



What is a topographic map?

The distinctive characteristic of a [topographic map](#) is the use of elevation contour lines to show the shape of the Earth's surface. Elevation contours are imaginary lines connecting points having the same elevation on the surface of the land above or below a reference surface, which is usually mean sea level. Contours make it possible to show the height and shape of mountains, the depths of the ocean bottom, and the steepness of slopes.

USGS topographic maps also show many other kinds of geographic features including roads, railroads, rivers, streams, lakes, boundaries, place or feature names, mountains, and much more. Older maps (published before 2006) show additional features such as trails, buildings, towns, mountain elevations, and survey control points. Those will be added to more current maps over time.

The phrase "USGS topographic map" can refer to maps with a [wide range of scales](#). Each topographic map has a unique name.

The USGS offers 3 categories of topographic maps:

1. [OnDemand Topos](#) enable users to request customized USGS-style topographic maps. These maps utilize the best available data from [The National Map](#). Exclusive to the topoBuilder application is the ability to select from multiple map scales and center maps wherever users choose.
2. [US Topo](#) maps are the current 1:24,000 scale* topographic map series, published as digital documents (that can also be printed) from 2009 to the present.
3. The [Historical Topographic Map Collection](#) is scanned images of maps originally published (at all scales) as paper documents in the period 1884–2006.

The USGS also publishes other kinds of maps, including some topographic maps that are not standard quadrangle maps.

Learn more:

- [USGS Map Store](#)
- [Maps for America](#)
- [How do I find, download, or order topographic maps?](#)

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