

Geography of the United States

1.1 Introduction

Before learning about the history of the United States, you need to know something about our country's **geography**. *Geography* comes from a Greek word that means "writing about" or "describing" the Earth. Geography is the study of our physical and cultural surroundings. Geographers study our natural surroundings. They tell us the locations of places and describe plants, bodies of water, and landforms.

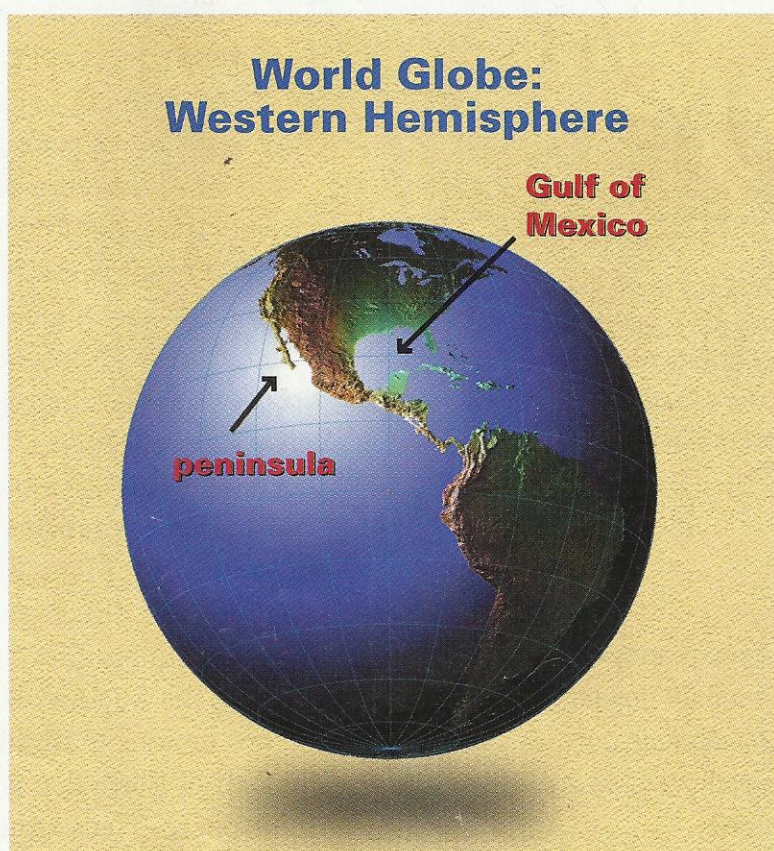
Geography helps to explain how humans interact with their natural surroundings. For example, geographers study how mountains prevent people from moving easily from one place to another. Learning about the geography of the United States will help you to understand our country's history.

In this chapter, you will learn some geography skills for reading and understanding maps. You will begin by learning how to read a **globe**.

