



Elements of Culture

Geography Teachers Association of NSW

What is culture?

Culture can be defined as all those things that make up a person's way of life. It is the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to the next.

A **cultural group** is made up of people of similar heritage who identify with others in the group through sharing the same language, the same ancestry and often the same religion.



The 8 elements of culture

1. Language
2. Religion, or religious background
3. Political system and ideas
4. Ethnic background
5. Forms of social organisation
6. Customs and traditions
7. Arts and literature
8. Economic systems

1. Language

Language is important
for communicating and
the passing on of
traditions and beliefs.



2. Religion, or religious background

Religion is the set of beliefs and practices that define the relations between human being and a sacred being (often referred to as as a god or gods).

The world's major religions include: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.



3. Political system and ideas

The role of governments is to meet the collective needs of people.

Types:

- **Democracy** – multi-party states in which the people have supreme power. Example, Australia, UK, USA.
- **One-party states** – states in which one political party (to the exclusion of all others) has total power. Example, China
- **Dictatorships** – a state in which a single person has absolute power. Example, North Korea.



4. Ethnic background

The ethnic background of a people. In the case of Australia, diversity is an important characteristics. In 2016, nearly half (49 per cent) of all Australians were born overseas (first generation Australian) or had one or both parents had been born overseas (second generation Australian).



5. Forms of social organisation

The manner in which society organises itself.

Examples include:

- Families & house holds (nuclear families, extended family, mixed and same sex couples, single parent households, group households, single person households)
- Friendship groups
- Religious groups
- Social class (working class, middle class etc.)
- Occupation group
- Sports club
- Interest group

Social class: The ways in which people are ranked by social status.

Criteria typically used to rank people:

- Money (income & wealth)
- Occupation
- Education
- Race

6. Customs and traditions

The rules of behaviour (written and unwritten) that influence the ways people behave.



7. Arts and literature

The product of the creative skills of people.
The means by which a people's culture is passed down from one generation to another.



8. Economic systems

Economic systems

Four types:

- **Subsistence:** People produce most of what they need to survive.
- **Market:** The demand for goods and services determines what is supplied in the market place.
- **Command:** Governments determined what goods and services are supplied.
- **Mixed:** Individuals make some decisions, the government makes others.

The ways cultures change

Changes in transport and communications technologies – new technologies increase the rate at which ideas and cultural influences spread.

Contact with other cultural and social influences – The contact between two societies will change the culture of both the societies through the process of ‘cultural diffusion’ and ‘assimilation’. Some characteristics will be embraced, others rejected and some adapted.

Geographical factors – the nature of the natural or physical environment (for example, the climate or rainfall, attitude of the place or closeness to the sea) influences the culture and lifestyle of a people. Any change in the physical features will automatically lead to a change in their culture, habits and way of living.