



UNIT ONE: GEOGRAPHY: ITS NATURE AND PERSPECTIVES

The word “geography” is probably a familiar one to you since most people take geography for granted. Geography is concerned with place and location – two concepts that are inherently important parts of everyday life. However, the Advanced Placement Geography course invites you to see your world through the lens of the geographer, and in doing so encourages you to enlarge your vision to encompass other places and locations and consider them in new ways.

Don’t make the mistake of thinking of a geographer as merely someone that can name all the rivers, lakes, cities, and countries of the world. That would take a lot of memorization, and you would have to question the value of the information by itself. Geographers do have this kind of knowledge, but human geographers are much more interested in understanding how these places shape and are shaped by people, and what their location means in the past, present and future. Some key concepts that define geography as a field of study are:

- **Location** – the position of something on earth’s surface
- **Space** – the physical gap or distance between two objects
- **Scale** – the relationship between the size of an object or distance between objects on a map and the size of the actual object or distance on earth’s surface
- **Place** – a specific point on earth with human and physical characteristics that distinguish it from other points
- **Pattern** – the arrangement of objects on earth’s surface in relationship to one another
- **Regionalization** – the organization of earth’s surface into distinct areas that are viewed as different from other areas
- **Globalization** – the expansion of economic, political, and cultural activities to the point that they reach and have impact on many areas of the world

All of these concepts help you to understand the importance of **spatial organization** – the location of places, people, and events, and the connections among places and **landscapes** (the overall appearance of an area that is shaped by both human and natural influences). Geographers believe that the “**why of where**” is critical – explanations for why a spatial pattern occurs. Sometimes geographers ask questions about how particular human patterns came about, so that specific places become distinct from all others.

Often these patterns and places combine into regions – large areas that may be compared to other large areas. Some patterns and places may reach many areas of the world so that geographers may comment on the effects of globalization. Spatial organization defines human life on earth, with all of its similarities and differences, and the spatial analysis tradition is an integral part of the geographical perspective.

GEOGRAPHY AS A FIELD OF STUDY

Geography was first given structure as a field of study by the ancient Greeks from the words *geo*, “the earth”, and *graphein*, “to write.” Several scientists described the parts of the known world, and used a combination of mathematics, explorers’ reports, rumors, and assumptions to draw maps of the world. The Greeks also laid the foundations for **cartography**, the art and science of map-making. Of course, the maps were much more accurate for the areas around Greece than they were for other parts of the world. A good example is a reconstructed map by Hecataeus, who lived in the late 6th and early 5th centuries B.C.E. One of the great unsolved mysteries of his day was the shape and extent of the southern part of the African land mass. Some scientists believed that it eventually widened and connected to East Asia. The Greeks understood that the earth was round, with Ptolemy estimating in the 2nd century C.E. that the circumference of the earth was about 16,000 miles. He was about 9,000 miles short of reality, an assumption that led Christopher Columbus to believe that he was near Asia when he first landed in the Americas.

Geography was and still is of interest to people in many lands. For example, the ancient Chinese studied geography, although they apparently did not have contact with Mediterranean geographers until much later. Also, while Europeans during the Middle Ages (500-1400 C.E.) lost touch with Greek and Roman geographical knowledge, Muslim scholars in the Middle East built on that knowledge to describe and analyze their known world. These Arab geographers were often great travellers, and they searched the Eastern Hemisphere for new knowledge. Although they were most interested in practical knowledge of locations, places, and products, these scholars proposed theories about the evolution of mountain ranges.

Geography was reborn in Europe in the 17th century as a broad study of both physical landscapes and the roles that humans play in shaping them. The modern scientific study of geography began in Germany during the 17th century, as European power began to slowly spread over much of the globe. In the 1700s, the German philosopher and geographer **Immanuel Kant** defined geography as the study of interrelated spatial patterns – the description and explanation of differences and similarities between one region and another. By the end of the 18th century, place could be determined and described by using lines of latitude and longitude, and maps were becoming much more accurate and reliable. By the turn of the 20th century, students in universities throughout Europe were studying geography as a distinct discipline.

As geography became more and more specialized throughout the 20th century, many sub-fields emerged, including cultural, social, urban, population, medical, economic, and political geography. However, today the field may be divided into two great branches: physical and human geography.

Human geography focuses on people. Where are they? How are they alike and different? How do they interact? How do they change the natural landscapes, and how do they use them? Because other fields of study – such as history, sociology, economics, and political science – also deal with human behavior, human geography often overlaps and interacts with these disciplines.