

# Choosing the Best Atlas for Your Classroom

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As editor of Social Studies School Service's Geography Catalog, I frequently receive plaintive phone calls from teachers and department heads who are about to spend their hard-won money on an atlas (or on dozens or even hundreds of atlases), and they need more information than the one-paragraph descriptions our print catalogs give them.

Often they ask which atlas is "best," but the real question that needs to be asked is "Which atlas is best for my particular needs?" Some important questions to consider here: Who is going to use the atlas? What will they use it for? What features are most important to you? How much do you plan to spend?

For instance, if you will use the atlas for intensive work on understanding latitude and longitude, you might require an atlas that uses no other location system that might distract students or be used as a crutch. On the other hand, you may prefer an atlas that includes not only latitude and longitude but also alphanumeric grids, because then one system can serve as the answer key to the other.

This article provides a series of descriptions that permit point-by-point comparisons between atlases. It discusses what types of maps are included, how color is used, how much detail is shown, and how up-to-date the atlases are.

Note that, throughout these descriptions, the term "sub-national political units" refers to political entities one level below the national government (such as states, departments, provinces, and republics in a federation). Also, the phrase "republics of the Russian Federation" refers to the semi-autonomous states that compose Russia (Chechnya is the most famous example), not the nations that broke away from the USSR (Ukraine, for example). The term "terrain regimes" may be unfamiliar to some readers: most physical-political maps use color to indicate elevation, with low areas typically colored green and high areas brown, but other maps use color to denote terrain regimes—for example, light green for marshes, dark green for forested areas, light brown for desert areas, and dark brown for mountainous regions.

## Atlases discussed:

Student Atlas of World Politics (DHK295)  
Classroom Atlas of the United States (CRM601)  
Quick Reference United States Atlas (RM101)  
Perthes World Atlas (KP117)  
Goode's World Atlas ((RM108)  
Answer Atlas (RM221)  
Compact Peters World Atlas (HM125)  
Student Atlas (DKP118)  
Scholastic Atlas of the World (SCB107)  
Explorer World Atlas (HM119)  
Scholastic New Headline World Atlas (HM2505)  
Quick Reference World Atlas (RM122)  
Student Atlas of the World (CRM267)  
The World Almanac Notebook Atlas: 2008 (HM126)  
World Atlas: Scholastic Edition (UM116)

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### **Student Atlas of World Politics (DHK295)**

McGraw-Hill. 8½" x 11". 236 pages. 8th Edition. ©2008.

**Main selling points:** thematic maps and data tables focus on factors that influence international relations

**Types of maps:** physical and political maps of the continents; historical maps emphasizing 20th-century political developments; and maps that graphically illustrate current statistics concerning the global economy, natural resources, environmental conditions, and demographics measuring development of the standard of living (for instance, infant mortality, life expectancy, literacy, gender inequity, and employment)

**Treatment of physical features:** most maps are political (mountain ranges indicated typographically) or statistical; the physical maps of the continents use shaded relief to depict mountain ranges and plateaus

**Use of color:** shaded relief in physical maps; a seven-color system distinguishing countries in political maps; most of the maps use colors to represent statistical differences between countries

**Level of detail:** world maps and regional maps show nations; eight maps of regional "flashpoints" show rivers and sometimes show major transportation routes

**System of location:** 20-degree longitude and latitude lines (unnumbered except on the physical and political maps of the continents)

**Projections:** predominantly Greenwich-centered Robinson (armadillo) projections of the world, but regional maps use other projections as needed

**Index:** 16 pages, gives page numbers and latitude and longitude, with countries and major cities keyed to political maps of the continents and physical features keyed to physical maps of the continents

**Special features:** 12 data tables; bibliography of sources; teacher's guide available separately

**Accuracy:** Statistics accurate through 2006

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### **Classroom Atlas of the United States (CRM601)**

MapQuest. 8" x 11". 104 pages. ©2005.

