

Types of Maps

The two types of maps are general purpose and thematic. The type depends on what kind of information is drawn on the map. General purpose maps show a wide range of information about an area. They generally show either the human-made features of an area or its natural features, but not both.

Political maps are one common type of general-purpose map that shows human-made features. They show the boundaries of countries or the divisions within them, like the states of the United States. They also show the locations and names of cities.

Physical maps display natural features such as mountains and valleys, rivers, and lakes. They picture the location, size, and shape of these features. Many physical maps show elevation, or how much above or below sea level a feature is. Maps often use colors to present this information. A key on the map explains what height above or below sea level each color represents.

Physical maps usually show relief, or the difference between the elevation of one feature and the elevation of another feature near it. Elevation is an absolute number, but relief is relative. It depends on other landforms that are nearby. The width of the color areas on a physical map usually shows the relief. Narrow areas of color show steep places, and wide areas of color show gently sloping land.

Thematic maps show more specialized information. A thematic map might indicate the kinds of plants that grow in different areas. That kind of map is a vegetation map. Another could show where farming, ranching, or mining takes place. That kind of map is called a land-use map. Road maps show people how to travel from one place to another by car. Just about any physical or human feature can be displayed on a thematic map. To further your understanding of thematic maps, research information online about national parks in various world regions or in particular countries. Then create a thematic map showing the location of some of these national parks in different parts of the world.