

Placing Europe: HOW do we know where is it?

AP Human Geography, Unit I: Geographic Concepts

Grade Level: 9th – 12th

Duration: 3 class periods

Needed Supplies (by student): A pack of colored pencils (at least 12 colors)

Objective:

One of the primary issues introduced during the course's first unit is the process through which inanimate spaces are transformed into "places". A place, in essence, is a space that holds some form(s) of cultural value, meaning, and/or referential understanding – all places are also spaces but not all spaces become places (such as a closet to a bedroom or a random ten-square mile of unpopulated farmland in Iowa). Once humans applying such cultural values, meanings, or understandings to a space (or sometimes a collection/grouping of spaces) then that space becomes place. But before the process of *becoming* can begin there must first exist a *believing* in particular cultural, historical, or conceptual references held by those about to engage in the *creating* of envisaged places.

This multi-day lesson will utilize the essential question set "What is Europe? And *Where* is it?" as the means of exploring how we understand regions (spaces that are understood through associations; in this case, cultural ones), and how/why the boundaries of these regions are assigned, maintained, and realigned. This introductory lesson, by way of focusing on "where is Europe?" will have future implication in this AP course when we get to the units on cultural and political geography, as these are when the European Union is formally introduced and expanded upon.

Day 1: Lesson 1.1: *What is a place?*

Prep Homework: Students will take home a printed sheet of paper that has a general outline of their larger population community (city, town, or the area of a county), and using their colored pencils will try to outline the most general areas of their hometown/city/county. In the case of this module I utilize the city of Chicago (as this is my home city) and I ask students to outline the different major regions (the "west side", the "northside", the "southside", etc). They are asked to not use the internet and through their best effort mark where they think the "exact" boundaries are. This homework assigned will take no more than 15 minutes. It might be constructive on this printed outline to include major natural features, such as rivers, hills, lakes, or even some manmade points of reference, such as where their school is or the "downtown", as these points of reference will enable the student to extrapolate from this easily-identified focal point.

Lesson 1.1 Segments:

PART A: Start the lesson by asking students to compare their maps with those in their table groups. Students will look for how similar or different their map is from those in their groups (four total students in each group; 4 minutes). The objective is NOT to identify accuracies or inaccuracies, but rather possible explanations for why varied differences might exist. Groups will then share with the class if group members had greater or fewer differences in where they defined the general boundaries of larger regions of the city. (4 minutes)

PART B: Using a projector, the teacher will show a map of the United States (including state boundaries) and ask each group to identify the states that form the boundaries of the major regions (Midwest, the South, the Northeast, etc). (5 minutes). This will then transition into utilizing the "vernacular regions" map in Chapter 1 of most AP Human Geography textbooks.

PART C: After student groups identify what they believe to be the boundaries of the major US regions, transition into a broader discussion about “how” we decide on where something is or isn’t. Out of all of the US regions we will delve most specifically into “where is the South?”, and explore if the means by which we make this decision are based on cultural perceptions, linguistic references, economic statistics, ethnic/racial components, climate and topography, a distinct set of historical developments, religious practices, pop cultural references, or perhaps political practices. The specifics of this point are detailed in the vernacular regions section of Unit 1 for AP Human Geography. This will also later be looped into being applied to how students attempted to define both the boundaries of their city’s internal regions and the boundaries of the US’ distinct regions. This last portion is more teacher-directed, as the teacher is formally introducing the concept of vernacular regions (25 minutes).

PART D: The last part of Day 1 will leave students with an idea of what Day 2 will be focused upon: “How do we know where Europe is?” The teacher will transition the broader discussion about why it is problematic to attempt to define an exact boundary of the American South (this is what AP Human Geography calls the differences between formal and vernacular regions; formal being able to be determined through scientific knowledge and universally-agreed upon facts, and vernacular being fluid and based on personal, subjective interpretations, therefore lacking universality). Lesson 1.1 ends with the teacher clarifying the preparatory homework for tomorrow’s lesson.

