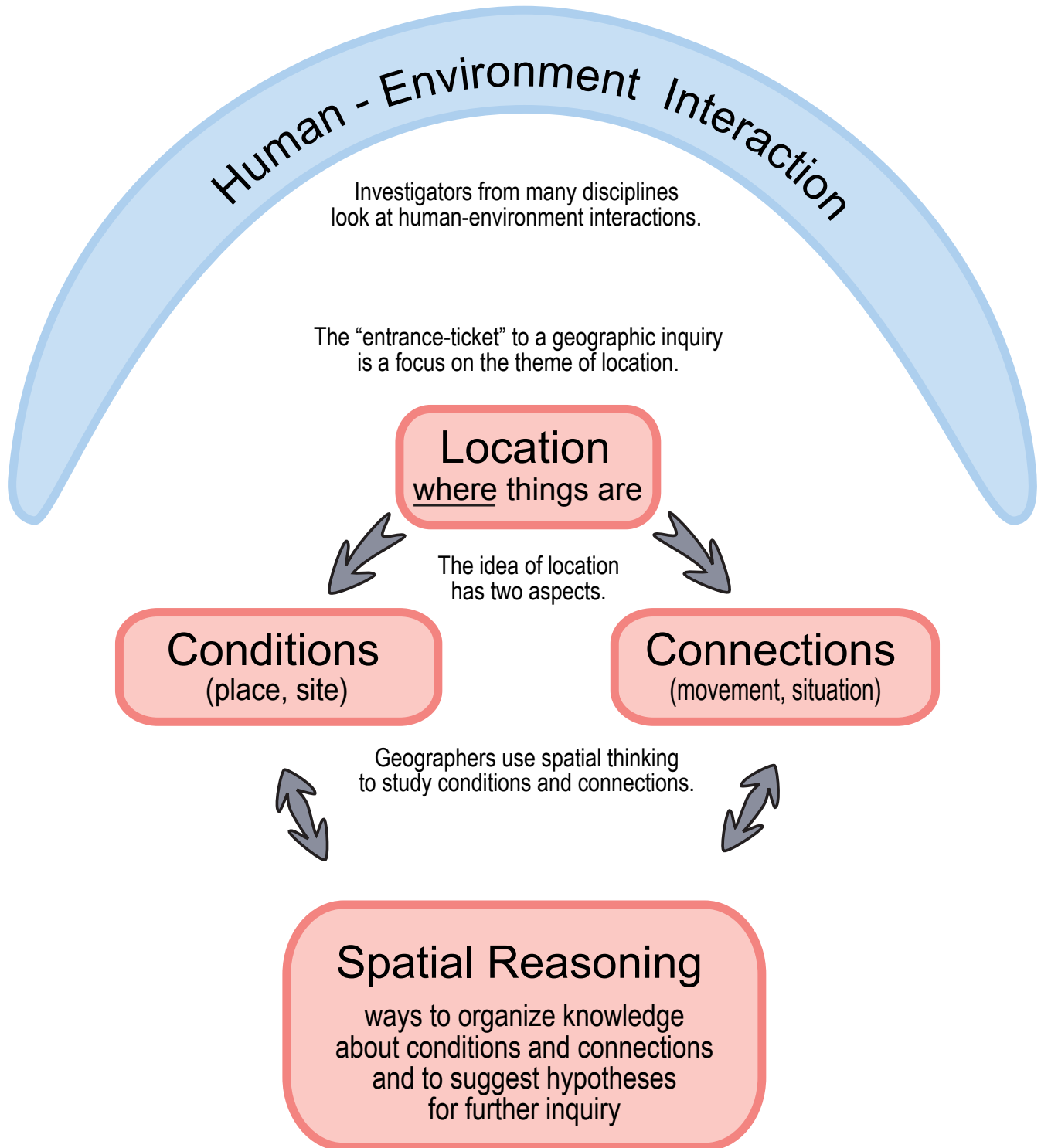


Basic Themes of Geography

The over-arching goal is to understand how people interact with their environment in places.



The Themes of Geography

What Is a Geographical Theme? (abridged from Chapter 5, *Teaching Geography*, Guilford Press, 2014).

To learn about themes, it might help to look at what musicians have done over the years. For a nice, clear example, listen to the third movement of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony. After a introduction, a clarinet plays four notes. This short phrase is part of the theme of the movement, but we do not know it yet. It is just there, amid the swirling strings and tootling flutes. Played by a lone clarinet, the phrase is understated, barely audible. Awhile later, the phrase comes back, now seven notes long and louder, more insistent. Still later, a flute replays the four notes, then a small group repeats the longer phrase.

This continues, and the movement is almost half over before we hear the entire theme.

At that point, all of the previous hints take on a deeper meaning. Tchaikovsky's strategy was to use fragments of the theme as portents, so that the theme itself would be more memorable when it finally arrives. The full statement of the theme, in turn, helps to tie the entire movement together into a coherent unit. The theme then reappears, in several different forms, throughout the rest of the movement.

Likewise, a pedagogical theme is something that pervades a class and helps hold it together. The theme provides guidance about what kind of questions should be asked and what kind of answers are valid. It helps decide what examples to use and what pictures to show. But the theme is not necessarily announced at the beginning of a class.

Repeat: a theme is not a term to memorize. It is a core idea that pervades a class and helps hold it together by defining what facts and ideas are important.

How Should Pedagogical Themes Be Used?

Inductively: create a setting where students grab an idea as if they thought of it themselves.

Cooperatively: the key themes of geography work with each other, like scissors, not knives.

How do most texts (mis)use the five themes? Deductively and individually - as in, here is a theme-word, and here are some facts related to it. Memorize them - they'll be on the test.

Geographers have used several of the same basic themes for centuries. Unfortunately, they used different words at different times in the past. Here is a brief "translation tool" to help you recognize a similar concept in an older piece of geographic writing.

"Translation Dictionary" of Basic Theme-Words in Geography

Classic geographic idea:	Site	Situation
Other common terms:	Descriptions, Landscapes, Traits, Characteristics	Analyses, Patterns, Links, Distributions
First draft of "The 5 themes":	Relationships within places	Relationships between places
Final draft of "The 5 themes":	Place	Movement
Attempt to relate to scale:	Local	Global
Jargony expressions that occasionally pop up:	Particularistic, Idiographic	Systematic, Nomothetic
National Standards phrase:	Ecological perspective	Spatial perspective
Phrases preferred by teachers in summer institutes and conference sessions:	Conditions (in places)	Connections (between places)

Figure 5A, *Teaching Geography*, Guilford Press, 2014