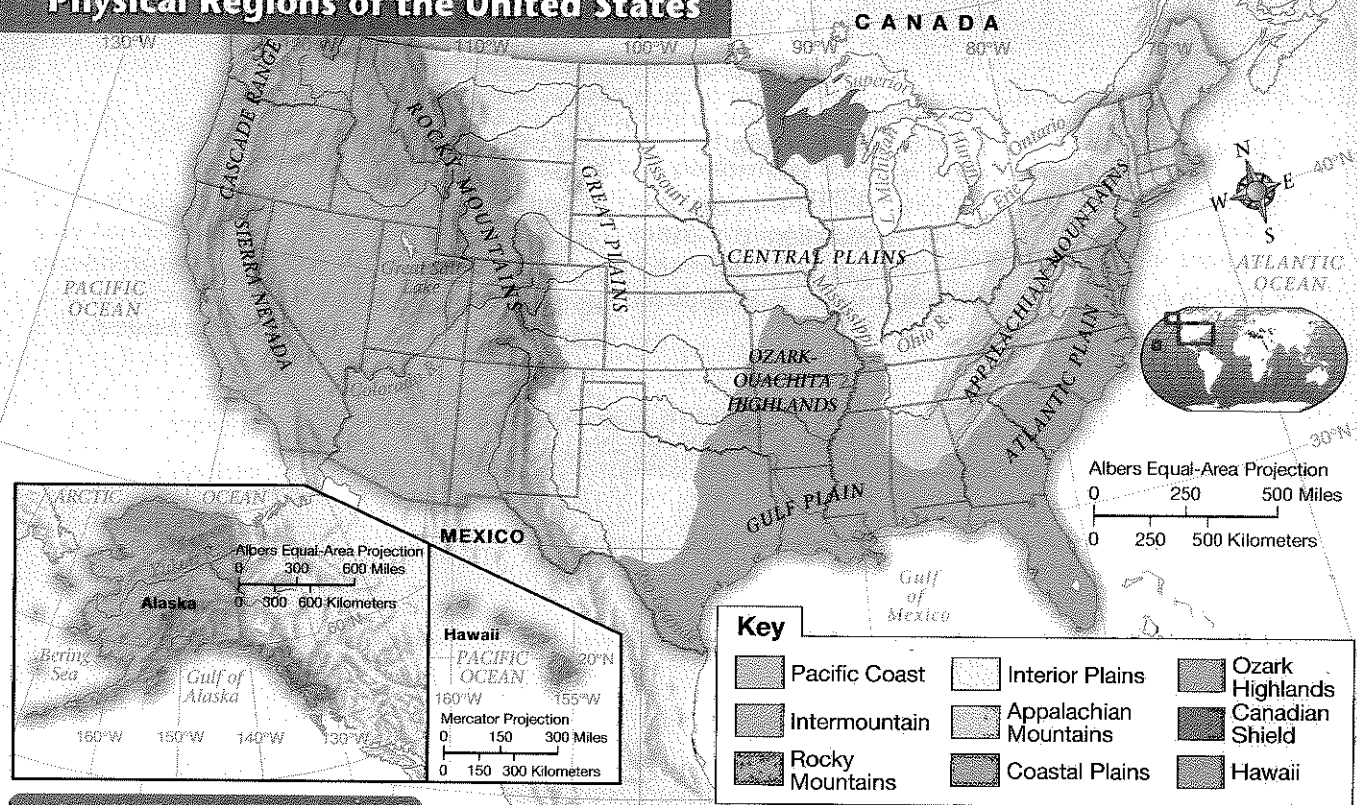


## Physical Regions of the United States



### GEOGRAPHY Skills

Geographers divide the United States into different physical regions.

- Location** On the map, locate (a) Sierra Nevada, (b) Great Lakes, (c) Atlantic Plain, (d) Mississippi River, (e) Rocky Mountains
- Region** Through what three physical regions does the Mississippi River flow?
- Critical Thinking**  
**Comparing** Compare the Pacific Coast and the Rocky Mountain regions. Why do you think more people live on the Pacific Coast than in the Rocky Mountains?