Day 2: Lesson 1.2: “The Process of HOW: What defines Europe and its space?”

Prep Homework for Day 2: Students will be asked to familiarize themselves with the major continents, specifically where Europe is in relation with Africa (particularly North Africa), Asia (particularly the Middle East), and Russia (including the Asian portion of the Russian Federation). Most important of this assigned work is students knowing where “Europe” is generally outlined on world maps (i.e. where are its exact boundaries marked on most maps).

Lesson 1.2 Segments:

PART A: As a bell ringer I show a short 5-minute segment from a comedy skit where Americans are asked to identify basic European countries on a world map (France, Italy, Britain, etc), and the students will see that the majority of participants cannot even identify basic or better-known European states. This YouTube video could work for most: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLJdY1Y9k9g>

PART B: Each student will be given a blank map of Europe (see page 3) so as to briefly research and shade a specific data marker relating to marking where “Europe” is. Upon receiving this handout everyone should start by using their **green** colored pencil to outline the “traditional” boundaries of what has been considered Europe. The teacher can project the image from this link so that students can see the referenced space (students are NOT shading in, but rather outlining the exterior of the green shaded space):

link:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europe#/media/File:Europe_orthographic_Caucasus_Urals_boundary_\(with_borders\).svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europe#/media/File:Europe_orthographic_Caucasus_Urals_boundary_(with_borders).svg)

Upon outlining the space of “traditional Europe”, students will have 15 minutes to shade the spatial boundaries for their assigned data set based on the provided links. For the sake of time it might be helpful to assign this when the students arrive in class (tell them which student # they have been assigned).

Student Handout: *“Traditional Europe”*



Student #1: Historical Origins

Let the students know that some have argued that Europe is based on the traditions of ancient Greece and Rome, and so they should see if some parts of today's Europe are "left out", and if some parts of today's Africa and Asia are "left in". After outlining "traditional Europe" with their green colored pencil this first student will use a **blue** colored pencil to outline the areas of Greek cultural influences (in any direction) regardless of whether it is within or outside of today's Europe. Then this student will do the same for areas of Roman cultural influence (essentially, the entire space of the entire Roman Empire), but this time with a **red** colored pencil. The Wikipedia links for the two needed maps are posted here:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/00/Roman_Empire_Trajan_117AD.png
<https://www.worldhistory.org/uploads/images/68.jpg?v=1485682784>

Student #2: Linguistics

Some have argued that Europe is based on certain "shared linguistics", particularly the classical tongues of Latin and Greek, joined thereafter by the early Germanic, Slavic, and Celtic languages. After outlining "traditional Europe" with their green colored pencil this second student will use a blue colored pencil to outline the areas of Europe that still speak a Celtic/Gaelic language, followed by using a purple colored pencil to outline the areas dominated by the "classical languages": Latin (i.e. Romance) and Greek), then a red colored pencil to outline the areas for the Slavic languages, and finally a yellow colored pencil for the areas of the Germanic languages. Obviously portions of today's Europe will be left out, which will (hopefully) generate questions about the "linguistic theory" and its legitimacy. The student should feel free to go beyond their initial green line (doing so is a part of the point of this lesson). The links for this student are here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavic_languages#/media/File:Slavic_europe.svg
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romance_languages#/media/File:Romance_20c_en.png
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_language#/media/File:Idioma_Griego.PNG
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_languages#/media/File:Map_of_Celtic_Nations-flag_shades.svg
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germanic_languages#/media/File:Germanic_languages_with_dialects_revised.png

Student #3: Religious

Some have argued that Europe is based on a commonly shared religious tradition. After outlining "traditional Europe" with their green colored pencil this third student will use a purple colored pencil to outline the areas of Europe dominated by Catholic Christianity; a red colored pencil to outline those areas dominated by Protestant Christianity; and a yellow colored pencil to outline those areas dominated by Orthodox Christianity. This student will also use a black colored pencil to circle the spaces where there are Muslim majorities within the boundaries of "traditional Europe", such as in Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania, and areas of Russia. The map of this student is found here:

