Page 135—The Land of the Nile
The Nile River is the world’s longest river. From east-central Africa, the Nile flows north for 4,160 miles until it empties into the Mediterranean Sea.

The ancient land once called Lower Egypt lies at the Nile’s mouth at the Mediterranean Sea and is made up mainly of the Nile Delta. A delta is a triangular piece of rich land formed from soil deposited at the mouth of some rivers.

The higher land to the south was known as Upper Egypt. There, the narrow and fertile Nile Valley follows the Nile River for more than 600 miles. Even farther south, the Nile runs between desert cliffs in a series of six cataracts, or waterfalls.

The Nile River cuts across the arid, or dry, desert known as the Sahara. Only on the fertile lands by the Nile could early Egyptians grow crops of wheat and barley.

Heavy rains fall in the mountains at the Nile’s source far to the south. This rainfall caused the river to overflow its banks. The yearly flooding deposited silt along each bank, making the soil fertile.

This physical setting supported permanent settlement. By 4000, B.C., farming villages lined the Nile River from the delta to the first cataract. To the ancient Egyptians, the Nile was “the giver of life.”

Summarize: What are the major features of the Nile River?

Page 136—Controlling the River
To the ancient Egyptians, the Nile was “the giver of life,” but it also took life away. In some years, the rains were not heavy enough to make the Nile overflow its banks. The land baked in the sun, and the crops dried up. Without a harvest, many

Analyze Maps: The Nile River flows from higher land in the south to lower land in the north.

Why do you think the land in northern Egypt was called Lower Egypt?
Egyptians starved. In other years, too much rain fell at the Nile’s source, and the river flooded wildly, drowning people and destroying crops.

Over time, the Egyptians developed agricultural techniques that gave them some control of the Nile. At first, they built simple irrigation ditches to bring water to their fields. Later, they built dams and dikes to control the yearly flooding. They also learned to store water in ponds or pools for use during times when the river was low.

As the Egyptians learned to benefit more and more from the Nile, the populations of settlements along its shores increased. Irrigation became so important to the food supply in these growing communities that it was supervised by government officials. Eventually, the government began to have complete control over all farming and irrigation.

The authority of early Egyptian leaders was based on their ability to provide water for crops. Over time, they built more complex irrigation systems. In good years, large harvests produced surplus food so the rulers stored it to feed people in times of drought. They also used surplus food to feed the laborers on public works projects.

**Summarize:** How did ancient Egyptians control the flooding waters of the Nile?

**Page 137—Geography: Aswan High Dam**

In 1970, Egypt completed the Aswan High Dam, one of the world’s largest embankment dams. Embankment dams are constructed of earth and rock.

The Aswan High Dam holds back floodwater during rainy seasons and releases water during times of drought. It also generates huge amounts of electricity. Because of the dam, the Nile no longer overflows its banks to deposit rich soil. Farmers now depend on fertilizers to enrich their land. Also, the lack of new deposits of silt has caused land along the Nile to erode.

The lake formed by the dam would have covered ancient temples and settlements. So, in the 1960s, an international team of workers cut apart the temples and moved them to higher ground, where they were reassembled.
Page 138—A Source of Religion

Even though the Egyptians learned to control the Nile with irrigation systems, they could not always predict, or tell in advance, what each year’s flooding would be like. They nervously wondered if the Nile’s water would be too low or too high. The Egyptians also could not predict exactly when the floods would come. In some years, the floods arrived early, but in others the floods arrived late.

The flooding of the Nile influenced the early Egyptians’ religious beliefs. To find order in the world around them, the Egyptians created stories to explain events in nature. In these stories, gods or goddesses controlled a specific part of nature. From these stories, the Egyptians developed beliefs in many gods and goddesses. In this way, like the Sumerians, the early Egyptians formed a polytheistic religion.

One of the Egyptians’ most important gods was the sun god, Ra, also pronounced Re. Early Egyptians noticed that the sun’s position is predictable. Every day, the Egyptians saw the sun rise, move across the sky, and set. They believed that the sun was a god who was born each day and died each night. This cycle led the Egyptians to believe that their own lives would continue in an afterlife, or a life after death. Belief in the afterlife became an important part of early Egyptian culture.

Another important god was Hapi, god of the flood. The Egyptians held many festivals to honor Hapi, hoping he would reward them with good harvests. Other important gods included Horus, the sky god, and Osiris, the god of the next world.

Each Egyptian city had one or more special gods or goddesses. As a city gained strength, its god became more important. For example, when the city of Thebes grew powerful, belief in the city’s god, Amon, spread. The Egyptians combined Amon and Ra, considering Amon-Ra their most powerful god.

**Summarize:** How did the unpredictability of the Nile’s floods affect early Egyptians’ religious beliefs?
By 3100 B.C., the early Egyptians were developing an advanced civilization in towns along the Nile. They built temples as places to worship their gods and stone tombs to hold the bodies of rulers who had died. Early writing appears on these temples and tombs. The Egyptians made pottery on which they painted scenes from their lives. They mined copper for tool-making and gold for decorative art.

Farming along the Nile made all these advances possible. In the fertile soils of the Nile Delta and the Nile Valley, farmers grew surplus crops of wheat and barley. They used donkeys to carry grain to storehouses in towns, where scribes recorded it and rulers distributed it. The Egyptians ground the wheat into flour for making bread, the main part of their diet.

Having a surplus of grain allowed farmers in some towns to use the surplus grain for trade. The Sinai Peninsula was a crossroads for the early Egyptians and traders from southwestern Asia.

Trade also took place on the Nile River. The Nile served as a highway connecting Egyptian settlements. To use this “highway,” the Egyptians became expert shipbuilders. At first, the Egyptians built their boats from bundles of reeds. Later, they made large sailing ships out of wood from what is now Lebanon.

Sails did more than just increase traveling speed. They also made it possible for ships to sail upstream against the river’s current. This meant that nearly all the Nile, except for the cataracts in Nubia, could be used for travel and trade.

Trade and travel along the Nile made it possible for some towns to grow into cities. Then some of these trade centers emerged as separate cultures and powers. By 3100 B.C., Egypt consisted of two kingdoms—Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt.

**Cause and Effect:** How did trade along the Nile support the growth of Egypt?

The physical setting of the Nile River supported permanent settlements and an early civilization in ancient Egypt. The Egyptians developed agricultural techniques, such as irrigation, along the Nile River. It was these techniques that permitted the Egyptians to grow surplus food. Over time, Egyptian trade surpluses allowed the growth of cities.