

# The five themes of geography help coordinate the study of our planet

By Matt Rosenberg, ThoughtCo.com on 11.12.19

Word Count **817**

Level **MAX**



Image 1. The bridge over the Zambezi River at Victoria Falls separates the countries of Zimbabwe and Zambia. Photo by Diego Delso, delso.photo, License CC-BY-SA via Wikimedia Commons.

The five themes of geography are location, place, human-environment interaction, movement, and region. They were created in 1984 by the National Council for Geographic Education and the Association of American Geographers to facilitate and organize the teaching of geography in the K-12 classroom. While they have been supplanted by the National Geography Standards, they provide an effective organization of the teaching of geography.

## Location

Most geographic studies begin with learning the location of places. Location can be relative or absolute.

*Relative Location:* Relative location refers to locating a place relative to other landmarks. For example, you could give the relative location of St. Louis, Missouri as being in eastern Missouri, along the Mississippi River southwest of Springfield, Illinois.

As one drives along most major highways, there are mileage signs indicating the distance to the next town or city. This information expresses your current location relative to the upcoming place. So, if a highway sign states that St. Louis is 96 miles away from Springfield, you know your relative location from St. Louis.

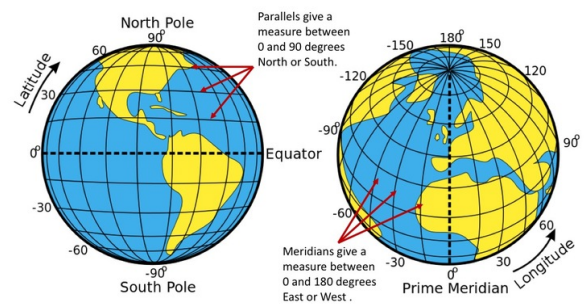
Relative location is also a term that is used to indicate a place's location within a larger context. For example, one could state that Missouri is located in the Midwest of the United States and is bordered by Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa. That is the relative location of Missouri based on its location within the United States.

Alternatively, you could state that Missouri is south of Iowa and north of Arkansas. This is yet another example of relative location.

*Absolute Location:* On the other hand, absolute location references a place on the Earth's surface based on specific geographic coordinates, such as latitude and longitude. Based on the previous example of St. Louis, the absolute location of St. Louis is 38°43' North 90°14' West.

One can also give an address as an absolute location. For example, the absolute location of St. Louis City Hall is 1200 Market Street, St. Louis, Missouri 63103. By providing the full address you can pinpoint the location of St. Louis City Hall on a map.

While you can give the geographic coordinates of a city or a building, it is difficult to provide the absolute location of an area such as a state or country because such places can't be pinpointed. With some difficulty, you could provide the absolute locations of the boundaries of the state or country but most of the time it's easier to just display a map or describe the relative location of a place like a state or country.



## Place

Place describes the physical and human characteristics of a location.

*Physical characteristics:* Includes a description of such things as the mountains, rivers, beaches, topography, climate, and animal and plant life of a place. If a place is described as hot, sandy, fertile or forested, these terms all paint a picture of the physical characteristics of the location. A topographical map is one tool used to illustrate the physical characteristics of a location.

*Human characteristics:* Includes the human-designed cultural features of a place. These features include land use, architectural styles, forms of livelihood, religious practices, political systems, common foods, local folklore, means of transportation, and methods of communication. For example, a location could be described as a technologically advanced French-speaking democracy with a Catholic majority.

## Human-Environment Interaction

This theme considers how humans adapt to and modify the environment. Humans shape the landscape through their interaction with the land; this has both positive and negative effects on the environment. As an example of the human-environment interaction, think about how people

living in cold climates have often mined coal or drilled for natural gas in order to heat their homes. Another example would be the massive landfill projects in Boston conducted in the 18th and 19th centuries to expand habitable areas and improve transportation.

## Movement

Humans move, a lot! In addition, ideas, fads, goods, resources and communication all travel distances. This theme studies movement and migration across the planet. The emigration of Syrians during war, the flow of water in the Gulf Stream, and the expansion of cell phone reception around the planet are all examples of movement.

## Regions

Regions divide the world into manageable units for geographic study. Regions have some sort of characteristic that unifies the area. Regions can be formal, functional or vernacular.

Formal regions are those that are designated by official boundaries, such as cities, states, counties and countries. For the most part, they are clearly indicated and publicly known. Functional regions are defined by their connections. For example, the circulation area for a major city area is the functional region of that paper. Vernacular regions are perceived regions, such as "The South," "The Midwest" or the "Middle East"; they have no formal boundaries but are understood in our mental maps of the world.

