

The United States

Lesson 1: Physical Features

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How does geography influence the way people live?

Terms to Know

lock a gated passageway used to raise and lower ships in a system of connected canals

tributary a small river that flows into another river

levee a raised riverbank built to control flooding and reduce damage to homes and crops

Continental Divide an imaginary line through the Rocky Mountains that separates rivers flowing west from rivers flowing east

coastal plain a flat lowland next to a coast

fall line an area where waterfalls flow from higher to lower ground

ethanol a liquid fuel made in part from plants

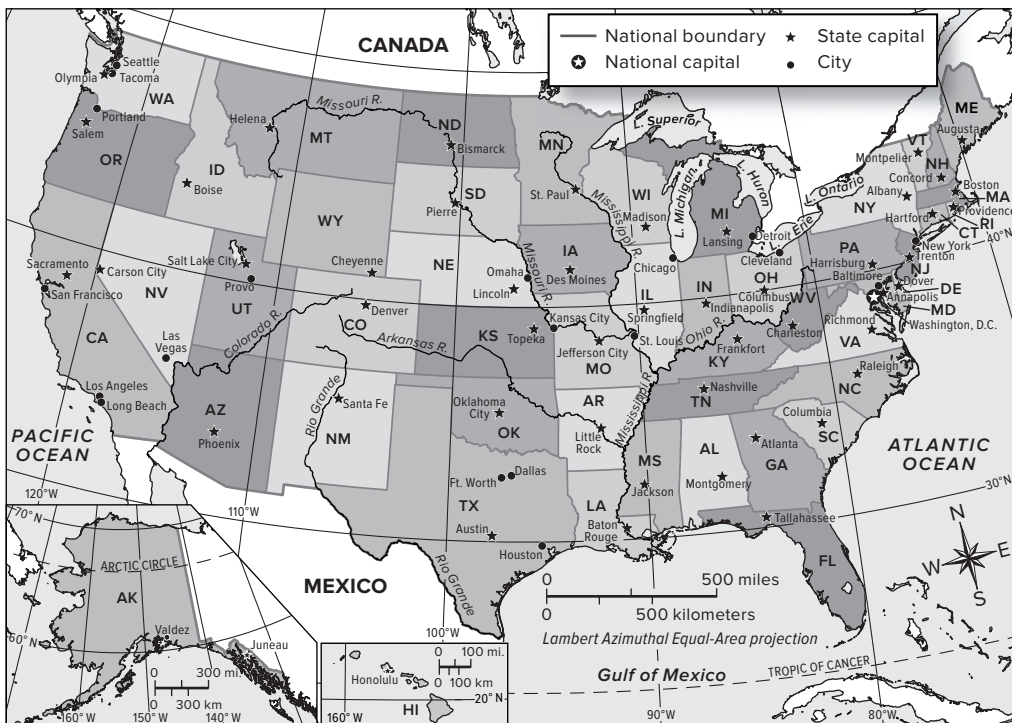
cordillera a region of parallel mountain chains

timberline the elevation above which it is too cold for trees to grow

national park a park that was set aside for the public to enjoy its great natural beauty

chinook a dry wind that sometimes blows in winter

Where in the World: The United States



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Lesson 1: Physical Features, *continued*

Bodies of Water

Guiding Question *How do the bodies of water in the United States affect people's lives?*

Oceans, rivers, and lakes help make the United States prosperous. The Atlantic Ocean on the east, the Pacific Ocean on the west, and the Gulf of Mexico on the southeast help the country trade with other countries. Ships also travel many of the country's rivers. Rivers provide power for homes and industries too.

The Great Lakes are a cluster of five huge lakes in the Midwest and central Canada. They are the largest group of freshwater lakes in the world. From west to east, they are Lake Superior, Lake Michigan, Lake Huron, Lake Erie, and Lake Ontario.

During the 1950s, the United States and Canada built canals, or waterways, to connect the Great Lakes to each other and to the St. Lawrence River. **Locks**, or gated passageways, raise or lower ships so they can go from one canal to the next. The St. Lawrence Seaway now connects the Midwest to the Atlantic Ocean and seaports all over the world.

The Mississippi is one of the longest and busiest rivers in the world. It winds south from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. Along the way, many tributaries flow into it. A **tributary** is a smaller river that flows into a larger river. The Missouri and the Ohio Rivers are major tributaries of the Mississippi. Ships filled with cargo sail on the river. In the past, it often flooded. The government built walls called **levees** along the riverbank to control floods.

