What is Human Geography?

Human Geography is one of the major divisions of geography; the spatial analysis of human population, its cultures, activities and landscapes.

- Fouberg, Murphy and de Blij

Not a bad definition- so let’s break down it down:

• 1st: We need to know what geography is. Right?
• 2nd: We also need to know what the terms “spatial” and “analysis” mean.

Let’s get started.

What is Geography?

Geography:

• is the scientific study of the Earth’s surface
• studies the interactions between people and their physical environments
• focuses on the locational and spatial variations of phenomena, both human and non-human (so called natural or physical/biological)
• is descriptive, i.e., describes a phenomenon (an occurrence), where it is located, and how it is related to other phenomena (occurrences)
• identifies regions (again, both human/cultural and physical/biological regions)
• describes, analyzes, explains and interprets

Charles Fuller, former geography professor at Triton College, has used the following description of geography in his course syllabi:

Geography is the systematic study of the spatial patterns of all phenomena on or near the Earth’s surface. Its primary methodology is spatial analysis which asks two basic questions: where are things located (spatial), and why are they located where they are (analysis). Its primary tool of communication is the map.

Stop for a second. Read the Mr. Fuller’s definition again. Notice how he describes the spatial analysis by the use of “where” and “why there” in the definition.

Using the spatial perspective, Human Geographers look where something occurs, search for patterns, and span most of the social studies disciplines to answer the why there question.

The best advice for you throughout the entire year is to learn to always ask “where” and “why there”. So whether you have read a section of notes, looked at a map, or studied a chart, stop yourself and ask yourself the “where” and “why there” questions.

Here’s the basic steps:

• Think about where the pattern exists.
• Look for where the pattern doesn’t exist.
• Then start asking yourself...why there.
Both are challenging skills, but admittedly figuring out the “why there” can be a great adventure where students (and teachers) will ponder all the different possibilities on why a pattern exists. Sometimes the answer is simple and as the year goes on and you learn more about the world, you start to make more connections faster - just like upgrading your internet speed!

Therefore, in the end, students in Human Geography will study history, religion, politics, economics, sociology and other social studies subjects. We work with these subjects when they help us answer the why. So, Human Geography is in the driver’s seat and the other social studies courses come along for the ride.

Or, as we like to think, Human Geography is the center of the educational universe! If only there was a chart to illustrate the importance of Human Geography. And you’ve probably guessed it, there is such a chart (drum roll please):

Some people have stated that if you play, the title track to *2001: A Space Odyssey* while looking at the chart, you achieve a sense of total inner peace. Those people who have suggested that are the teachers of this course and some people have suggested that they seek medical assistance.

In the end, Human Geography provides the foundation for understanding fundamental similarities and differences between people culturally, politically, economically and socially through a spatial perspective. It is a capstone course that will help you in other classes in your career. In fact we like to think that it will make you well rounded (just like a globe).

Okay, we think we did it.

You should know what Human Geography “ain’t”, you should have a sense of what geography is, and finally you should understand what Human Geography is specifically. But, just in case you need some more detail. We’ve included a small sampling of topics covered in Human Geography.
Geography:

• Students study the conflict between Spanish speakers in California and English speakers on one scale, but they will also learn about other conflicts such as the one between Flemish and French speakers in Belgium.

• Students will learn about where their food comes from and how it is produced. Did you know your strawberry shake from a fast-food restaurant does not have one strawberry in it? It does have over 45 chemicals which make it taste like strawberries.

• Students will study transportation network patterns and the impact the Federal Highway Act of 1956 had on the development of the U.S. and compare it with the lack of development of a transcontinental railroad in Africa and its impact on the economy.

• Students will study the conflict between secularism and religion in the world today, how Islam got to Indonesia, how Confucianism blended with Buddhism in China, and how Catholicism and Protestantism didn’t blend in Northern Ireland.

• Students will study how demographic shifts will change American politics in the next couple of decades. For example, Hispanics will become the majority in the U.S. by 2040 or so. Whites will be the largest minority followed by African-Americans. How will this change electoral politics? To what states will Federal monies flow during and after these demographic shifts? What policies will be changed?