



## What You Will Learn...

## Main Ideas

1. The five themes of geography help us organize our studies of the world.
2. The six essential elements of geography highlight some of the subject's most important ideas.

## The Big Idea

Geographers have created two different but related systems for organizing geographic studies.

## Key Terms

absolute location, *p. 12*

relative location, *p. 12*

environment, *p. 12*



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TAKING NOTES

Use the graphic organizer online to take notes on the five themes and six essential elements of geography.

# Geography Themes and Essential Elements

## If YOU lived there...

Your older sister has offered to drive you to a friend's house across town, but she doesn't know how to get there. You know your friend's street address and what the apartment building looks like. You know it's near the public library. You also would recognize some landmarks in the neighborhood, such as the video store and the supermarket.

## What might help your sister find the house?

**BUILDING BACKGROUND** Like drivers, geographers have to know where places are in order to study them. An area's location is only one of the aspects that geographers study, though. In fact, it is only one of the five themes that geographers use to describe a place.

## The Five Themes of Geography

Have you ever gone to a Fourth of July party with a patriotic theme? If so, you probably noticed that almost everything at the party was related to that theme. For example, you may have seen American flags and decorations based on the flag's stars and stripes. You may have seen clothes that were red, white, and blue or heard patriotic music being played. Chances are that almost everything at the party reflected the theme of patriotism.

Like party planners, geographers use themes in their work. Geographers do not study parties, of course, but they do note common themes in their studies. Just as a party's theme is reflected in nearly every aspect of the party, these geography themes can be applied to nearly everything that geographers study. The five major themes of geography are Location, Place, Human-Environment Interaction, Movement, and Regions.

## Close-up

# The Five Themes of Geography

Geographers use five major themes, or ideas, to organize and guide their studies.



**Location** The theme of location describes where something is. The mountain shown above, Mount Rainier, is in west-central Washington.



**Place** Place describes the features that make a site unique. For example, Washington, D.C., is our nation's capital and has many great monuments.



**Regions** Regions are areas that share common characteristics. The Mojave Desert, shown here, is defined by its distinctive climate and plant life.



**Movement** This theme looks at how and why people and things move. Airports like this one in Dallas, Texas, help people move around the world.



**Human-Environment Interaction** People interact with their environments in many ways. Some, like this man in Florida, use the land to grow crops.

## ANALYSIS SKILL ANALYZING VISUALS

Which of the five themes deals with the relationships between people and their surroundings?

## Location

Every point on Earth has a location, a description of where it is. This location can be expressed in many ways. Sometimes a site's location is expressed in specific, or absolute, terms, such as an address. For example, the White House is located at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in the city of Washington, D.C. **A specific description like this one is called an absolute location.** Other times, the site's location is expressed in general terms. For example, Canada is north of the United States. **This general description of where a place lies is called its relative location.**

## Place

Another theme, Place, is closely related to Location. However, Place does not refer simply to where an area is. It refers to the area's landscape, the features that define the area and make it different from other places. Such features could include land, climate, and people. Together, they give a place its own character.

## Human-Environment Interaction

In addition to looking at the features of places, geographers examine how those features interact. In particular, they want to understand how people interact with their environment—how people and their physical environment affect each other. **An area's environment includes its land, water, climate, plants, and animals.**

People interact with their environment every day in all sorts of ways. They clear forests to plant crops, level fields to build cities, and dam rivers to prevent floods. At the same time, physical environments affect how people live. People in cold areas, for example, build houses with thick walls and wear heavy clothing to keep warm. People who live near oceans look for ways to protect themselves from storms.

## Movement

People are constantly moving. They move within cities, between cities, and between countries. Geographers want to know why and how people move. For example, they ask if people are moving to find work or to live in a more pleasant area. Geographers also study the roads and routes that make movement so common.

## Regions

You have already learned how geographers divide the world into many regions to help the study of geography. Creating regions also makes it easier to compare places. Comparisons help geographers learn why each place has developed the way it has.

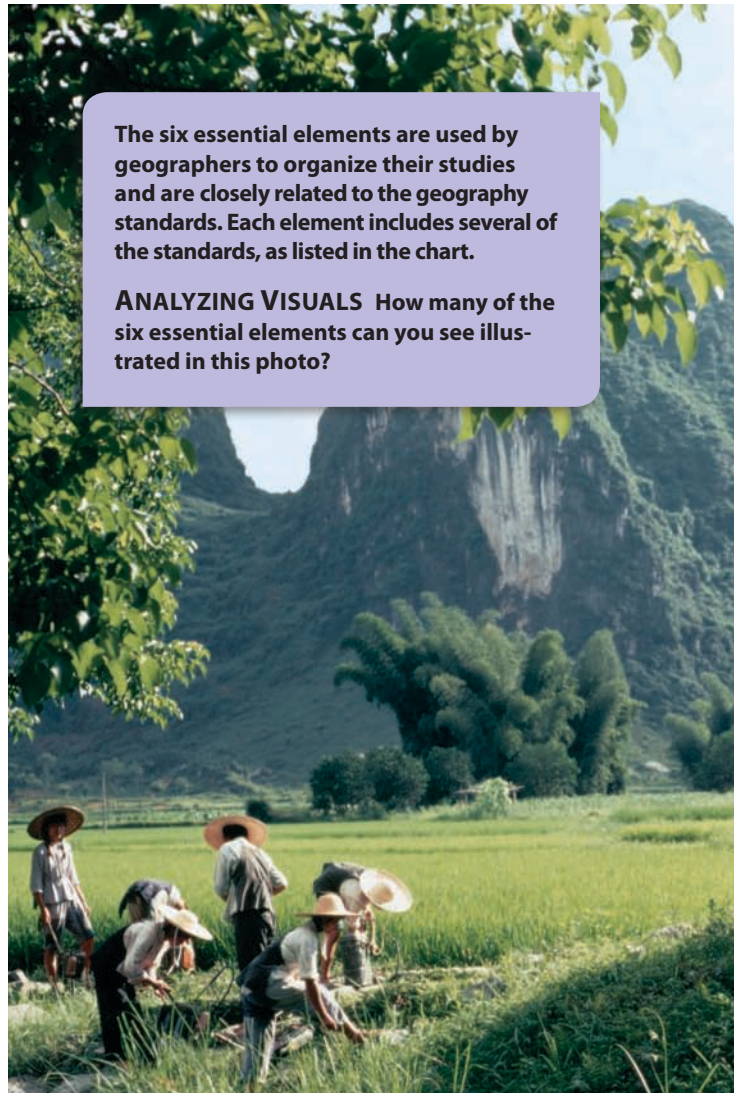
**READING CHECK** **Finding Main Ideas** What are the five themes of geography?