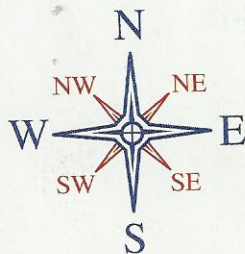
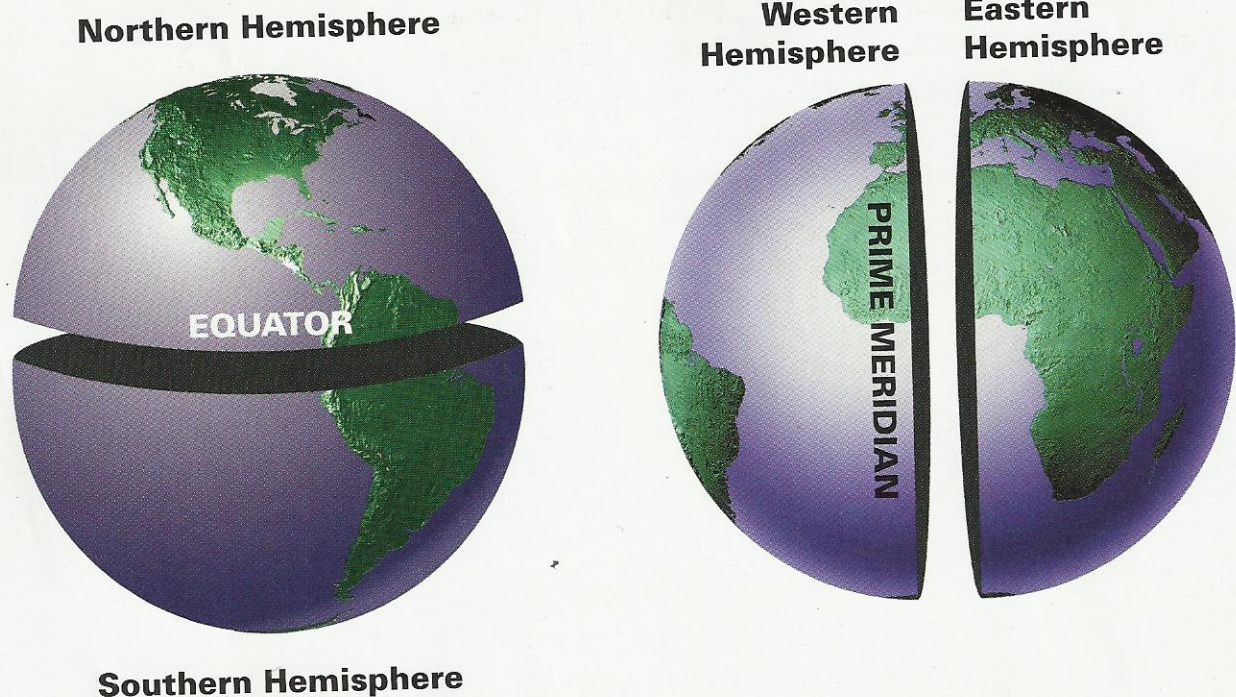
A globe is the most accurate map of Earth. You will then learn how to use **latitude** and **longitude** to find any place on Earth. Next, you will learn 14 **geographic terms**.

These terms are used to describe bodies of water, such as bays, and landforms, such as islands. Finally, you will learn about 15 **physical features** of the United States, such as the Mississippi River and the Great Plains.

Look at the picture of the globe on this page. This part of the globe shows the United States. As you read this chapter, look back at this globe. How can you use a globe to find places? How does a globe help you to better understand the United States?



World Globe: Hemispheres



The four main points on this compass rose (in blue) are *cardinal points*. Points in between them (in red) are *intermediate points*.

compass: An instrument (tool) for finding directions. A magnetic compass has a needle that always points north.

1.2 Understanding the Globe

Earth is a huge sphere, like a ball. Most maps that show Earth's surface are flat. A globe, though, is a sphere. Only a globe is a truly accurate map of Earth.

The most northern point on Earth is the North Pole. The most southern point is the South Pole. No matter where you are on Earth, north is always in the direction of the North Pole. South is always in the direction of the South Pole. When you face north, east is to your right and west is to your left. These directions are the four main points on a **compass**. They are called *cardinal points*.

Points in between the cardinal points are called *intermediate points*. These points include northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest. Many maps have a symbol that shows all or some of these directions. This symbol is called a *compass rose*.

