

Defining Geography: What is Where, Why There, and Why Care?

By Charles F. Gritzner
South Dakota State University
Brookings, South Dakota

History is the study of events through time. Basically, historians ask “What happened when and why then?” But many people, it seems, have a problem defining geography. Not enough people understand the nature of the discipline or its relevance to our everyday lives.

This brief essay presents an easily taught, understood, and remembered definition of geography. I have used it in my own teaching, public speaking, and professional writing for more than a decade. It works beautifully, and I believe that it will work for you and your students as well.

The Nature of Geography

Immanuel Kant, writing some two centuries ago, may have been the first scholar to identify clearly and succinctly the unique nature of both history and geography. He observed that:

- **History** organizes and analyzes events in terms of when they occurred (the **temporal** context, or time).
- **Geography** focuses upon Earth’s features and conditions by asking where they are found (the **spatial** context, or location).

Both history and geography, then, are **methodologies** – unique ways of thinking about our world and its events, conditions, patterns, and consequences. If “When?” is the realm of history, then “Where?” is the primary focus of geographic inquiry.

But what is “spatial analysis”? When most people think of space, they associate it with astronomy, not geography. In a geographic context, “space” is defined as a portion of Earth’s surface. Location, place, area, region, territory, distribution, and pattern are all closely related spatial concepts.

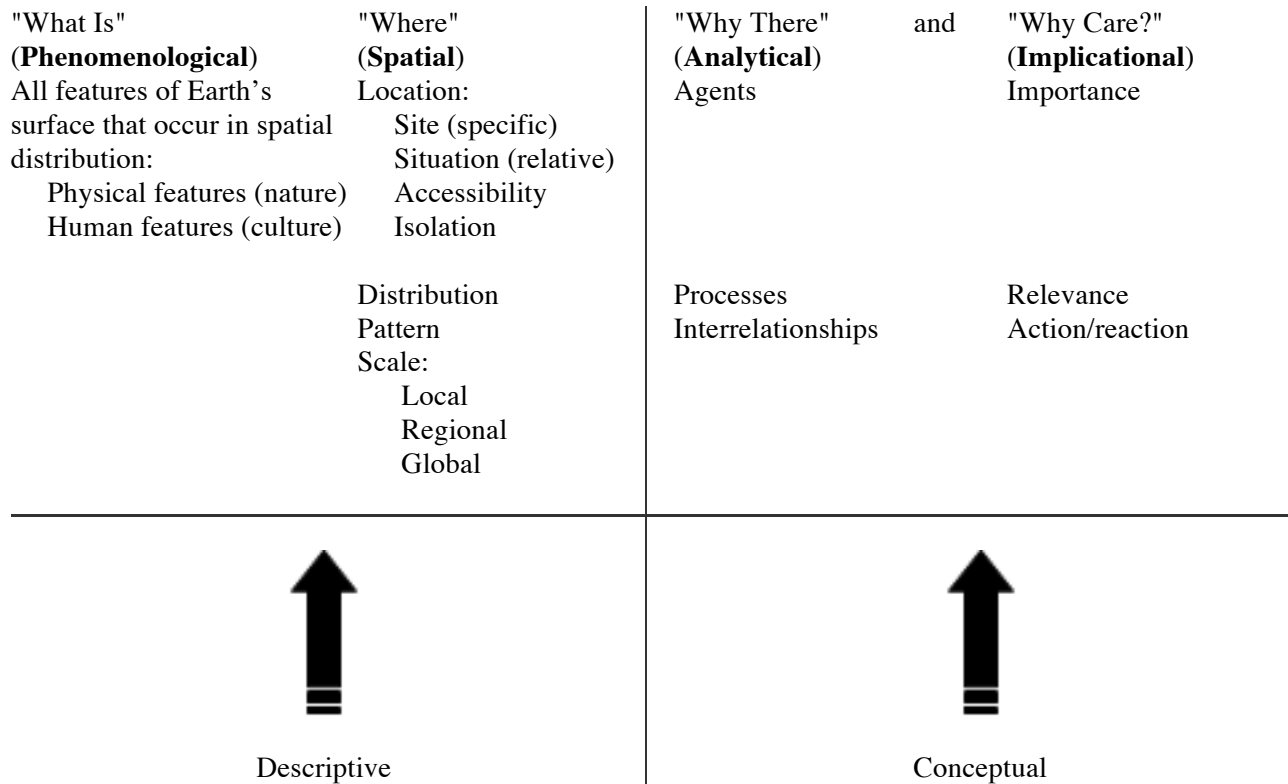
A Concise Definition

The following definition incorporates all essential elements traditionally recognized as being fundamental to geography: it is the study of “what is where, why there, and why care?”*

