

1.1 Geography of the United States | Explore

Climate Regions

What climate regions are found in the United States?

Geography of the United States: Outline Map

As you read about the geography of the United States, take note of significant landforms, climate regions, and eco-regions by marking and labeling them on an outline map of the United States.

What are the winters and summers like where you live? One of the ways regions can be defined is through their weather. A **climate region** is a **region** distinguished by the type of long-term weather experienced in the area.

For example, the northern United States typically experiences cooler temperatures than the southern United States. More specifically, the United States is usually divided into seven different **climate** regions: **humid continental**, **humid subtropical**, **arid**, **semiarid**, **highland**, **Mediterranean**, and **marine west coast**. Historically, climate has had a lot to do with where and why certain groups settled in different parts of the United States. As a result, climate has strongly influenced the **culture** of many areas.

Remember, though, that regions are generalizations. When we talk or learn about regions we look for patterns, comparisons, and trends. Places in the same region are similar to each other in some ways, but they also are different in other ways.

Humid Continental

A humid continental climate is found in the northeastern United States, in places such as Connecticut and New York. Humid continental areas have variable, or changing, weather. Average temperatures differ greatly from summer to winter: summers are hot and humid; winters are cold and rainy or snowy. Temperatures can even change greatly from one day to the next. Humid continental areas are also subject to major storms with thunder, lightning, heavy rains, and high winds.

Humid Subtropical

Humid subtropical areas are found in the southeastern United States, in places such as Florida and South Carolina. Summers are uncomfortably hot and humid, even during the evening. The area is subject to rain throughout the year. Winters are generally mild, but severe winter storms also can occur.

Arid

The word *arid* means “dry.” An arid climate is too dry to support most plants, but some plants, such as the cactus, have adapted to the lack of the water. Temperatures swing widely from morning to night, with the middle of the day usually being very hot. Nights can become very cold in arid climates because clear skies allow heat to escape into the atmosphere. Hot **desert** areas in the **Southwest** have an arid climate, as do the patches of cold desert that can be found in the western United States.

Semi-arid

The semiarid region is partially dry, as the name suggests. Do you live in an area of the United States that has dry, hot summers and cool winters? If so, you live in a semiarid region. Semiarid regions in the United States include the states of **Nebraska**, Oklahoma, and parts of Montana and Colorado.

Highland

The **Rocky Mountains** stretch from Canada to the southwestern United States and help create a highland climate in which the temperature varies with altitude. The higher up you go, the colder it gets! Parts of Montana, Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado, as well as areas of Canada, are in the highland climate region.

Mediterranean

The Mediterranean climate is found only near a large body of water. California, which borders the Pacific Ocean, has a Mediterranean climate. Summers are hot and dry, and winters are rainy and cool. Further inland, where the sea has less influence, Mediterranean climates change to desert.

Marine West Coast

The marine west coast region includes the **Pacific Northwest**. This area has mild temperatures and is cloudy and rainy year-round. Winds come from the west, bringing moist ocean air.

VIDEO SEGMENT

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The Characteristics of Place

What is a region?

A **region** is an area of land having certain characteristics that make it different from other areas. Just about any characteristic can be used to define regions. For example, physical landforms, such as mountains or deserts, may define geographic regions; the language people in an area speak or the food they produce may define cultural regions. Other characteristics, such as an area's natural resources or its **climate**, or long-term weather, can also be used to define and distinguish one region from another region.

An area may be divided into many different sets of regions. The **Appalachian Mountains**, for example, define a geographic region of the eastern United States. This **landform** region is also characterized by seasonal rainfall and other climate patterns. The area is home to certain animal species, such as deer and owls, but other animals, such as **prairie** dogs and alligators, do not live there. Certain plants, such as oak trees and blackberry bushes, grow in this region, but other plants, such as the Saguaro cactus, do not. If you live in the Appalachians, people in your town might work as miners, but you probably won't find anyone who works on a deep-sea fishing boat.

Studying the regions of the United States will help you better understand the history of its human inhabitants. When people live in a place, they rely on and adapt to the natural features of that place. They use available materials for food, tools, clothing, housing, and games. They develop habits, customs, and skills that are useful for

their livelihood. Just as wildlife adapts to its surroundings, both human behavior and people's daily routines are shaped by the place's characteristics. The physical characteristics of a place directly impact the economic activities of that place.

The physical and human characteristics of a place will also shape the contemporary events that usually occur there. For example, hurricanes and tropical storms are more common for people who live along the Gulf Coast than those who live in the Midwest or New England. Traffic congestion and air pollution are two issues that people living near large urban cities face, rather than people living in rural areas. In recent decades, states in the nation's "sunbelt" have seen an increase in population as more people have sought warm weather lifestyles. Depending on where you live, you will most likely experience different events than someone living in a different region of the United States.