**Main selling points:** Very inclusive—includes history maps, and extends its coverage to U.S. territories, many maps include explanatory captions

**Types of maps:** full U.S. in physical, political, and thematic maps; regions in physical-political and thematic maps; political maps of territories; U.S. history in 40 maps from first migrations to the presidential election of 2004

**Treatment of physical features:** lightly indicated shaded relief in physical and physical-political maps

**Use of color:** physical-political maps are beige with parks in green and state borders indicated by lines; thematic and history maps use color for effective presentations

**Level of detail:** world maps; western hemisphere maps; Canada, U.S., and Mexico maps; and regional U.S. maps, all with sub-national political units showing major and capital cities, large lakes, and major rivers

**System of location:** country, hemisphere, and world maps use longitude and latitude; regional maps use no locator system

**Projections:** unidentified, except world is Robinson and hemisphere is Miller cylindrical

**Index:** 4 pages; identifies type of feature (lake, sea, etc.); entries keyed to the small-scale maps by page numbers and latitude and longitude; the index is a weak point because it does not cover the regional or history maps

**Special features:** a two-page map skills tutorial, an illustrated glossary of landforms

**Accuracy:** U.S. history maps updated to 2004, world map includes independent East Timor

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### **Quick Reference United States Atlas (RM101)**

Rand McNally. 8½" x 11". 64 pages. ©2000.

**Main selling points:** inexpensive, excellent shaded relief

**Types of maps:** physical-political maps with shaded relief

**Treatment of physical features:** detailed shaded relief

**Use of color:** states are white with bordering states in color; extent of major cities shown in orange

**Level of detail:** North America map, two U.S. maps (one physical-political with shaded relief, the other a highway map), and a map of each state; major roads and railroads; major and mid-sized cities; lakes, rivers, and canals

**System of location:** both alphanumeric and latitude and longitude

**Projections:** state maps are Lambert conformal conic, except Alaska, which is polyconic

**Index:** 7 pages; nearly all city names, includes few physical features; entries are keyed to states and include alphanumeric locators

**Special features:** no special features

**Accuracy:** 2003 printing

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### **Perthes World Atlas (KP117)**

Klett-Perthes/McGraw Hill. 9" x 11". 315 pages. ©2006.

**Main selling points:** first-class cartography at a moderate price; exceptional detail; superb pictorial essay on how to read and interpret maps; thematic maps are numerous and of outstanding quality; and almost the entire atlas is also available in digital format so teachers can display maps on computers or project maps for their whole class to see

**Types of maps:** 90 world and regional maps, 70 world thematic maps

**Treatment of physical features:** highly detailed shaded relief

**Use of color:** physical-political maps use an unlimited palette of colors to set countries apart, thus minimizing the potential for confusion; thematic maps also use an unlimited palette of colors

**Level of detail:** world maps, continent maps, regional and individual country maps, sub-national political units shown for many but not all applicable countries; major and capital cities, midsize towns; major roads, major and minor railroads, and canals

**System of location:** all maps use latitude and longitude; physical-political maps (and some thematic maps) also use alphanumeric grids

Projections: world maps use the Winkel Tripel projection; regional maps use a variety of unidentified projections

**Index:** 92 pages; page numbers and alphanumeric keys; symbols identify the types of features

**Special features:** a “visual table of contents” provides locator maps for quickly finding the map you want; an illustrated essay (11 pages) explains “How to Read and Interpret Maps”; a glossary defines technical demographic terms used in the thematic maps; tables include national maps with country statistics, a statistical profile of the Earth, and continent-by-continent listings of major mountains, rivers, lakes, and islands

**Accuracy:** includes independent East Timor

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### **Goode's World Atlas (RM108)**

Rand McNally. 9" x 11½". 371 pages. 21st Edition. ©2005.