Geographers divide the United States into different physical regions marked by contrasting landforms and physical features.\*

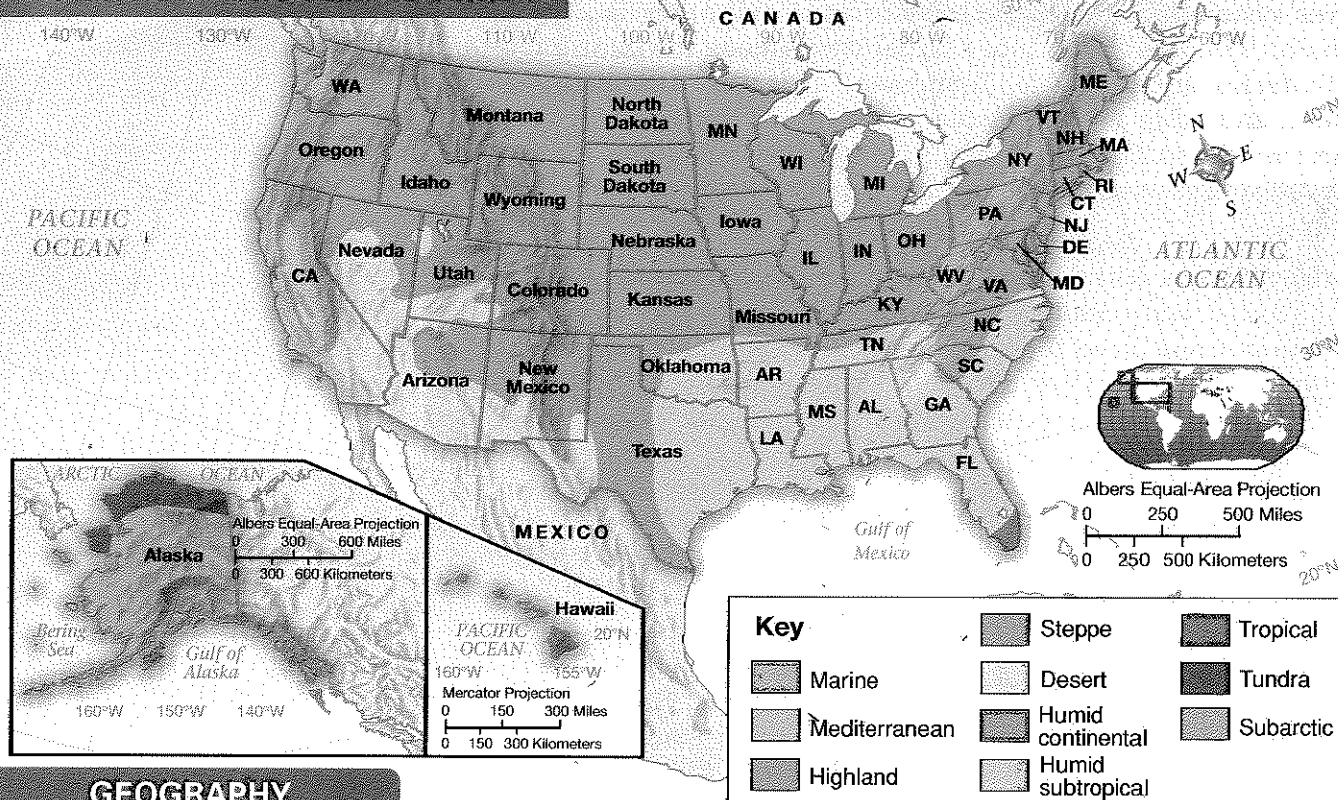
**Pacific Coast** The westernmost region of North America is the Pacific Coast. It includes high mountain ranges that stretch from Alaska to Mexico. In the United States, some of these western ranges are near the Pacific Ocean. The Cascades and the Sierra Nevada stand a bit farther inland. Important cities of the Pacific Coast region include Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, San Diego, and Los Angeles.

A notable feature of the Pacific Coast region is the San Andreas Fault. This 600-mile fracture in the Earth's crust runs through California from northwest to southeast. Movement of the Earth's crust along this fault can cause earthquakes. For example, powerful quakes shook San Francisco in 1906 and Los Angeles in 1994, causing significant damage and loss of life.

**Intermountain Region** East of the Pacific Coast mountain ranges lies the Intermountain Region. This region is marked by mountain peaks, high plateaus, deep canyons, and dry, sandy deserts. The Grand Canyon, more than a mile deep, cuts through the Intermountain Region. Another prominent physical feature is the Great Salt Lake of Utah, the nation's largest saltwater lake.

\*To review definitions of major landforms and other geographic terms, refer to the Glossary of Geographic Terms at the end of this section.

## Climates of the United States



### GEOGRAPHY Skills

The United States is a land of many climates.

- 1. Location** On the map, locate (a) an area with a Mediterranean climate (b) an area with a desert climate.
- 2. Place** What states have three or more different climates?
- 3. Critical Thinking**  
**Applying Information**  
 (a) Identify a state or a part of a state where water is probably scarce. (b) Why is water in such short supply there?

