It may seem at first glance that California and the ancient land of Mesopotamia have very little in common. Mesopotamia, located in modern-day Iraq, is considered the cradle of Western civilization, and first became home to an economic power in 3100 B.C. California, on the Pacific Coast of North America, did not achieve status as an economic power until almost 5,000 years later, at the end of the 1800s. In spite of these differences of time and place, it is important to realize that both regions were able to rise to economic power because of their unique geographical landscapes.

Let's first look at Mesopotamia. It was bordered on either side by two rivers: the Tigris and the Euphrates. These rivers had many different branches, or tributaries, feeding into them, creating a vast network of streams and canals. The canals provided a built-in transportation system for the Sumerian and Akkadian peoples who first settled the place. Using the simple canoes and log rafts they built, they could communicate and trade. This ability to trade was especially important since Mesopotamia did not have its own supply of resources such as timber, metals or semi-precious stones, and had to import all of these things. Water routes allowed Mesopotamia to import the materials needed to become an economic power.

Water transport also greatly increased the speed of communication in Mesopotamia. Overland transportation at that time was painfully slow and clunky, via simple wheeled pushcarts, or pack animals such as donkeys or camels. With water transport, settlers could use downstream river
currents to ship goods much faster. Raw materials arrived at the bigger towns with greater frequency, which meant that these towns and cities could grow and develop faster. Knowledge and news from other regions could also come in quicker, allowing the Mesopotamians to become savvy and cosmopolitan. So we see that the speedy input of goods and knowledge via the waterways allowed the Mesopotamians a distinct advantage over competing regions, and allowed their economic and cultural life to flourish.

Mesopotamia was also blessed with especially rich soil. Diverse elevations (there are both high hills and low-lying marshlands) and climatic variations in the region allowed for the evolution of many types of edible seeds and plants, as well as a variety of farm animals. Mesopotamia is considered the birthplace of agriculture—it is here where the first species of wheat, barley, flax, chick pea and lentil were first cultivated by man for human consumption. In looking at the development of farming in Mesopotamia, we see that it was a combination of Mesopotamia's geographical advantage (specifically, its abundance of plant and animal species) and the intelligence of its human settlers that made it all possible. With so many crops, the settlers of Mesopotamia could be well-nourished, which gave them the physical strength to thrive, and also gave them many products to trade with other regions. It is no surprise, then, that historians have dubbed Mesopotamia as "The Fertile Crescent," due to its productive soil.

While the great city of Babylon was thriving in Mesopotamia in 3100 B.C., California remained rather insignificant as a trade or cultural center. It was inhabited by nomadic tribes who lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Life in these tribes was simply a matter of day-to-day survival, and no deeper developments, such as writing or advanced technological inventions, were able to take place. Unlike tribes in other parts of North America, the California Indians never built great settlements or amassed significant wealth. This is partly because for a long time California Indians were geographically isolated—cut off by the Sierra Nevada mountains on one side, the vast Pacific Ocean on the other, and desert to the south. They could not easily communicate with tribes outside of California. Also, they could not cultivate crops because the land was for the most part too dry. When João Rodrigues Calbrilho, a Portuguese explorer, arrived with his crew in California in the early 1500s (they were the first Europeans to do so), the crew abandoned the place, thinking it was too isolated from the world's other trade points.

It was only in the mid-1800s, when American settlers from the East discovered precious gold buried under California soil that the region finally started to become an important economic center. The natural resources hidden in California's land, in the form of gold and oil, motivated the Americans to somehow overcome the region's isolation. First attempts to do this were the Pony Express and the Overland Express, companies that used horses to relay communication from California to other parts of America. Then came the telegraph, and soon after that the transcontinental railroad, which ended California's isolation issue once and for all.

With the arrival of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, California's natural geographical advantages could finally be exploited, and by 1900, the area was in full economic boom. The American settlers who had built the railroads quickly replaced the nomadic native tribes. They opened up commerce along the 840 miles of Pacific shoreline, which soon became full of bustling ports that brought labor and trade goods across the Pacific Ocean from China and Japan. The American settlers also built large aqueducts to irrigate inland California, which previously had been too dry to cultivate crops. Thanks to the state's temperate, Mediterranean-like climate, a large variety of crops could flourish, now that there was sufficient water. Like Mesopotamia 5,000 years earlier, California became an
agricultural giant, and today it is America's prime producer of almonds, walnuts, avocados, grapes, melons, peaches, strawberries, and wine. Hollywood, another major economic asset to California, formed around Los Angeles in the early 1900s because the area's geography was suited to filmmaking. Southern California had large natural spaces and year-round good weather, both helpful conditions for making films. California continues to be an economic powerhouse today thanks to its geographical assets—natural resources, good climate, and fertile soil. California ranks as the world's 12th largest economy.

