

Social Studies Glossary

Note: An asterisk (*) indicates that the definition of the term is from the *New York State Social Studies Resource Guide with Core Curriculum*

TERM	DEFINITION
Authority	The power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience.
Belief Systems*	An established orderly way that groups or individuals look at religious faith or philosophical tenets. A combination of ideas, values, and practices including all religions, as well as philosophical, ethical, and moral systems that serve a society's cultural needs.
Bill of Rights	The first ten amendments to the United States Constitution; adopted in 1791.
Branches of Government	Established in the United States Constitution to divide the power of government among the legislative, executive, and judicial bodies.
<i>Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS (1954)</i>	A landmark 20th century Supreme Court decision that ruled public school racial segregation unconstitutional. The decision became a driving force behind the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.
Checks and Balances	A system in which each branch of government is able to check (restrain) the power of the others in order to maintain the balance among branches created in the Constitution.
Canal	A man-made channel (waterway) that can be used to move water for irrigation, or a man-made channel used to connect waterways used for transportation.
Change*	Involves the basic alternatives in things, events, and ideas.
Choice*	The right or power to select from a range of alternatives.
Citizen	A member of a community or political society who has rights and responsibilities and is entitled to its protection.
Citizenship*	Membership in a community (neighborhood, school, region, state, nation, world) with its accompanying rights, responsibilities, and dispositions.
Civics	A social science that deals with civic affairs, especially the rights and duties of citizenship.
Civic Values*	Important principles that serve as the foundation for our democratic form of government. These values include justice, honesty, self-discipline, due process, equality, majority rule with respect for minority rights, and respect for self, others, and property.
Civilizations	Societies that have attained relatively advanced stages of social, political, and cultural developments.
Civil Rights	Legal and political rights of all United States citizens guaranteed by the Constitution and Bill of Rights.
Climate	The average weather of a place over a long period of time.
Colony	A settlement of people in a distant territory that remains under the control or jurisdiction of a parent country, often established for economic and political reasons.
Community	A group of people living, working, or learning in the same area with a common set of interests or within a set of recognized boundaries.
Compass Rose	A directional marker on a map that indicates north, south, east, or west.
Conflict*	A clash of ideas, interests, or wills that result from incompatible opposing forces.
Constitution	The system of fundamental laws that prescribes the nature, functions, and limits of a government or other institution; a framework for how a government or institution works; a written plan of government.
Constitutional Democracy	A political system in which the principles of popular sovereignty and the protection of citizens' freedom coexist by limiting the arbitrary exercise of power and making those who hold power legally accountable.

TERM	DEFINITION
Consumer	A person who acquires goods or services for personal use rather than for resale or use in production or manufacturing.
Continent	One of the earth's seven large continuous land masses.
Contributions	Includes the economic, political, and social beliefs of civilizations including their writing systems, works of literature, and technologies that become the foundations of subsequent societies.
County	A political unit, normally the largest territorial and political subdivision of a state.
Cultural	Of or relating to the artistic and intellectual aspects of the human experience.
Culture*	The pattern of human behavior that includes ideas, beliefs, values, artifacts, and ways of making a living which any society transmits to succeeding generations to meet its fundamental needs.
Current Event	Something that has occurred (or is occurring) in the immediate or near- present time
Decision-Making*	The processes used to monitor and influence public and civic life by working with others, clearly articulating ideals and interest, building coalitions, seeking consensus, negotiating compromise, and managing conflict.
Delta	A triangular-shaped area formed by soil deposited at the mouth of a river.
Democracy	A form of government in which political control is exercised by the citizens through elections.
Depression	A prolonged and severe decline in the level of economic activity.
Developed Nation	A country that has a high per capita income, an economy dominated by service industries and manufacturing, primarily urban populations, and high literacy rates.
Developing Nation	A country that is in the process of growth, characterized by low rates of urbanization, industrialization, literacy, and capital formation, and has relatively high rates of infant mortality.
Development	The progress or growth of an event or idea from one stage to another.
Discrimination	Unfair treatment against individuals or a group based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other attributes of the group.
Distribution	The deliverance of goods and services.
Diversity*	Understanding and respecting others and oneself including similarities and differences in languages, gender, socioeconomic class, religion, and other human characteristics and traits.
Domestic	The things of or related to one's own country
Due Process of Law	The right of every citizen to be protected against arbitrary action by government; the guarantee that established legal processes will be equally applied to each individual.
Economics	Of or related to the development, production, distribution, management, and consumption of material wealth.
Economic Systems*	Include traditional, command, market, and mixed systems. Each must answer the three basic economic questions: What goods and services will be produced? How shall goods and services be produced? For whom shall goods and services be produced?
Economy	A system for the management of the resources and production of goods and services of a community, country, etc.
Election	Organized method through which citizens vote to choose representatives, influence policies, and determine public spending at the local, state, or national levels
Emigrant (person) (Emigration = process)	A person who leaves his/her country to settle in a different country.
Empathy*	The ability to understand through being able to identify in one's self responses similar to the experiences, behaviors, and responses of others.
Entrepreneur	An individual who organizes or promotes a business, who risks losses for the possibility of financial gain.
Environment*	Surroundings including natural elements and elements created by humans.
Era	A period of time marked by certain characteristics or events.

