Map Scale

Map scale is the ratio, or comparison, of the distance on the map to the real distance on the ground. When you change the scale of your map from small scale to large scale, it is the same as “zooming in.” Mapmakers can show more detail on a large scale map because one unit on the map represents fewer units on the ground than on a small scale map. So if you want to show details of your town, you would use a large scale map. But if you want to show the whole country, you would use a small scale map.

Using Scale Bars

Using the map scale to measure from San Francisco, CA to Denver, CO:

1. Put a piece of paper on the map to connect San Francisco and Denver
2. Draw marks on the paper where the dots are
3. Place the paper under the map scale and determine how many miles it is from San Francisco to Denver