

Civics Study Packet 7: Geography

By Lance Waring (updated Feb 2017)

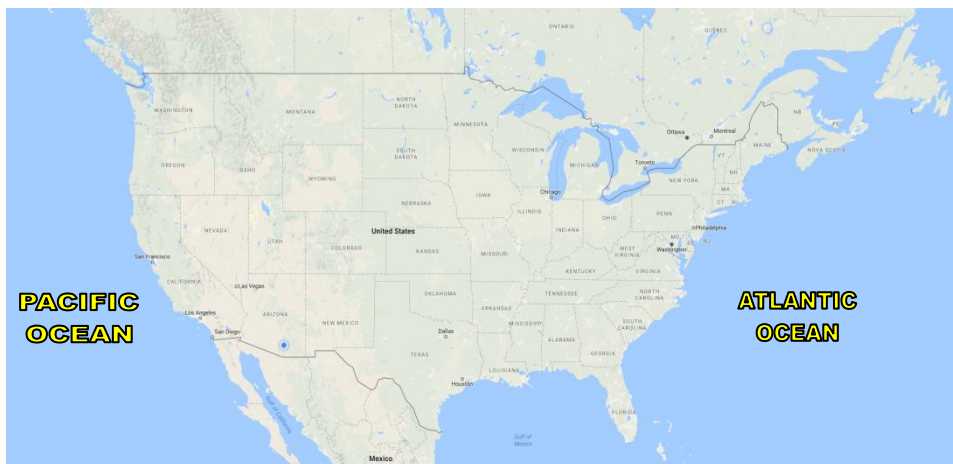
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THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE UNITED STATES

Geography is the study of the surface features and divisions of the earth. So the geography of the United States is the study of the natural and man-made items found within the areas and boundaries of this country.

The United States is an enormous nation stretching from one ocean to another. *The Atlantic Ocean is on the East Coast of the United States* (on the right side of the map). All of the original thirteen colonies were located directly on the Atlantic Coast. This makes sense since the British colonists arrived in North America by crossing the Atlantic Ocean from Europe. Of course, the Africans who were unfortunately brought here to be sold as slaves also arrived across the Atlantic on the East Coast of America.

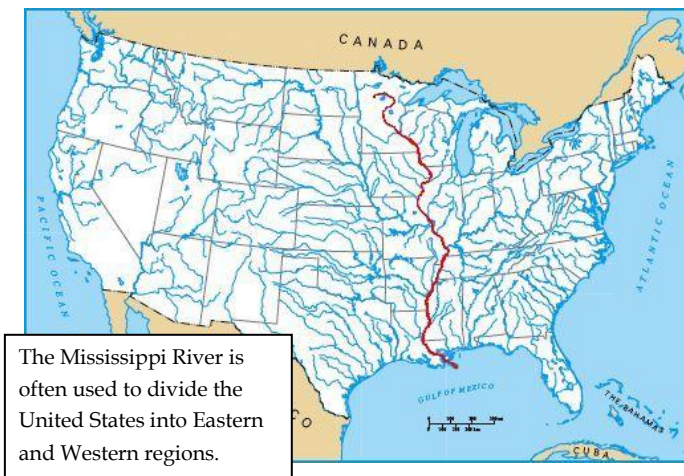
NOTES



Today, there are fourteen states located directly on the East Coast. *These include New England states such as Massachusetts and Maine, Mid-Atlantic states such as Delaware and New York, and Southern states such as South Carolina and Georgia.* About one-third of the U.S. population lives in these East Coast states.

There are a number of significant hydrological (water) features in the nation's interior. For example, there are several major rivers within the United States. *The two longest rivers in America are the Missouri River and the Mississippi River.* (The Missouri River actually flows into the Mississippi River.)

The Mississippi River is often used as the line to divide the country into eastern and western halves. This makes the area of the West more than twice as large as that of the East. Yet well over half of the current American population lives east of the Mississippi River.



The five Great Lakes are another major hydrological feature of the United States. These lakes separate eight American states from the enormous Canadian province of Ontario. Although they are fresh water bodies, the Great Lakes are connected to each other and to the Atlantic Ocean through the Saint Lawrence River.



