

Five Themes of Geography

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Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. A place's absolute location is its exact position on Earth. Absolute location is given as coordinates of latitude and longitude. Lines of latitude and longitude are an imaginary grid that's been placed on the globe to help us locate places. They are measured in degrees. The zero degree line of latitude is the Equator, and the zero degree line of longitude is the Prime Meridian. These lines divide the Earth into hemispheres.

A place's relative location is its position in relation to other people and places. What is the place near? Relative location can be described in terms of distance ("Chicago is about 1,300 miles from the Bahamas"), time ("Chicago is about four hours from the Bahamas by plane"), direction ("Chicago is north of the Bahamas") or a landmark ("My aunt's house is in Chicago, close to the Cloud Gate.")

2. The theme of place helps us consider the things that make a place unique and different from other places. We can consider a place's physical characteristics. Physical characteristics include elements of the natural environment, like landforms, bodies of water, climate, vegetation and animal life. Landforms are natural shapes or features of the landscape. Climate is the pattern of weather in a place over a long period of time.

In addition to physical characteristics, human characteristics also make a place unique. These include things like the population density, languages people speak, the architecture (what the buildings look like), the religions people practice, the government, the clothing people wear, the food they eat.

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3. The theme of human-environment interaction helps us look at the ways that humans and the environment affect one another. Humans depend on the environment for things like food, clothing and shelter. In Ancient Egypt, it rained very little. So, farmers depended on the flooding of the Nile River to grow food. When the Nile flooded, it left behind a rich mud called silt that was great for planting.

Humans also change, or modify, the environment to meet our needs. In Egypt, the Nile didn't always flood regularly. When it didn't flood, Egyptians couldn't farm crops as well. They were left without food or water. So, in 1970, the Aswan High Dam was constructed in Egypt. This dam captures water from the Nile, and this water is used during dry seasons. Some of the ways humans modify the environment are positive, like planting trees. Some are negative, like polluting and burning too many fossil fuels.

Humans also adapt to the environment, changing our behavior to live more easily. We adapt by wearing different kinds of clothes, depending on the weather and climate of the place we live.

4. The theme of movement investigates how and why people, goods and ideas move from one place to another. The movement of people is called migration. When people migrate to a new place, they plan to stay for an extended period of time, whether temporarily or permanently. So, when you go on a field trip or vacation, you're not migrating. People migrate for many reasons. Sometimes, they're trying to get away from things like persecution, war, crime or poverty. Other times, opportunities are encouraging them to move, like jobs, money and freedom of religion or politics.

In addition to people, the theme of movement looks at how products, natural resources and ideas move around the globe. States and countries import, or buy and bring in, goods from other places. They also export, or sell and send out, goods to other places. Ideas and information move through channels of communication like email, the phone, the internet and letters.

5. A region is an area that has one or more features in common. Regions help us divide the world into units that we can study. Regions can be united by physical characteristics, like climate or landforms, or human characteristics, like culture or language, or some combination of both of these.

Political units, like states, countries, counties and provinces, are considered political regions. Each of the states in the US is a political region. The United States as a whole is also a political region. Political regions are separated by political borders, or boundaries. If a political region gains or loses territory, these borders can change.

6. A cultural region, or culture region, is united by a cultural feature. This could be language, religion or way of life. "Common tongue" is another way of saying a "common language." The Arabic-speaking World is made up of the countries where Arabic is a main language spoken. It spans North Africa and the Middle East.

A region does not have to have only one feature in common. In fact, many regions are made up of places that are close together on the map and share physical and human characteristics. North Africa is a region in northern Africa made up of about eight countries and territories, shown in color on the map. Physical characteristics that tie the region together include the Sahara Desert and a climate that's mostly hot and dry. North Africa also borders the Mediterranean Sea. What human characteristics unite the region? The main religion there is Islam, and the main language spoken is Arabic.

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