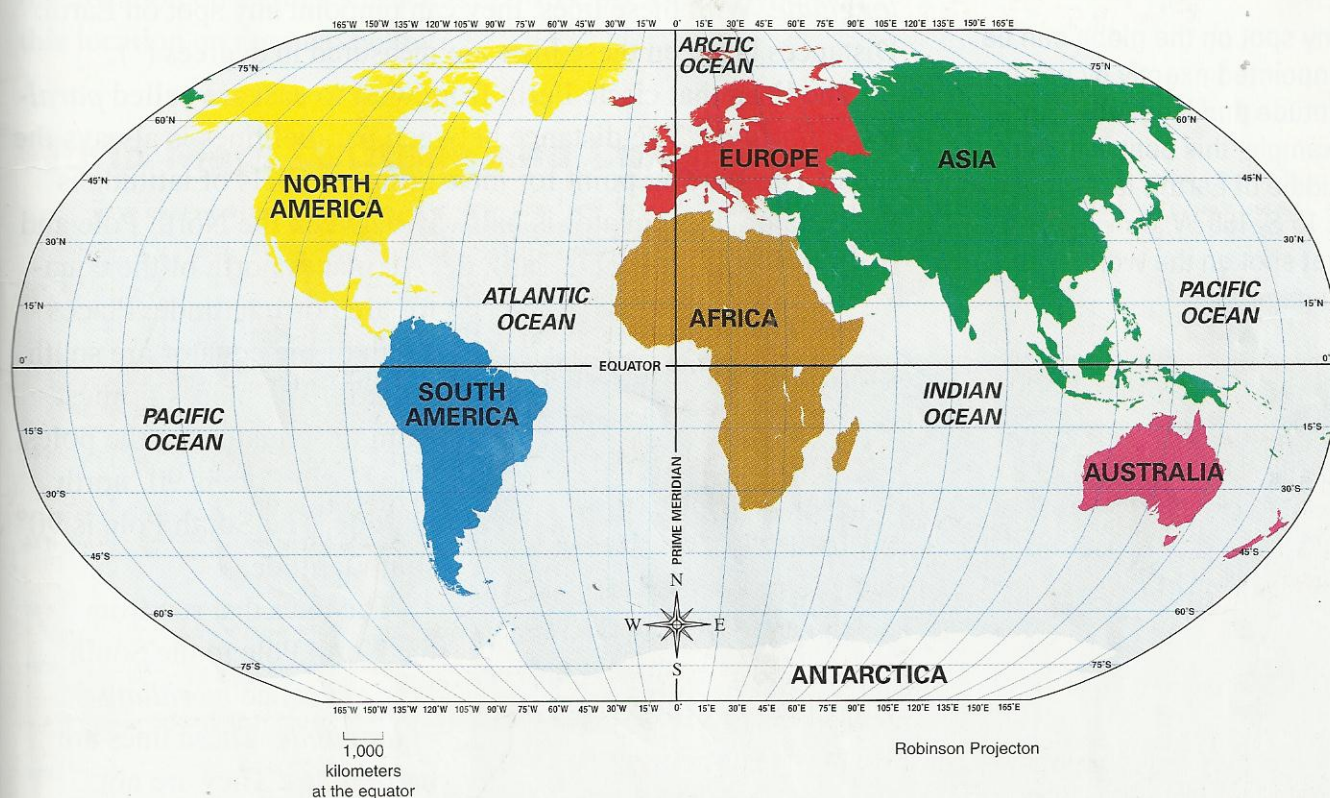
An imaginary line circles Earth halfway between the North Pole and the South Pole. This line is called the *equator*. The equator divides Earth into two half-spheres called *hemispheres*. The half of Earth that is north of the equator is the Northern Hemisphere. The southern half is the Southern Hemisphere.

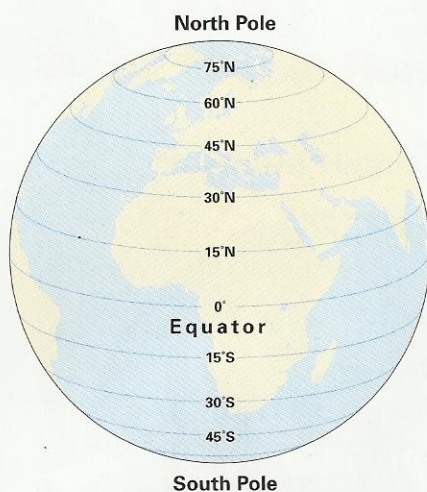
Another imaginary line cuts Earth in half from the North Pole to the South Pole. This line is called the *prime meridian*. (You will learn more about meridians in the next section.) The half of Earth that is east of the prime meridian is the Eastern Hemisphere. The half to the west is the Western Hemisphere.

A globe of the world shows that we live on a watery planet. More than 70 percent of Earth's surface is covered by water, mainly the water of oceans. Oceans are the largest bodies of water on Earth. The four oceans, from largest to smallest, are the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and the Arctic Ocean.

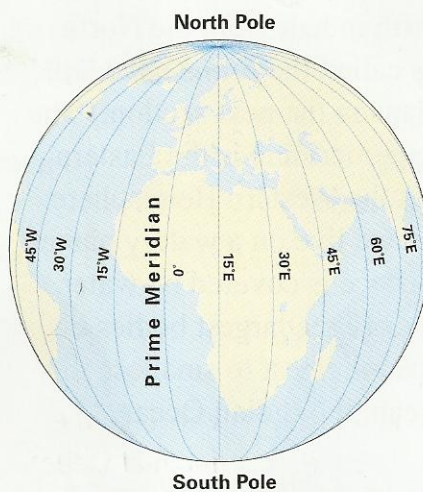
Oceans surround large masses of land called *continents*. The seven continents on Earth, from largest to smallest, are Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Antarctica, Europe, and Australia.

