HANDS DOWN EDUCATION · 6-WEEK UNIT STUDY PLANNER

Maps and Geography unit study

A K-12 geography homeschool curriculum built on maps: directions, scale, latitude and longitude, landforms, projections and map history, with a six-week plan.

GRADE BANDS K-2 · 3-5 · 6-8 · 9-12
FULL GUIDE https://handsdowneducation.com/homeschool/maps-and-geography

How to use this planner

The six weeks below are the guide's authored scope and sequence: one focus, one key activity and one portfolio output per week. Run the activity at the level your child is at (the grade band notes tell you how), keep the output, and by week six you have a portfolio that shows the unit end to end.

Pace is yours. A week here is three to five working sessions; a topic that is going well can take two calendar weeks, and one that has run dry can be closed early. Tick the box when a week's output is in the portfolio.

Six-week scope and sequence

Wk	Focus	Key activity	Portfolio output	Done
1	**Maps and directions**	Bird's-eye view, bedroom maps, finding north, the compass rose and treasure hunts.	A bedroom or house map with a compass rose.	☐
2	**Symbols and legends**	Reading road, park and transit maps; designing symbols; a neighborhood walk map.	A neighborhood map with a legend.	☐
3	**Scale and distance**	Scale bars, scale floor plans, measuring routes and converting map distance to real distance.	A scale drawing and a distance table.	☐
4	**Grids, latitude and longitude**	Letter-number grids, the equator and prime meridian, finding places by coordinates, orienteering.	A coordinate scavenger list or an orienteering course map.	☐
5	**Landforms and topographic maps**	Mountains, valleys, rivers and coasts; contour models; reading real topographic maps.	A contour map from a clay model.	☐
6	**The whole world**	Continents and oceans, projections, the history of mapmaking and digital maps; final mapping project.	A fantasy or local map project and a short presentation.	☐

Running it at your child's level

Grades K-2: directions, symbols and familiar places

Young children learn that a map is a picture of a place seen from above. They can learn left and right, the four cardinal directions, simple symbols and a legend, and the difference between land and water on a globe. Their own home and neighborhood are the best teaching maps, and treasure hunts make practice a game.

- Bird's-eye view: photograph a table set with toys from above, then draw it as a map with a symbol for each toy.
- Bedroom treasure map: draw the bedroom from above, mark an X, and let your child find the treasure, then swap roles.
- Compass walk: find north outside, label the four walls of a room N, E, S and W, and play a game of take three steps north, two steps east.
- Land and water: roll a globe or beach ball, note whether the right thumb lands on land or water, tally twenty throws and talk about why water wins.

  Reading: Me on the Map by Joan Sweeney, which zooms out from a child's room to the world, and Mapping Penny's World by Loreen Leedy, about a girl who maps her dog's favorite places.

Grades 3-5: scale, grids and the world map

Upper elementary students can measure with a scale bar, find places with letter-number grids and then latitude and longitude, name the continents and oceans, and read landforms on physical maps. This is the age for drawing to scale, a first orienteering course and following a long journey across a real map.

- Scale floor plan: measure a room, choose a scale and draw it on graph paper, then check it by measuring the drawing and converting back.
- Grid hunt: use the grid on a city or park map to find ten places, then switch to a globe and find cities from their latitude and longitude.
- Orienteering course: hide five markers in a park or yard and draw a map with a compass rose and scale so a sibling can find them in order.
- Journey map: follow a canoe's route from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic on a map while reading Paddle-to-the-Sea, marking each landform it passes.

  Reading: Paddle-to-the-Sea by Holling Clancy Holling, with its margin maps of the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence, and There's a Map on My Lap! by Tish Rabe from the Cat in the Hat's Learning Library.

Grades 6-8: topographic, thematic and ratio maps

Middle schoolers can read contour lines, calculate real distances and areas with ratios, compare thematic maps of population, climate and land use, and explain why places differ. Free topographic and satellite maps let them test what they read against the real landscape.

- Contour model: build a clay mountain, slice it at equal heights, trace the layers to make a contour map, then read a real USGS topographic map of a nearby hill.
- Ratio distances: on a state map with a 1:1,000,000 scale, measure three routes with a ruler and string and convert each to kilometers and miles.
- Thematic comparison: compare maps of rainfall, population density and farmland for one country and write a paragraph explaining the patterns you see.
- Satellite check: compare a paper map of your town with satellite imagery in Google Earth and list what the map leaves out and why.

  Reading: Maps by Aleksandra MizieliDska and Daniel MizieliDski, an oversized illu
  the free lessons from National Geographic Education.

Grades 9-12: projections, mapmaking history and maps as evidence

High schoolers can explain why every flat map distorts the round Earth, compare the Mercator, equal-area and other projections, trace the history of mapmaking from Ptolemy to satellite surveys and GPS, and read maps critically as arguments that choose what to show. With a research paper and a mapping project, the unit supports a geography, world history or earth science credit.

- Projection test: peel a clementine and try to flatten the peel, then compare the sizes of Greenland and Africa on a Mercator map and a globe and explain the difference.
- Longitude problem: read about the 18th-century race to measure longitude at sea and explain why an accurate clock solved it.
- Critical map reading: find two maps of the same data with different color scales or boundaries and write an analysis of how each choice changes the message.
- Digital mapping project: map a local question, such as parks within walking distance of homes, in a free online mapping tool and present the findings.

  Reading: How to Lie with Maps by Mark Monmonier, a short classic on how map choices shape meaning, and Longitude by Dava Sobel, the story of John Harrison's sea clock.

