

## Exactly what is a topographic map?

This question requires considerable explanation because the contents of a topographic map are very different from those of most other maps such as the familiar road map. The key is the word “contour”. On the map, the contour lines are shown in brown. Imagination and practice are requirements for understanding these contour lines. To visualize hills, valleys, and the many other landforms, it is essential to read the features of the land as portrayed by contours.

To understand the contour line think of, it as an imaginary line on the ground which takes any shape to maintain a constant elevation above sea-level. For example, the shoreline of the sea is in effect a contour representing the zero elevation or sea-level. If the sea should rise upon the land, the new shoreline would be a new contour line. All successive rises would be contours, and a vertical difference between them may then be established.

For uniformity, it was decided long ago to establish a contour difference or interval in feet. A contour interval and scale are determined and established for each topographic map, depending largely upon the flatness or steepness of the land of the particular area being mapped. The primary needs for the map are also considered. In the flat or lowlands, the interval can be as small as one foot. But it may become 5, 10, 20, 50, or 100 feet as the steepness of a hilly or mountainous land increases.