

THE
HANDY
GEOGRAPHY
ANSWER
BOOK



SECOND EDITION

Paul A. Tucci and Matthew T. Rosenberg

Your Smart Reference™

About the Authors



Paul A. Tucci is chief operating officer and partner at iwerk, inc., an innovative software developer and IT services corporation based in Michigan. He is also a partner in the private equity investment banking firm Cranbrook Partners, and is on the board of directors of the Rizlov Foundation, an organization that grants scholarships to students of classical music. Previously, Paul held senior executive management positions at leading global academic information publishing companies, managing global sales and marketing and product innovation for 18 years.

Tucci has traveled to and done business in more than half of the countries of the world, and is also the author of the book *Traveling Everywhere: How to Survive a Global Business Trip*. He has lectured throughout the world and written extensively on global information development issues. He has also guest-lectured in international management, marketing, and culture at such institutions as the University of Michigan, Northwestern University, New York University, and INSEAD in Fountainebleau, France. A graduate of the University of Michigan, Tucci received a B.A. in international politics, with a concentration in international development, foreign relations, and languages.

Matthew Todd Rosenberg studied geography at the University of California at Davis and earned a master's at California State University, Northridge. He is the author of the first edition of *The Handy Geography Answer Book*, and also published *The Geography Bee Complete Preparation Handbook*. He has worked as an adjunct professor, a newspaper columnist, a city planner, and as a disaster manager for the Red Cross. His work in disaster relief took him all across America, as well as Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. His contributions to the science of geography earned him the Excellence in Media Award from the National Council for Geographic Education.

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Detroit

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*For a list of Internet websites and further
resources, visit The Handy Geography
Answer Book page at visibleink.com.*

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Introduction

My interest in geography began when I was a little boy, reading whatever I could of my family's collection of *National Geographic* magazines. I still remember actual pictures and stories of far-away places, of distant lands and settlements and modern civilization, of colorful foods that had unimaginable flavors, of people wearing robes and silks, and so many eyes and smiles. I knew at this age that I would want to be a part of the world, and know the whole world.

My geography professor emeritus at the University of Michigan, Dr. George Kish, a noted geographer and cartographer, inspired us with his stories in lectures on Mondays and Wednesdays. I remember he told us what it was like to stand somewhere in Siberia and feel the temperature changes from the thermals on the ground rising up to his waist, creating a gradient of perhaps 30 degrees. I learned that geography was much more than just looking at a globe and naming names on a map. It is about the land, the people on that land, the delicate balance of nature, and our very interdependence upon it, despite the miracles of technology and grocery stores. It's about the effects of nature on places that we may never visit, the stories of human survival and rebuilding, and of renewal.

From the earliest times, mankind has been fascinated with understanding the questions of geography. The Caves of Lascaux, in France, demonstrate the fascination with which our early ancestors—16,000 years ago—had for their surroundings. Their interaction with nature and reverence for where they were, and how they fit into this world we now inherit, is clearly drawn on stone walls.

It is our nature to wonder about places, to try to understand how do we fit in to this great puzzle that we call Earth. When we begin with asking a question about the planet that we live on, we open up a little part of ourselves to that place. Somehow, it becomes less foreign to us. In my travels around the world, I am always amazed at the number of people who know so much about our country. They speak of New Orleans as if they have walked down Bourbon Street. According to a Roper Poll on Geographic Understanding, American kids ranked dead last in their knowledge of the rest of the world. If you know the people, places, and history of the world, you are more likely to promote peace with other lands. You see the differences as well as the plethora of similarities. Quite possibly, you find things about each place that are admirable. Or you see how your country or region compares to some other place and begin to work to solve common problems and inequities.

World change begins with our geographic interest. I hope that this book stimulates your interest and knowledge, perhaps even makes you delve deeper into a particular place, or set foot upon another land and grasp the hands of its people.

—Paul A. Tucci



DEFINITIONS AND HISTORY

What does the word “**geography**” mean?