<https://www.churchpop.com/content/images/wordpress/2014/10/traditional-religions.png>

Student #4: Physical Geography

Some have argued that Europe is a distinct physical space, ultimately defined by natural geography. After outlining “traditional Europe” with their green colored pencil this fourth student will outline various natural geographic features: a dark blue colored pencil to highlight the boundary of the tectonic plates; a brown colored pencil to highlight the Ural mountains, which are the so-called “eastern boarder separating Europe and Asia” (only mark where the mountains actually exist, not including all the way down to the Caspian Sea); and a red colored pencil to outline the European mainland (excluding Scandinavia, the island states of Great Britain, Ireland, and Iceland, and any of the much smaller islands off the coast of the mainland, such as Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Crete, Cyprus).

<https://geology.com/plate-tectonics.shtml>

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Ural-Mountains>

PART C: Make sure to end the lesson with enough time to ask an open question to the class: “*did any of your colors match the green line you started out with?*” They should indicate in the negative, and leave them with a verbal cue: “tomorrow we will talk about why none of them matched the green line”. It is entirely optional if you assign homework, however from past experience I found that, given the heavy teacher-centered nature of this multi-day activity it is better to reconvene on day #3.

Day 3: Lesson 1.3: “So....where exactly is *Europe*?”

Lesson 1.3 Segments:

PART A: I generally begin this third day as an immediate continuation of the prior day’s activity, and so I open by asking students to get out their data maps and spend 12 minutes discussing with their group members the likely problems with each traditional approach utilized by historians and geographers to demarcate the exact boundaries of Europe. I put these questions on the board for the groups to consider for each data set, and request that they write out their answers for each:

1. Why is it problematic to spatially define Europe by way of the areas directly impacted by Greek and Roman culture? Identify and explain TWO pieces of evidence to verify why this would be problematic.
2. Why is it problematic to spatially define Europe by way of areas populated by Germanic, Slavic, Romance, Greek, and Celtic speakers? Identify and explain TWO pieces of evidence to verify why this would be problematic.
3. Why is it problematic to spatially define Europe by way of the areas populated by Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox Christianity? Identify and explain TWO pieces of evidence to verify why this would be problematic.
4. Why is it problematic to spatially define Europe by way of a distinct natural feature, such as a mountain range, a fault line, or the outline of the European mainland?

PART B: Usually students take about 12 minutes to complete PART A, during which I walk around the room and listen to points being made so as to inject my own consideration or observation.

After the 12 minutes I let them know that we will come back to their responses, but that now we will watch a brief 8 minute video on the historical struggle to spatially define the boundaries of Europe. I also remind them of the short activity from day #1 where we were talked about how (and where) we define particular neighborhoods or regions of our home town/city. Did we base these on cultural differences? Distinct social characteristics? Economic qualities? A physical feature defined by nature? Remind them of these points, as the means of that process is largely identical to the means of demarcating Europe.

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFWgAaOGYwI>

PART C (conclusive summary): Completion of the video brings the lesson back to the primary question: “Where exactly is Europe?” I generally lead the students along by letting them think that there still might be “an answer”, but the reality of the issue is that there really is no definitive answer, as the purpose of the lesson is to demonstrate that places, such as Europe, exist more in our minds than they necessarily do in the physical world. This last part is highly open ended, and you can take the conversation in a variety of directions, but I try to get them to see that “Europe” might be more of a state of mind than a physical place, and that this approach to understand a place is applicable to all other places that we envisage, such as “the west side of Chicago” the “Mid West of the USA”, the “northern Illinois”, etc. The means by which we attempt to determine these answers is more important than the final decision (as the decision is likely to be open to reinterpretation), but equally important to this is the contemplative question: “if so many places exist more in our mind than as expressions of the natural world, then how do we know that they actually exist?” I try to leave the kids with the final thought that many of these things (such as “Europe”) do exist, but how and why we believe they exist are highly personal and extremely open to fluid change across space and time.