

North American Geography



How can we use geography to describe the land and people of North America?

Framing the Unit

This unit introduces fourth graders to the year's topic: North American geography. In this unit, they will explore the question: *What can geography tell us about land and people?* The unit also targets the social studies practices of generating questions to pursue knowledge through inquiry, identifying the purpose of a source from an analysis of key details, and developing a claim based on evidence. Students learn about North American physical and human geography through an examination of a wide variety of maps, then apply that knowledge in a research project focused on either Mexico or Canada. The United States will be the focus of the remaining units in this grade.

Prepare to teach this unit by exploring the [Background Brief: North American Geography](#), which was designed to help you build content knowledge through a variety of resources. The brief also highlights current perspectives and research—along with potential misconceptions and any debates you should know about—so you can present this unit with confidence.

Enduring Understandings

1. Physical geography is the branch of geography dedicated to studying Earth's natural systems, including landforms, bodies of water, climate, soil, and vegetation. Physical maps can be used to understand the physical features of an area.
2. Human geography is the branch of geography dedicated to studying how people and their cultures interact with Earth's surface. Political geography, one kind of human geography, studies how territorial boundaries are organized and how they influence human populations. Political maps can be used to understand the human geography of an area.
3. Mexico and Canada are two large countries in North America. People can learn about these countries by studying the physical geography, including physical features and plants and animals. It is important to also understand the human geography of Mexico and Canada, including their economies and cultures.

Unit Overview

Connections to Current Events and Issues

Connections to today's world and students' lives are built into this unit. Other contemporary connections could be added or developed for various topics of study within this unit, and we encourage you to take advantage of opportunities to connect students' learning to contemporary local, national, and global developments that may arise as you teach this unit. Some ideas for linking this unit to current events and issues include:

- [Navigate and Notice: A Launchpad to Geographic Inquiry](#) is a resource from the Leventhal Map Center that outlines the sequence and questions the LMC uses to guide students in investigating maps. It can be used as a supplement to the targeted map protocols aligned to lesson objectives already found in this unit.

Vocabulary (in order of appearance)

Tier 3 Vocabulary

basin
bay
coastal plain

gulf
peninsula
plateau

human geography
political map

Priority Tier 2 Vocabulary

geography
physical map
desert
mountain

plain
volcano
province
territory

state
nation
culture
economy

Lesson Clusters

Cluster 1: Physical Maps (Lessons 1-6)

What can maps tell us about physical geography?

Focus Standards: 4.T1.1, 4.T1.2, PS 2, PS 4, PS 6, RI.4.7, SL.4.1, W.4.2d

Cluster 1 focuses on what physical maps tell us about the land of North America as students explore the Supporting Question: *What can maps tell us about physical geography?* A series of activities help students understand the names and attributes of different landforms and bodies of water, how to analyze a map, and where different features can be found on a physical map of North America. By the end of the cluster, students are able to provide an answer to one of their inquiry questions supported by two pieces of evidence from maps.

Unit Overview*Cluster 2: Political Maps (Lessons 7-12)***What can maps tell us about human geography?**

Focus Standards: 4.T1.2, 4.T4b.5, 4.T4c.4, 4.T4d.5, 4.T4e.5, PS 2, PS 4, PS 6, PS 6, RI.4.7, SL.4.1, W.4.2d, W.4.8

Cluster 2 focuses on the Supporting Question: *What can maps tell us about human geography?* Students begin the inquiry by observing the differences between physical maps and political maps. They ask questions about political maps and how they show the ways land is divided into countries, states, provinces, and nations. Students investigate sources to understand the boundaries on political maps. For a deeper dive into the kinds of information on a political map, students create their own political map of a state. They also explore the meaning of *nation* by examining maps showing political features of the Navajo Nation. Finally, students synthesize their learning in a Discussion Diamond and then choose a map to use for evidence in answering the supporting question.

