What Teachers Need to Know

Location

Western Hemisphere

Because Earth is round, it cannot be seen completely at any one time. Even an astronaut in space can see only half the world at once. One half of the world is called a hemisphere, meaning half of a sphere, or ball. The northern part of Earth is called the Northern Hemisphere and the southern part is called the Southern Hemisphere. But Earth can also be looked at as having a Western Hemisphere and an Eastern Hemisphere. Every continent is in at least two hemispheres at once. For example, North America is in the Northern Hemisphere and the Western Hemisphere.

Around the center of Earth is an imaginary line called the Equator. It is halfway between the North and South Poles. This is the place where the Northern and Southern Hemispheres divide. The dividing lines for the Eastern and Western Hemispheres are the Prime Meridian (also called the Greenwich meridian) and the 180th meridian. The Prime Meridian refers to 0° longitude, an imaginary line that runs from the North Pole to the South Pole going through the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, a suburb of London, England. The International Date Line also runs from the North Pole to the South Pole, generally following the 180th meridian (it deviates in a few places to avoid dividing Siberia and again to include the Aleutian Islands with Alaska). The Prime Meridian (0° longitude) and the 180th meridian are on opposite sides of Earth, and together divide the globe into Eastern (0° to 180° east of the Prime Meridian) and Western (0° to 180° west of the Prime Meridian) Hemispheres.

North America

North America is the third-largest continent and is in both the Northern Hemisphere and the Western Hemisphere. The continent stretches from the Isthmus of Panama to the Arctic Ocean, and includes Greenland, Canada, the United States (including Hawaii), Mexico, the Caribbean Islands, and the Central American nations of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. North America is bordered by the Arctic Ocean in the north, the Atlantic Ocean in the east, the Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea in the west, and the continent of South America to the south.

Caribbean Sea

The Caribbean Sea is an arm of the Atlantic Ocean and is bordered to the north and east by the West Indies, to the south by South America, and to the west by Central America. Since the early 1900s, the Caribbean has been linked to the Pacific Ocean through the Panama Canal.

The Caribbean Sea has four major island groups known collectively as the West Indies. The groups are the Bahamas, the Greater Antilles, the Lesser Antilles, and the Netherlands Antilles.
IV. United States Geography

The islands have a generally warm and sunny climate. Most of the islands fall within the tropics and would be very hot if not for the breezes that move inland from the sea and keep the temperature around 80ºF. Many of the islands are prime vacation spots because of their warm weather and sandy beaches.

Starting with the voyages of Christopher Columbus in 1492, Europeans began to colonize and then fight over possession of the islands. Some islands changed hands several times. Today, the Spanish heritage in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic is very evident, as are African influences, especially in music. Haiti’s predominant cultural influences are French and African. The British stamp is apparent in many of the island nations, such as Trinidad and Tobago, the Bahamas, and Barbados. The Netherlands Antilles were colonized by the Dutch in the seventeenth century and remain a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

**Gulf of Mexico**

The Gulf of Mexico, like the Caribbean, is known for its warm waters. The Gulf is bordered by the southeast coast of North America, from the tip of Florida to the Yucatán Peninsula. Its eastern boundary is the island of Cuba. The Strait of Yucatan links the Gulf to the Caribbean, and the Strait of Florida links it to the Atlantic.

**The Gulf Stream and Climate**

The Gulf Stream is a warm ocean current that originates off the coast of South America and flows to the Gulf of Mexico and up the coast of North America. The water temperature of the Gulf Stream is around 80ºF. As it moves north, away from the Equator, the water cools.

The Gulf Stream passes from the Gulf of Mexico through the Strait of Florida and moves northeast until it meets the North Atlantic Drift off Newfoundland, Canada. The merged ocean current then flows toward Western Europe. As the North Atlantic Drift flows past the coasts of northwest Europe, the warm water of the ocean current moderates the climate. Considering the northern latitudes of countries like Ireland and England, one would expect much colder winters than the 40ºF days they typically enjoy. The difference is the presence of the North Atlantic Drift. The southwestern coast of England is warm enough in a few places for palm trees to grow.

**Regions and Their Characteristics**

We sometimes talk about the United States in terms of regions, such as New England and the Southwest. These categories are determined by cultural characteristics as well as physical location. As a result, and depending on the context, one state may appear in more than one region.

**New England**

States: Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island

Climate: in the northernmost states, cold winters and warm summers; in the more southerly areas, milder winters and warmer summers

Economy: industry, trade, commercial fishing, commercial farming
Cultural literacy characteristics: The region is associated with
- Pilgrims and Puritans, the first Thanksgiving.
- Boston, Lexington, Concord, and the beginning of the American Revolution.
- Lobsters, maple syrup, and village squares.

Other: The term New England was used by the English colonists to refer to what they thought they were creating in their colonies—a “new” England.

**Mid-Atlantic**
States: New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland
Climate: relatively mild winters and warm summers, often with high humidity
Economy: industry, trade, commercial farming, some commercial fishing

Cultural literacy characteristics: The region is associated with
- New York City, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island.
- Philadelphia, the Liberty Bell and the Mummers Parade.
- the first state to ratify the Constitution (Delaware).
- crab cakes.

Other: With the exception of Pennsylvania, these states border the Atlantic Ocean, hence the name. Historically, Maryland and Delaware are also considered Southern states because they had slave economies.