We now see that, like Mesopotamia, California has certain geographical advantages that have made it a power player on the world stage. California did not have it as easy as Mesopotamia did—it had several geographical disadvantages to conquer before its advantages could really shine. Technology had to evolve so that communication between California and other parts of the world was not so difficult and slow. Aqueducts needed to be built to irrigate the dry inland areas, making them lush and fertile like the ancient Mesopotamian soil. But once these changes were in place, the other, significant geographical advantages of California could be enjoyed, and the state could assume its place in world history, alongside ancient Mesopotamia, as one of the great centers of economic power. The examples of California and Mesopotamia show us that no matter what time of history we are in, geography will play a key role in determining its economic promise.
advantage  ad·van·tage

Definition
	noun

1. anything good that you get from something.

*The advantages of my new job are better hours and better pay.*

Advanced Definition
	noun

1. a position or place of superiority or domination.

*All her preparation gave her the advantage in the debate.*

*Our initiatives have paid off and put us at an advantage over our competitors.*

2. something that gives a position of superiority or domination.

*A degree from a top school is an advantage in competing for a job.*

3. something that is a benefit, profit, or gain.

*Saving money and avoiding the traffic are advantages of being able to walk to work.*

Spanish cognate

*ventaja*: The Spanish word *ventaja* means advantage.

These are some examples of how the word or forms of the word are used:

1. Nature has tried many variations. The ones that succeeded, conferring individuals some *advantage* in their environment - for instance, making eating or hiding easier - spread and keep spreading wildly. The ones that didn't simply disappeared.

2. The Kushites employed many of the same irrigation techniques as the ancient Egyptians did, taking *advantage* of the rainy season to keep the land fertile. Using dams and cataracts, the Kushites directed the flow of water to grow wheat, barley, lentils, peas, and even dates and mangoes.

3. This robot moves by inching its body forward, pulling its body in tight, and then releasing it to go long, much like an inch worm. It's not a very fast robot, but it does have an *advantage*, the researchers realize. If they picked this robot up and dropped it randomly somewhere else, the
robot would just keep on moving as if nothing had happened. The researchers realize this tradeoff—the bot may not be very fast, but it certainly is durable.

4. Even though there clearly are numerous **advantages** to the activation of The Hoover Dam and the work done at the site, there are a few environmental impacts that are harsh.

5. One of the main **advantages** of biodiversity is that there are certain natural processes that plants and animals perform that humans simply cannot. The billions of bees in the world play a critical role in pollinating the world's flowers. If they did not do this, the food supply would dwindle and the human population would suffer greatly.

6. The war was bitter, with most young men leaving home to join the fight, sometimes clashing with family members from the other side on the battlefields. The North was at an **advantage**. With access to more soldiers, as well as factories that could quickly churn out wartime materials, they were often able to fight harder and longer.

7. Once the brothers had decided to begin testing their experiments with gliders, they needed to find a better place to glide as Ohio wasn't quite windy enough. After writing to the U.S. Weather Bureau, analyzing the weather data for various areas and asking other inventors for advice, the Wright brothers decided that Kitty Hawk in North Carolina would be the best place to take **advantage** of sea breezes for gliding practice.

8. In an unusual move, Franklin never patented a single one of his designs or inventions, which meant other people were free to copy them, improve upon them or recreate them. He resisted hoarding his ideas because he truly believed that people benefitted from one another's inventions. It gave society an **advantage** if new designs and inventions were available to all, because that way, more minds could work on them in order to make them better.

9. To meet the demands of the growing population, cargo ships flooded through the Golden Gate, carrying food, tools, clothing, building material, farmers, businessmen, and more people looking to take **advantage** of the gold rush. The San Francisco Bay was designated as an official port of entry for ships bearing foreign goods and was in a prime location for access to gold country. Between January 1848 and December 1849, the population of the city of San Francisco grew from 1,000 to 25,000.

10. Besides its rivers, one of Maine's most distinct features is its tree cover. Forestry and logging are important industries in Maine. Trucks stacked high with tree trunks rattle down roads in central Maine all day long, making loud noises and leaving behind the sticky smell of pine. Penobscot Indians used trees to their **advantage** long before modern loggers, however. In addition to making the canoes mentioned above, people built homes from the bark of birch trees. Bigger dwellings were made of larger branches and logs.
agriculture  ag·ri·cul·ture

Definition  noun

1. the science or activity of farming. Agriculture includes raising crops and animals for food.

Advanced Definition  noun

1. the raising of crops and livestock, or the science connected with improving the processes involved.

With improved methods of farming, agriculture flourished in the area.

With little industry or technology, the country relies on agriculture for its primary means of support for its people.

Spanish cognate

agricultura: The Spanish word agricultura means agriculture.

These are some examples of how the word or forms of the word are used:

1. Although erosion occurs naturally at a very slow rate, human activities have sped up the process by an estimated 10 to 40 times globally. The biggest culprit is unsustainable agricultural practices and the industrialization of agriculture. The mechanized equipment used in modern agriculture allows for deep plowing of the soil. This breaks the soil into finer particles, which is desirable for agriculture because it facilitates planting and also increases the plants’ access to oxygen. However, deep plowing also increases the amount of soil that is vulnerable to being washed away by erosion.

