

# The Five Themes of Geography

SECTION

1

**BEFORE  
YOU  
READ**

## Reach Into Your Background

If you were going to tell someone how to get to your school from where you live,

what would you say? You might say something like “Go six blocks north and one block east.” Or you might say your school is next to a local park or shopping center. These directions are examples of geography at work in your everyday life.

## Questions to Explore

1. What is geography?

2. How can the five themes of geography help you understand the world?

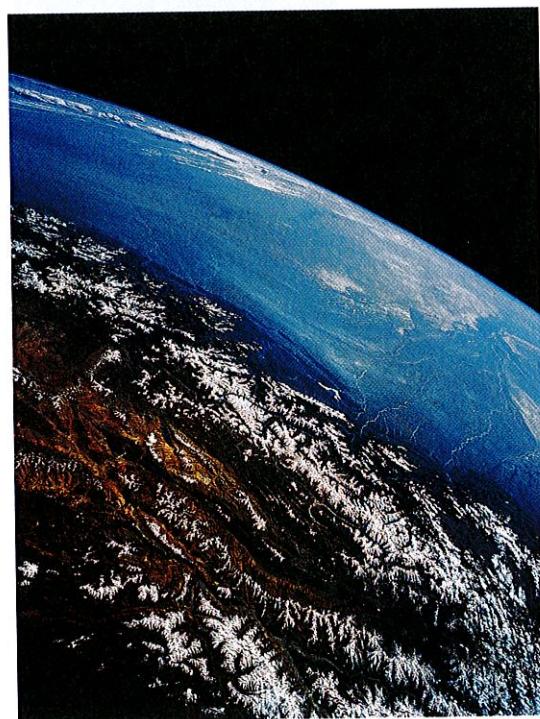
## Key Terms

geography  
latitude  
parallel  
degree  
Equator  
longitude  
meridian  
Prime Meridian  
plain

**W**hat would it be like to look at the Earth from a spaceship? Michael Collins, an astronaut who went to the moon, did just that. In his book *Carrying the Fire*, Collins described what he saw in July 1969 from his space capsule, 200 miles above the Earth. Even that far away, Collins could see natural features of the planet and evidence of the Earth’s people.

“**T**he Indian Ocean flashes incredible colors of emerald jade and opal in the shallow water surrounding the Maldiv Islands; then on to the Burma [Myanmar] coast and nondescript green jungle, followed by mountains, coastline, and Hanoi. We can see fires burning off to the southeast, and we scramble for our one remaining still camera to record them. Now the sun glints in unusual fashion off the ocean near Formosa [Taiwan]. There are intersecting surface ripples just south of the island, patterns which are clearly visible and which, I think, must be useful to fishermen who need to know about these currents. The island itself is verdant—glistening green the color and shape of a shiny, well-fertilized gardenia leaf.”

▼ From hundreds of miles in space, huge clouds drifting over the Indian Ocean look like haze. What features can you see on the land?



# The Study of the Earth

From his high perch, Michael Collins described the colors of the ocean and the plant life on the land. He wrote about how land and water looked. He saw fires set by human beings. Collins was looking at the world as a geographer does.

**Geography** is the study of the Earth, our home. Geographers analyze the Earth from many points of view. They may discuss how far one place is from another. You do this when you tell someone directions. But they also study such things as oceans, plant life, landforms, and people. Geographers study how the Earth and its people affect each other.



**Predict** What do you think each of the five geographic themes means?

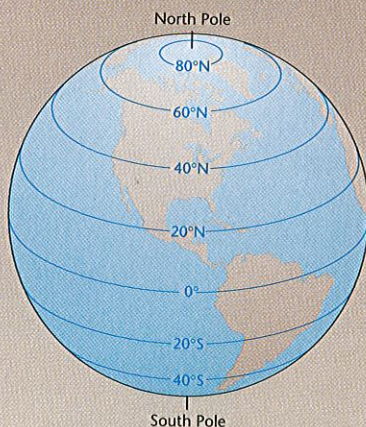
## The Themes of Geography: Five Ways to Look at the Earth

In their work, geographers are guided by two basic questions: (1) Where are things located? and (2) Why are they there? To find the answers, geographers use five themes to organize information. These themes are location, place, human-environment interaction, movement, and regions.

