

# Lesson 1

## Overview of North America

The remainder of this course covers the physical, economic, and cultural aspects of the various regions of the world. You will study the following regions in the remainder of this semester:

- Unit 3 – North America
- Unit 4 – Central America
- Unit 5 – South America

You will need to refer to a *World Atlas* to complete many of the activities and reading assignments. Your program may provide you with an atlas that is used regularly in your school, or you can go to the school or community library, as well as the Internet to find answers to the questions you will find throughout the course. Most atlases have maps that show geographical features, vegetation, and political boundaries. In addition, there may be maps showing population distribution, climate zones, rainfall, and other information.

## North America

North America is the third largest continent in size, after Asia and Africa. Situated in the northern half of the Western Hemisphere, the continent extends southwards over 5,000 miles (8,000 kilometers). It joins the continent of South America at the very narrow Isthmus of Panama. The section between Mexico and South America is called Central America, although it is often considered to be a subcontinent of North America.

The coastline of North America is very uneven. Great gulfs and bays reach into the mainland. The largest are Hudson Bay in the north, and the Gulf of Mexico and Gulf of California in the south.

North America's larger islands are in the Arctic Ocean and Caribbean Sea. The largest island in the world, Greenland, is in the Arctic and most of it is covered with snow all the time.

Because it extends from the Arctic almost to the equator, North America has striking contrasts in climate. The temperature is always cold in the far north, and always hot in the far south. The north is too cold for agriculture and very few people live there. In the Caribbean, the heat is cooled somewhat by ocean breezes. Unfortunately, most of the islands are in the path of hurricane winds, which destroy property and crops every year.

The greater part of North America enjoys a temperate climate with warm summers and cold winters. Rainfall varies. There is over 80 inches of rainfall a year along the northwest Pacific coast and in the tropical rainforests of Central America and the Caribbean. There are dry areas also. The driest are in the deserts of the southwestern United States and Mexico. In Death Valley, California, which is the lowest point in North America, there is less than two inches of rainfall a year.

Look at a map and compare the location of the United States with that of other countries in North America. Not only is it between Asia and Europe, it is also near South America. Its location is favorable for trade in all directions. Goods can be carried easily over inland waterway systems. The Great Lakes between Canada and the United States form the largest connected area of fresh water on earth. (Incidentally, North America has more lakes than any other continent.) The Great Lakes can be reached through the St. Lawrence Seaway—a series

of canals, dams, and locks in the St. Lawrence River. South of the Great Lakes is the Mississippi-Missouri river system, which drains the central plains. Along with the Ohio River and about 250 other tributaries, it forms one of the greatest inland waterway systems in the world.

The principal geographical features of North America are its two mountain systems and the great central plains that lie between them. On the west coast, high and rugged mountains extend the entire length of the continent. In the north they begin at the tip of Alaska. The highest peak in North America, Mt. McKinley, is in Alaska. The western mountains include the coastal ranges that hug the Pacific coast, and the Rocky Mountains further inland. The Rockies extend southward into Mexico, where they are called the Sierra Madre Oriental and Sierra Madre Occidental. Lying between the Rocky Mountains and the coastal ranges are lower areas—basins and plateaus. (A basin is an area that is lower than the surrounding land. It is shaped somewhat like a basin, or bowl.) The largest are the Columbia Plateau, the Colorado Plateau, and the Great Basin. These intermountain areas are dry and have harsh climates, but they are rich in minerals, and their scenery is spectacularly beautiful.

The other mountain system, the Appalachian Mountains, is in the east. This area is a mixture of mountain and plateau and extends from the Gulf of St. Lawrence almost to the Gulf of Mexico. The Appalachians are not very rugged. Their peaks are worn down and rounded. On the east they merge with the Piedmont Plateau, which slopes into the Atlantic Coastal Plain. The Appalachian region is rich in minerals and has many fertile river valleys. The rivers provide abundant water power for the area.

Surrounding Hudson Bay and covering about one-half of Canada is the Laurentian Plateau, or the Canadian Shield. It is a region of rock and poor soil, and consists mainly of low-lying hills, rounded mountains, and many lakes. There is little agricultural land here, but the plateau is rich in minerals.

In the middle of North America, between the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians, are the central plains. The plains are shaped like a giant “V” and extend from southern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. The western part of the region is called the Great Plains. The plains of southern Canada and the northern United States are among the most fertile in the world. Other

extensive lowlands in North America are in the southeastern United States and on the southeast coast of Mexico. The lowlands in the north are *tundra* where the soil is frozen most of the year and where only a few low plants will grow.



## Overview of North America Activity A

**Directions:** Carefully review a few world maps and maps of North America. Then answer the following questions based on what you have learned.

### World Maps

1. Locate and name the highest mountain range on each of the following continents:
  - a. North America \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. South America \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Europe \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Asia \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Locate and name the major waterways that flow through the following continents:
  - a. North America \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. South America \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Africa \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Europe \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. Asia \_\_\_\_\_
  
3.
  - a. Find a population distribution map. Look at the areas with the most inhabitants. What are nearly all of these areas close to?  
\_\_\_\_\_

b. Why do you think this is so?

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### North America Maps

4. What large bodies of water border North America?

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5. What is the main geographical feature of the western part of North America?

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6. What is the main vegetation type for North America?

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7. Describe the topography of Mexico.

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8. How is Central America similar to Mexico in terms of geographical features?

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## Climate & Topography Activity B

**Directions:** Find one article from a newspaper, news website, or news magazine about an event in the national or international news (examples: a conflict, natural disaster, environmental controversy, etc.). Then make a list of three geographic questions related to the article, such as “How does climate affect what is going on?” Finally, answer your questions. Hint: An atlas may help you to make educated guesses.

1. Question:

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Answer:

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2. Question:

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Answer:

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3. Question:

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Answer:

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4. How does geography help us to understand current events?

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5. How helpful was the atlas in answering your questions?

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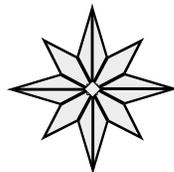
6. Where else might you find answers to geographic questions (besides maps)?

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**NOTES or questions for your mentor / teacher**



**End of Lesson 1**