

GEOLOGIC TIME SCALE

Read the text, and then answer the questions that follow.

Have you ever wondered how old our planet is? Scientists certainly have! Scientists who specialize in studying Earth's physical structure and history, called **geologists**, estimate that Earth is about 4.6 billion years old. This estimate is based on a thorough analysis of rock layers and the fossil record.

Geologists describe the age of a rock in two ways: relative age and absolute age. The **relative age** of a rock is its age compared to the ages of other rocks. **Absolute age** is the number of years that have passed since the rock formed, and it is calculated through a process called radioactive dating. By studying clues in Earth's rocks and determining their ages, geologists can organize past events into a sequence called the **geologic time scale**.



To find a rock's relative age, geologists use a number of different clues:

- The **law of superposition** states that, in undisturbed horizontal sedimentary rock layers, the oldest layer is at the bottom and the youngest layer is at the top.
- Lava that hardens on Earth's surface forms an igneous **extrusion**. An extrusion is younger than the rock it covers.
- Magma that pushes into layers of rock below Earth's surface and hardens forms an igneous **intrusion**. An intrusion is younger than the rock around it.
- A **fault** is a break in Earth's crust caused by forces inside the Earth. A fault is always younger than the rock it cuts through.
- **Index fossils** are fossils of an organism that was widely distributed and existed for a geologically short period of time. Geologists infer that rock layers with matching index fossils are the same age.

Use the information you learned from the passage to answer the questions below.

1. Look at the image to the right. A fault was created in the rock layers during an earthquake. Did the earthquake occur before or after sedimentary rock layers A, B, and C were deposited? Explain.



2. A geologist finds the same type of index fossil in a rock layer in Kansas and in a rock layer over 7,000 miles away in the Himalayan foothills. What can she infer about the ages of the two rock layers?

Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key

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Table of Contents Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key

1. Understanding the eBook Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key User Reviews and Ratings
 - Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key Free and Paid eBooks
 - Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key Public Domain eBooks
 - Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key eBook Subscription Services
 - Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key Budget-Friendly Options
6. Navigating Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key eBook Formats

- ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key Compatibility with Devices
 - Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key Enhanced eBook Features
7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - Interactive Elements Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 8. Staying Engaged with Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - Setting Reading Goals Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Geologic Time Scale Activity Answer Key
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
 14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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