**Main selling points:** one of the best atlases in the world

**Types of maps:** physical-political; also dozens of types of special interest maps

**Treatment of physical features:** shaded relief, colors representing elevations and depths, and many specialized symbols

**Use of color:** the physical-political maps use shades of colors to convey elevations and depths, marking borders with shaded lines; special interest maps use a wide variety of color schemes

**Level of detail:** world maps, continent maps, regional and individual country maps; sub-national political units shown for many but not all applicable countries; major and capital cities, midsize towns; major roads, railroads, and canals

**System of location:** all maps include latitude and longitude

Projections: extensive variety

**Index:** 108 pages; supplies pronunciations, locations, types of features (desert, mountain, river, etc.)

**Special features:** introductory essays (with diagrams) concerning scale, projections, and symbols used in thematic maps; 65 pages of world thematic maps; a half dozen or more pages of thematic maps for each continent; more than 60 maps of major cities; several statistical tables; glossary of foreign terms

**Accuracy:** includes independent East Timor

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### **Answer Atlas (RM221)**

Rand McNally. 8½" x 11". 176 pages. Revised edition. ©2007.

**Main selling points:** Selects the most often used maps from the superlative Goode's World Atlas and puts them in an affordable paperback edition

**Types of maps:** physical-political; also a half dozen types of special interest maps

**Treatment of physical features:** shaded relief, colors representing elevations and depths

**Use of color:** the physical-political maps use shades of colors to convey elevations and depths, marking borders with shaded lines; special interest maps use a wide variety of color schemes

**Level of detail:** world maps, continent maps, regional and individual country maps, sub-national political units shown for many but not all applicable countries; major and capital cities, midsize towns; major roads, railroads, and canals

**System of location:** all maps include latitude and longitude

**Projections:** extensive variety

**Index:** 14 pages

**Special features:** seven world thematic maps; a half dozen or more thematic maps for each region; many maps of major cities; 11 pages of intriguing geographical questions and answers; flags of the world with national statistics; 21 pages of special interest tables and diagrams; glossary of foreign terms

**Accuracy:** includes independent East Timor.

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### **Compact Peters World Atlas (HM125)**

Hammond. 8½" x 12½". 231 pages. ©2002.

**Main selling points:** the Peters equal-area projection is used for every map throughout the atlas, eliminating traditional map distortions said to have reinforced certain imperial/colonial biases; in addition, all maps are drawn to the same scale, eliminating confusion when comparing areas from one map to another

**Types of maps:** 43 double-page maps (physical with shaded-relief topography and political boundaries represented by colored lines) each show 1/60th of the earth's surface; 246 thematic maps under 45 subject headings embrace natural and human geography

**Treatment of physical features:** shaded relief with a color scheme representing topographical regimes

**Use of color:** in the physical maps, shaded relief with a color scheme representing topographical regimes; thematic maps use a variety of color schemes

**Level of detail:** cities, towns, major roads, important physical features; sub-national units of U.S., Canada, and Australia

**System of location:** latitude and longitude plus a unique alphabetical grid  
**Projections:** equal-area Peters projection used in every map  
**Index:** 42-page index; innovative, simplified locator system: cities, towns, and physical features  
**Special features:** essay on cartography; alphabetical page finder for nations; cartographic page finder  
**Accuracy:** includes Nunavut; published before East Timor's independence

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### **Student Atlas (DKP119)**

Dorling Kindersley. 9½" x 11". 176 pages. Fifth Edition. ©2008.