The word geography is of Greek origin and can be divided into two parts, *geo*, meaning the Earth, and *graphy*, which refers to writing. So geography can be loosely translated to “writing about the Earth.” Ancient geography was often descriptions of far away places, but modern geography has become much more than writing about the Earth. Contemporary geographers have a difficult time defining the discipline. Some of my favorite definitions include “the bridge between the human and the natural sciences,” “the mother of all sciences,” and “anything that can be mapped.”

Who **invented** geography?

The Greek philosopher Thales was one of the first to argue about the shape of the world in the sixth century B.C.E. And Chinese texts of the fifth century B.C.E. describe the provinces of China in great detail. However, the Greek scholar Eratosthenes is credited with the first use of the word geography in the third century B.C.E. He is also known as the “father of geography” for his geographical writing and accomplishments, including the measurement of the circumference of the Earth.

What is **geologic time**?

Geologic time is a time scale that divides the history of the planet Earth into eras, periods, and epochs from the birth of the planet to the present. The oldest era is the Precambrian, which began 4.6 billion years ago and ended about 570 million years ago. Next came the Paleozoic Era, which lasted from 570 to 245 million years ago, followed by the Mesozoic Era, from 245 to 66 million years ago. We’re now living in the

When did geography begin?

We must assume that one of the earliest questions human beings asked was “What’s over that hill?” Geographic thought has been present for thousands of years—maps drawn in the sand or etched in stone, as well as explorations to distant lands, were made by the earliest civilizations. Geographic knowledge has been accumulating since the beginning of humankind.

Cenozoic Era, which began 66 million years ago. The Paleozoic, Mesozoic, and Cenozoic eras are each divided into periods. Additionally, the Cenozoic Era is divided into even smaller units of time called epochs. The last ten thousand years (the time since the last significant Ice Age) is called the Holocene Epoch.

What is the **AAG**?

The Association of American Geographers (AAG) is a professional organization of academic geographers and geography students. The AAG was founded in 1904 and publishes two key academic journals in geography, the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* and the *Professional Geographer*. The AAG also holds annual conferences and supports regional and specialty groups of geographers.

What is the **NCGE**?

The National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE) is an organization of educators that seeks to promote geographic education. The NCGE publishes the *Journal of Geography* and holds conferences every year.

What is the **National Geographic Society**?

Founded in 1888, the National Geographic Society has supported exploration, cartography, and discovery and publishes the popular magazine *National Geographic*, the fifth most-popular magazine in the United States.

What do **modern geographers** do?

While there are a few jobs with the title of “geographer,” many geography students use their analytical ability and knowledge of the world to work in a variety of fields. Geography students often take jobs in fields such as city planning, cartography, marketing, real estate, environment, and teaching.

THE EARTH

How **old** is the **Earth**?

The Earth is approximately 4.6 billion years old.

How was the **Earth formed**?

Scientists believe that the Earth was formed, along with the rest of the solar system, from a massive gas cloud. As the cloud solidified, it formed the solid masses such as the Earth and the other planets.

What is the **circumference** of the Earth?

The circumference of the Earth at the equator is 24,901.55 miles (40,066.59 kilometers). Due to the irregular, ellipsoid shape of the Earth, a line of longitude wrapped around the Earth going through the north and south poles is 24,859.82 miles (40,000 kilometers). Therefore, the Earth is a little bit (about 41 miles [66 kilometers]) wider than it is high. The diameter of the Earth is 7,926.41 miles (12,753.59 kilometers).

Is the Earth a **perfect sphere**?

No, the Earth is a bit wider than it is “high.” The shape is often called a geoid (Earth-like) or an ellipsoid. The rotation of the Earth causes a slight bulge towards the equator. The circumference of the Earth at the equator is 24,901.55 miles (40,066.59 kilometers), which is about 41 miles (66 kilometers) greater than the circumference through the poles (24,859.82 miles [40,000 kilometers]). If you were standing on the moon, looking back home, it would be virtually impossible to see the bulge and the Earth would appear to be a perfect sphere (which it practically is).

What is a **hemisphere**?

A hemisphere is half of the Earth. The Earth can actually be divided into hemispheres in two ways: by the equator, and by the Prime Meridian (through Greenwich, England) at 0 degrees longitude and another meridian at 180 degrees longitude (near the location of the International Dateline in the western Pacific Ocean). The equator divides the Earth into northern and southern hemispheres.