### FOCUS ON READING

What do you know about environments?

The six essential elements are used by geographers to organize their studies and are closely related to the geography standards. Each element includes several of the standards, as listed in the chart.

**ANALYZING VISUALS** How many of the six essential elements can you see illustrated in this photo?



## The Six Essential Elements

The five themes of geography are not the only system geographers use to study the world. They also use a system of standards and essential **elements**. Together, these standards and essential elements identify the most important ideas in the study of geography. These ideas are expressed in two lists.

The first list is the national geography standards. This is a list of 18 basic ideas that are central to the study of geography. These standards are listed in black type on the chart below.

The essential elements are based on the geography standards. Each element is a big idea that links several standards together. The six essential elements are The World in Spatial Terms, Places and Regions, Physical Systems, Human Systems, Environment and Society, and The Uses of Geography. On the chart, they are shown in purple.

Read through that list again. Do you see any similarities between geography's six essential elements and its five themes? You probably do. The two systems are very similar because the six essential elements build on the five themes.

**ACADEMIC VOCABULARY**  
element part



The Essential Elements and Geography Standards	
<p><b>The World in Spatial Terms</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective</li> <li>How to use mental maps to organize information about people, places, and environments in a spatial context</li> <li>How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on Earth's surface</li> </ul>	<p><b>Human Systems</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The characteristics, distributions, and migration of human populations on Earth's surface</li> <li>The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics</li> <li>The patterns and networks of economic interdependence on Earth's surface</li> <li>The processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement</li> <li>How the forces of cooperation and conflict among people influence the division and control of Earth's surface</li> </ul>
<p><b>Places and Regions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The physical and human characteristics of places</li> <li>How people create regions to interpret Earth's complexity</li> <li>How culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions</li> </ul>	<p><b>Environment and Society</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How human actions modify the physical environment</li> <li>How physical systems affect human systems</li> <li>Changes that occur in the meaning, use, distribution, and importance of resources</li> </ul>
<p><b>Physical Systems</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The physical processes that shape the patterns of Earth's surface</li> <li>The characteristics and spatial distribution of ecosystems on Earth's surface</li> </ul>	<p><b>The Uses of Geography</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How to apply geography to interpret the past</li> <li>How to apply geography to interpret the present and plan for the future</li> </ul>

## Primary Source

### BOOK

## Geography for Life

The six essential elements were first outlined in a book called *Geography for Life*. In that book, the authors—a diverse group of geographers and teachers from around the United States—explained why the study of geography is important.

“Geography is for life in every sense of that expression: lifelong, life-sustaining, and life-enhancing. Geography is a field of study that enables us to find answers to questions about the world around us—about where things are and how and why they got there.”

“Geography focuses attention on exciting and interesting things, on fascinating people and places, on things worth knowing because they are absorbing and because knowing about them lets humans make better-informed and, therefore, wiser decisions.”

“With a strong grasp of geography, people are better equipped to solve issues at not only the local level but also the global level.”

—from *Geography for Life*,  
by the Geography Education Standards Project

ANALYSIS  
SKILL

### ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

Why do the authors of these passages think that people should study geography?

For example, the element Places and Regions combines two of the five themes of geography—Place and Regions. Also, the element called Environment and Society deals with many of the same issues as the theme Human-Environment Interaction.

There are also some basic differences between the essential elements and the themes. For example, the last element, The Uses of Geography, deals with issues not covered in the five themes. This element examines how people can use geography to plan the landscapes in which they live.

Throughout this book, you will notice references to both the themes and the essential elements. As you read, use these themes and elements to help you organize your own study of geography.

**READING CHECK** Summarizing What are the six essential elements of geography?

**SUMMARY AND PREVIEW** You have just learned about the themes and elements of geography. Next, you will explore the branches into which the field is divided.

## Section 2 Assessment



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ONLINE QUIZ

### Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and Places

- a. Locate** Choose a city in the United States to locate on a globe. Use latitude and longitude to determine the **absolute location** of the city.  
**b. Contrast** How are the themes of Location and Place different?  
**c. Elaborate** How does using the five themes help geographers understand the places they study?
- a. Identify** Which of the five themes of geography is associated with airports, highways, and the migration of people from one place to another?  
**b. Explain** How are the geography standards and the six essential elements related?  
**c. Compare** How are the six essential elements similar to the five themes of geography?

### Critical Thinking

- 3. Categorizing** Draw a chart like the one below. Use your notes to list the five themes of geography, explain each of the themes, and list one feature of your city or town that relates to each.

Theme					
Explanation					
Feature					

### FOCUS ON WRITING

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- 4. Including Themes and Essential Elements** The five themes and six essential elements are central to a geographer's job. How will you mention them in your job description? Write down some ideas.