**Main selling points:** a wide variety of maps accompanied by lots of explanatory text; the abundance of text makes this a teaching tool as well as a reference (be aware that much of the text is very, very small)

**Types of maps:** physical, political, physical-political, thematic; introductory section shows world maps; subsequent sections feature continental maps plus maps of sub-continental regions

**Treatment of physical features:** shaded relief

**Use of color:** in physical and physical-political maps, shaded relief with color-coded terrain regimes; political maps distinguish countries by a five-color system; thematic maps use colors in a variety of ways

**Level of detail:** larger cities, major roads, rivers, major physical features; sub-national units shown for Australia, Canada, and the United States

**System of location:** latitude and longitude plus alphanumeric grids used for regional maps

**Projections:** wide variety

**Index:** 22 pages; countries, cities, and significant physical features indicated with page numbers and alphanumeric keys

**Special features:** flags of the world; brief glossary; facts about maps and mapping

**Accuracy:** includes independent East Timor

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### **Scholastic Atlas of the World (SCB107)**

Scholastic. 8½" x 11½". 224 pages. Updated edition. ©2003.

**Main selling points:** augmenting maps with text and graphic boxes makes this a good starter atlas for young geographers

**Types of maps:** political

**Treatment of physical features:** shaded relief with major rivers, lakes, and peaks drawn and labeled

**Use of color:** color indicates terrain regimes

**Level of detail:** world map; regional maps; some individual country maps; sub-national political units (states, departments, provinces) often shown; major and capital cities; no roads or railroads

**System of location:** alphanumeric grids

**Projections:** vary from map to map as appropriate

**Index:** 17 pages; page numbers and alphanumeric keys; identifies type of feature (river, lake, desert, etc.)

**Special features:** graphic representations of the solar system and of certain geographical comparisons (largest islands, largest lakes, longest rivers, highest and lowest points of continents)

**Accuracy:** includes Nunavut; published before East Timor's independence

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### **Explorer World Atlas (HM119)**

Hammond. 9" x 12½". 132 pages. Revised edition. ©2007.

**Main selling points:** large pages, detailed regional maps

**Types of maps:** political (plus one physical world map)

**Treatment of physical features:** one world map is a two-page physical map with shaded relief mountain ranges and seafloor features, using color to indicate elevation; in the political maps that make up the rest of the volume, major rivers and lakes are drawn and labeled, other physical features are indicated typographically, and a few terrain regimes (deserts, marshes) are indicated with symbols

**Use of color:** countries are distinguished by a system of five colors

**Level of detail:** world maps; many regional maps; some individual country maps; some maps show regions of large countries; sub-national political units; major and capital cities (often in detailed insets); major roads, railroads, and canals

**System of location:** all maps include both latitude and longitude and alphanumeric grids; inset locator maps

**Projections:** continent maps are usually optimal conformal projections and most area maps are Lambert conformal conic projections

**Index:** 22 pages; includes very few physical features; page numbers and alphanumeric keys

**Special features:** essay on map projections, excellent key to symbols, world flags and country facts, tables of statistics (solar system, Earth's dimensions, oceans, continents, and major islands, mountains, rivers, lakes, and canals)

**Accuracy:** includes independent East Timor

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### **Scholastic New Headline World Atlas (HM2505)**

Hammond. 8½" x 11". 52 pages. Revised edition. ©2007.

**Main selling points:** inexpensive

**Types of maps:** political, plus smaller special interest maps

**Treatment of physical features:** special interest maps include a small physical map of each continent, with shaded relief mountain ranges and use of color to indicate elevation; in the political maps that make up the rest of the volume, major rivers and lakes are drawn and labeled, other physical features are indicated typographically, and a few terrain regimes (deserts, marshes) are indicated with symbols

**Use of color:** beige maps with shaded borders; special interest maps use colors

**Level of detail:** world map; regional maps; some individual country maps; a few maps show sub-national political units; major and capital cities; no roads or railroads

**System of location:** all but the special interest maps include both latitude and longitude and alphanumeric grids; inset locator maps

**Projections:** continent maps are usually optimal conformal projections and most area maps are Lambert conformal conic projections

**Index:** 6 pages; page numbers and alphanumeric keys; identifies type of feature (river, lake, desert, etc.)

**Special features:** four small special interest maps for each continent (topography, population, land use, mineral resources), world flags and country facts, tables of statistics (solar system, Earth's dimensions, oceans and seas, continents, and major islands, mountains, rivers, lakes, and canals)

**Accuracy:** includes independent East Timor

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### **Quick Reference World Atlas (RM122)**

Rand McNally. 8½" x 11". 58 pages. ©2008.