The Earth is not a perfect sphere but rather an ellipsoid. As the Earth spins, centrifugal forces cause the planet to bulge slightly around the middle.

There are seasonal differences between the northern and southern hemispheres but there is no such difference between the eastern and western hemispheres. Zero and 180 degrees longitude divide the Earth into the eastern (most of Europe, Africa, Australia, and Asia) and western (the Americas) hemispheres.

What are the **Arctic and Antarctic Circles**?

The circles are imaginary lines that surround the north and south poles at 66.5 degrees latitude. The Arctic Circle is a line of latitude at 66.5 degrees north of the equator and the Antarctic Circle is a line of latitude at 66.5 degrees south. Areas north of the Arctic Circle are dark for 24 hours near December 21 and areas south of the Antarctic Circle are dark for 24 hours near June 21. Almost all of the continent of Antarctica is located to the south of the Antarctic Circle.

If the Earth is so large, why did **Columbus think that India was close enough to reach by sailing west from Europe?**

The Greek geographer Posidonius did not believe Eratosthenes' earlier calculation, so he performed his own measurement of the Earth's circumference and arrived at the figure of 18,000 miles (28,962 kilometers). Columbus used the circumference estimated by Posidonius when he argued his plan before the Spanish court. The 7,000 mile (11,263 kilometer) difference between the actual circumference and the one Columbus used led him to believe he could reach India rather quickly by sailing west from Europe.

How **fast does the Earth spin?**

It depends on where you are on the planet. If you were standing on the north pole or close to it, you would be moving at a very slow rate of speed—nearly zero miles per hour. On the other hand, those who live at the equator (and therefore have to move about 24,900 miles [40,000 kilometers] in a 24-hour period) zoom at about 1,038 miles (1,670 kilometers) per hour. Those in the mid-latitudes, as in the United States, breeze along from about 700 to 900 miles (1,126 to 1,448 kilometers) per hour.

Why **don't we feel** the Earth moving?

Even though we constantly move at a high rate of speed, we don't feel it, just as we don't feel the speed at which we're flying in an airplane or driving in a car. It's only when there is a sudden change in speed that we notice, and if the Earth made such a change we would certainly feel it.

Does the Earth **spin at a constant rate?**

The rotation of the Earth actually has slight variations. Motion and activity within the Earth, such as friction due to tides, wind, and other forces, change the speed of the

How was the circumference of the Earth determined?

The Greek geographer and librarian at the Great Library of Alexandria, Eratosthenes (c.273—c.192 B.C.E.), was aware that the sun reached the bottom of a well in Egypt only once a year, on the first day of summer. The well was near Aswan and the Tropic of Cancer (where the sun is directly overhead at noon on the summer solstice). Eratosthenes estimated the distance between the well and Alexandria based on the length of time it took camel caravans to travel between the two places. He measured the angle of the sun's shadow in Alexandria at the same time as the well was lit by the sun, and then used a mathematic formula to determine that the circumference of the Earth was 25,000 miles (about 40,000 kilometers)—amazingly close to the actual figure!

planet's rotation a little. These changes only amount to milliseconds over hundreds of years but do cause people who keep exact time to make corrections every few years.

What is the **axis** of the Earth?

The axis is the imaginary line that passes through the north and south poles about which the Earth revolves.

What is **inside the Earth**?

At the very center of the Earth is a dense and solid inner core of iron and other minerals that is about 1,800 miles (2,896 kilometers) wide. Surrounding the inner core is a liquid (molten) outer core. Surrounding the outer core is the mantle, which makes up the bulk of the interior of the Earth. The mantle is composed of three layers—two outer layers are solid and the inner layer (the asthenosphere) is a layer of rock that is easily moved and shaped.

If I **dug through the Earth**, would I end up in China?

If you are in North America and you were able to dig through the Earth (which is impossible due to such things as pressure, the molten outer core, and solid inner core), you would end up in the Indian Ocean, far from land masses. If you were really lucky, you might end up on a tiny island, but you're surely not going to end up in China. The points at opposite sides of the Earth are called antipodes. Most antipodes of Europe fall into the Pacific Ocean.