Think about the climate and physical features of the area where you live. Then, consider how those characteristics along with the area's cultural characteristics help define your way of life. How would you describe the region where you live?

READING PASSAGE

Tools of the Geographer: Maps vs. Globes

What types of questions would a geographer use a map or a globe to answer? Read more to find out the difference between these models.

Lexile Score 1150



Answer Key

Maps vs. Globes: Size and Distribution

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Landform Regions—Eastern and Central United States

What landform regions are in the eastern United States?

Did you know that the United States encompasses more than 3.5 million square miles? It is the world's third-largest country—smaller than Russia or Canada, but larger than China, Brazil, and Australia. There are five major mountain ranges within the United States. There are also 13 major rivers—each more than 1,000 miles long—and four major deserts.

Geographers divide the United States and part of Canada into the following **landform** regions:

- **Gulf and Atlantic Coastal Plains**
- **Appalachian Mountains**
- **Central Plains**
- **Ozark Plateau**
- **Canadian Shield**
- **Great Plains**
- **Rocky Mountains**
- **Basin and Ranges**
- **Coastal Range**

However, not all geographers divide the regions in exactly the same way.

Geographers use many different methods when defining regions by their physical landforms. That is why you will see several variations of the list below if you look at

different maps and sources. Let's take a look at these regions from **east** to west.



What landform region do you live in?

Gulf and Atlantic Coastal Plains, Appalachian Mountains, Ozark Plateau

The Gulf and Atlantic Coastal Plains are low, flat plains that run along the Gulf of **Mexico** and partially up the eastern seaboard of the United States. A **plain** is a wide, flat area of land. The Appalachian Mountain **region** is west of the Gulf and Atlantic Coastal Plains and stretches from eastern Canada to western Alabama. The Ozark **Plateau** region is distinguished by a high plain found just west of the Appalachian Mountains. A plateau is an area of land that is flat and raised higher than the adjacent land. The Ozark Plateau region covers parts of Missouri, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and southeastern **Kansas**.

Canadian Shield

To the north of all these regions is the Canadian Shield, an expanse of hundreds of lakes surrounding Hudson Bay in Canada. This rocky terrain stretches from the **Great Lakes** into eastern and central Canada and is shaped like a shield around Hudson Bay.



The Canadian Shield

What is the Canadian Shield?

Creating a Model of a Landform Region

Create a model of a landform region of the United States and find images of physical features of the region.

VIDEO SEGMENT

1.1 Geography of the United States | Explore

Landform Regions—Western United States What landform regions are in the western United States?

Great Plains and Rocky Mountains

In the center of the United States, the **Great Plains region** stretches across the interior of North America. Historically, this region was covered in tall **prairie** grasses. Today, this area is important farmland. Because of the amount of wheat grown here, the region has been called “the nation’s breadbasket.” The Great Plains slowly rise in **elevation** as they spread west to the base of the **Rocky Mountains**. Because the rise in elevation is so gradual, the Great Plains region is generally considered to be very low and flat.

The Rocky Mountains cut across the entire continent, from Alaska all the way south to **Mexico**. Part of the Rocky Mountains form a natural division, called the Continental Divide. This division separates the rivers that flow west into the Pacific Ocean from the rivers that flow **east** into the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. The Continental Divide is literally a dividing line for continental North America!

Basin and Range

Between the Pacific Ocean to the west and the Rocky Mountains to the east lies a vast area called the **Basin and Ranges** region. A basin is a large area of land that is sunken lower than adjacent land. A range is a mountainous area. The Basin and Range region varies from **desert** in the South to **grasslands** in the North. The Grand Canyon is one of the amazing physical features found in the Basin and Range

region. Another feature of this sparsely populated region is Death Valley. Located in California, Death Valley is the hottest and lowest point in all of North America. The highest temperature ever recorded in the United States—a scorching 134 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade—happened in Death Valley on July 10, 1913!

Coastal Range

Cooling things down a bit to the west, the **Coastal Range** region follows the high mountain chains that dominate the landscape several hundred miles east of the Pacific Ocean. This region has numerous mountain ranges, including the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the south and the Cascade Mountains in Washington State. Lower mountains in the Coastal Range region lie just inland from the ocean and run all the way up and down the coastline.

READING PASSAGE

The La Brea Tar Pits

Los Angeles, California, home of Hollywood and modern skyscrapers, is also home to one of the most amazing archaeological finds in North America: the La Brea Tar Pits. These pits contain more than one million fossils...

Lexile Score 1100

Answer Key

IMAGE

The Grand Canyon

The Grand Canyon in Arizona spans 1.2 million acres and is listed as a World Heritage site for its natural heritage.