**South**
States: Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas
Climate: humid subtropical; hot summers and mild winters; for much of the area precipitation is in the form of rain rather than snow, especially the more southerly parts of the region
Economy: commercial farming, areas of industry, oil drilling

Cultural literacy characteristics: The region is associated with
- Delmarva Peninsula: Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia.
- slavery and a plantation economy. Most states seceded and joined the Confederate States of America.
- Nashville and country music.
- Disney World.
- birthplace of the blues and jazz.
- Mardi Gras.

Other: During the Civil War, Maryland and Delaware were border states. They did not join the Confederacy, but remained slave states until the end of the war.

**The Midwest**
States: Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri
Climate: cold winters and warm summers; precipitation may vary from year to year and from area to area; much of the winter precipitation is in the form of snow
Economy: major commercial farming with manufacturing

**Teaching Idea**
Duplicate Instructional Master 40, Regions of the United States, and distribute one to each student. Provide atlases, geography books, and similar references that include maps of the United States. Have students identify and label each state within the regions. As an alternative and as a check on student knowledge, make an overhead of the map. Have the class try to fill in the state names without looking at any references. Try not to rely on the same few students. When most students are unable to identify the remaining states, ask students to use the reference books to fill in the missing names on their maps.

When students have finished filling in state names, have them color each region a different color and create a key for the map.
IV. United States Geography

Cultural literacy characteristics: The region is associated with

- Chicago and the beginning of the meat-packing industry.
- Detroit, the auto city, “Motown.”
- settlement of the upper Midwest by Germans and Scandinavians.
- the origin of the Mississippi River; annual flooding.
- Minnesota, the land of 10,000 lakes.
- Lake Superior, the largest of the Great Lakes; Lake Michigan.
- very cold, snowy winters.
- the home of Paul Bunyan and Babe, the blue ox.

Other: Part of the Midwest overlaps with the Great Plains region.

Great Plains

States: Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas

Climate: cold winters and warm summers; precipitation may vary from year to year and from area to area. Much of the precipitation is in the form of snow

Economy: major commercial farming including cattle ranching

Cultural literacy characteristics: The region is associated with

- tornadoes and dust storms.
- buffalo, Native Americans hunting on horseback, and the last Indian wars.
- cattle trails and railheads to get cattle to Chicago.
- settlement in later phases of westward expansion, after the Homestead Act.
- Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

Other: Parts of these states are not within the Great Plains but are mountainous, and those areas have arid and semiarid climates. The Great Plains region overlaps with the Midwest, the West, and the South.

The Southwest

States: Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, Texas

Climate: hot, dry, and in many places, desert; the mountain areas of these states receive snow in the winter

Economy: cattle, light industry

Cultural literacy characteristics: The region is associated with

- cliff dwellings of the Anasazi.
- Pueblo Native Americans.
- Navajo weavings, turquoise jewelry.
- desert, cactus.
- strong Spanish influence, dating back to the period when much of the Southwest was part of Mexico.
- Mexican food.

Other: The first Europeans to colonize these states were Spanish, and the Spanish heritage is very apparent in architectural styles and place names.

The West

Climate: arid and semiarid in the mountainous areas; hot summers and cool winters along the southern coast; mild winters and summers but very rainy all year round in the northwest
Economy: mining, cattle ranching, light industry, lumbering, paper, wood products, dairy products
Cultural literacy characteristics: The region is associated with
- mining towns.
- California Gold Rush.
- cowhands and cattle ranching.
- Spanish influences in architecture and place names.
- Northwest Native Americans.
Other: The region overlaps with the Pacific Northwest and the Southwest.

The Pacific Northwest
States: Washington, Oregon
Climate: temperate with mild winters and summers, but very rainy all year round
Economy: lumbering, wood products, paper, dairy products
Cultural literacy characteristics: The region is associated with
- Northwest Native Americans.
- Columbia River and Lewis and Clark Expedition.
- Asian populations.
Other: The region overlaps with the West.

Other Regional Names
Additional terms that appear in history texts and in contemporary news reports are
- Gulf Coast, referring to the states along the Gulf of Mexico: Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas.
- the Southeast, namely North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana.
- Far West, namely California, Oregon, and Washington.
Some of these regions overlap. Which term is used depends on what the topic is. For example, someone interested in finding out which states border the Gulf Coast would not want to know what states were in the Southeast, only which states were Gulf States.

50 States and Their Capitals
Each of the 50 states has a city or town that is the capital. The capital city is the seat of state government. Most states have a capitol building in which much of the business of state government takes place. Each state has an executive branch of government (headed by the governor), a legislative branch, and a judicial branch.
The legislative branch varies from state to state. Some states have full-time legislators, while others meet only periodically. Each state is responsible for making laws that apply to the citizens of that state, such as laws on taxation, education, labor, etc.

It is a Sequence goal in Grade 5 that students learn the names of the 50 states and their capitals. They should also know the name of the governor of their home state.

### State Capital

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**Teaching Idea**

To help students become more familiar with the 50 states and their capital cities, make a copy of Instructional Masters 42 and 43, *Start the Match!* and *Finish the Match!*, for each student.

**Teaching Idea**

Have students create displays for states of choice. Ensure that all 50 states are represented. (This project can be a nice activity for the entire grade level to share.) Students can conduct research on their state, noting required information as well as other facts they find interesting. If students have learned to sing “Fifty Nifty,” host a “Fifty Nifty State Fair” for parents and caregivers. Start by singing the song and then allow guests to tour each state’s display. The state fair is also a meaningful end-of-the-year activity.