What is the **mid-Atlantic ridge**?

We don't get to appreciate the beauty of this huge mountain range because it's located at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean (with one exception: Iceland is a part of the ridge).

The ridge is a crack between tectonic plates where new ocean floor is being created as magma flows up from under the Earth. As more crust is created, it pushes the older crust further away. The new crust at the ridge piles up to form mountains and then begins to move across the bottom of the ocean. Because the Earth can't get larger as more crust is created, the crust eventually has nowhere to go except back into the Earth. This is where subduction occurs.

What is **subduction**?

When two tectonic plates meet and collide, crust must either be lifted up, as in the case of the Himalayas, or it must be sent back into the Earth. When crust from one plate slides under the crust of another, it is called subduction, and the area around the subduction is called a subduction zone.

What is the **North Magnetic Pole**?

The North Magnetic Pole is where compass needles around the world point. It is located in Canada's Northwest Territories at about 71 degrees north, 96 degrees west (latitude and longitude), about 900 miles (1,450 kilometers) away from absolute North Pole. It moves continuously, so to determine true north, look at a recent topographic map for your local area. It should note the "magnetic declination," which means the degrees east or west that you'll need to rotate your compass to determine which way is actually north.

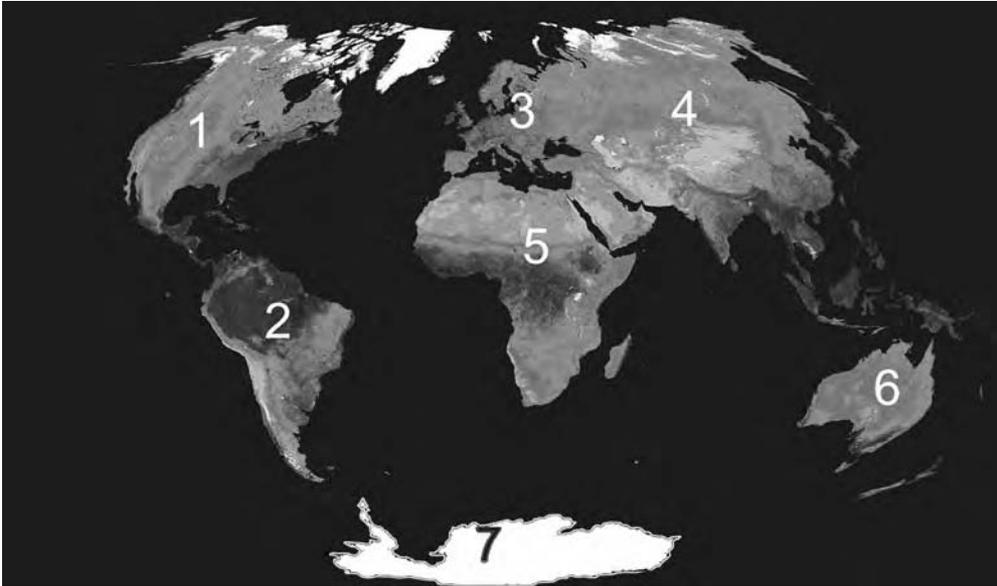
CONTINENTS AND ISLANDS

What are **continents**?

Continents are the six or seven large land masses on the planet. If you count seven continents these include Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, Antarctica, North America, and South America. Some geographers refer to six continents by combining Europe and Asia as Eurasia, due to the fact that it is one large tectonic plate and land mass. So whether you count Europe and Asia one continent or two (divided at the Ural Mountains in western Russia) is up to the individual. Australia is the only continent that is its own country.

What is the **largest continent**?

The largest continent is Eurasia (Europe and Asia combined) at 21,100,000 square miles (54,649,000 square kilometers). But even if you consider Europe and Asia to be two separate continents, Asia is still the largest, at 17,300,000 square miles (44,807,000 square kilometers).



A satellite image showing the continents of North (1) and South America (2), Europe (3), Asia (4), Africa (5), Australia (6), and Antarctica (7). (Image courtesy MODIS Land Group/Vegetation Indices, Alfredo Huete, Principal Investigator, and Kamel Didan, University of Arizona).