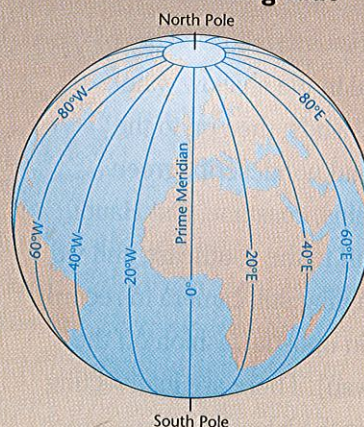
**Location** Geographers begin to study a place by finding where it is, or its location. There are two ways to talk about location—its absolute location and its relative location. Absolute location describes a place's exact position on the Earth. You might call absolute location a geographic address. Geographers identify the absolute location by

### How Latitude and Longitude Form the Global Grid

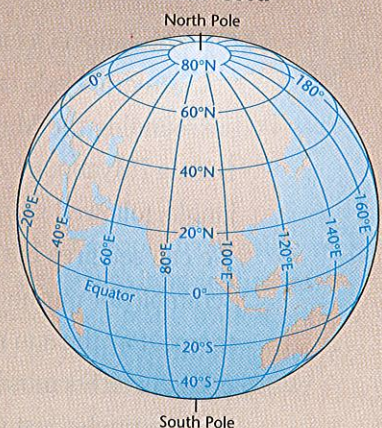
**Parallels of Latitude**



**Meridians of Longitude**



**Global Grid**

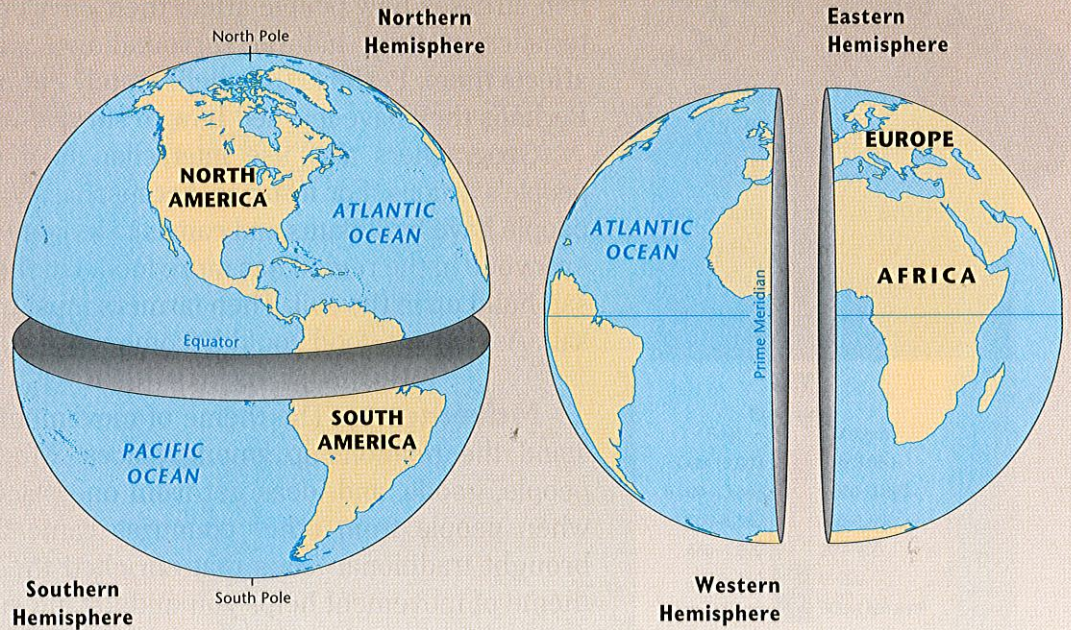


**Map Study** Latitude and longitude lines can help you find the absolute location, or geographic address, of a place. You can give the address as, for example, 20°S, 140°E.

**Location** Find 20°S, 140°E on the Global Grid. What continent is found at this address?

## The Hemispheres

**Map Study** The Equator and the Prime Meridian both divide the Earth in two. Each half is called a hemisphere. The Equator divides the Earth into Northern and Southern hemispheres. The Prime Meridian divides the Earth into Eastern and Western hemispheres. **Location** The United States is in North America. In which of the hemispheres is the United States located?



using two kinds of imaginary lines around the Earth: latitude and longitude. With these lines, they can pinpoint any spot on the Earth.

Lines of **latitude** are east-west circles around the globe. They are also called **parallels**, because they are parallel to one another. They never meet. These circles divide the globe into units called **degrees**. In the middle of the globe is the parallel called the **Equator**, which is 0 degrees latitude. Geographers measure locations either north or south of the Equator. The farthest latitude north of the Equator is 90° north, the location of the North Pole. The farthest latitude south of the Equator is 90° south, the location of the South Pole.

Geographers also must pinpoint a place from east to west. For this they use lines of **longitude**. These lines, also called **meridians**, circle the globe from north to south. All meridians run through the North and South poles. The **Prime Meridian**, which runs through Greenwich, England, is 0 degrees longitude. Geographers describe locations as east or west of the Prime Meridian. The maximum longitude is 180°, which is halfway around the world from the Prime Meridian.