To this definition, I often add “pertaining to the various physical and human features of Earth’s surface, including their conditions, interactions, spatial distributions, and patterns.”

The following diagram further amplifies each of the four elements contained within the definition.

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Some definitions of geography (including that developed by the National Geographic Society) emphasize cultural ecology – the relationship humans establish with the natural environment. Both geographers and cultural ecologists are concerned with the ways in which humans culturally adapt to, use, and modify the environments they occupy.

Using the Definition

“What is?” might be a particular type of **ecological** relationship, such as tropical shifting cultivation, pastoral nomadism, or mining.

“Where?” then places the activity in a particular location and perhaps with a particular group, such as Amerindians of the Amazon Basin, Tuareg of the Western Sahara, or residents of Minnesota’s Iron Range.

“Why there?” can be quite complex because in most instances, many factors are involved. Shifting **cultivation**, for example, might include such factors as heavily leached, hence infertile, tropical soils; cultural isolation and tradition; or **sustainability**. In the case of the Tuareg, certainly the region’s arid environment, a long-standing **pastoral** tradition, and the consequences of overgrazing are important. A concentration of iron ore, the need for iron in an industrial society, and proximity to Great Lakes shipping lanes all help shed light on northern Minnesota mining activity.

Finally, “Why care?” provides an opportunity to establish the importance of the foregoing activities in their particular location, as well as in their natural and cultural geographic contexts.

The Definition in Practice

This definition of geography works well for several reasons. First, it emphasizes that geography is a **methodology**. It stresses the geographic way of organizing and analyzing information pertaining to the location, distribution, pattern, and interactions of the varied physical and human features of Earth's surface. All geographic inquiry should begin with the question, "Where?" Geographers and all other scientists ask "Why?" And, of course, most major Earth-bound events, features, and conditions can and often do have some impact on our lives, thereby begging the question, "Why care?"

Second, the definition can be a framework for all traditional geographic subjects, themes, and traditions. Third, the definition functions at all scales. In studying towns and cities, for example, site (specific location and condition of a place) can often explain their presence. For example, New York City is located at the mouth of the Hudson River with a natural harbor protected by Long Island; San Diego and Seattle are on excellent natural harbors; and Denver is at the eastern terminus of a pass through the Rocky Mountains. South Dakota's largest and fastest growing city, Sioux Falls, affords a splendid example to illustrate the importance of "Where?" When the city was settled in 1856, eastern South Dakota was inhabited by people of the Sioux culture. The city's name, itself, implies the importance of location and place: The falls on the Big Sioux River provided power for a mill around which the city was originally established. Through time, the city grew primarily because of its location in the wettest, hence most agriculturally productive, area of the state. It also served as a major highway and rail hub. Finally, rapid growth continued because of its location at the intersection of two interstate highways.

An example on the global scale, petroleum resources in the Middle East certainly have contributed to a host of conflicts, and "petro-politics" surely will be a major issue for decades to come. Oil production, distribution, consumption, and trade all impact the lives of several billion people daily.

The definition I describe is clear and concise. It places no limitation on what geographers study; it clearly identifies the discipline's unique methodology -- the spatial dimension of features, including where they are, in what patterns they occur, what important relationships exist, and so forth.

If geography is to be taught as a science, the distribution of features must be explained -- that is, we must address the question, "Why there?" Finally, all geographic teaching and learning should relate to the human need to know, emphasizing "Why care?" The definition presented here provides a simple framework for unlocking the extreme complexity of geography.

*Charles F. Gritzner, "What Is Where, Why There, and Why Care?," *Journal of Geography*, 101, no. 1 (January/February 2002), pp. 3840.