World Map: Continents and Oceans

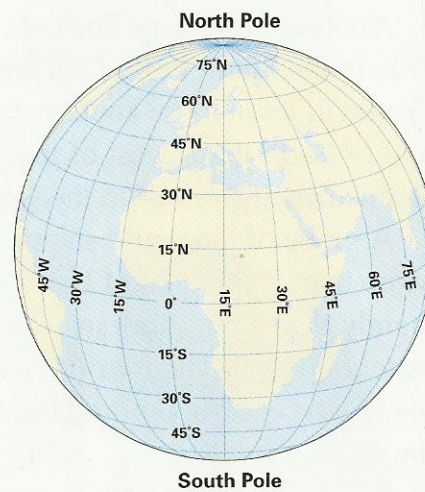




Parallels of Latitude



Meridians of Longitude



Latitude and Longitude

Any spot on the globe can be pinpointed exactly by using latitude and longitude. For example, this boat is in the middle of Earth's largest ocean at 15°S, 150°W. Can you find that spot on the world map on page 15?

1.3 Understanding Latitude and Longitude

Geographers begin to study a place by finding its location. To do this, they use two types of measurements, called *latitude* and *longitude*. With these lines, they can pinpoint any spot on Earth. Distances between these lines are measured in degrees (°).

The lines that circle Earth from west to east are called *parallels of latitude*. The distance between parallel lines is always the same. The starting point for measuring parallels of latitude is the equator. The equator is halfway between the North Pole and the South Pole. It is at 0° latitude. All places north of the equator are north latitude. Places south of the equator are south latitude. The places farthest from the equator are the poles. The North Pole is 90° north latitude. The South Pole is 90° south latitude.

The lines that run from the North Pole to the South Pole are called *meridians of longitude*. These lines are half-circles. They are not parallels because they are not always the same distance apart. They are farthest apart where they cross the equator, and they meet at the two poles.