## Climates of the United States

The United States has 10 major climates. Today, as in the past, these climates strongly influence the nation's population patterns and economic activities.

**Marine** The strip of land from southern Alaska to northern California is sometimes called the Pacific Northwest. This region has a mild, moist marine climate, with warm summers and cool winters. The Pacific Northwest has many forests, making it a center of the lumber industry.

**Mediterranean** Much of California has a Mediterranean climate. Winters are mild and wet. Summers are hot and dry. Because of dry conditions, farmers and fruit growers must often irrigate the land. This region produces almost all of the nation's almonds, walnuts, olives, apricots, dates, and figs.

**Highland** In the Cascades, Sierra Nevada, and Rocky Mountains, a highland climate brings cooler temperatures. Conditions in a highland climate vary according to altitude. For example, Mount Rainier in the state of Washington, at over 14,000 feet above sea level, is snowcapped all year. The highland climate attracts vacationers eager to ski in the winter and escape the heat during the summer.

**Desert and Steppe** Much of the southwestern United States has a desert climate, with hot days and cold nights. This dry region stretches as far east as the Rockies. The deserts of New Mexico, Nevada,



# Glossary of Geographic Terms

The list below includes important geographic terms and their definitions. Sometimes, the definition of a term includes an example in parentheses. An asterisk (\*) indicates that the term is illustrated on page 19.

**altitude** height above sea level

\***archipelago** chain of islands (Hawaiian Islands)

**basin** low-lying land area that is surrounded by land of higher elevation; land that is drained by a river system (Great Basin)

\***bay** part of a body of water that is partly enclosed by land (San Francisco Bay)

**canal** waterway made by people that is used to drain or irrigate land or to connect two bodies of water (Erie Canal)

\***canyon** deep, narrow valley with high, steep sides (Grand Canyon)

\***cape** narrow point of land that extends into a body of water (Cape Cod)

**climate** pattern of weather in a particular place over a period of 20 to 30 years

\***coast** land that borders the sea (Pacific Coast)

**coastal plain** lowland area lying along the ocean (Gulf Plain)

**continent** any of seven large landmasses on the Earth's surface (Africa, Antarctica, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, South America)

**continental divide** mountain ridge that separates river systems flowing toward opposite sides of a continent

\***delta** land formed by soil that is deposited at the mouth of a river (Mississippi Delta)

**desert** area that has little or no moisture or vegetation (Painted Desert)

**directional arrow** arrow on a map that always points north

**downstream** in the direction of a river's flow; toward a river's mouth

**elevation** the height above sea level

**fall line** place where rivers drop from a plateau or foothills to a coastal plain, usually marked by many waterfalls

**foothills** low hills at the base of a mountain range

\***gulf** arm of an ocean or sea that is partly enclosed by land, usually larger than a bay (Gulf of Mexico)

**hemisphere** half of the Earth (Western Hemisphere)

\***hill** area of raised land that is lower and more rounded than a mountain (San Juan Hill)

\***island** land area that is surrounded by water (Puerto Rico)

\***isthmus** narrow strip of land joining two large areas or joining a peninsula to a mainland (Isthmus of Panama)

\***lake** body of water surrounded entirely by land (Lake Superior)

**latitude** the distance in degrees north and south from the Equator

**longitude** the distance in degrees east or west from the Prime Meridian

**marsh** lowland with moist soils and tall grasses

\***mountain** high, steep, rugged land that rises sharply above the surrounding land (Mount McKinley)

**mountain range** chain of connected mountains (Allegheny Mountains)

**mouth of a river** place where a river or stream empties into a larger body of water

**ocean** any of the five largest bodies of salt water on the Earth's surface (Arctic Ocean, Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean, and Antarctic Ocean)

\***peninsula** piece of land that is surrounded by water on three sides (Delmarva Peninsula)

**piedmont** rolling land along the base of a mountain range

\***plain** broad area of fairly level land that is generally close to sea level

\***plateau** large area of high, flat, or gently rolling land

**prairie** large area of natural grassland with few or no trees or hills

\***river** large stream of water that empties into an ocean or a lake or another river (Pecos River)

\***sea** large body of salt water that is smaller than an ocean (Caribbean Sea)

