

SODA: The Life-force of a Geographer

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As a Geographer, especially during my undergraduate education, I was often asked questions like, “So...what does a geographer do?” or, “You’re majoring in geography, huh? What are you going to do with that? Teach?” My limited view at the time was relegated to trite responses I had heard from professors: “...Geography is what geographers do...” ... “Geographers study the earth-space environment...” ... “...Geography describes the earth...” Of course, those “definitions” only confuse people more (even some geographers).

For many years this troubled me, getting me so upset at times that I retorted to the questions with a quick, “I’ll do whatever I want!” But, after realizing I should be a better Ambassador for my beloved subject, my responses were less abrasive, though I usually feigned a *MacGyver* quote: “I’m not trying to be mysterious about it. It’s just that what I do is tough to explain.”

Over the years, after taking stock in what I do – what *Geographers* do – I came up with a simpler explanation: Geographers SODA. A simple mnemonic device, SODA outlines four key elements associated with geography: Geographers usually **S**peculate, **O**bserve, **D**escribe/**D**ata gather, and **A**nalyze. And with solid and astute training, anyone can learn to SODA like a Geographer.

Speculate. “Why is *that* there?” Geographers speculate about all sorts of things: location, space, time, and physical and anthropogenic phenomena. Speculation helps develop a hypothesis and/or research question. Or multiple questions and/or hypotheses.

Observe. “What do you *see*?” Geographers’ observations usually lead to supporting or not supporting their **S**peculations, and help further refine the hypotheses and/or questions. Observing is a powerful geographic technique!

Describe. “How would you communicate your observations?” Geography as a word means “to write about the Earth”. But Geographers not only describe the Earth, they also expound upon *how* they describe it. They discuss what methods were used and why, how they are going to test their hypothesis, and describe what they’ve seen and experienced. They note specific and general details about their **O**bservations and **S**peculations, perhaps collaborating with others, to describe the Data gathered as accurately as possible.

Analyze. “What do your findings *say*?” Geographers are brilliant at synthesizing information. They take into account multiple phenomena when assessing one specific topic. Because of their close association with all things spatial, they often see patterns and trends others might miss. They are masters at comparing and contrasting results from their hypotheses testing and/or research questions. They can take any **S**peculation, and through **O**bservation and **D**ata gathering of their **D**escriptions, **A**nalyze

it to find/help proffer an answer (or support/not support hypotheses). Many times, this results in more hypotheses and questions, so the cycle begins again.

This is the power of Geography: its ability to take the mundane, discouraging, frustrating, and interesting and make sense of it.

But what happens *after* the **Analysis**? Well, depending on circumstances, you can either **SODA POP** or **SODA CAN**. If your **SODA** will be given as a presentation or poster, then try **SODA POP**. If your **SODA** will be a paper (e.g., journal article, thesis, book, etc.), then try **SODA CAN**. (Keep in mind that sometimes, there may be cause for the entire **SODA POP CAN!**)

Propose the next step. The **Analysis** generated through **SODA** leads to the next move. And that move must be formally **Proposed**.

Organize the results. The **Proposed** next move then needs to be **Organized** in a way that your audience will understand it.

Present findings. Once **Organized**, the results should be **Presented**. Hopefully, by the end of the **Presentation**, there is even more valuable feedback.

AND/OR

Conclusion. The **Analysis** can also lead to a **Conclusion**. Maybe what you've discovered is something entirely new.

Application. A **Conclusion** should then lead to an **Application**. How can what you've discovered be used? Why is it important?

New Knowledge. The **Application**, in most cases, *is* – or at least leads to – **New knowledge**. And this can then be shared with the world (however small your world may be).

**While mnemonic devices like SODA abound in the educational arena, I devised SODA as a logical pathway to enhance Geography pedagogy. It also follows the Scientific Method.