TERM	DEFINITION
Ethnic Group	People who share a common cultural background including ancestry, language, religion, and/or distinct customs.
Ethnicity	Cultural identity based on ancestry, language, religion, and/or distinct customs.
Evidence	The available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid.
Executive Branch	The part of a government that enforces the law.
Factors of Production	Are human, natural, and capital resources which when combined become various goods and services (e.g., How land, labor, and capital inputs are used to produce food.).
Factory	A building or group of buildings where goods are manufactured or assembled chiefly by machine.
Federal Holiday	Federal holidays include: New Year’s Day, Martin Luther King Jr.’s Birthday, Washington’s Birthday, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day. Technically, there are no U.S. national holidays because only the federal government can designate holidays for its own workers. However, the states widely celebrate federal holidays and the term “national holiday” is commonly used to designate a federal holiday.
Federal System (federalism)	The form of political organization in which power is divided between a central government and its territorial subdivisions; the division of power between the national government and the states.
Folklore	The traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth.
Foreign	The things of or related to a country other than one’s own
Foreign Policy	A government’s plan or course of action for interacting with or relating to other countries in pursuit of its national interests.
Future	The time yet to come.
Geography	<p>The study of the earth, its land, water, plant and animal life, and how people interact with them.</p> <p>Essential elements of Geography:</p> <p>The World in Spatial Terms—Geography studies the relationships between people, places, and environments by mapping information about them into a spatial context.</p> <p>Places and Regions—The identities and lives of individuals and peoples are rooted in particular places and in those human constructs called regions.</p> <p>Physical Systems—Physical processes shape Earth’s surface and interact with plant and animal life to create, sustain, and modify ecosystems.</p> <p>Human Systems—People are central to geography in that human activities help shape Earth’s surface, human settlements and structures are part of Earth’s surface, and humans compete for control of Earth’s surface.</p> <p>Environment and Society—The physical environment is modified by human activities, largely as a consequence of the ways in which human societies value and use Earth’s natural resources, and human activities are also influenced by Earth’s physical features and processes.</p>
Global	Of, relating to, being in, or serving the whole world; world wide; comprehensive.
Global Economy	The international spread of capitalism, especially in recent decades, across national boundaries and with minimal restrictions by governments. Also referred to as <i>globalization</i> .
Governance	The action or manner of governing.

