The Geographer’s World

Understanding the Lines on a Map

Learning the Skill

Maps and globes are marked by lines that extend horizontally and vertically.

Lines of Latitude

The horizontal lines are called latitude lines, or parallels, because they are always an equal distance apart. The starting latitude line, which is 0° latitude, is the Equator. Lines of latitude are labeled N or S to show whether they are north or south of the Equator. The Equator divides the globe into northern and southern hemispheres.

Besides the Equator, four other lines of latitude have significance because they mark the progress of the sun through the seasons. Because of Earth’s tilt, the sun does not shine directly on any one latitude all year round. The Equator is where the sun shines directly overhead on the equinoxes, or the first days of spring and fall.

Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn

On the longest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, about June 21, the sun shines directly overhead at 23½°N. This line of latitude is called the Tropic of Cancer. This day is the shortest day of the year in the Southern Hemisphere. On the longest day of the year in the Southern Hemisphere, December 21, the sun shines directly overhead at 23½°S, at the Tropic of Capricorn.

Two other lines of latitude show the northernmost and southernmost extent of the sun. Locations that are north of the Arctic Circle, at 66½°N, and south of the Antarctic Circle, at 66½°S, experience at least one day a year when the sun never rises and at least one day a year when the sun never sets.

Lines of Longitude

Longitude lines, also called meridians, run vertically north and south. They meet at two points: the North Pole and the South Pole, and are farthest apart at the Equator. The starting point, which is 0° longitude and is called the Prime Meridian, runs through Greenwich, England. Longitude lines are labeled E or W to show whether they are east or west of the Prime Meridian.
Directions: Study the map below. Then use the information in the passage on the previous page to identify the lines of latitude and longitude.

1. A: ________________________________
2. B: ________________________________
3. C: ________________________________
4. D: ________________________________
5. E: ________________________________
6. F: ________________________________
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Applying the Skill

**Directions:** Use the world map and the information in the passage to answer the questions below.

1. Name two continents that have their longest days around December 21.
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2. Which continents lie entirely in the Northern Hemisphere?
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3. When it is summer at the southern tip of South America, what season is it at the southern tip of Africa?
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4. When it is the longest day of the year in North America, the sun shines directly overhead on which line of latitude?
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