The western United States has fewer lakes and rivers than the eastern part of the country. Major western lakes are the Great Salt Lake, Lake Tahoe, and Lake Mead. Some western rivers flow toward the west, but some flow east toward the Gulf of Mexico.

Westward-flowing Rivers	Colorado, Columbia, Snake, Willamette
Eastward-flowing Rivers	Missouri, Platte, Kansas, Arkansas, Rio Grande

The **Continental Divide** separates these two sets of rivers. The divide is an imaginary line that runs along the highest ridges of the Rocky Mountains.

Marking the Text

1. Read the text on the left. Highlight the names of the bodies of water that border the United States. Underline the names of the five Great Lakes.

Drawing Conclusions

2. Why is the St. Lawrence River important?

Identifying Cause and Effect

3. How does the Continental Divide affect rivers in the west?

Reading Progress Check

4. How do people in the United States use rivers?

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Lesson 1: Physical Features, *continued*

Defining

5. What is the *fall line*?



Marking the Text

6. Read the text on the right. Highlight the names of the two areas of plains that lie west of the Appalachians.

Determining Word Meaning

7. Why are the Rocky Mountains considered a cordillera but not the Appalachians?



Reading Progress Check

8. How did the fall line that runs east of the Appalachians contribute to population patterns?

Landscape and Resources

Guiding Question *How do the landscape and resources of an area affect how people live?*

The United States has many landscapes, from vast plains to basins, plateaus, and tall mountain ranges.

Along the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico lie flat lowlands called **coastal plains**. The most fertile plains soil is in the southeast by the Gulf. Natural resources, such as iron ore, coal, oil, and natural gas, lie under these plains. Petroleum is also in the Gulf of Mexico.

West and north of the Atlantic coastal plains are the oldest mountains in North America, the Appalachians. Rich coal deposits are found here. On the east, the Appalachians meet a fertile hilly area, the Piedmont. The **fall line** on the east edge of the Piedmont marks where it drops to the lower coastal plain. Rivers go over the fall line in waterfalls, stopping ships from traveling farther inland.

Vast inland plains lie west of the Appalachians. The Central Lowlands in the Midwest have grassy hills, flatlands, forests, and farmland. The Great Plains stretch west of the Mississippi River. They rise in elevation from east to west. Much of this region is a prairie, or grassland, with fertile soil. Farms and ranches are common. **Ethanol**, a liquid fuel made from corn and blended with gasoline, comes from this region.

West of the Great Plains are the towering Rocky Mountains. The Rockies are actually a **cordillera**, or series of parallel mountain ranges. Many are snowcapped. Trees cover their slopes but not above the **timberline**, where it is too cold for trees to grow.

Western Resources	
Energy	petroleum, natural gas, hydroelectric power, wind power, solar power
Minerals	gold, silver, copper, zinc, lead
Timber	

Near the Pacific coast are other mountain ranges. Between the Rockies and these Pacific ranges stretch dry basins and plateaus. The western states, including Alaska, meet the Pacific Ocean. Hawaii lies in the middle of the ocean. Inlets form excellent harbors along the coast. The West also has large areas of great natural beauty that have been set aside in **national parks**.

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Lesson 1: Physical Features, *continued*

Climates

Guiding Question *How does the climate of an area affect how people live?*

The climates of the United States vary. The Northeast has a humid continental climate. The Southeast has a humid subtropical climate. Summer temperatures in these regions are similar, but the Northeast has a colder winter.

The Great Plains have a humid continental climate. This area has cold, snowy winters and hot, humid summers.

The inland West has a desert climate of hot summers and mild winters. On the eastern side of the Rockies, a partly dry steppe climate dominates. Temperatures get hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Sometimes, a dry winter wind called a **chinook** blows.

Alaska has a cold climate. The Northwest Coast has a marine west coast climate. It has mild temperatures year-round and lots of rainfall. The Mediterranean climate in southern California brings warm, dry summers and mild, wet winters. Hawaii has a tropical rain forest climate.

The location of a place affects the natural hazards that occur there. The East Coast and the Gulf Coast both have hurricanes. The Great Plains have tornadoes. The Pacific Coast experiences earthquakes, volcanoes, wildfires, and mud slides.



Marking the Text

9. In the text, highlight the type of climate found in each of the nine areas of the United States that are mentioned in this section.



Reading Progress Check

10. What are the natural hazards that occur throughout the United States?

Writing

Check for Understanding

1. **Narrative** Suppose you are flying in a plane over the United States from east to west. Describe the geographic features you see.

2. **Expository** Explain how bodies of water are important to the people of the United States.