*Cluster 3: Mexico and Canada (Lessons 13-20)***How can we use geography to tell others about Mexico and Canada?**

Focus Standards: 4.T1.1, 4.T1.2, 4.T1.3, PS 2, PS 4, PS 6, SL.4.1, W.4.7, W.4.8

Cluster 3 begins with an opportunity to ask questions about the geography of Mexico and Canada through interaction with a population map. Students learn general information about Mexico and Canada by reading an article about each. Students then choose one of the countries for a small research project. They investigate multiple sources and create a slide presentation to share their learning with others. In the process, they learn about key topics that are important when studying geography: population density, land features, plants and animals, economy, and culture. Finally, students present their work to a partner who studied a different country.

Summative Assessment: North American Geography (Lessons 21-22)

Focus Standards: 4.T1.1, 4.T1.2, 4.T1.3, PS 2, PS 6, SL.4.1, W.4.8

In this Summative Assessment students return to questions they have asked through the unit to consider the questions' value in building knowledge to answer the Essential Question. They choose one from each cluster, explain its importance, and answer it using information from the unit. These combined responses answer the Essential Question: *How can we use geography to describe the land and people of North America?*

Unit Focus Standards

Content Standards

- **4.T1.1:** On a physical map of North America, use cardinal directions, map scales, key/legend (symbols for mountains, rivers, deserts, lakes, cities), and title to locate and identify important physical features (e.g., Mississippi and Rio Grande Rivers, Great Lakes, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, Gulf of Mexico, Hudson's Bay, Appalachian Mountains, Rocky Mountains, Sierra Madre, the Great Basin, Mojave, Sonoran, and Chihuahuan Deserts, the Yucatan Peninsula, the Caribbean Sea).
- **4.T1.2:** On a political map of North America, locate Canada and its provinces, Mexico and its states, the nations of the Caribbean, and the United States of America and its states; explain the meaning of the terms continent, country, nation, county, state, province, and city.
- **4.T1.3:** Research, analyze, and convey information about Canada or Mexico by consulting maps, atlases, encyclopedias, digital information and satellite images, photographs, or news articles; organizing materials, and making an oral or written presentation about topics such as the peoples, population size, languages, forms of government, major cities, environment, natural resources, industries, and national landmarks.
- **4.T4b.5:** Using resources such as print and online atlases, or state websites, construct a map of a state in the Southeast region that provides information about physical features (e.g., waterways and mountains) and that includes a title, scale, compass, and map key.
- **4.T4c.4:** Using resources such as print and online atlases, historical sources, or national or state websites, construct a map of a state in the Midwest region that provides information about physical features (e.g., waterways and mountains), natural resources and industries such as agriculture and that includes a title, scale, compass, and map key.
- **4.T4d.5:** Using resources such as print and online atlases, historical sources, or state websites, construct a map of a state in the Southwest region that provides information about physical features (e.g., waterways and mountains), climate, settlements and movements of Native Peoples (including current reservation lands), European exploration and pioneer settlements of the 17th-19th centuries and that includes a title, scale, compass, and map key.
- **4.T4e.5:** Using resources such as print and online atlases, or state websites, construct a map of a state in the West region that provides information about physical features (e.g., waterways and mountains), important landmarks, national parks, and historic sites and that includes a title, scale, compass, and map key.

Practice Standards

- **PS 2:** Generate open and closed questions relevant to multiple aspects of a topic.
- **PS 4:** Identify the purpose of a source using information about the source type, maker, intended audience, date, place of origin, and/or an analysis of key details.

Unit Overview

- **PS 6:** In response to an inquiry question, develop a plausible claim based on evidence found in a source.

Literacy Standards

- **RI.4.7:** Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, timelines, animations, or interactive elements on webpages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears.
- **SL.4.1:** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- **W.4.2:** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.
 - **W.4.2d:** Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.
- **W.4.7:** Conduct short research projects that build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.
- **W.4.8:** Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; take notes and categorize information, and provide a list of sources.

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