

A Regional Comparison of the Geography of the United States

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Abstract: This report describes the instructions and results of a regional study to a U.S. Geography class at San Jose State University. A student project comparing regions of the United States can be as complicated or as simple as the course curriculum allows, with the results of that comparison reflecting the depth and breadth of comparison criteria assigned. Delimiting regions is the first of many choices the instructor must make in constructing a project of this type for students. This project can be modified for many grade levels depending on the student level, access to data, and desired instructional outcome.

Summary of Project

Students were given three pages of written instructions and complete instructions verbally in class. They were given the opportunity to ask additional questions in class on several occasions.

Using specific criteria listed below, students reported on observed differences and similarities among ten counties (or equivalent political unit), one in each of ten different regions of the United States. The first part of this project was an eight to ten page research paper, and specific instructions were included not to make a "list" of the required criteria for each county. Rather, the written portion of the project was to be a narrative describing the various counties, giving the reader a "sense of place" for each county as well as a sense of the differences and similarities among regions in which those counties were located.

The project assignment also included a three to five minute in-class oral presentation describing one or two important comparisons students may have discovered in their investigation. The presentations were followed by a question and discussion period of about the same length of time.

The oral presentations began about a week after the graded written reports were returned to the students. This timing allowed the students to note suggestions from the instructor concerning the information the students had chosen to convey. Students could use these suggestions to upgrade the information presented in class, and potentially improve their grade if needed.

The regions were a combination of physical and cultural ones as delimited in the text used for the course, and regional maps were readily available in the text. The regions used in this project were:

Atlantic Northeast	Inland South
Megalopolis	Southeastern Coast
Appalachians/Ozarks	Heartland
Great Plains/Prairies	Intermontane West
North Pacific Coast	

In selecting counties for this project, students needed to familiarize themselves with the regional boundaries as designated by their textbook. They then entered their initials on their chosen counties on a U.S. Geological Survey wall map of the conterminous United States which had only political boundaries for states and counties. For this project, Hawaii and Alaska were not included. The USGS map was posted in the classroom without the regional boundaries. By entering their initials on the map, all students were required to choose different counties with no duplication except for Santa Clara County, which was required to be included by all students.

For one county in each of nine regions and Santa Clara County (home of Jose State University) they were required to find the following information:

- Absolute and Relative Location
- Name and relative location of the County Seat
- Population of county and population of largest city
- Urban-rural population distribution
- Climate and other significant physical geography features
- Dominant type of economic activity

Students were also asked to find other geographic information about the country that might be significant in providing a basis of comparison to counties in their study.

Results

Making regional comparisons can be a complicated pursuit even for Geography instructors, but for students who have had little or no previous instruction in spatial concepts as applied to geographic features, it sometimes becomes nearly impossible. Many of the students this class had not had a previous Geography course, and their K-12 geography instruction was sporadic and of inconsistent quality, as is common in California schools. There were those, of course, who were able grasp the concept more easily, and who produced interesting, in depth reports. For example, a few students connected climatic differences, differences in economic activity, and economic activity with rural-urban population differences. Some students were able to associate the relative location of the county seat with the regional historical geography, observing settlement and recent development patterns. One student commented on

the location of garages in some parts of the country when compared to our California style, and several students investigated the differences in population demographics when to the various ethnic groups.

Most students were unclear on the intention of the classroom presentation. However, the instructor used this opportunity to review much of the lecture and text material by asking certain questions and making comments that were intended to help all students see how certain geographic factors in the presentation applied or did not apply to specific regional characteristics. An interesting side effect of classroom presentations was the lack of attendance on the part of students who did not have to present that day. Presumably this would not be as much of a factor in a high school situation, where attendance is less voluntary.

Many of the students used visual aids during their presentation. Use of these aids was a casual suggestion made by the instructor, and some the students seemed to take this ball and run with it. Many of the students in this particular class are future Middle or High School teachers, which may explain the penchant for constructing posters and graphs. The use of these visual aids gave the students an excellent opportunity to experiment with materials they may use in future careers, and gave the instructor an opportunity to comment on the value of certain types of visual aids.

Observations

Using only one county in a region – for example – as extensive as the Great Plains, compared to one county in Megalopolis, and Santa Clara County, does not in itself a regional comparison make. However, for students who have had little instruction in Geography, this project allowed them to begin to make connections and comparisons, and to deduce some reasons for those connections.

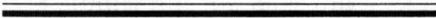
Counties located in or near the transition zone between regions may have presented a misleading similarity with a county in a neighboring region not indicative of the entire region. Because students chose counties from any part of the region, many of those counties were outside the core area where regional homogeneous factors were manifested more intensely.

Attendance for classroom presentations could be improved considerably by explaining to students that the question and discussion portion after each presentation would be used as a review of the text and lecture material. Classroom presentations take a considerable amount of time, and this part of the project could not be used in a class of more

than 15 or 20 students, depending on the structure of the course.

