Water Cycle Definitions

water cycle —describes the continuous movement of water on, above, and below the surface of the Earth. Water is always changing states between liquid, vapor, and ice.

evaporation—the sun causes liquid water to turn from a liquid to a gas (water vapor). The invisible water vapor floats high into the atmosphere (the air that surrounds the earth).

condensation—the opposite of evaporation. Colder temperatures high in the atmosphere cause the water vapor to turn back into tiny liquid water droplets—the clouds.

precipitation—tiny cloud droplets combine with each other and grow into bigger water drops. When they get heavy enough, they fall to Earth as precipitation, such as rain, snow, and sleet.

groundwater—exists in the ground below your feet, where it came from some precipitation and runoff that soaks into the ground. Plants use this to grow.

runoff—when rain hits the land or snow melts, it flows downhill over the landscape and provides water to rivers, lakes, and the oceans. Some even soaks into the ground to become groundwater.

seepage—happens when precipitation falls on the ground and starts to soak into the ground due to gravity. It can happen downward, upwards, and sideways, too, from the ground into the bottom of rivers, lakes, and the oceans.

snowmelt—winter snow piled up in the mountains is melted by the heat of the sun in the spring. It flows downhill off the mountains and can cause flooding in the valleys.

ocean—large body of saltwater that contains most of all of Earth's water. Almost all the water that evaporates from liquid to water vapor (which forms clouds) comes from here.

river—runoff water of large size will accumulate and move a lot of water off the land and back into oceans.

stream—runoff water of small to medium size will accumulate and move water off the land, flowing toward larger bodies of runoff water that go back into oceans.

lake—a large body of freshwater.

transpiration—plants around you are "breathing" and releasing water. Plants have tiny holes in their leaves that allow water to leave the leaf, via evaporation, and go into the air.

watershed—the area of land where all of the water that falls in it and drains off of it goes into the same place.

**Definitions adapted from* http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/watercycle-kids-beg.html