There are five Great Lakes in the system. 1) *Lake Superior* is the largest. In fact, it is the largest freshwater lake in the world by surface area. 2) *Lake Huron* gets its water from Lake Superior and flows into two other Great Lakes. It is the second-largest of the Great Lakes. 3) *Lake Michigan* is the only Great Lake located entirely within the United States. 4) *Lake Erie* is the southernmost and shallowest of the Great Lakes. Finally, 5) *Lake Ontario* is the smallest of the five Great Lakes in surface area. Even so, it is still the 14th largest lake on earth.

Still another major hydrological feature is the nation's second ocean. *The Pacific Ocean is on the West Coast of the United States* (on the left side of the map). Three large states — *California, Oregon and Washington* — are located on the West Coast. About 15% of Americans live in West Coast states.

> REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is geography?
2. What Ocean is on the East Coast of the United States?
3. Name at least three states located on the East Coast of the United States.
4. Name the two longest rivers in the United State.
5. Name at least one of the Great Lakes?
6. What Ocean is on the West Coast of the United States?
7. Name at least one state located on the West Coast of the United States.

CONTIGUOUS, CONTINENTAL, AND ISLAND STATES

The United States is a union of fifty individual states. This, of course, is why the American flag has fifty stars. Before Alaska and Hawaii became states in 1959, the U.S. flag only had 48 stars. Similarly, before Arizona and New Mexico joined the Union in 1912, the flag only had 46 stars.

Forty-eight of the fifty states are physically grouped together between Canada and Mexico. This cluster of states is called the *Contiguous United States* or simply the *Lower Forty-Eight*. Both of these terms refer to all the states except for Alaska and Hawaii.

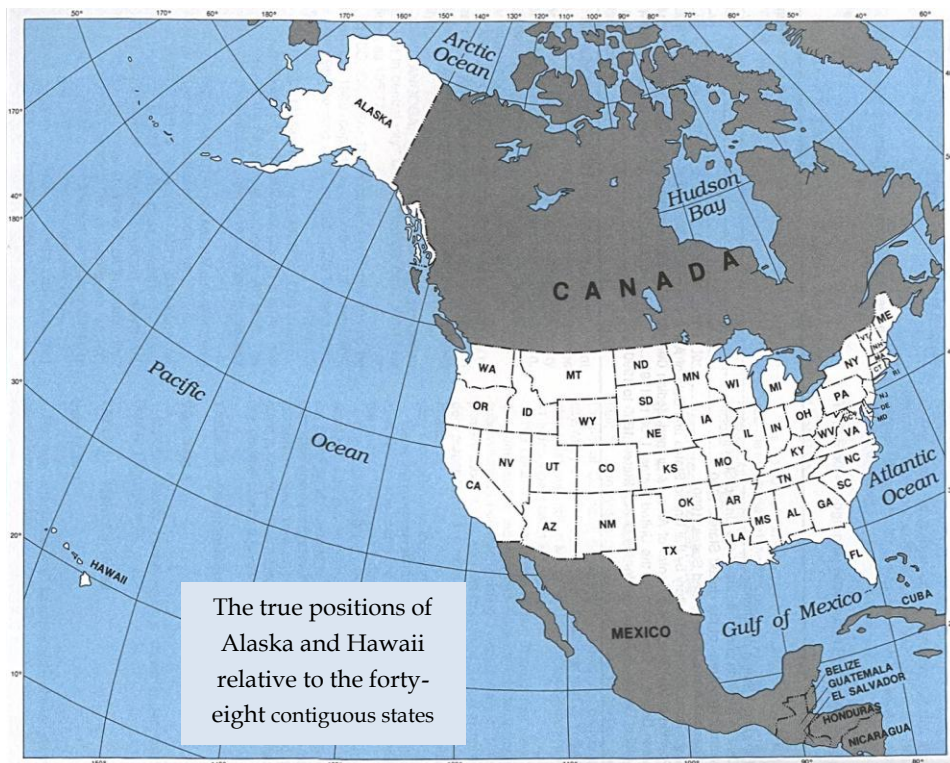
Some people mistakenly use the term *Continental United States* for the same purpose; but technically, this phrase includes Alaska since it is also located on the North American continent northwest of Canada. This position separates Alaska from the Lower Forty-Eight states, all of which are located south of Canada.

