

About Mental Maps

A geographically informed person gathers and selects information about the surrounding environment, and organizes this information in the form of spatial images or "mental maps." We use mental maps of our surroundings to orient ourselves, to organize our perceptions, and to describe the world in which we live. A mental map may be a picture of an area as small as one's own home or school, or as large as the entire world. Mental maps include facts as well as rough personal impressions of what the world is like and how it is organized, making every mental map unique.



Mental maps are constantly being revised and corrected based on experience and observation. Our pictures of the spatial layout of the world, our country, our region or province, or our immediate surroundings become more complex as we acquire more knowledge.

In this exercise, you will be quickly sketching a mental map of Canada and its defining geographic features. Do not try to reproduce a detailed or perfect map. Focus on how you think of the Canadian land or territory in your own mind. Follow the instructions below to create your mental map.

Task: Draw a Mental Map of Canada

1. Before starting, take a moment to visualize a very general image of what you would like to sketch: the contours of the Canadian land mass and its major bodies of water. Imagine the main features of the country (e.g., overall shape, the Great Lakes, Hudson Bay, the St. Lawrence Seaway, major islands...), and the relative size and position of the provinces and territories.
2. Next, sketch in a few lines or points to guide your map. For example, you may wish to lightly trace in the approximate line of the 49th parallel (border with the U.S.), and the 60th parallel (the North), as well as the location of Winnipeg or the Red River, which are roughly at the longitudinal centre of Canada.
3. Now, sketch out the rough shapes of the provinces and territories, using rectangles and triangles to start. Use the lines of the graph paper to guide the size or scale.
4. Adjust your lines and shapes to reflect the relative size and shape of the provinces and territories, and add a bit more detail to the contours of the country and the provincial borders. Sketch in main bodies of water or rivers, islands, and mountain ranges. Add in the location of the capitals and other major population centres, and other geographic elements that you consider to be important.
5. Label all important geographic elements included in your map.

A Mental Map of Canada

Assessing your mental map of Canada

1. Compare your map with that of a partner, and discuss what each of your maps says about your perceptions of Canada. For example, is the Northern region largest in both maps? Have you both indicated the cities in approximate locations? Have you included the same geographic elements? Which region has the greatest, or least, amount of detail?
2. Use an atlas of Canada to check your work.
Assess/rate your mental map using this scale: *1 (lowest) to 4 (highest)*.

Map Characteristics	Rating (1 - 4)	What do you need to improve? Add? Correct?
The overall contour or shape of the country is accurate.		
All provinces and territories are on the map.		
Each province or territory is in the right relative location and is correctly labelled.		
The scale or relative size of the provinces and territories is roughly correct.		
The shapes of the provinces and territories are roughly correct.		
The shapes and sizes of the main bodies of water are roughly correct.		
The distances between points are more or less in scale (proportional).		
Some distinctive features of human geography (e.g., cities) and physical geography (e.g., mountain ranges) are correctly located and labelled.		