Geographers also discuss relative location. This explains where a place is by describing places near it. Suppose you live in Newburg, Indiana. You might give Newburg's relative location by saying: "I live in Newburg, Indiana. It's about 180 miles southwest of Indianapolis."

**Place** Geographers also study place. This includes a location's physical and human features. To describe physical features, you might say the climate is hot or cold. Or you might say that the land is hilly. To emphasize human features, you might talk about how many people live in a place and the kinds of work they do.

### LINKS TO MATH

#### Using Latitude

Latitude can be used to measure distance north or south. One degree of latitude is equal to about 69 miles. For example, Fort Wayne, Indiana, is located 6 degrees north of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Therefore, we can determine that Fort Wayne is located about 414 miles north of Chattanooga ( $6 \times 69 = 414$ ).

## READ ACTIVELY



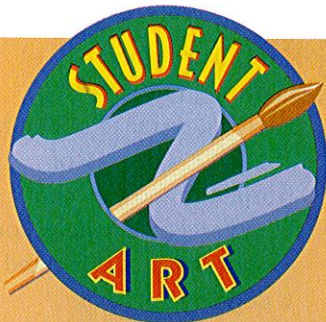
**Predict** What two things about the environment of a place do you think the theme of interaction stresses?

**Human-Environment Interaction** The theme of interaction stresses how people affect their environment, the physical characteristics of their natural surroundings, and how their environment affects them. Perhaps they deliberately cut trails into the mountainside. Perhaps they have learned how to survive with little water.

Geographers also use interaction to discuss the consequences of people's actions. For instance, because farms in Turkey receive little rain, people have built dams and canals to irrigate the land. On the good side, everyone in the region has more food. On the bad side, irrigation makes salt build up in the soil. Then farmers must treat the soil to get rid of the salt. As a result, food could become more expensive.

**Movement** The theme of movement helps geographers understand the relationship among places. Movement helps explain how people, goods, and ideas get from one place to another. For example, when people from other countries came to the United States, they brought traditional foods that enriched the American way of life. The theme of movement helps you understand such cultural changes.

**Regions** Geographers use the theme of regions to make comparisons. A region has a unifying characteristic such as climate, land, population, or history. For instance, the Nile Valley region is a snake-shaped region on either side of the Nile River. The region runs through several countries. Life in the valley is much different from life in the regions alongside the valley. There the landscape is mostly desert.