TERM	DEFINITION
Government*	The formal institutions and processes of a politically organized society with authority to make, enforce, and interpret laws and other binding rules about matters of common interest and concern. Government also refers to the group of people, acting in formal political institutions at national, state, and local levels, who exercise decision making power or enforce laws and regulations. (Also from the Civics Framework for the 1998 National Assessment Educational Progress, NAEP Civics Consensus Project, The National Assessment Governing Board, United States Department of Education, p. 19.)
Group	A number of individuals, objects or organizations collected, situated, or classified together.
History	The branch of knowledge concerned with the recording and explanation of past events.
Human Rights*	Those basic political, economic, and social rights that all human beings are entitled to, such as the <i>right to life, liberty, and the security of person, and a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family.</i> Human rights are inalienable and expressed by various United Nations Documents including the <i>United Nations Charter</i> and <i>Universal Declaration of Human Rights</i> .
Idea	An opinion, viewpoint, belief or plan.
Identity*	An awareness of one’s own values, attitudes, and capabilities as an individual and as a member of different groups
Individual	A single person, objective or organization.
Immigrant (person) (Immigration = process)	A person who comes to live in a country after leaving his/her home country.
Imperialism*	The domination by one country of the political and/or economic life of another country
Industrial Revolution	The term given to the change in social and economic organization resulting from the replacement of hand tools by machine and power tools and the development of large-scale industrial production that began in England in the 1760s and thereafter spread throughout much of the world
Industrialization	The growth of machine-based production and the factory system; the process of introducing manufacturing into countries or regions where most of the people are engaged in economic activities based on manual labor.
Interdependence*	A reliance upon others in mutually beneficial interactions and exchanges.
Island	A body of land surrounded by water.
Judicial Branch	The part of government that interprets the law.
Justice*	Fair, equal, proportional, or appropriate treatment rendered to individuals in interpersonal, societal, or governmental interactions.
Labor Union	An association of workers organized to improve wages and working conditions.
Latitude	A measure of distances north and south of the Equator; imaginary lines that are parallel numbered in degrees north or south of the Equator.
Law	The system of rules that a particular country or community recognizes as regulating the actions of its members and may be enforced by the imposition of penalties.
Legislative Branch	The part of a government that passes (enacts) laws.
Lifestyle	The consistent, integrated way of life of an individuals as typified by their manner, work, possessions, dress, attitudes, etc.
Local	Of, relating to, being in, or serving a particular area or place.
Location	Absolute: The exact position on Earth’s surface determined by using latitude and longitude or a specific street address. Relative: The position of a place in relation to other places or things.
Longitude	A measure of distances east and west of the Prime Meridian; imaginary lines intersecting at the poles, numbered in degrees east or west of the Prime Meridian.

TERM	DEFINITION
Migration	The act or process of people moving from one place of residence to another with the intent of staying at the new destination permanently or for a relatively long period of time.
Movement of People and Goods*	The constant exchange of people, ideas, products, technologies and institutions from one region or civilization to another that has existed throughout history.
Multicultural	Of, pertaining to, representing, or including several different cultures, ethnic groups, or cultural elements.
National	Of, relating to, being in, or serving a nation or country, or a group of people organized under one government.
National Anthem	A song officially adopted by a country's government that represents its ideals, culture, history, beliefs, etc.; for example, <i>The Star Spangled Banner</i> for the United States, <i>O Canada</i> for Canada, etc.
National Holiday	See Federal Holiday
Nation-State*	A geographic/political organization uniting people by a common government
Nationalism*	The feeling of pride in and devotion to one's country or the desire of a people to control their own government free from foreign interference or rule.
Native Americans	A member of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.
Natural Resources	A necessary or beneficial material source occurring in nature.
Needs and Wants	Refer to those goods and services that are essential such as food, clothing, and shelter (needs), and those good and services that people would like to have to improve the quality of their lives, (i.e., wants—education, security, health care, entertainment).
New York	A state in the mid-Atlantic regions of northeastern United States.
New York State Constitution	A written document that sets forth the fundamental political principles of the state of New York, and establishes the structure, procedures, powers, and duties of its government.
Overpopulation	A situation in which the number of people living in a country, city, region, etc., outstrips the available resources needed to maintain an acceptable standard of living, often resulting in poverty, malnutrition, disease, etc.
Participation	The action or state of taking part or sharing with others in an activity such as influencing local policy makers.
Past	The time having happened or existed before the present.
Patriotism	A devotion to one's country in words or deeds including devotion to the fundamental values and principles upon which it was founded and depends.
People	Humans collectively; a group of persons, often related, who share a common culture, language or inherited condition of life.
Perspective	An idea of the relative importance of things.
Petition	A formal request for government action guaranteed in the first amendment to the Constitution.
Physical Features	Natural characteristics found on the earth's surface or that affect the earth's surface, such as landforms, climate, winds, and ocean currents.
Physical Systems*	Physical processes shape Earth's surface and interact with plant and animal life to create, sustain, and modify ecosystems
Places	Locations having distinctive cultural and physical characteristics that give them meaning or character and distinguish them from other locations.
Places and Regions*	The identities and lives of individuals and peoples are rooted in particular places and in those human constructs called regions.
Plains	A landform that is a large, relatively flat expanse of land often covered by grasses.
Plateau	A landform that is large, relatively flat that has a higher elevation than the surrounding land.
Political	Of, pertaining to, or concerning the state, or the structure or affairs of its government.

