

# WHAT IS GEOGRAPHY?

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There are numerous definitions of geography and many misconceptions. Geography is not just the memorization of place names and it is not just map making though both of these activities most certainly are important. Students often try to grasp at a definition using a familiar stem, "geography is the study of ..." and insert such descriptors as landscapes, mountains, climates, rivers, and people among others. While a definition of this field of study no doubt includes such subject matter, it is essential for the student to understand geography's unique way of studying the world. *Geography for Life* defines the two major perspectives of geography as the spatial and ecological perspectives. These are complemented by the historical and economic perspectives.

One can discover definitions of the field of geography in every social studies or geography textbook. However, the following definitions are anonymous responses from participants at the Geography Summit II which was held at Southwest Texas State University in 1996 and collected by Dr. Ed Fernald of the Florida Geographic Alliance. Geography is:

- a social science that focuses on the spatial distribution of human and physical phenomena;
- the study of the physical world, its inhabitants, the interaction between the two, and the patterns and systems involved;
- the world and all that is in it;
- the study of pattern and processes associated with the earth;
- the study of relationships between humans and their environment by emphasizing a spatial and environmental perspective at a variety of scales;
- a spatial discipline---it is a perspective that seeks to understand patterns on Earth and the processes that created them;
- the study of humans interacting with their environment including the physical environment, the built environment and socially constructed spaces; and
- a spatial perspective of all human and physical phenomena.

A student can readily see that the word "spatial" appears in these definitions or is implied in all of them. Geography is concerned with where and why things are located as they are. It is concerned with the patterns of phenomena and the processes that created them. Therefore there is no special or specific subject matter which it studies, but rather its subject matter is Earth, described and explained using the spatial perspective. History is somewhat similar because its subject matter is Earth in the historical perspective.

Geography is often described as two parts which make up a whole. That is, geography is dichotomized into:

- Regional Geography, and
- Topical, or Systematic, Geography.

Regional geography focuses on areas of Earth space that have some degree of homogeneity. Regions may be basically physical, human or some combination of both and may vary in size from continents to small ecosystems.

Topical geography considers systematic studies of climate, landforms, economics, and culture among others. Geographers may specialize and call themselves, for example, urban geographers, climatologists, political geographers, biogeographers, and historical geographers. One thing in common to all of them is their focus on the spatial perspective in their studies. They see their subject matter in terms of locational characteristics and seek answers to certain patterns of place or the interactions between places

By the end of the 7th grade course in geography, students should be able to see and understand the world using the "geographic eye" or, in other words, the spatial perspective. This perspective will enable them to understand why location is an important variable in such activities as buying a house, locating a business, understanding an historical event, and planning for the future. It will help them understand the ripples of the global economy as well as the climatic influences of the el Nino. Geography, indeed, has survival value and furthers good citizenship among our students.