

Hello. It's real important to know about all of the states. But books can make it seem complicated, too. We think they can be packed full of facts no one will remember, which is why we simplified it and created our 'snapshot' books.

But we can go a step farther. We can take you through the basics before you even read a word. And that is what we are going to do here. So listen on – and why not make some notes, too? Then you can expand them as you read. At the end you will have your own state book written in your own words. How great is that!

OK, let's get started!

1. California is on the west coast – that's right by the Pacific Ocean. It is a very long state, and so it was natural several centers would grow up. The biggest – from north to south – are San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

Then, just inland from San Francisco, is the state capital – Sacramento.

And all that great land is home to 40 million people. That makes it the most populated of all the states. Just as well it has such a large area for them to live in!

2. Now for the land. California has two ranges of mountains and a line of wide basins between them.

Along the coast are the rugged Coast Ranges. They run right down the coast and make it so hard to build coastal settlements. One important gap in these ranges is at San Francisco, which is one reason the city grew up before other places. Inland of the Coast Ranges is a broad series of basins. The Central Valley makes up the northern part, and the Imperial Valley makes up the southern area. To the east of these basins are the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and their northerly extensions called the Klamath Mountains and Cascade Mountains. They act as an almost impenetrable barrier, and for centuries cut California off from the rest of North America. To the east of those are more basins, and here is where Death Valley is found.

3. Now to weather and climate. California is famous for its warm, sunny, climate, which is often called a Mediterranean climate. A Mediterranean climate has a long, warm, dry summer, and cloudy winters with rain. But in the mountains, winters are cold and snowy. And those mountains block out almost all moist air coming from the Pacific Ocean, so it hardly ever rains. Which is why in those basins the land is desert.

The climate near the coast naturally suits crops such as citrus and vines, which is why grapes are an important crop. But it means other crops, such as wheat, need water provided to them, and why irrigation is by far the largest user of water in the state.

4. Now plants and animals. Remember, the land has long dry summers. Mountains are also high. So plants need to adapt to those conditions. One of the most famous species of tree is the California coastal redwood. These are the tallest trees on Earth, and can reach the height of a 30-storey building.

The Giant Sequoia is closely related to the redwood, but grows further inland. The trunks of Sequoia trees are up to 30 feet across.

And the, on the cold exposed shoulders of the Sierras are the bristlecone pines. They grow at the highest elevation of any tree in the world, and one at least is 4,600 years old – the oldest tree on the planet.

No big trees grow in the south-eastern desert, of course, but equally famous plants such as the Joshua tree and the saguaro cactus do.

Otherwise, the coastal areas have woody shrubs and trees, all with mostly evergreen and tough leaves and thick bark that are designed to stand up to hot dry summers and wildfire.

5. Now natural hazards. California may seem an idyllic place to live, but people have to cope with severe natural hazards. All of coastal California is underlain by active faults. The most famous is the San Andreas Fault. When the fault moves, it causes earthquakes.

California's hot summer also causes hot, dry winds to blow over the coastal hills. Anything can catch the tinder-dry scrub at this time, and set off wildfires.

6. Now on to history. The first people in California probably arrived there around thirteen thousand years ago. When Europeans first came to California, the native population may have been around three hundred thousand.

The first Europeans to reach California were the Spanish. In 1769, the first groups of Spanish priests and soldiers established a fort (called a presidio) and a mission church at San Diego.

Eventually, California had three Spanish forts and twenty-one missions. Each mission was one day's journey from the next. Around the missions and forts, small towns called pueblos sprang up. San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Jose all began as pueblos.

Mexico stopped being a colony of Spain in 1821, and under Mexican rule California became home to thousands of small ranches where cattle were raised.

The Mexican government also gave land to non-Mexicans, so the first United States citizens began to arrive. One of the most important of these new immigrants was John Sutter. He built a fort at Sacramento. Sutter's fort soon became a stopover for the American settlers who arrived in California from the Midwest.

As more and more American settlers arrived in California, they began to think about making California part of the United States. In 1846, some U.S. citizens declared an independent California Republic. They made their own flag, with a single star and the painted image of a grizzly bear. By 1847 Mexico had sold California to the United States for fifteen million dollars.

In January, 1848, gold was discovered in a stream east of Sacramento. Word of the discovery soon spread and people rushed to the gold fields. The California Gold Rush was on. This is how San Francisco became a boom town.

On September 9, 1850, California was made a state.

The Gold Rush lasted just six years. By 1855 most miners had moved on to other strikes.

But another remarkable event was on the horizon. In 1890, California was 40 years old. Up until then, very little growth had taken place in the south of the state.

But in 1892, oil was discovered in Los Angeles. By 1900, the city was covered in oil derricks, and there were more 100,000 people living in the city.

The oil boom did not last very long, and soon the oil derricks had been dismantled. It was then that people began to see one of the advantages of the Los Angeles region for new industries, and many moved to Southern California, including movie making.

7. So let's wrap this up. We have taken you on a journey through landscape and climate to history and hazards. That will give you a framework to keep in your head. Now read on, and watch the videos. Learning can be real easy.