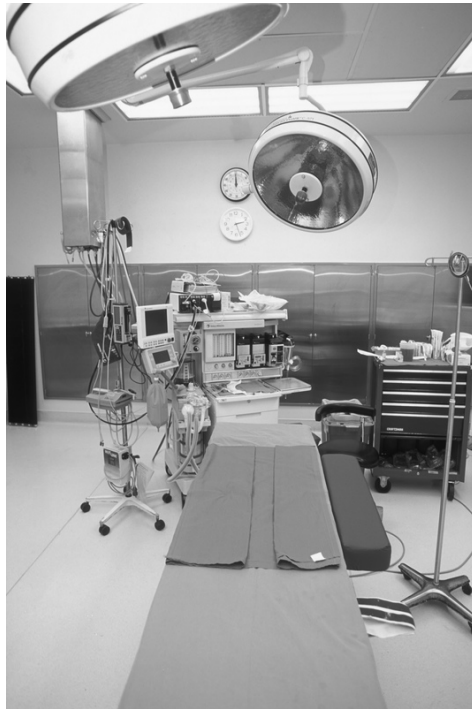
What does this picture of downtown Seoul, South Korea make you think? Do you like what you see? Would you like to be here? Why or why not?

What might each of these people think when viewing this picture or visiting this part of the city: an American tourist, an elderly Korean farmer, a Korean teenager, an international businessperson? Why would each person have a different impression of and experience with the place shown in this photograph?



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Consider your own impressions of this setting. Then think about how other people might view this place differently. What would your parents and grandparents think about it? What would a mountaineer think about it? What about an artist or a person who's spent his or her entire life in Florida?



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People have impressions (sometimes strong ones) of indoor places as well as of geographical locations on Earth. For example, what do you think about when you look at this picture of an operating room? If you've had surgery, you may react differently to this picture than someone who's never been in an operating room. If you aspire to be a surgeon or a nurse, you might feel differently about this scene than someone who is afraid of needles or blood.



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Technology also plays a role in shaping people's impressions of places. For example, people can tour the Grand Canyon not only on foot but also by helicopter and airplane. Visitors to Las Vegas and Phoenix today can take brief flights over the canyon, whereas in the days before air travel they might not have opted to undertake the drive to the canyon's viewing points.

How do you think the advent of helicopter and airplane tours has altered the "Grand Canyon experience"? Now that people can see the entire canyon from the air in a short amount of time, in what ways do you think people's impressions of the canyon may have changed?



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Advertising can have a profound impact on people's attitudes toward places. For example, you've probably seen automobile ads or commercials showing cars or SUVs being driven through the mountains. Why do you think car companies set the ads in the mountains? How do you think this practice affects people's impressions of the vehicles? How do you think it affects people's impressions of the mountains? Think about the geographical settings of ads or commercials you've seen recently. How does this advertising influence the viewer's perceptions of the places shown?



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Our ideas about places are also frequently influenced by symbols that represent those places. The Statue of Liberty is a symbol representing the United States and New York City. It also represents certain values and periods of history. Many people have an immediate reaction to seeing this statue. What does it mean to you? What does it mean to other people in the United States? To foreigners?



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The Golden Gate Bridge is another example of a symbol that represents a place. In this case, the bridge often makes people think of natural beauty, opportunity, and the possibility of starting a new life on the West Coast. Of course, the bridge might have a very different meaning to someone who lived through a particularly difficult period of life in San Francisco, who has to commute through slow traffic over the bridge each day, or who witnessed someone committing suicide by jumping off the bridge.

What does the bridge make you think about?



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Is your town represented by any widely recognized symbols? If so, what impressions do you think these symbols give to residents and visitors?