2. "It is imperative that we increase honey bee survival both to make beekeeping profitable," the statement noted, "but more importantly to meet the demands of U.S. agriculture for pollination and thus ensure of [sic] food security."

3. Alexandra Sullivan, a food systems researcher in New York City, studies urban agriculture. Urban agriculture is another name for farming and gardening in a city environment. Ms. Sullivan studies everything from tiny gardens in empty lots between buildings, to bigger fields that have been planted and cultivated.

4. Why should humans worry about the Everglades? The loss of the area’s biodiversity doesn’t just hurt the plants and animals that originally made their homes there. Humans have benefited from the Everglades in many ways, from the creation of park and tourism jobs to the water supply that keeps the cities and agriculture of Southern Florida running. If the wetlands suffer, so do humans.
**economic**  
\[e\-co\-nom\-ic\]

**Definition**  
adjective  
1. having to do with money and the production of goods and services.

_Economic conditions are getting better now, so people are spending more money._

**Advanced Definition**  
adjective  
1. of or pertaining to the production and distribution of goods, wealth, and services.
2. of or pertaining to the study of such production and distribution.
3. relating to personal financial matters.

**Spanish cognate**  
_económico_: The Spanish word _económico_ means economic.

**These are some examples of how the word or forms of the word are used:**

1. The disappearance of animal species may seem like a remote concern for human beings, at least compared to things like war and _economic_ collapse. But we tend to forget that all things are connected.

2. To make matters worse, when hard _economic_ times hit portions of the country, the Irish were the last to be employed. Many businesses that did need workers posted signs that said they were hiring, but added "Irish need not apply" if they did not feel too desperate for laborers.

3. Roosevelt was determined to not only mend the _economic_ or financial injuries to the American people, but also to mend the injuries to their spirit, sense of initiative, purpose and creativity. Roosevelt viewed the Great Depression as a complicated problem that had arisen within a complicated society.

4. Beyond his keen intuition that facilitated his discoveries and solutions, Franklin had an exceptional intelligence. This was evident in the way he approached problems—the man was famous for being _economical_, community driven and supportive of education and hard work. He didn’t come from a wealthy family and was well known for living simply, yet smartly.

5. Whole neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Staten Island were flooded. The Rockaways, a neighborhood in the southernmost section of Queens, saw devastation wrought upon its classic beachfronts. The Rockaway boardwalk, an iconic fixture of New York City summers, was casually brushed aside by waves and winds. Transformers blew in Manhattan, sending the global _economic_ center into darkness for days on end.

6. In the early- to mid-1800s, large farms called plantations were the backbone of the Southern _economy_. Cotton, a cheap material used often in everyday life all over the world, was one of the most important crops grown on the plantations. As a result, cotton plantations multiplied throughout the region. Soon the South had become the main grower and exporter of cotton for Europe and a powerful _economic_ force.
1. Which place is considered the cradle of Western civilization?
   A. California
   B. Egypt
   C. South Africa
   D. Mesopotamia

2. How does the author compare California and Mesopotamia?
   A. Both are geographically isolated.
   B. Both were home to ancient advanced cultures.
   C. Both rose to power because of their unique geographical landscapes.
   D. Both had fertile soil to easily grow crops.

3. Water transportation was crucial for the economical development of Mesopotamia. What evidence from the passage best supports this conclusion?
   A. "Raw materials arrived at the bigger towns with greater frequency, which meant that these towns and cities could grow and develop faster."
   B. "Overland transportation at that time was painfully slow and clunky, via simple wheeled pushcarts, or pack animals such as donkeys or camels."
   C. "The canals provided a built-in transportation system for the Sumerian and Akkadian peoples who first settled the place."
   D. "These rivers had many different branches, or tributaries, feeding into them, creating a vast network of streams and canals."

4. Man-made constructions needed to be developed before people could enjoy the geographical benefits of the area. This statement is true about which area?
   A. Mesopotamia
   B. California
   C. both Mesopotamia and California
   D. America

5. What is this passage mostly about?
   A. how ancient Mesopotamians invented writing
   B. the economic benefits of the California gold rush
   C. similarities and differences between Mesopotamia and California
California and Mesopotamia - Similarities and Differences - Comprehension Questions

6. Read the following sentence: "In looking at the development of farming in Mesopotamia, we see that it was a combination of Mesopotamia’s geographical advantage (specifically, its abundance of plant and animal species) and the intelligence of its human settlers that made it all possible."

What does "abundance" mean?

A. large amount  
B. small amount  
C. lack of  
D. affluence

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Native American tribes in California were geographically isolated; ________, they were unable to communicate easily with other tribes outside of California.

A. moreover  
B. namely  
C. ultimately  
D. as a result

8. Why were nomadic Native American tribes in California unable to develop advanced technological inventions at the same time as Mesopotamia?

9. How did the settlers who came to California after the construction of the transcontinental railroad overcome California’s geographic challenges? Give two examples from the passage.

10. What are the major differences between ancient California and Mesopotamia? Use information from the text to support your answer.