Variations of the assignment could involve choosing counties from the core area – if that can be satisfactorily determined. The assignment could also include fewer criteria and those criteria could be examined more depth. Another variation could involve assigning only two or three regions to different students and requiring more information on counties in that region. When students make classroom presentations, the overall picture could be painted, with gentle prodding by the instructor.

Regional comparisons by students invariably produce a wide variety of results, based on information processed by the student prior to writing and presenting to the class the results of their investigation. This particular experience was no exception.



The following pages (94-97) are the student handout.

Notes

Time/date selected for class presentation _____

Counties selected:

Region	County	State
Atlantic Northeast	_____	_____
Megalopolis	_____	_____
Inland South	_____	_____
Southeastern Coast	_____	_____
Appalachians/Ozarks	_____	_____
Heartland	_____	_____
Great Plains/Prairies	_____	_____
Intermontane West	_____	_____
North Pacific Coast	_____	_____

AND Santa Clara County California

Geography 140 - *The United States*
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The Geography of The United States of America
Instructions for Research Paper and Class Presentation

Students will prepare an 8-10 page research paper describing the results of an investigation of the geographic features of 10 counties in the United States. Each student will make a presentation to the class describing the results of the investigation.

Each student will choose one county from each of the following regions, which are described cartographically on the inside front cover of the textbook. (Numbers are from the map.)

Atlantic Northeast (6)
Megalopolis (8)
Appalachians/Ozarks (9)
Great Plains/Prairies (13)
North Pacific Coast (18)

Inland South (10)
Southeastern Coast (11)
Heartland (12)
Intermontane West (15)
PLUS Santa Clara County

All students must choose different counties in each region, but must include Santa Clara County. A county map of the United States is posted in the classroom. Students should enter their initials (3) IN PENCIL on the map as they determine which counties they will investigate. All initials must be entered by the end of class on Thursday, March 5. Make certain the counties chosen are in the appropriate regions. DO NOT enter initials in Santa Clara County.

Content of Paper

The research paper will describe the following features of each county:

- Absolute and relative location
- Climate and other significant physical geography features
- Type of economic activity
- Urban-rural population distribution
- Population of county and population of largest city
- Name and relative location of the county seat

The paper should also include other geographic information about the county that the student feels is important in giving the reader a "sense of place".

The paper will include a comparison of the above features among the 10 counties and observations on the possible reasons for differences and similarities.

Do not make a "list" of the above features for each county. A combination of all of the above information should tell a story about a variety of places, and give the reader (and writer) an understanding of what these places are like and why.

A conclusion to the paper should describe what the student discovered in this investigation.

Format

The paper must be typed or computer generated. Use a size 10 or small 12 font, double space the text, and use 1" margins on the top, bottom and sides. NO handwritten pages will be accepted. Include a cover page but no plastic or other special cover.

Include a bibliography but no footnotes or endnotes. Web sites used should be listed in the bibliography with the exact address so they can be checked. Other bibliographic references should include page numbers where relevant information was found.

The paper must be at least 8 pages in length, but no longer than 12 pages. The cover page and the bibliography are not included in this page number requirement. Any student who chooses to cartographically display some of the required information should consult the instructor before beginning the project. Otherwise, any variation in the required format will result in points being deducted.

Style and form of writing, spelling, punctuation and grammar will be included in grading criteria.

Class Presentation

Each student will present to the class the results of her/his investigation. Students will have received their graded papers approximately one week before presentations begin. They should take advantage of this time to correct any problems in their papers that might reflect in a lower grade on the class presentation. Comments on the returned paper should make these possible problems apparent in advance.

Each presentation should last approximately 5 minutes, with an additional 5 minutes or so for questions and/or discussion. The presentations will take place during the class periods on Thursday, April 23, Tuesday, April 28, and Thursday, April 30. There will be no presentations accepted at any other time. Sign up sheets for class presentation times will be posted in the classroom. Students are responsible for entering their names in times they can commit to without changes.

Point Distribution for Project Grade

Written presentation	100 points as follows
Accuracy of data	20 points
Style, form, language skills	20 points
Inclusion of required information	20 points
Description of comparison	20 points
Conclusion	20 points
Class presentation	50 points as follows
Organization (including timing)	25 points
Descriptive skill	25 points

Schedule and Rules

Students who have not entered their initials on counties on the map by the end of class on Thursday, March 5, will have 5 points deducted for every class period counties are not chosen. Make certain initials are easily read and IN PENCIL. Any student using a pen on the map will purchase a new map for the instructor. Maps are available at the U.S. Geological Survey Map Store in Menlo Park.

Papers received by any method of delivery after 9:00 a.m. on Thursday, April 9, will have 10 points deducted for every class period the paper is late.

Students who are not in class for the scheduled time of their presentation will not receive credit for this portion of the project.

Questions? Please do not hesitate to visit the instructor during office hours or communicate by telephone or e-mail as listed at the beginning of these instructions.

This project is intended to be fun and interesting and to contribute to the student's understanding of places in the United States. Allow plenty of time to find the data, which is readily available in reference books and through the World Wide Web.

The secret to success? **START NOW.** Don't wait until you do not have enough time to successfully complete this project. Plan ahead.