**Main selling points:** inexpensive, good rendering of topography

**Types of maps:** physical-political

**Treatment of physical features:** shaded relief mountain ranges, major rivers and lakes drawn and labeled

**Use of color:** countries (and sometime sub-national units) distinguished by a system of six colors

**Level of detail:** world map; regional maps; some individual country maps; some maps show sub-national political units; major and capital cities; major roads

**System of location:** all maps include both latitude and longitude and alphanumeric grids

**Projections:** various, but most often Lambert conformal conic or Lambert azimuthal

**Index:** ten pages; page numbers and alphanumeric keys; topographical features in italics and identified by type (mountain, ocean, etc)

**Special features:** table of Earth facts, world political information table (area, population, form of government, capital, and predominant languages listed for nations and for some sub-national political units), world facts tables (principal islands, bodies of water, rivers, mountains), table of principal cities

**Accuracy:** includes independent East Timor

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### **Student Atlas of the World (CRM267)**

GeoNova. 8½" x 11". 112 pages. ©2007.

**Main selling points:** Good selection of maps at a moderate price, strong section on the United States

**Types of maps:** political, physical-political, and thematic

**Treatment of physical features:** shaded relief with color indicating terrain regimes

**Use of color:** physical-political maps use colors to indicate terrain regimes; political maps use a six-color system to distinguish countries; thematic maps use color as needed

**Level of detail:** world maps, continent maps, U.S. maps; major rivers, capital and major cities

**System of location:** longitude and latitude for all but thematic maps

**Projections:** physical world is Robinson, political world is Winkel, ocean floor is Mercator, world thematic maps vary but are mostly Robinson; projections for continent maps are undefined

**Index:** 5 pages; identifies physical features; entries keyed to pages with longitude and latitude

**Special features:** an eight-page map skills section, a two-page introduction to the solar system, several pages on geology, an illustrated glossary of landforms

**Accuracy:** includes independent East Timor

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### **The World Almanac Notebook Atlas (HM126)**

Hammond. 8½" x 11". 55 pages. ©2008.

**Main selling points:** three-hole punched for storage in student notebooks, affordable price, and extensive section of national facts

**Types of maps:** political

**Treatment of physical features:** indicated typographically

**Use of color:** a five-color system distinguishes countries

**Level of detail:** world maps, continent maps and regional maps, U.S. and Canadian maps; major rivers, capital and major cities

**System of location:** longitude and latitude and alphanumeric grid

**Projections:** world is Robinson, continent and regional maps are Lambert conformal conic, optimal conformal, and Miller cylindrical

**Index:** two pages; identifies physical features; entries keyed to pages with alphanumeric grids

**Special features:** world facts and figures and an extensive section of nation facts and figures,

**Accuracy:** includes independent East Timor

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### **World Atlas: Scholastic Edition. (UM116)**

UniversalMap. 8½" x 11". 24 pages. Second Edition. Undated.

**Main selling points:** inexpensive, and students can store the atlas in their notebooks using three staples in the spine that form metal loops

**Types of maps:** physical-political

**Treatment of physical features:** shaded relief

**Use of color:** a five-color system distinguishes countries (or, in the U.S. map, states)

**Level of detail:** world maps, continent and regional maps, a U.S. map, major rivers, capital and major cities

**System of location:** both longitude and latitude and alphanumeric grids

**Projections:** world and Asia are Gall projection, most maps are an unspecified equal area projection, and several maps are conformal conic

**Index:** 5 pages; broken into sections (countries, states/provinces, cities; physical features, and water features); keyed to pages with alphanumeric locators

**Special features:** world and U.S. fact sheets

**Accuracy:** includes independent East Timor