

## **How to Read a Map**

Maps function within iconic semiotics, that is, they are ‘signs’ that resemble its referents, e.g., the icon of a saint in Orthodox Christianity is an assembly of media that resembles the saint. The map in every Subway carriage is just a collection of media, it’s not the system, but an icon of the system allows the viewer a perspective through semiology that would be empirically impossible.

## **The Parts of a Map**

**Title** – Usually the map will, just like a piece of writing, have a title within the map; though the titles of maps are almost always descriptive and specific. If you do not immediately recognize the geographic region represented in the map, then look to the title for direction. (The title of the map, if it even has one, is not the same as the name of the file.)

**Compass Rose** – Maps usually have a compass rose or some other symbol, such as an arrow, that helps orient the map user to the cardinal orientation (north, south, east, and west) of the map (while common, not all maps have the north oriented towards the top of the map). The compass rose informs the viewer which way is north, south, and so on. Do not describe the north as the “top” of the map. Use cardinal directions in order to be specific.

**Legend** – Maps usually have a legend that translates any of the symbols or color plains used. For example, it could be green shading to denote forest or drilling rigs to denote oil fields or a star denotes a state or national capital. Understanding the legend is key to reading a map.

**Scale** – Maps usually also have a scale that shows common measurements, such as miles or kilometers about the map. Sometimes they also indicate this as a ratio, as when they say that the map is drawn at 1:20,000 scale, meaning that one unit on the map (say, an inch) equals 20,000 of those same units (again, inches) in real life.

**Coordinates** – Maps may contain coordinates, marked along the borders, that are usually shown as measurements of latitude and longitude: These help the map user know where the area is in terms of the equator and other points east or west of another main point, such as London or Washington.

**Commentaries** – Maps may also include written commentaries that describe the information within the map in greater detail or context. Look for the following (though they may not always be there):

## **Hydrology**

Regardless of the map, one of the key features to look for, as important as the parts listed above, is water. Look for creeks, rivers, lakes, harbors, bays, gulfs, and seas. The history of commerce is a history of humans and water. Appreciate the difference between regions that have an abundance of rivers or access to the sea through port-cities with those regions that are landlocked or contain few rivers, especially when it comes to population, wealth, cities, and transportation infrastructure.

## **Population**

Remember, history isn't the study of the past. It's the study of the human past. Even if the map doesn't indicate exactly where or how many people reside, do your best to determine, based on the available information, how this map represents human geography.

## **Land Use**

Commerce is, at root, a basic relationship between labor and the natural world. Humans need resources to survive varied alimentary nutrients, shelter, clean water, and so on. Labor is the key to transforming the natural world into use value. Look for examples of how the land, including marine resources adjacent to land, is used, whether for agriculture or silviculture or manufacturing or energy generation or habitat restoration.

## **Political Maps**

While they continue to be popular, political maps aren't very useful now that the Cold War is over. Maps that detail physical geography, hydrology, agriculture, languages, or population densities are infinitely more useful than political maps. If you want to learn about a country, then don't count on learning much from a political map.