

# How the STATES Got Their SHAPES



**M**ost Americans are familiar with the map of United States, but why do our states have the boundaries they do? Every shape on the map tells a great story about our past. Why is California bent and why does Oklahoma have a panhandle? In each one-hour episode of *How The States Got Their Shapes* host Brian Unger criss-crosses the nation to explain how state boundaries were formed and how they affect our lives today. Viewers will learn about the many reasons borders were determined, from political dynamics such as the shifting boundaries of slavery, to the importance of access to ports and waterways, to unexpected events such as earthquakes. This series blends geography and history, showing how state lines have been shaped by both human decision-making and the natural world. With commentary from historians and compelling visuals, *How The States Got Their Shapes* gives teachers and students an informative and unique window into the American past.

## Pre-Viewing Activity

Before watching an episode, ask students to create a drawing of their state or another state of their choice. Compare these drawings with an actual map after they are completed. Students can then discuss the notable features of the U.S. map and the geography of their own state before watching.

## Curriculum Links

*How the States Got Their Shapes* would be useful for classes on U.S. History, American Culture, Social Studies and Geography. It is appropriate for fifth graders and above. Teachers should watch an episode before recommending it to students to make sure it is appropriate for their age level.





## Vocabulary

Using a dictionary, textbook, or online source like History.com, ask students to define the following words before or after watching this program. Students can also write down their own lists of words to define as they watch.

**arbitrary, entity, flashpoint, geopolitical, latitude, longitude, microcosm, rhombus, speculator, surveyor**

## Viewing Activities

Students can fill in the answers below during or after they watch an episode of *How the States Got Their Shapes*, and discuss their answers with the larger class or group after watching.

1. Which states or cities does Brian Unger visit in this episode?

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2. What did you learn about U.S. geography from watching this episode?

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3. What facts or stories in this episode did you find most surprising or interesting?

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4. What questions about U.S. geography came to mind while you were watching?

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## Extended Activities

1. Locate a large photocopy of the U.S. map with the state boundaries included. White out or erase the state names and cut the map up into individual states. Then have students work in small groups to identify each state by writing the names on the cut-outs. You can also play this game with a timer, challenging each group to name the states in the shortest amount of time.

2. This series explores the boundaries of many states. Working in small groups, ask students to research the history of their own state boundaries. Students can create visual presentations of their state boundaries on poster-board, on PowerPoint, or any other format. Each group should include a short written essay about their state boundaries, or a bullet-point list of interesting facts they learned about their state. These presentations can be shared with the larger class or group.

3. In this series, Brian Unger goes on the road to explore U.S. geography. Ask students to imagine they were going on a similar journey and design their own road trip to explore the boundaries of a particular state. Students can write up their plans in a short essay, describing the areas they hope to explore and the questions they'd like to answer. Their projects should also include road maps showing the route they would take on their road trips. Students can even design playlists of songs relevant to the state they'd like to visit.

4. *How the States Got Their Shapes* highlights several interesting state stories. Ask students to write an essay of 1-2 pages about the state they find most interesting, with details about the state's history. Students can also include information about the state motto, key dates, and geographic features.

## Websites

Learn more about the U.S. states on History.com:  
[www.history.com/shows/how-the-states-got-their-shapes](http://www.history.com/shows/how-the-states-got-their-shapes)

Play the "Place the State" game on History.com:  
[www.history.com/topics/states/interactives/place-the-state-game](http://www.history.com/topics/states/interactives/place-the-state-game)

View maps online at the Library of Congress website:  
[rs6.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/gmdhome.html](http://rs6.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/gmdhome.html)

More U.S. history maps:  
[www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/histus.html](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/histus.html)

## Books

Hayes, Derek. **Historical Atlas of the United States**. (University of California, 2006)

Linklater, Andro. **How the United States Was Shaped by the Greatest Land Sale in History**. (Plume, 2003)

Nash, Gary and Carter Smith. **Atlas of American History**. (Facts on File, 2006)

Stein, Mark. **How the States Got Their Shapes**. (HarperCollins, 2008)

