Lesson one
United States of America: An Exploration
Factsheet for teachers

Purpose of this lesson

In order to develop an in-depth knowledge of the USA pupils need to understand the key geographical features of the country. In this lesson pupils will work with an atlas (and/or online maps) in order to create their own map of the USA.

Vocabulary

Geology the study of the origin, history, and structure of the earth.
Lake a body of water surrounded by land.
Latitude the distance of a place north or south of the earth's equator.
Longitude the distance of a place east or west of the Greenwich meridian.
Mountain a large landform that stretches above the surrounding land in a limited area, usually in the form of a peak.
Mountain Range a series or chain of mountains that are close together.
Prairie a large grassland.
River a large stream of flowing fresh water.
Topography the study of the shape of the surface features of an area.

Key Features of the United States of America

Political and Administrative Boundaries

The USA shares borders with Canada, Mexico and maritime borders with Russia, Cuba and the Bahamas (as well as Canada and Mexico).

The United States of America is a federal republic made up of 50 states.
The population distribution across the USA will be explored in more detail later in this module. However the exercises in this lesson introduce pupils to some of the key settlements in the USA.

Map of USA © Wikimedia

The National Geographic website entry for ‘Human Geography’ provides a good introduction to the different features of the country. Go to the National Geographic website [http://education.nationalgeographic.co.uk/education/encyclopedia/north-america-human-geography/?ar_a=1](http://education.nationalgeographic.co.uk/education/encyclopedia/north-america-human-geography/?ar_a=1)

**Physical Features**

This video provides a good overview of the physical features of the USA which you may wish to use with your pupils at the end of the mapping activity.

United States Physical Geography. Go to YouTube website [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLs3KJQdLxg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLs3KJQdLxg)

For more information about the National Parks go to the National Parks Service website [http://www.nps.gov/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/index.htm)

For more information on a wide range of issues related to the geography and geology of the USA and is useful for background information, real time data on a number of phenomena as well as maps and images go to the United States Geological Survey website [http://www.usgs.gov/](http://www.usgs.gov/)
Key Features

**Appalachian Mountains:** Located in the North East. They are a line of low mountains separating the eastern seaboard from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi basin.

![Appalachian Mountains](https://i.imgur.com/3AshleyHarrigan.jpg)

**Cascade mountains:** Located in the North West this includes large intermittent volcanic mountains.

![Cascade Mountains](https://i.imgur.com/MossFlickr.jpg)

**Rocky Mountains:** A major mountain range located in the West. The range stretches from Canada nearly to Mexico. Its highest peaks are in Colorado, the tallest is Mount Elbert (4,400m).

![Rocky Mountains](https://i.imgur.com/Mattman4698Flickr.jpg)
**Sierra Nevada:** Mountain range in the west running 64km north to south and approximately 110km across. It includes Lake Tahoe which is the largest alpine lake in North America.

**Five Great Lakes:** Series of interconnected freshwater lakes in the north eastern The form part of the border between the USA and Canada.
- Lake Erie
- Lake Huron
- Lake Michigan
- Lake Ontario
- Lake Superior

**Great Plains:** Grassland region of North America between the Rocky mountains and the Mississippi river.

For an overview of how mountains are formed, go to the RGS-IBG subject knowledge animation 'Mountains, Volcanoes, Earthquakes': [http://www.rgs.org/OurWork/Schools/Teaching+resources/Key+Stage+1-2+resources/Subject+knowledge+animation+Mountains+volcanoes+and+earthquakes.htm](http://www.rgs.org/OurWork/Schools/Teaching+resources/Key+Stage+1-2+resources/Subject+knowledge+animation+Mountains+volcanoes+and+earthquakes.htm)
### Rivers

#### Top 10 Longest Rivers in the USA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Mouth</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>US States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Missouri River</td>
<td>Mississippi River</td>
<td>3,768 km</td>
<td>Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mississippi River</td>
<td>Gulf of Mexico</td>
<td>3,544 km</td>
<td>Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yukon River</td>
<td>Bering Sea</td>
<td>1,979 km</td>
<td>Alaska</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rio Grand River</td>
<td>Gulf of Mexico</td>
<td>2,830 km</td>
<td>Colorado, New Mexico, Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Colorado River</td>
<td>Gulf of California</td>
<td>2,330 km</td>
<td>Colorado, Utah, Arizona, Nevada, California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Arkansas River</td>
<td>Mississippi River</td>
<td>2,322 km</td>
<td>Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Columbia River</td>
<td>Pacific Ocean</td>
<td>2,000 km</td>
<td>Washington, Oregon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Red River</td>
<td>Atchafalaya and Mississippi River</td>
<td>1,811 km</td>
<td>Oklahoma, Texas, Oregon, Washington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Snake River</td>
<td>Columbia River</td>
<td>1,674 km</td>
<td>Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon, Washington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ohio River</td>
<td>Mississippi River</td>
<td>1,575 km</td>
<td>Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are just a few of the physical features you may wish to discuss with your pupils as an introduction. You may wish to set a homework activity to investigate some of these further.

You may also wish to mention the National Parks. There are 59 protected areas in the USA known as National Parks. The most famous:

**Yosemite National Park**, California. Includes North America’s largest waterfall (Yosemite Falls) and the world’s tallest uninterrupted granite monolith (El Capitan).
Rocky Mountain National Park, north west America: Shaped by glaciers and remained covered in ice until about 11,000 years ago.

Redwood National Park, California: Named for its famous sequoias.

Grand Canyon, Arizona: After the Great Smoky Mountains, Grand Canyon is the second most visited national park, at least 5 million people visit every year. Stretches 277 miles along Colorado River. In places up to a mile deep and 18 miles wide.

Hawaii volcanoes, Hawaii: One of the world's most volcanically active spots located on the Hawaiian Island in the Pacific Ocean. Two active volcanoes Kilauea and Mauna Loa.
Everglades, National Park, Florida: The only subtropical wilderness in the USA. Intricate network of rivers and wetland.

Mesa Verde, Colorado: One of the first National Parks established to ‘preserve the works of man’. The park includes more than 4,000 archaeological sites.

Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming. More than 10,000 hot springs, fumaroles, and geysers – Old Faithful is the most famous landmark. In 1872 Yellowstone became the first national park. Yellowstone Lake is North America’s highest altitude lake.

Main Activity

Possible answers for task one includes:

Cities; Monuments; Landmarks; Tourist attractions; Stereotypes; Famous names; Rivers; Lakes; Mountains; Settlements; States; Deserts; Geographical features; National parks.

Possible answers to task three on sound clips:

Any major towns or cities (Las Vegas, Los Angeles, New York City); Any smaller towns and cities (Oklahoma, Dallas, Seattle); Waterfall (Niagara Falls); Train (San Francisco, Washington DC); Desert (Death Valley); Nature Reserve (The Grand Canyon, Rocky Mountains, Red Wood National Park).