TERM	DEFINITION
Political Systems*	Monarchies, dictatorships, and democracies that address certain basic questions of government such as: What should a government have the power to do? What should a government not have the power to do? A political system also provides for ways that parts of that system interrelate and combine to perform specific functions of government.
Population	All the people in a country, state, city, region, etc.
Population Density	Average number of people (or animals) living in a defined area (usually a square mile or square kilometer).
Power*	The ability of people to compel or influence the actions of others. “Legitimate power is called authority.”
Practice	A habit, custom, or method of doing something.
Preamble	The introduction to a formal document that expresses its purpose; the Constitution has a preamble.
Present	The current moment of time; now.
Producer	A person, group, or business that makes goods or provides services to satisfy consumer needs and wants.
Reform Movement	A political, social, or religious effort to make things better in a society by putting a stop to abuses or malpractices or by introducing better procedures
Region	An area with one or more unifying characteristics or features that make it different from other areas
Religion	A belief in a divine or superhuman power or powers obeyed and worshiped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe.
Religious	Adherence to a particular religion or religions
Representative Government	The form of government in which power is held by the people and exercised indirectly through elected representatives who make decisions.
Republic	A form of representative government in which the people elect important officials to represent them; based upon the ultimate sovereignty of the people.
Responsibilities	The opportunity or ability to act independently and make decisions without authorization.
Revolution	A drastic change in governmental, economic, or societal conditions.
Rights	A moral or legal entitlement to have or obtain something or act in a certain way.
Rural	Relating to the countryside, not the city.
Science and Technology	Means the tools and methods used by people to get what they need and want.
Social	Of, pertaining to, or concerning the life, welfare, and relations of human beings in a community.
State	The power or authority represented by a body of people politically organized under one government especially an independent government within a territory having definite boundaries, e.g., the State of New York is within the United States
Scarcity*	The conflict between unlimited needs and wants and limited natural and human resources
Society	An organized group of persons associated together for religious, benevolent, cultural, scientific, political, patriotic, or other purposes.
Space	A particular place or location.
Suburb (suburban)	Communities outside the central city that are functionally linked to the city, usually residential communities with their own governments.
Symbol	Something that stands for, represents, or suggests something else, e.g., a flag for a nation, the Liberty Bell for freedoms enjoyed by Americans, etc.
Technology	The system by which a society provides its members with those things that are needed or desired
Theme	A subject or topic.
Time	A particular moment or an interval, measured numerically, such as in days, minutes, or years.
Time Line	A graphic means of displaying events in chronological order.

TERM	DEFINITION
Tolerance	Respecting and accepting others regardless of their beliefs, practices, or differences.
Tradition	A passing down of a culture from one generation to the next; a continuing pattern of culture, beliefs, or practices.
Transportation	The means and equipment necessary for the movement of passengers or goods, including canals, railroads, automobiles, and airplanes).
Turning Point	An event marking a unique or important historical change of course or one on which important developments depend.
United States	A constitutional federal republic comprising fifty states and a federal district.
United States Constitution	A written document that sets forth the fundamental political principles of the United States of America, and establishes the structure, procedures, powers and duties of its government.
Urban	Related to a city or densely populated area.
Urbanization*	The movement of people from rural to urban (city) areas.
Value	A standard or principle regarded as desirable; the ideals, customs, institution, etc., of a society toward which the people of the group have an affective regard.
Vote	A decision made by an individual or group on a proposal, bill, or candidate for elective office.
Weather	Present conditions in the atmosphere including relative humidity, barometric pressure, temperature, wind speed and direction, cloud cover, and precipitation.
World History	The study of global connections and interactions of people across time and place.

Disclaimer: The New York State Education Department does not recommend specific texts or publishers. Other resources may be visited for definitions.

