

Defining Geography: What is Where, Why There, and Why Care?



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The Nature of Geography

Most everyone knows that history is the study of events through time. Basically, historians ask "What happened when and why then?" But many people, it seems, have a problem defining geography. One reason why geography has languished in the curricula of many American schools is that so few people understand the nature of the discipline or its relevance to our everyday lives. What is geography? What is its unique perspective? What do geographers do? Why is geography important? Why should we teach (and learn) geography in the schools? These are questions that have gone largely unanswered in American education. This brief essay presents an easily taught, understood, and remembered definition of geography. It has been used with great success by the author in his own teaching, public speaking, and professional writing for more than a decade. It works beautifully, and I believe that it will work for you and your students as well.



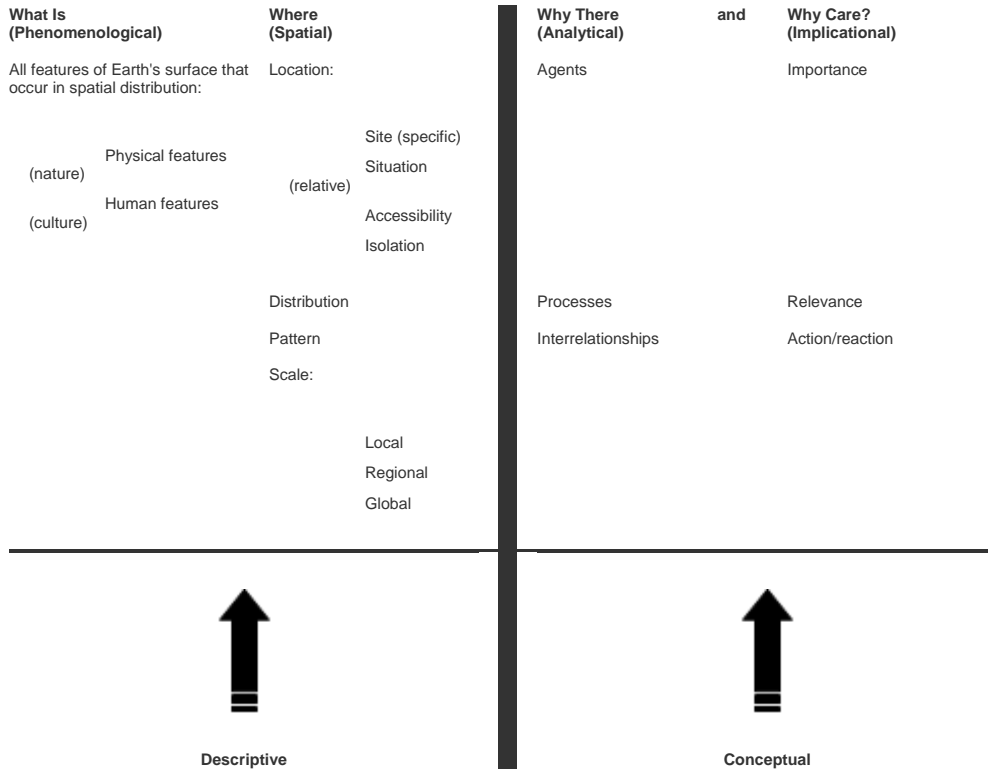
Immanuel Kant, writing some two centuries ago, may have been the first scholar to identify clearly and succinctly the unique nature of both history and geography. In essence, he observed that history organizes and analyzes events in terms of **when** they occurred (the **temporal** context, or **time**). Geography, on the other hand, focuses upon Earth's features and conditions through asking **where** they are found (the **spatial** context, or **location**). Both history and geography, then, are **methodologies** -- unique **ways** of thinking about our world and its events, conditions, patterns, and consequences. Following Kant's rationale, a simple definition of geography emerges: if "**When?**" is the realm of history, then "**Where?**" is the primary focus of geographic inquiry.

If we can agree that the spatial method of organization and analysis is at the heart of geography and the geographic perspective, then this reality must be reflected in any definition of the science. Here, however, a stumbling block looms on the horizon: What is "spatial analysis"? When most people think of "space," after all, they associate it with astronomy, not geography. In a geographic context, "space" is defined as a portion of Earth's surface. Location, place, area, region, territory, distribution, and pattern are all closely related spatial concepts.