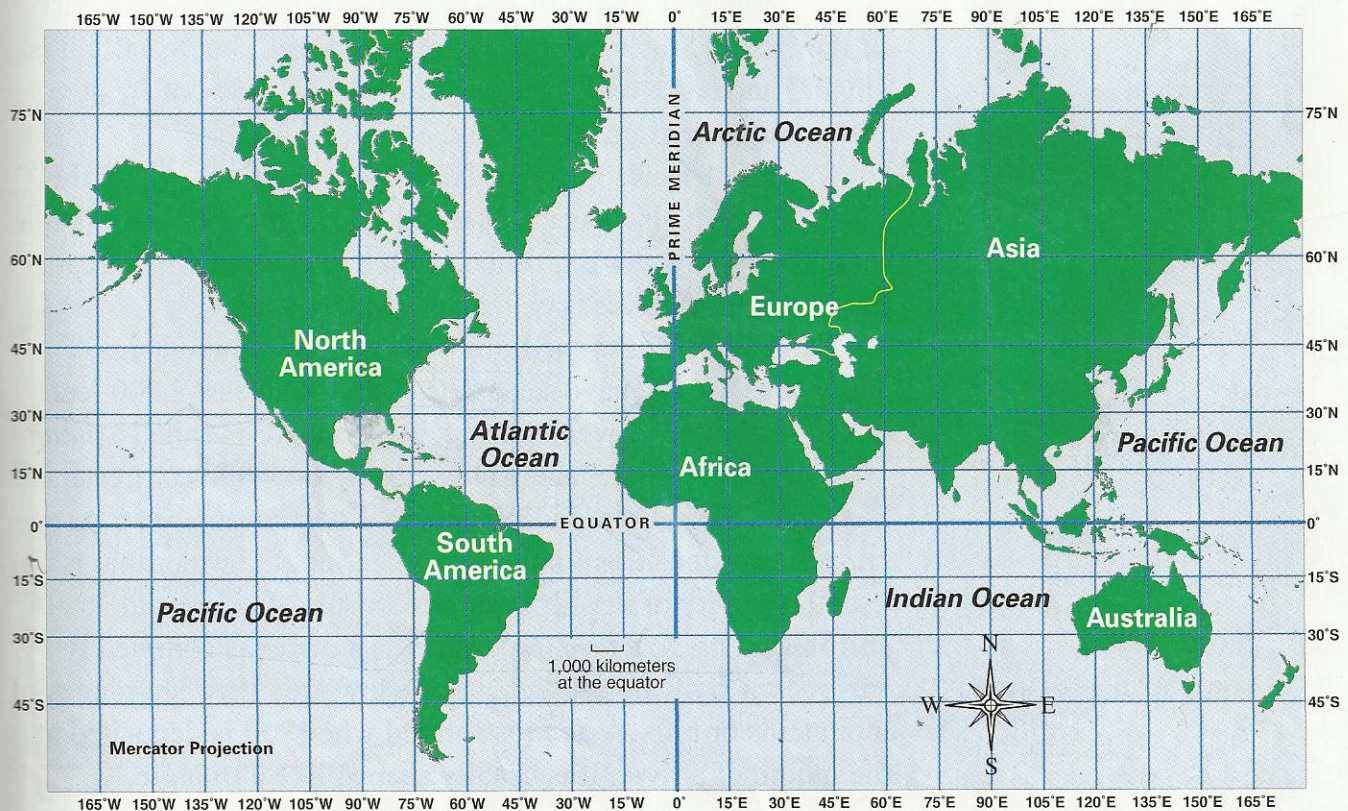


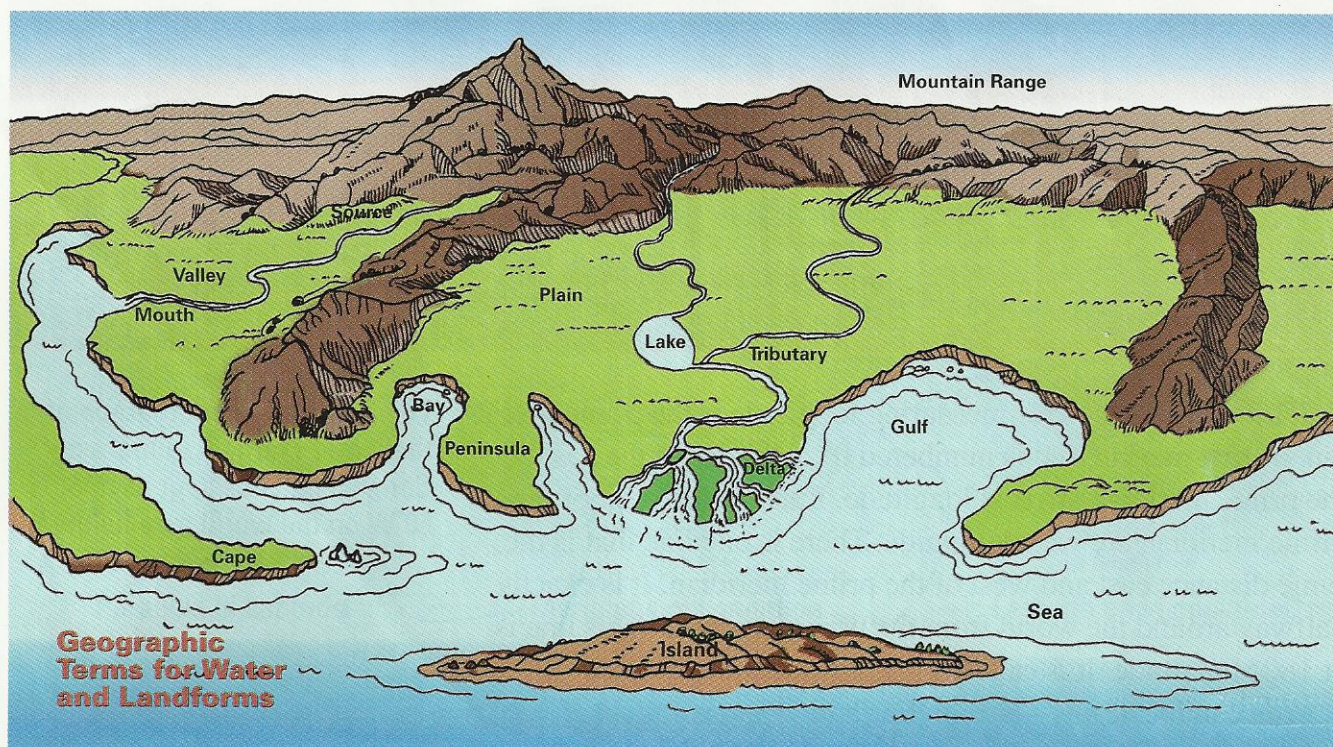
The starting place for measuring longitude is the prime meridian, or first meridian. It is numbered 0° . All lines to the east of the prime meridian are east longitude. Lines to the west of the prime meridian are west longitude. There is one line that is the same distance east and west of the prime meridian. It is exactly halfway around the world from the prime meridian. This line is at 180° longitude. It is called the *international date line*.