A sample week, subject by subject

Reading & Writing

Write directions from your front door to a favorite place using left, right, north, south and landmarks, then have someone follow them exactly and revise where they went wrong.

Math

Measure a bedroom with a tape measure, choose a scale such as 1 centimeter to 50 centimeters, and draw a floor plan to scale on graph paper with a scale bar.

Science

Build a clay or sand mountain, slice it at equal heights with dental floss or mark water levels in a tub, and trace the outlines to make a contour map.

Social Studies

Find your home on a globe, a world map, a state map and a street map, and write its latitude and longitude, continent, country and nearest ocean.

Art

Design a fantasy island map with a compass rose, a legend of at least eight symbols, a scale bar and a grid of letters and numbers for finding places.

Books, sites and kits

- Me on the Map by Joan Sweeney (Book (K-2)) — A child zooms out from her room to her street, town, country and world.
- Mapping Penny's World by Loreen Leedy (Book (K-3)) — A girl maps her dog's favorite places, introducing legends, scale and symbols.
- There's a Map on My Lap! by Tish Rabe (Book (K-3)) — A rhyming introduction to map types, scale, grids and projections.
- Paddle-to-the-Sea by Holling Clancy Holling (Book (3-6)) — A carved canoe's journey through the Great Lakes, with maps in every margin.
- Maps by Aleksandra MizieliDska and Daniel MizieliDski (Book (all ages)) — packed with landmarks, foods and people to find.
- How to Lie with Maps by Mark Monmonier (Book (9-12)) — A classic, readable explanation of how projections, scale and symbols shape what maps say.
- National Geographic MapMaker (Website) — Free interactive maps with layers for climate, population and landforms.
- Google Earth (Website) — Free satellite and 3D imagery for comparing maps with the real landscape and measuring distances.

Standards this unit covers

- D2.Geo.1.K-2 (C3) — Construct maps, graphs and other representations of familiar places — bedroom, house and neighborhood maps.
- D2.Geo.2.3-5 (C3) — Use maps, satellite images, photographs and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their environmental characteristics.
- D2.Geo.1.6-8 (C3) — Construct maps to represent and explain the spatial patterns of cultural and environmental characteristics — thematic map comparisons.
- 2-ESS2-2 (NGSS) — Develop a model to represent the shapes and kinds of land and bodies of water in an area — landform and water maps.
- 4-ESS2-2 (NGSS) — Analyze and interpret data from maps to describe patterns of Earth's features — physical and topographic maps.
- CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.5.G.A.1 (CCSS Math) — Use a pair of perpendicular number lines to define a coordinate system — map grids and coordinates.
- CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.7.G.A.1 (CCSS Math) — Solve problems involving scale drawings of geometric figures, including computing actual lengths and areas from a scale drawing.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.2 (CCSS ELA) — Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly — written directions and map reports.

Common questions

What should a geography unit study include?

Six strands: directions and the compass rose, symbols and legends, scale and distance, grids with latitude and longitude, landforms and bodies of water including topographic maps, and the world map itself with continents, oceans, projections and the history of mapmaking. The six-week scope and sequence above runs one strand a week, and each week leaves a map in the portfolio.

How do I start a geography unit study?

Start in your child's bedroom. Draw it from above together, add a compass rose after finding north with a phone compass or the sunrise, and hide a small treasure for them to find with the map. Then widen out to the house, the street and the neighborhood. By the end of the first week you will have three maps and a child who knows which way north is, and the grade-band section above gives the next steps.

What age is a geography unit study best for?

Every age, with a different depth. Preschool and early elementary children learn directions, symbols and familiar places; upper elementary students learn scale, grids, latitude and longitude and the continents and oceans; middle schoolers read topographic and thematic maps and calculate distances with ratios; high schoolers compare projections, analyze maps as evidence and use digital mapping tools.

Can I teach geography to several ages at once?

Yes, and a single neighborhood walk works for everyone. A five-year-old marks the playground and the mailbox on a picture map, a nine-year-old adds a compass rose and a scale, a twelve-year-old measures the route and calculates the real distance from the map, and a fifteen-year-old plots the walk in a free mapping tool and adds elevation.

Do we need to memorize countries and capitals?

Some memorization helps, and free quiz games make it painless, but map skills come first. A child who can read scale, direction, grids and landforms can make sense of any place, and countries and capitals stick better once they are attached to stories, foods and weather from your other subjects.

Does this unit work for secular and faith-based homeschools alike?

Yes. Directions, scale, grids, landforms, projections and the history of mapmaking are the same in any home, and the unit makes no claims beyond what a map shows. Families can easily add maps of the places in the books they already read, from family history to the history and literature they study.

How much does a geography unit study cost?

Very little. Graph paper, a ruler, a tape measure, a simple compass and modeling clay cover the core activities. A globe or a wall map is the main optional purchase. National Geographic MapMaker, Google Earth, USGS topographic maps and geography quiz games are free online, and road maps and atlases are in every library.

Is geography a good homeschool subject?

It is one of the most connected. Map skills map onto the geography strand of the C3 social studies framework at every grade and onto earth-science standards about landforms and bodies of water, with measurement, ratio and coordinate grids along the way. The skills list above names each with its strand and standard.

Turn this into a full, standards-aligned curriculum

Generate a complete plan around maps and geography for your child's grade and pace — free to try, no account required.

https://handsdowneducation.com/curriculum/generate