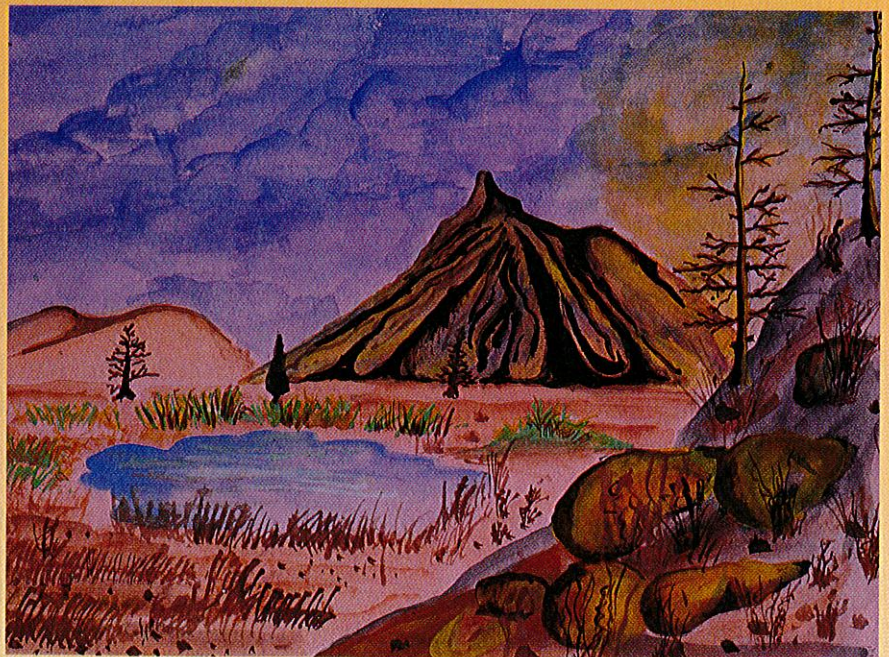
**Edwin Rioba**

**Age 16**

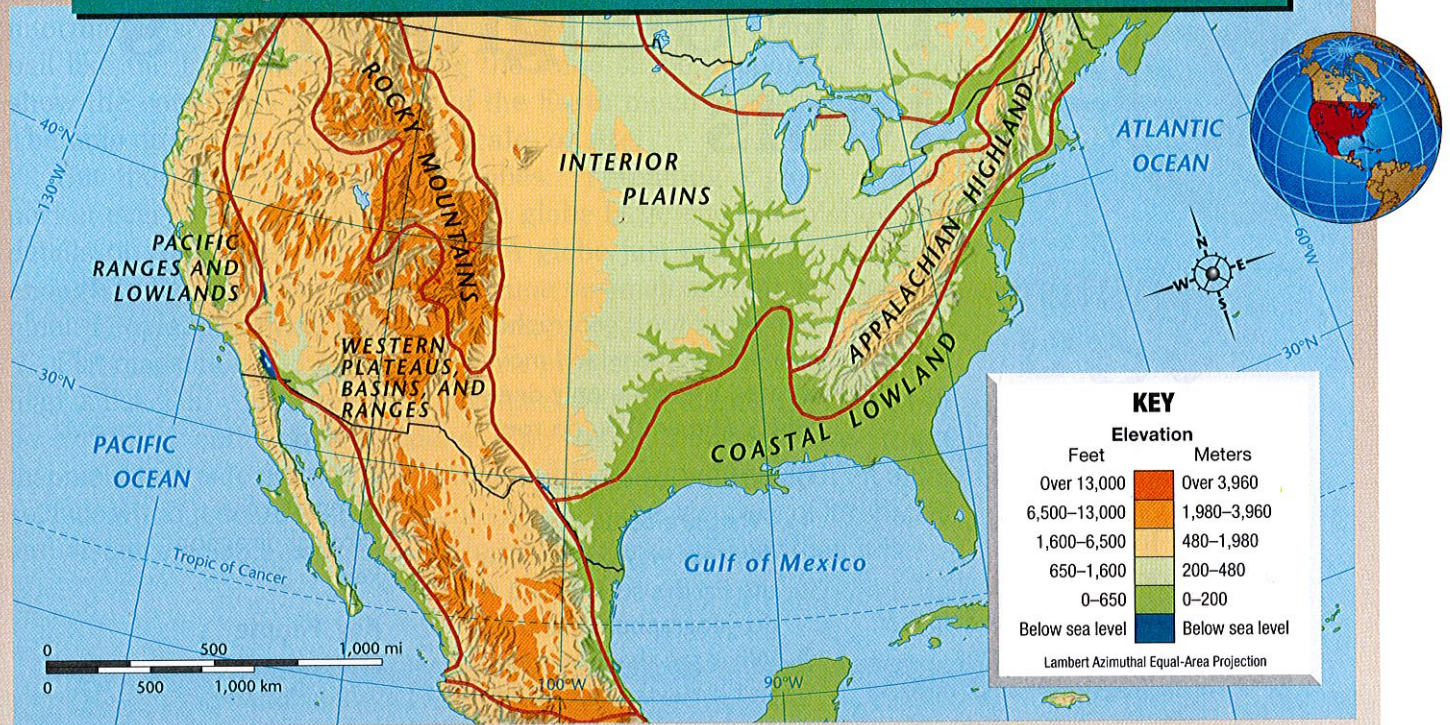
Kenya

The Great Rift Valley of East Africa was formed over millions of years by earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Running from Syria in Asia to Mozambique in Africa, it stretches some 4,500 miles (7,200 km). **Place** Based on this picture, what landforms do you think are commonly found in the Great Rift Valley?

### The Rift Valley—Lake Naivasha



## Physical Regions of the United States and Mexico



**Map Study** Suppose that you wanted to drive from the west coast to the east coast of North America. A map like this one gives you an idea of the landforms you

might find. **Regions** What obstacle would you have to cross to go from the west coast to the Interior Plains?

On maps, geographers use color and shape or special symbols to show regions. One map may show a **plain**, a region of flat land. The map above shows different regions of elevation, to show the height of land above sea level. A place can be part of several regions at the same time. For example, Houston, Texas, is in both a plains region and an oil-producing region.

### SECTION 1 REVIEW

- Define** (a) geography, (b) latitude, (c) parallel, (d) degree, (e) Equator, (f) longitude, (g) meridian, (h) Prime Meridian, (i) plain.
- What are two questions geographers ask when they study the Earth?

- List the five themes of geography.
- Give an example of how each theme can be used.

#### Critical Thinking

- Identifying Central Issues** You decide to start a geography club. When you invite a friend to join, she tells you she thinks geography is boring. She would rather learn about people, not just places. What could you say to change her mind?

#### Activity

- Writing to Learn** Make a chart listing the five geography themes. Find the location of your town or city on a map. Write down a relative location that tells where your city or town is. Then, take a walk around your neighborhood and think about the other four themes. Complete the chart by adding descriptions of your neighborhood that relate to each theme.