



Three types of maps and what they show

KS2 GEOGRAPHY Ages 10-13 🕒 3 min read

What are maps?

Maps are flat pictures that show us information about places on Earth. But not all maps show the same things! Some maps show countries and cities, others show mountains and rivers, and some show completely different information like weather or population. Learning the difference helps you pick the right map for the right question.

Political maps

Political maps show borders between countries, states, and regions. They use different colours to show where each country ends and another begins. You'll see capital cities marked with special symbols, and main cities highlighted too. These maps answer questions like: "What countries border France?" or "Which state is New York in?"

Think of it like a colouring book where each country or region gets its own colour so you can see where the lines are drawn between them.

Physical maps

Physical maps show the natural features of Earth. Instead of country borders, they display mountains, valleys, rivers, oceans, lakes, and deserts. They often use different shades of colour — greens for lowlands, browns for hills and mountains, and blues for water. A physical map helps you understand the landscape and geography of a place. These maps answer questions like: "Where are the tallest mountains?" or "Which rivers flow through this region?"

Think of it like a 3D model of the land shaped in bumpy and flat areas, but flattened onto paper to show what the ground actually looks like.

Thematic maps

Thematic maps focus on one specific topic or theme. They might show population density, climate zones, languages spoken, natural resources, rainfall, or disease

spread. Thematic maps use colours, symbols, and patterns to show where something is concentrated. For example, a climate map shows where it's hot, cold, wet, or dry. A population map shows where most people live.

Think of it like a treasure map that highlights only one type of treasure — maybe just gold, or just jewels — instead of showing everything at once.

Why does it matter?

Different maps serve different purposes. If you need to find the capital of Australia, use a **political map**. If you want to know about the **Great Dividing Range**, use a **physical map**. If you're researching where Aboriginal populations live, you'd use a **thematic map**. Good geographers know which map tool to use for each question!