**sea level** average level of the ocean's surface from which the height of land or depth of the ocean is measured

\***source of a river** place where a river begins

**steppe** flat, treeless land with limited moisture

**strait** narrow channel that connects two larger bodies of water (Straits of Florida)

\***tributary** stream or small river that flows into a larger river or stream

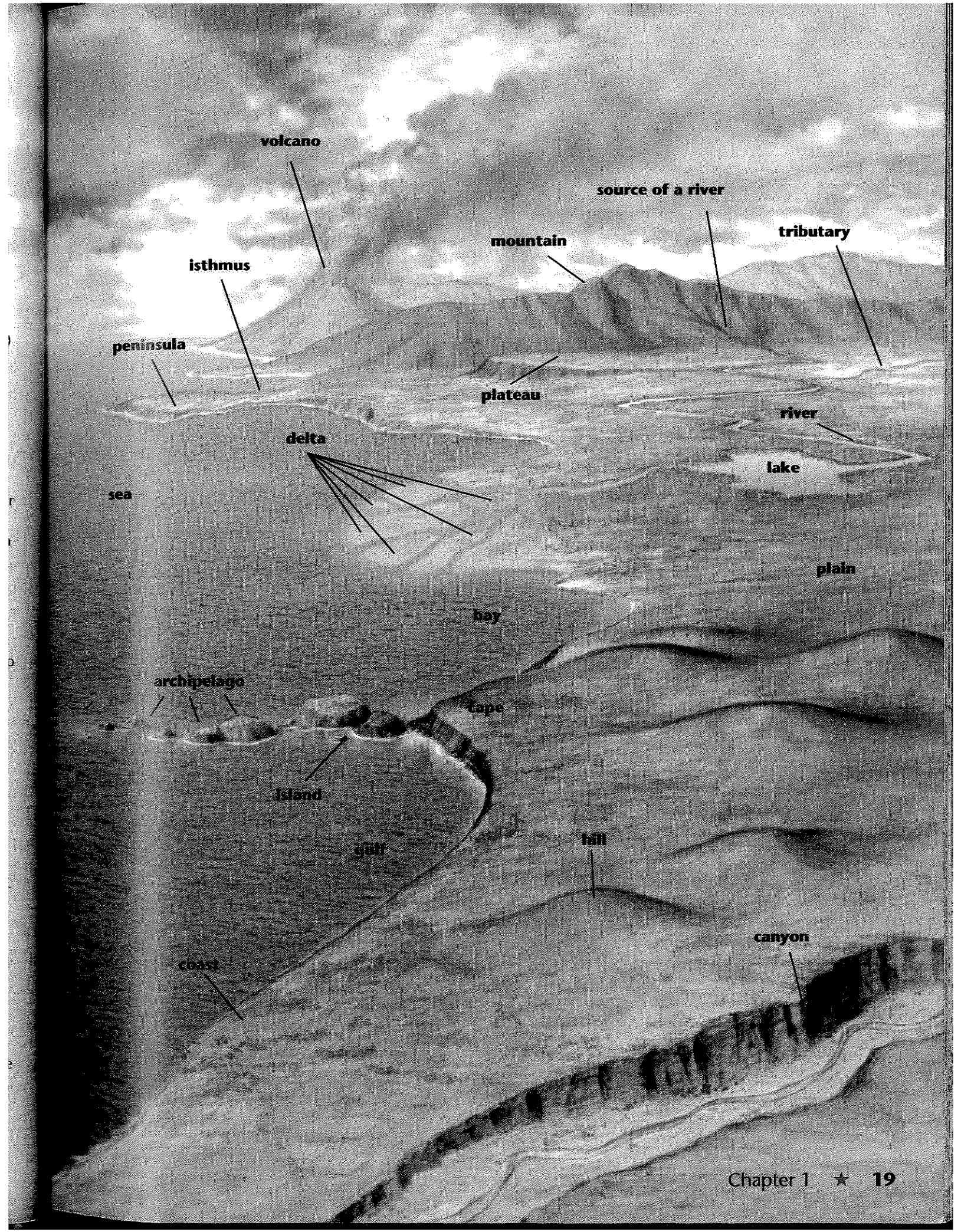
**upstream** in the direction that is against a river's flow; toward a river's source

**valley** land that lies between hills or mountains (Shenandoah Valley)

\***volcano** cone-shaped mountain formed by an outpouring of lava—hot, liquid rock—from a crack in the Earth's surface (Mount St. Helens or Mauna Loa)

**weather** condition of Earth's atmosphere at any given time and place





volcano

source of a river

tributary

mountain

isthmus

peninsula

plateau

delta

sea

river

lake

plain

bay

archipelago

cape

island

gulf

hill

canyon

coast