

What a Map Leaves Out

C2 | Adults / Teens | Reading + Vocabulary + Discussion | 70-85 minutes

BEFORE YOU READ

Talk with a partner. Can a map ever be neutral, and what happens when people treat it as if it were?

1. Match the words (1-6) with the definitions (A-F).

- | | | |
|------------------------|-------|---|
| 1. abstraction | _____ | A. a simplified representation of a complex reality |
| 2. foreground | _____ | B. the quality of being easy to read or understand |
| 3. omission | _____ | C. showing a high level of detail |
| 4. granular | _____ | D. the act of leaving something out |
| 5. surveillance | _____ | E. make something more noticeable or important |
| 6. legibility | _____ | F. careful observation of people or activity, often by authorities or technology |

2. Read the article. The bold words are the vocabulary from Activity 1.

1. Maps often appear authoritative because they turn a complicated world into clear lines, labels and symbols. Yet every map is an **abstraction**. It selects some features, reduces others and omits almost everything that cannot fit its purpose. A railway map, a flood-risk map and a tourist map can describe the same place while making it seem like three different places.

2. This selectivity is not automatically deceptive. Without simplification, a map would be unusable. The important question is what a map chooses to **foreground**. A transport app may highlight the fastest route while leaving out a steep hill, a hostile street crossing or the experience of travelling with a child or using a wheelchair.

3. Digital maps can be exceptionally **granular**, offering live traffic, business ratings and detailed satellite images. Greater detail, however, does not remove bias. Data are collected unevenly, categories are designed by particular institutions and an **omission** can be as influential as an error. What is not measured may become harder to argue for.

4. There are also questions of power. Mapping can help communities document hazards or claim services, but it can also enable **surveillance**. When movements, purchases and locations are continuously recorded, a map becomes more than a guide: it becomes an instrument through which organisations can observe and classify people.

5. The value of a map therefore depends partly on its **legibility** to those who use it. People should be able to ask who made it, for what purpose and with which data. Map literacy is not only the ability to find a destination; it is the ability to recognise that every representation has a point of view.

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UNDERSTAND, DISCUSS AND WRITE

3. Comprehension. Answer in complete sentences. Use the article to help you.

1. Why does the article call every map an abstraction?

2. What does it mean for a map to foreground something?

3. Why does greater digital detail not remove bias?

4. How can mapping both help and harm communities?

5. What broader skill does the article include in map literacy?

4. Discuss. Talk in small groups. Give reasons and examples.

- Which kinds of local knowledge are absent from most maps?
- Should public maps show safety information? Who should decide?
- When does useful location data become surveillance?
- How could a map better represent accessibility or lived experience?

5. Homework: Write an opinion paragraph.

Write 220-260 words: 'A map is an argument, not just a tool.' Explain and evaluate this claim using one real or imagined example.

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ANSWER KEY AND TEACHING NOTE

Vocabulary matching

1. **abstraction** - A
2. **foreground** - E
3. **omission** - D
4. **granular** - C
5. **surveillance** - F
6. **legibility** - B

Comprehension answers

1. Why does the article call every map an abstraction?

A map simplifies complex reality by selecting, reducing and omitting features according to a purpose.

2. What does it mean for a map to foreground something?

It makes that feature more noticeable or important, often while leaving other experiences less visible.

3. Why does greater digital detail not remove bias?

Data are collected unevenly, categories reflect institutions and omissions can still shape what people see and argue for.

4. How can mapping both help and harm communities?

It can document hazards and support claims for services, but it can also enable surveillance and classification.

5. What broader skill does the article include in map literacy?

Recognising who made a representation, for what purpose and with which data, rather than only using it to navigate.

Teaching note

Compare vocabulary answers before reading. Help learners plan an argument about maps: an example, an explanation and an evaluation. Accept accurate comprehension paraphrases and supported personal responses.