Alaska has interesting hydrological features. It has a major coastline along the Pacific Ocean; but unlike any other state, Alaska also has a shoreline along the Arctic Ocean. This gives the United States direct access to a third ocean. The longest river in Alaska, and the third longest river in the United States, is the Yukon River.

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Alaska can get very cold – especially in the wintertime. In fact, temperatures below -70°F have been recorded in some portions of the state. However, *the temperature is well above freezing (32°F) in many parts of Alaska for significant periods throughout the year.* As the Alaska.net website explains:

“The Alaskan summer is as divine as it looks in all the postcards. You can expect highs in the 60s and 70s; in the Interior the mercury can even sneak into the 80s for periods of time. But the best part of Alaska summers is the long days. During the weeks leading up to late June’s summer solstice, the sun is above the horizon anywhere from 18 to 21 hours depending on the part of the state.” (2017)



> REVIEW QUESTIONS

8. Are all of the U.S. states located on the continent of North America?
9. Name at least two U.S. states that border Canada.
10. Is the temperature always below freezing in all parts of Alaska throughout the entire year?

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THE SOUTHERN BORDER

The American Southwest is the region where the United States meets Mexico. The term *Southwest* generally refers to Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. *Three of these states—Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona—have a border with the nation of Mexico.* In fact, *the city of Nogales, Arizona is located directly on the border between the two nations.* The Rio Grande, *which is the fourth longest river in America, forms the border between Texas and Mexico.* California, which is not part of the Southwest, is the only other U.S. state bordering Mexico.



> REVIEW QUESTIONS

11. Name at least two U.S. states that border Mexico.
12. What natural feature separates the state of Texas from Mexico?
13. Name an Arizona city that is located on the Mexican border.

THE NATION'S CAPITAL

NOTES

The capital of the United States is Washington D.C. This special city is not within the boundaries of any of the fifty states. *The letters D.C. stand for District of Columbia.* “The U.S. Constitution provided for a federal district under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Congress and the District is therefore not a part of any state” (Wikipedia, 2017). This arrangement ensures that no state governor or legislature has any special influence over the nation’s capital. The residents of Washington D.C. are represented in Congress by one nonvoting delegate to the House of Representatives.

> REVIEW QUESTIONS

14. What is the capital of the United States?
15. What do the letters D.C. stand for in Washington D.C.?

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN AMERICA

Ever since English colonists arrived in North America, English has been the primary language on the continent north of Mexico. Today, it is one of the two official languages of Canada. (The other is French.) It is also the *primary* language of government and business throughout the United States of America.

However, many people are surprised to learn that *English is not the official language of the United States*. In fact, the United States simply does not have any official language. English is the official language in more than half of the individual states, but it is not official at the national level. Still, most residents find it useful to learn the English language in order to gain greater access to public and private services throughout the country.

> REVIEW QUESTIONS

16. What is the official language of the United States of America?

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SELECTIVE SERVICE

The U.S. Armed Forces have been an all volunteer force since the 1970s. This means Americans are not drafted to fill military manning needs. Nonetheless, as a matter of readiness, young men residing in the United States are required to register with the Selective Service System.

“The Selective Service System is an independent agency of the U.S. government that maintains information on those potentially subject to military conscription. Virtually all male citizens and male immigrant non-citizens between the ages of 18 and 25 are required by law to have registered within 30 days of their 18th birthdays and must notify Selective Service within ten days of any changes to any of the information they provided on their registration cards, like a change of address.”

(Wikipedia, 2017)

Mandatory registration with the Selective Service System applies only to men. Women are not, and never have been, required to register with the Service. (They may, however, voluntarily join any of the U.S. Armed Forces.)

> REVIEW QUESTIONS

17. What is Selective Service?

18. When must all men register for the Selective Service?

19. Which women are required to register for the Selective Service?