You can locate any place on Earth by using parallels of latitude and meridians of longitude. To note the location of a place on Earth, first name its latitude, including north or south. Then name its longitude, including east or west. For example, one location on Earth's surface is at 30°N , 90°W . Can you find this location on the map below?

This is an aerial photograph of the world's largest rainforest. Can you find this spot at 15°S , 60°W on the world map below?

World Map: Latitude and Longitude





1.4 Using Geographic Terms for Water and Landforms

landforms: masses of land, such as continents, islands, and peninsulas

Geographic terms, or names, help us describe different **landforms** and bodies of water. You already know that most of Earth's water is in the four oceans. A smaller body of salt water is called a *sea*. Sometimes part of a sea or an ocean cuts into a mass of land. A body of water like this is called a *gulf*. An example is the Gulf of Mexico, near the southeastern part of the United States. A *bay* is similar to a gulf, but usually it is smaller and has a wide opening to the sea. A body of fresh water that is surrounded by land is called a *lake*.

Water also flows in rivers. A river has a *source*, where the river begins. It also has a *mouth*, where the river empties into a larger body of water like an ocean or a lake. A smaller stream that feeds into a river is called a *tributary*.

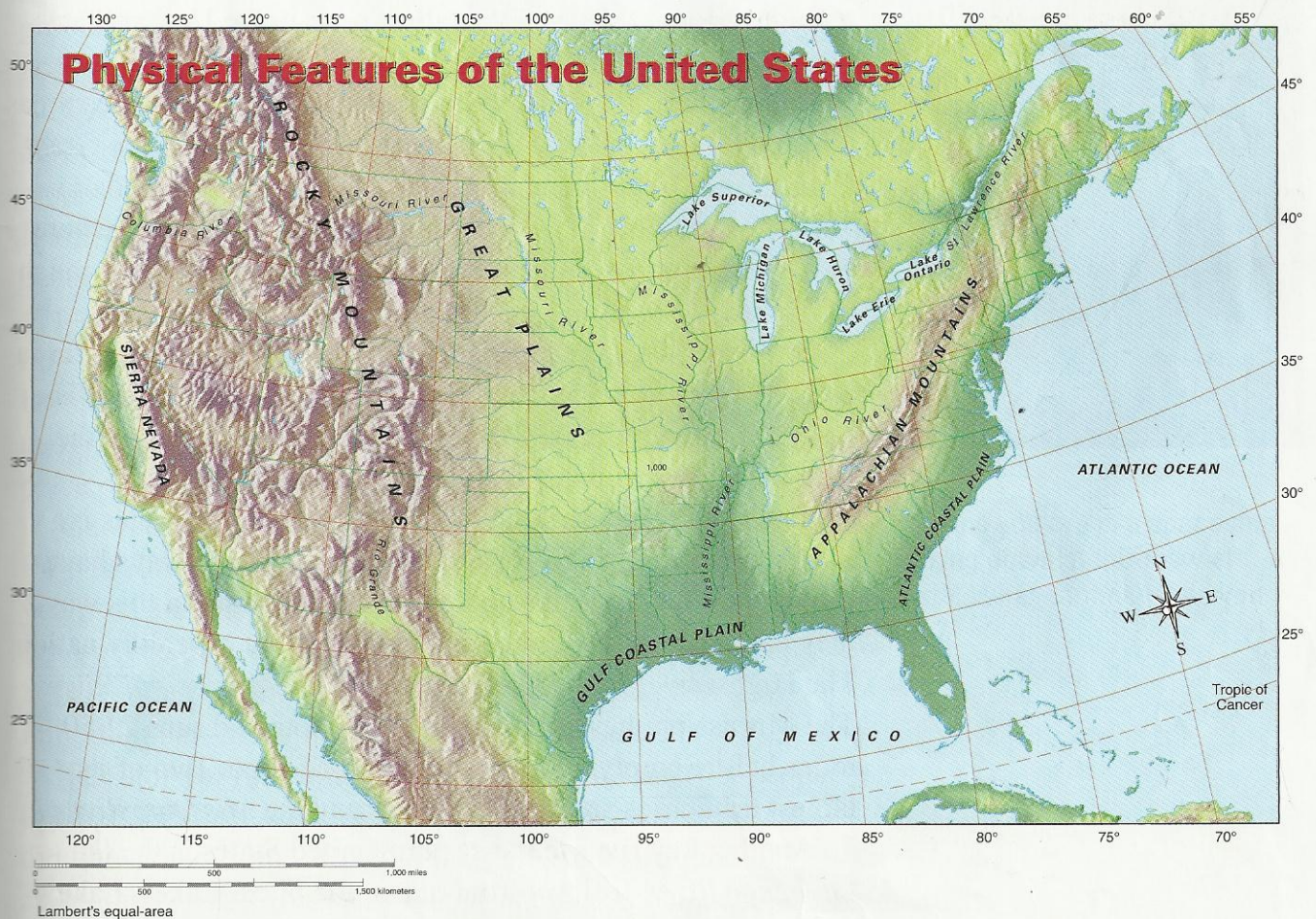
The major types of landforms are mountains and plains. Mountains usually have steep sides and rise at least 2,000 feet above sea level. A row of connected mountains is called a *mountain range*. *Plains* are land that is mostly flat, with few trees.