What is a **subcontinent**?

A subcontinent is a landmass that has its own continental shelf and its own continental plate. Currently, India and its neighbors form the only subcontinent, but in millions of years, Eastern Africa will break off from Africa and become its own subcontinent.

What was **Pangea**?

About 250 million years ago, all of the land on Earth was lumped together into one large continent known as Pangea. Faults and rifts broke the land masses apart and pushed them away from each other. The continents slowly moved across the Earth to their present positions, and they continue to move today. The Indian subcontinent (composed of India and its neighbors) continues to push into Asia and create the Himalayas.

What is the **world's largest island**?

The world's largest island is Greenland, technically now known as Kalaallit Nunaat. Greenland is located in the North Atlantic Ocean near Canada. It is a territory of Denmark but has locally governed itself since 1979. It is approximately 840,000 square miles (2,175,600 square kilometers). Australia, while it also meets the usual definition

What island did Robinson Crusoe shipwreck on?

Daniel Defoe based his novel *Robinson Crusoe* on the story of Alexander Selkirk. Selkirk was an English sailor who had an argument with the captain of his ship and asked to go ashore on the island of Mas a Tierra (also known as Robinson Crusoe Island), about 400 miles (644 kilometers) west of Chile. Selkirk was stranded on the island from 1704 to 1709, when he was rescued by another English ship.

of an island (surrounded by water) and is larger than Greenland, is not considered an island but a continent.

Why is **Greenland** considered an **island** while **Australia** is a **continent**?

Australia is three and a half times larger than Greenland and comprises most of the land on the Indo-Australian plate, while Greenland is distinctly part of the North American plate.

What is an **archipelago**?

An archipelago is a chain (or group) of islands that are close to one another. The Aleutian Islands of Alaska and the Hawaiian Islands are both archipelagos. They are usually formed by plates pushing into one another or by volcanic activity.

What is a **strait**?

A strait is a narrow body of water between islands or continents that connects two larger bodies of water. Two of the most famous straits are the Strait of Gibraltar, which connects the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, and the Strait of Hormuz, which connects the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman.

HIGH, LOW, BIG, SMALL, AND WONDROUS

What is the **lowest point** in the world on land?

The world's lowest point is at the Dead Sea on the border of Israel and Jordan. It is 1,312 feet (400 meters) below sea level.

What is the **lowest point** on **dry land**?

The world's lowest point is still the Dead Sea shoreline, at approximately 1,378 feet (420 meters) below sea level.

What are the **lowest points** on each continent?

In Africa, the lowest point is Lake Assal in Djibouti, 512 feet (156 meters) below sea level. In North America, California's Death Valley lies at 282 feet (86 meters) below sea level. Argentina's Bahia Blanca is the lowest point in South America at 138 feet (42 meters) below sea level. The Caspian Sea in Europe lies at 92 feet (28 meters) below sea level, and Australia's lowest point is a mere 52 feet (16 meters) below sea level at Lake Eyre.

What is the **highest point** in the world?

At 29,035 feet (8,850 meters), the highest point above sea level in the world is Mt. Everest, which lies on the border of China and Nepal.

Is **Mt. Everest** growing taller?

Because of the shifting plates underneath the surface of the Earth, Mt. Everest is actually growing at a rate of 2.4 inches (6.1 cm.) per year.

What are the **highest points** on each continent?

The highest peak in South America, Aconcagua, lies in Argentina at 22,834 feet (6,960 meters). In North America, Alaska's Mt. McKinley (also called Denali, as it is known indigenously) is 20,320 feet (6,194 meters). The famous Mt. Kilimanjaro (19,340 feet [5,895 meters]) is in Africa's Tanzania. Ice-covered Antarctica's high point is known as Vinson Massif, 16,864 feet (5,140 meters). Europe's Mont Blanc is in the Alps between France and Italy at 15,771 feet (4,807 meters). Australia's high point, Kosciusko, is the lowest of all the continents at 7,310 feet (2,228 meters).

What is the **highest mountain** on **Earth**?

