

Read Physical Maps

What mountain range is closest to you where you live? What major rivers are closest to you? To find out, you would look at a physical map. Physical maps show physical features, such as elevation, mountains, valleys, oceans, rivers, deserts, and plains.

1 Identify the title and region shown on a map.

A map's title can help you to identify the region covered by the map. The title may also tell you the type of information you will find on the map. If the map has no title, you can identify the region by reading the labels on the map.

2 Use the map key to interpret symbols and colors on a map.

A key or legend often appears in a small box near the edge of the map. The legend will tell you the meaning of colors, symbols, or other patterns on the map. On a physical map, colors from the key often show elevation, or height above sea level, on the map.

3 Identify physical features, such as mountains, valleys, oceans, and rivers.

Using labels on the map and colors and symbols from the key, identify the physical features on the map. Rivers, oceans, lakes, and other bodies of water are usually colored blue. Colors from the key may indicate higher and lower elevation, or there may be shading on the map that shows mountains.

4 Draw conclusions about the region based on natural resources and physical features.

Once you understand all the symbols and colors on the map, try to draw conclusions about the region. Is it very mountainous or mostly flat? Does it have a coastline? Does the region have lots of lakes and rivers that suggest a good water supply? Physical maps can give you an idea of lifestyle and economic activities of people in the region.