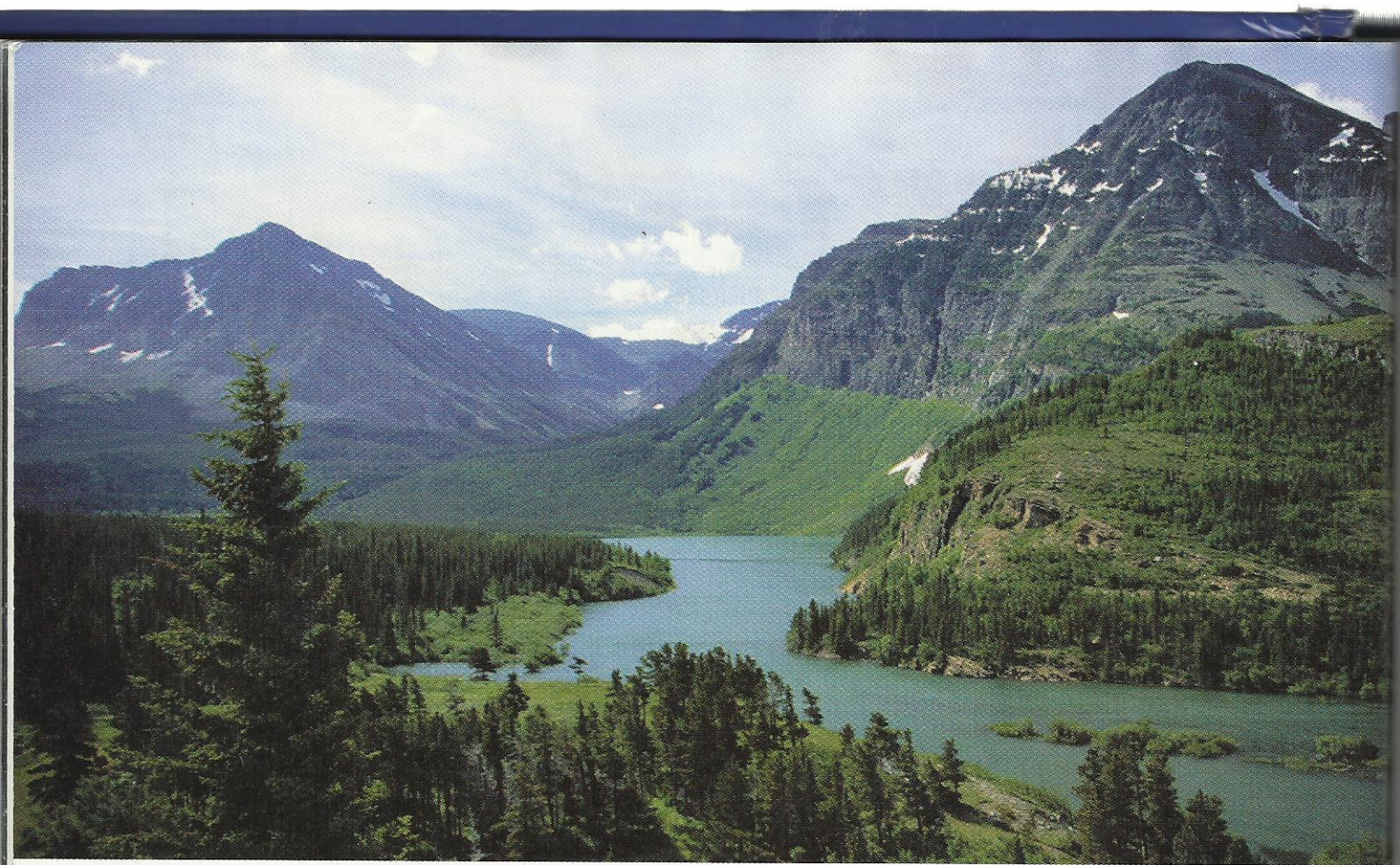
You can see other landforms in the illustration above. A *cape* is an extension of land jutting out into the water that is usually smaller or thinner than a peninsula. A *peninsula* is surrounded by water on three sides. An *island* is completely surrounded by water. A *valley* is the low area between ranges of mountains or hills. A *delta* is formed when soil is deposited at the mouth of a river. It is usually shaped like a triangle.

