

Cultural diffusion: the definition, the types, the vocabulary

Cultural diffusion is the spread of cultural traits (languages, religions, foods, technologies, fashions, ideas) from the place they began, the HEARTH, to other places and peoples, through trade, migration, conquest, missionaries, media and the internet. The receiving culture adopts the trait, adapts it, or blends it with its own (syncretism).

The types, with the test question

Type	How it spreads	Test question	Examples
Relocation	people move and carry the trait; it may fade at the hearth	Did people have to migrate?	Spanish to the Americas; Chinatowns; the Amish; Hinduism in Bali
Expansion	spreads outward while staying strong at the hearth	Did it spread without the people moving?	the three kinds below
Contagious	person to person, every direction, like a disease	To whoever was nearby, regardless of rank?	a viral video; a TikTok dance; early Islam in Arabia; school slang
Hierarchical	top down: from the powerful or the big cities	Did it start with the elite or the biggest cities?	Paris fashion; hip-hop from NY and LA; Christianity after Constantine; new phones
Stimulus	the idea spreads but the trait is changed to fit	Did a new version keep the idea but change the form?	McDonald's with no beef in India; the Cherokee syllabary; Japanese kana
Reverse hierarchical	from small places to big	Did it start small and reach cities last?	Walmart from small-town Arkansas; country music

Barriers

- [] physical: oceans, deserts, mountains
- [] language: spreads faster inside one language than across
- [] religion and custom: beef in India, alcohol in Saudi Arabia
- [] politics: the Great Firewall, closed borders, Japan's sakoku (1639-1853), censorship
- [] time-distance decay: the further and later, the weaker (the internet has nearly removed it)

The vocabulary AP Human Geography tests

hearth	the origin point of a trait or culture
time-distance decay	weaker with distance from the hearth and time since
acculturation	a group adopts traits of a dominant culture, keeping some of its own
assimilation	a group loses its own traits and becomes like the dominant culture
syncretism	two cultures' traits blend into a new one (Vodou, Tex-Mex, Anglo-Indian English)
cultural convergence / divergence	cultures become more alike through diffusion / more different through isolation

From

sciencewithshobha.com/blog/cultural-diffusion-definition-the-types-relocation-expansion-contagious-hierarchical-stimulus-with-30-examples-and-ap-human-geography-practice/ · 1-on-1 online physics and chemistry, free 30-minute first class.

Thirty examples sorted by type, and practice

Trait	Hearth	Type
farming	Fertile Crescent, c. 10,000 BC	contagious and relocation; about 1 km a year into Europe
Arabic numerals	India, c. 500 AD	hierarchical through scholars to the Arab world and Europe
chess	India, c. 600 AD	contagious along trade routes
Buddhism	northern India	relocation (missionaries) and contagious along the Silk Road; faded at the hearth
Christianity	Roman Palestine	contagious, then hierarchical after Constantine; relocation to the Americas
Islam	Mecca, 7th century	contagious in Arabia; relocation with traders to Indonesia and East Africa
paper, gunpowder, compass, printing	China	westward along the Silk Road over centuries
coffee	Ethiopia, then Yemen	contagious through the Ottoman Empire; London 1652
tea	China	hierarchical (royal courts) then contagious
potatoes, tomatoes, maize, chocolate	the Americas	relocation: the Columbian Exchange after 1492
horses, wheat, cattle, smallpox	Europe and Asia	relocation: the Columbian Exchange the other way
Spanish	Spain	relocation (colonists)
English	England	relocation, then hierarchical (empire, business, the internet)
cricket	England	relocation (the British Empire)
football (soccer)	England, 1863	contagious through sailors, workers, schools
baseball	United States	hierarchical (military and business) to Japan, Korea, the Caribbean
jeans	San Francisco, 1873	hierarchical (Hollywood, youth culture)
jazz	New Orleans	hierarchical (Chicago, New York, radio)
hip-hop	the Bronx, 1970s	hierarchical to other cities, then contagious
pizza	Naples	relocation (Italian migrants) then stimulus (deep-dish, Hawaiian)
sushi	Japan	hierarchical (LA, New York) then stimulus (the California roll)
yoga	India	relocation (teachers) then stimulus (hot yoga)
McDonald's	California	hierarchical and stimulus (McAloo Tikki in India)
the Cherokee syllabary	Sequoyah, 1821	stimulus: the idea of writing, not the letters
Christmas trees	Germany	hierarchical (Prince Albert, 1840s) then contagious
Halloween	Ireland and Scotland	relocation to the US, then hierarchical back through American media
K-pop	South Korea	contagious online, hierarchical through media
anime, emoji, karaoke	Japan	hierarchical through media and technology companies
a viral TikTok dance	one account	contagious: the purest modern example
Walmart	small-town Arkansas	reverse hierarchical

Practice: name the type

1. A slang word spreads through a school in a week. 2. Italian immigrants open pizzerias in New York. 3. A Paris runway fashion reaches stores worldwide a year later. 4. Hinduism in Bali, carried by Indian traders. 5. KFC in China sells congee. 6. Walmart spread from small towns to big cities last. 7. Buddhism is strong in Japan, a minority faith in India. 8. Smartphones reached capitals first, villages last. 9. A TikTok sound in ten million videos in a month. 10. The Cherokee invent writing after seeing English books. 11. Sikh communities in Canada keep their faith and food. 12. The Olympics, revived in Athens, now hosted on every continent.

Answers

1) contagious 2) relocation 3) hierarchical 4) relocation 5) stimulus 6) reverse hierarchical 7) relocation and expansion away from the hearth 8) hierarchical 9) contagious 10) stimulus 11) relocation 12) hierarchical