



American Geography: *Discussion Guide*

Overview

Geography turns a spotlight on the character of American places and populations. Explore the geography of America’s varied landscape—its diverse ecosystems, natural resources, topography, and cultures. On this American odyssey, students will learn about the physical processes that shaped the country and the human influences that shaped the culture. They’ll also get to know maps of many kinds.

See how the land played a role in attracting populations and shaping culture. Marvel at the diverse habitats America has to offer — from coastal wetlands to western mountains, bustling cities to pristine prairies. The study of geography makes a world of difference in students’ understanding of America.

Glossary

Introduce the specialized vocabulary of geography. Have students use dictionaries and definitions from the videos to create flashcards for new terms, including those below:

culture	megalopolis	street map
ecosystem	natural resources	subtropical
estuary	political map	swamp
geography	population density map	tectonic
glacier	prairie	topography
marsh	relief map	wetland

1. Show the video segment “The Topography of the American West: A Land of Extremes” from *U.S. Geography: The West*.

- **Vocabulary:** Ask students to define *geography*, the study of places and people who live there, pointing out its derivation from the Greek roots *geo-* for “earth” and *-graphy* for “writing.” Also introduce *topography* (physical features) and *natural resources* (natural elements a place has and can take advantage of) as two aspects of geography.
- **Mapping:** Review the various types of maps and what each can reveal about a place.
 - a. Using a *relief map*, have students describe the topography of the American West. (As clues, ask students which of the following words apply: plains, mountains, farmland, wetland, desert, forest, tundra, waterways.)

- b. Using a *political map*, have students identify the western states and their capitals.
- c. Using a *population density map*, have students conclude where most people live and hypothesize why.
- d. Using a *road map*, have students determine distances and routes between major western cities.

Encourage students to create maps showing these western landmarks: Grand Canyon, Mt. Rainier, Denver, Los Angeles, Santa Fe, Phoenix, Yosemite National Park, Yellowstone National Park, Colorado River, Rio Grande, Snake River, Sonoran Desert, Mojave Desert, Death Valley, Great Salt Lake, Seattle, and San Francisco.

- **Discussion:** Ask students if they agree that the West is a “land of extremes.” Follow up with questions such as these: “What extremes does the West have in topography, climate, and population? In human-made features as well as surface features?”
- **Bulletin Board:** As a class project, have students bring to class a drawing or photo that helps to highlight an extreme in the geography of the West. Combine these to create a class collage for the bulletin board.

2. Show the video segment “Prairie Ecosystem” from *Assignment Discovery: America’s Prairie: Where the Sky Began*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)

- **Pre-Video Activity:** Ask students what they know about how the diverse characteristics of the American landscape were formed. Then have students develop a three-column K-W-L chart, identifying “What I Know” and “What I Want to Know.” After viewing the video, ask them to fill in the “What I Learned” column.
- **Demonstration:** Direct groups of students to create models or diagrams simulating one of the geologic events (e.g., tectonic plates, winds over the mountains, glaciers) or natural elements (e.g., storms, fire) that helped to form the American prairie. Summarize the natural elements and geological events that led to the prairie *ecosystem*.
- **Mural Activity:** Point out that the prairie ecosystem, a grassland with temperate climate, made up most of America before European settlement. Show photos of prairie wildflowers and grasses, as well as types of wildlife found on a Midwestern prairie, such as toads, owls, wolves, squirrels, skunks, opossums, rabbits, red-tailed hawks, badgers, swallowtail butterflies, gopher snakes, and foxes. Assign each student an element of the prairie to draw, and put the drawings together into a classroom mural.
- **Research:** Assign students to research a prairie animal or bird and report to the class.

3. Show the video clip “Coastal Regions” from *U.S. Geography: The South*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)

- **Mapping:** Have students color-code a map of the United States to distinguish the three different coastal regions described in the video: the wetlands of Maryland,

Virginia, and Louisiana; the Sea Islands of South Carolina; and the Everglades in Florida.

- **Diagramming:** Guide students to develop charts to compare and contrast the ecosystems of the three coastal regions. As a second diagramming activity, have students chart the differences between the ecosystems of the coastal regions and the prairie. For both activities, suggest a two-column chart labeled “Similarities” and “Differences.” Make sure that students consider climate, plants, wildlife, and soil.
- **Discussion:** Focusing on the Sea Islands, ask students these questions about the interrelationships between people and place: How did geography influence the culture of the Sea Islands? Where did the Gullah culture come from, and how was it first established in the Sea Islands? What are characteristics of Gullah culture, including language, arts, and customs? Why did Gullah culture continue to flourish there?
- **Persuasive Writing:** How can the unique habitat of the Everglades be protected? Have students imagine that they live in Florida, and direct them to write letters to an editor of a newspaper giving their ideas about what young people can do to preserve the Everglades and why it’s important to do so.
- **Group Brainstorming:** The video asks what resources supported settlement in the coastal regions. Ask small groups of students to list the natural resources they saw in the video (e.g., oysters along the Maryland coast). Then challenge them to add to the list by doing additional reading.

4. Show the video clip “Large Cities in the Northeast” from *World Geography North America: United States*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)

- **Map Skills:** Locate Boston, New York, and Philadelphia on a map of North America. (Make sure students understand why a political map is better than a street map or relief map for this purpose.) Discuss the physical characteristics of the three cities’ locations, and urge students to consider why and how the largest cities of the Northeast grew in these locations.
- **Diagramming:** Ask students to make Venn diagrams to show what the three cities have in common, including water, bridges, history, and commerce. Then challenge students to identify the unique aspects of each city.
- **Matching Quiz:** Challenge students to match the following items with Boston, New York, or Philadelphia: boroughs, eight million inhabitants, Liberty Bell, first capital, Delaware River, Hudson River, Harvard, Freedom Trail, Brooklyn Bridge, and theatre center.
- **Descriptive Writing:** Have students complete one of the following:
 - a. Develop a travel brochure highlighting a city of the Northeast — its character and physical features.
 - b. Create a diary for a simulated one-week trip in the Northeast.

Academic Standards

This discussion guide addresses the following national standards:

National Council for the Social Studies

<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>

- Culture
- Time, Continuity and Change
- People, Places and Environment

National Council for Geographic Education

www.ncge.org/publications/tutorial/standards/

- The World in Spatial Terms:
How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies
How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments
- Places and Regions:
The physical and human characteristics of places
That people create regions to interpret Earth's complexity
- Physical Systems:
The physical processes that shape the patterns of Earth's surface
The characteristics and spatial distribution of ecosystems on Earth's surface
- Human Systems:
The characteristics, distribution, and migration of human populations
The process, patterns, and functions of human settlement
- Environment and Society:
How human actions modify the physical environment
How physical systems affect human systems
The changes that occur in the meaning, use, distribution, and importance of resources

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/SubjectTopics.asp?SubjectID=7>

- Language Arts
- Writing: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process, gathers and uses information for research purposes
- Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts
- Listening and Speaking: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes
- Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media