1.5 Physical Features of the United States

The United States is located on the continent of North America. It is the world's third largest country. (Russia is the largest, Canada the second largest.) The United States is bordered on the west by the world's largest ocean, the *Pacific Ocean*. On the east, it is bordered by the world's second largest ocean, the *Atlantic Ocean*. To the southeast, it is bordered by the *Gulf of Mexico*.

Imagine riding in a space shuttle and looking down at the United States. You would immediately see huge mountain ranges that run from north to south. In the western part of North America, the *Rocky Mountains* stretch about 3,000 miles from New Mexico to Alaska. The Rockies are the largest mountain range in North America. The *Appalachian Mountains* are the second largest mountain range in the United States. The Appalachians stretch about 1,600 miles across the eastern United States, from the St. Lawrence River to Alabama. The *Sierra Nevada* mountain range, in the far western part of the





Glacier National Park is in the Rocky Mountains in northern Montana. The Rockies are the largest mountain system in the United States.

United States, is about 400 miles long. The Sierra Nevada includes Mount Whitney, the tallest peak in the United States, outside of Alaska and Hawaii.

While observing Earth from space, you would also see areas covered by huge plains. The largest of these areas is the *Great Plains*. The Great Plains stretch all the way from Canada to Texas. At one time, they were a huge natural grassland where buffalo roamed. Today, farmers in the Great Plains grow much of the world's wheat.

The other large area of flat land is the *Gulf Coastal Plain* in the southeast. This land sometimes experiences flooding. The floods bring rich soil down from the mountains, making the land ideal for farming.

One of the most striking features of the United States is its system of mighty rivers and lakes. These waterways have provided routes for ships and power for industry. In this way, they have helped the United States to become a wealthy nation. The largest river in the United States is the *Mississippi River*. The Mississippi has its source in Minnesota and runs 2,350 miles before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. Two of its largest tributaries are the *Ohio River* and the *Missouri River*.

Another key river in the eastern United States is the *St. Lawrence River*. It flows from one of the Great Lakes, Lake

Ontario, into the Atlantic Ocean. The St. Lawrence forms part of the border between the United States and Canada. In the south, much of the border between the United States and Mexico is formed by the *Rio Grande* (Spanish for “large river”). Finally, the *Columbia River* is the largest river on the West Coast of the United States. It forms part of the border between the states of Oregon and Washington. The Columbia empties into the Pacific Ocean near Portland, Oregon.

1.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about the geography of the United States. Geography helps us to understand how our physical surroundings affect our lives. In learning about America’s geography, you used a picture of part of a globe to learn about maps and how to use them.

Geographers use special tools to describe Earth. A globe shows the shape of Earth, as well as features like oceans and continents. Points of the compass show directions. Imaginary lines of latitude and longitude allow geographers to locate any place on Earth.

Geographic terms such as *mountain* and *ocean* are useful for describing landforms and bodies of water. In this chapter, you used a number of these terms to study geographic features of the United States. In later chapters, you will learn how features like mountains, plains, and rivers played an important part in the history of the United States.

The story of the United States begins with the first people to come to North America. Who were these people? Where did they come from? How did their physical surroundings affect their lives? You will find out in the next chapter.



Imagine you are in a spaceship looking down at this view of Earth. What continents do you see?