A Concise Definition

The following definition incorporates all essential elements traditionally recognized as being fundamental to geography: it is the study, as I wrote in the *Journal of Geography*, of "what is where, why there, and why care?" To this foundation can be added further information. For example, at the college level I often add "pertaining to the various physical and human features of Earth's surface, including their conditions, interactions, spatial distributions, and patterns." The definition is flexible in that it can easily incorporate any and all other perspectives on the nature of the discipline. The following diagram further amplifies each of the four elements contained within the definition.

Defining Geography: "What Is Where, Why There, and Why Care?"



Some definitions of geography (including that developed by the National Geographic Society) emphasize cultural ecology -- the relationship humans establish with the natural environment. Both geographers and cultural ecologists are concerned with the ways in which humans culturally adapt to, use, and modify the environments they occupy. Geographers, however, are particularly interested in what kinds of ecological practices occur within different cultures -- who is doing what, where, and why? The emphasis is on location and the characteristics of place. For example, "**What is?**" might be a particular type of ecological relationship, such as tropical shifting cultivation, pastoral nomadism, or mining. "**Where?**" then places the activity in a particular location and perhaps with a particular group, such as Amerindians of the Amazon

Basin, Tuareg of the Western Sahara, or residents of Minnesota's Iron Range. "**Why there?**" can be quite complex because in most instances, many factors are involved. Shifting cultivation, for example, might include such factors as heavily leached, hence infertile, tropical soils; cultural isolation and tradition; or sustainability. In the case of the Tuareg, certainly the region's arid environment, a longstanding pastoral tradition, and the consequences of overgrazing are important. A concentration of iron ore, the need for iron in an industrial society, and proximity to Great Lakes shipping lanes all help shed light on northern Minnesota mining activity. Finally, "**Why care?**" provides an opportunity to establish the importance of the foregoing activities in their particular location, as well as in their natural and cultural geographic contexts.

The Definition in Practice

This definition of geography works well for several reasons. First, it emphasizes that geography is a **methodology**. It stresses the geographic way of organizing and analyzing information pertaining to the location, distribution, pattern, and interactions of the varied physical and human features of Earth's surface. All geographic inquiry should begin with the question, "**Where?**" Geographers and all other scientists ask "**Why?**" And, of course, most major Earth-bound events, features, and conditions can and often do have some impact on our lives, thereby begging the question, "**Why care?**"

Second, the definition incorporates all traditional geographic subjects, themes, and traditions. In teaching, no matter what topic is being stressed or approach being taken, it can be easily integrated into the definition.

Third, the definition functions at all scales. In studying towns and cities, for example, site (specific location and condition of a place) can often explain their presence. For example, New York City is located at the mouth of the Hudson River with a natural harbor protected by Long Island; San Diego and Seattle are on excellent natural harbors; and Denver is at the eastern terminus of a pass through the Rocky Mountains. South Dakota's largest and fastest growing city, Sioux Falls, affords a splendid example to illustrate the importance of "**Where?**" When the city was settled in 1856, eastern South Dakota was inhabited by people of the Sioux culture. The city's name, itself, implies the importance of location and place: the falls on the Big Sioux River provided power for a mill around which the city was originally established. Through time, the city grew primarily because of its location in the wettest, hence most agriculturally productive, area of the state. It also served as a major highway and rail hub. Finally, rapid growth continued because of its location at the intersection of two interstate highways. An example on the global scale, petroleum resources in the Middle East certainly have contributed to a host of conflicts, and "petro-politics" surely will be a major issue for decades to come. Production, distribution, consumption, and trade all impact the lives of several billion people daily.

Geography has projected a very fuzzy image of its content and methodology for far too long. The definition presented here is clear and concise. It places no limitation on what geographers study (literally anything found on Earth's surface); it clearly identifies the discipline's unique methodology -- the spatial dimension of features, including where they are, in what patterns they occur, what important relationships exist between or among features, and so forth. If geography is to be taught as a science, the distribution of features must be explained -- that is, we must address the question, "**Why there?**" Finally, all geographic teaching and learning should relate to the human need to know, emphasizing "**Why care?**" The definition presented here identifies in simple, easily taught, and easily learned terms the extreme complexity of geography.

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