The highest mountain lies on the big island of Hawaii, with a height from the bottom of the sea floor, rising 33,474 feet



Mt. Everest is the tallest peak on Earth, standing 29,035 feet above sea level.

(10,203 meters) to the top of Mauna Kea, which is a volcano that rises 13,680 feet (4,170 meters) above sea level.

What are the **deepest points** in the oceans?

Lying deep below the Pacific Ocean, about 200 miles (322 kilometers) south of the island of Guam, is the Marianas Trench (also known as the Mariana Trench), which is 1,554 miles (2,550 kilometers) long and 44 miles (71 kilometers) wide. The deepest point of the Marianas Trench is 36,198 feet (11,033 meters). In the Atlantic Ocean, the Puerto Rico Trench is 28,374 feet (8,648 meters) below the surface. In the Arctic Ocean, the Eurasia Basin is 17,881 feet (5,450 meters) deep. The Java Trench in the Indian Ocean is 23,376 feet (7,125 meters) deep. Another deep point of note in the Pacific Ocean is Monterey Canyon off the coast of northern California. It is about 95 miles (153 kilometers) long and 11,800 feet (3,600 meters) deep. The cold waters generated in the trench create a perfect environment rich in foods that support a diverse range of wildlife.

In comparison to all of these ocean canyons, the most famous land canyon—the Grand Canyon in Arizona—is 277 miles (446 kilometers) long and 6,000 feet (1,829 meters) deep. The world's ocean canyons are much more impressive, but most people will never see them.

Where is the **farthest point from land**?

In the middle of the Southern Pacific ocean lies a spot that is 1,600 miles (2,574 kilometers) from any land. Located at 47°30' South, 120° West, this spot is equidistant from Antarctica, Australia, and Pitcairn Island.

Where is the **farthest point from an ocean**?

In northern China lies a spot that is over 1,600 miles (2,574 kilometers) from any ocean. Located at 46°17' North, 86°40' East, the land is equidistant from the Arctic Ocean, Indian Ocean, and Pacific Ocean.

What were the **seven wonders of the ancient world**?

While there was often disagreement by ancient and classical scholars as to which major works of art and architecture could be considered wonders, these seven were nearly always on the list: the Pyramids of Egypt (the only remaining wonder), the Colossus of Rhodes (on the island of Rhodes in Greece), the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (a marble temple in Turkey), the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus (Bodrum, Turkey), the Statue of Zeus at Olympia (an ivory and gold statue in South Western Greece), the Hanging Gardens of Babylon (an enormous garden building, with plants of every kind, near Al Hillah, Iraq) and the Lighthouse of Alexandria (on the island of Pharos, near Alexandria, Egypt).

What are the **seven wonders of the modern world**?

According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, the seven wonders of the modern world include the Channel Tunnel between England and France; the CN Tower in Toronto, Canada; the Empire State Building, New York; the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco; the Itaipu Dam between Brazil and Paraguay; the Netherlands North Sea Protection Works; and the Panama Canal.



One of the seven natural wonders of the world is the stunning Grand Canyon in Arizona.

What are the **seven natural wonders of the world**?

These include the Aurora Borealis (northern lights), Mt. Everest (on the border of China and Nepal), Victoria Falls (in eastern Africa), the Grand Canyon (USA), Great Barrier Reef (Australia), Paricutin (volcano in Mexico), and the harbor of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) with its stunning topography.

HUMAN CIVILIZATION

When did **agriculture** begin?

Agriculture began about 10 to 12 thousand years ago in a time period known as the first agricultural revolution. It was at this time that humans began to domesticate plants and animals for food. Before the agricultural revolution, people relied on hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants for nutrition. This revolution took place almost simultaneously in different areas of human settlement.

Where did **agriculture** begin?

Agriculture simultaneously began in what is known now as the Middle East (Fertile Crescent), the Yangtze River Region of southern China, the Yellow River Region of northern China, Sub Saharan Africa, South-Central Andes near modern day Peru, Bolivia and Chile, Central Mexico, and the eastern United States.

What is the **difference** between **cultivation** and **domestication**?

Cultivation is the deliberate attempt to sow and manage essentially wild plants and seed. Domestication is when people experiment and consciously select the right seeds to grow for various conditions.