

Exploring Our Solar System Teacher's Guide



Exploring Our Solar System is a planetarium program that explores the latest discoveries regarding the nine known planets, the asteroids, and the Sun. Because this is a partly live presentation, there will be ample time for questions. We encourage participation and discovery.

This Teacher's Guide is designed to help you, the teacher, prepare your class for their upcoming visit *The Northern Stars Planetarium* when it comes to your school. Please be aware that this program is offered to a variety of grade levels (3rd through 8th), being a live presentation it is not difficult to adapt the material to the proper age level; however, everyone gets this Teacher's Guide. Not everything presented here will be appropriate for your specific grade level, some of it may be too old, some too young. Use only what is appropriate and useful to you.

Study



Questions

1. What is a planet? What is the difference between a planet and a star? What is the difference between a planet and a moon?
2. What is the difference between *revolution* and *rotation*?
3. What are some of the differences between the *inner planets* and the *outer planets*? (Inner planets: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars. Outer Planets: Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune.)
4. Why is Pluto no longer called a planet? What is a "Dwarf Planet"?
5. Do all planets have gravity?
6. How does the size and mass of a planet affect the amount of gravity?
7. How many stars are in the Solar System?
8. What is the Sun? How is it different from all the other stars?
9. What are the constellations? Who created them?
10. Do astronomers think there are planets going around other stars? Why?

Vocabulary

Albedo The reflecting power of a planet or other non-luminous object. An albedo of 1.0 means that it reflects 100% of the light that hits it; 0.0 means it absorbs 100% of the light or reflects 0% of the light. Our moon's albedo is a low 0.07, while Venus has a high albedo of 0.7.

Asteroid Also called *Minor Planets* they are small rocky objects that orbit the Sun. Most (95%) are found in the *asteroid belt*, which is the region between Mars and Jupiter. There may be up to 100,000 asteroids, but only about 3,000 have been catalogued.

Atmosphere The outer gaseous layers of a star or planet. The air. Not all planets have atmospheres.

Constellation Dot-to-dot pictures drawn in the stars, using stars as the dots. There are 88 official constellations in the sky. They are a means of mapping the night sky. Many of them have their origins in ancient times, for example, 48 of the 88 came from Greek mythology.

Crater Circular ridges with deep centers. They are most often caused by either meteorite impacts or volcanic eruptions. Impact craters are more common on planets and moons with thin or no atmospheres; thicker atmospheres tend to burn up the meteoroid before it can hit the surface.

Gas This refers to substances in a gaseous state (as opposed to solid or liquid). The air is a gas. Do not confuse this term with gasoline.

Gas Giant Planet This refers to a planets such as Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune. These planets are gaseous without any solid surface that could be landed upon.

Gravity The force that attracts objects together. Earth's gravity pulls us down when we jump. The Sun's gravity keeps the planets from flying out of their orbits. All objects have gravity (even you!), the more massive something is the more gravity it has. All planets have gravity.

Orbit The invisible path a planet follows around the Sun.

Planetarium A special room with a domed ceiling and special projectors used to make the ceiling look like the night sky. A planetarium is not an observatory. Observatories are buildings that house telescopes for viewing the real sky.

Revolution The motion when one object goes around another. (ie. The Earth revolves around the Sun once every 365.25 days.)

Rotation The motion when an objects spins on an axis going through itself. (ie. The Earth rotates or spins on its axis once every 24 hours.)

Space Probe This is a type of satellite that travels from Earth to explore other planets. There are no people on board a space probe, it is run by computers. They take pictures and do scientific experiments to help us learn about these other worlds. Some examples of famous space probes are: *Voyagers 1-2, Curiosity, Spirit, Opportunity, Magellan, Galileo, Cassini, Pathfinder, Phoenix, and Messenger.*



Match Game


Match the planet on the left with the features that go with it on the right.

| | |
|---------|--|
| Mercury | Biggest Planet |
| Venus | Red Planet |
| Earth | Made of ice |
| Mars | Planet with Life |
| Jupiter | Has Big Red Spot |
| Saturn | Closest to the Sun |
| Uranus | Has 67 Moons |
| Neptune | Is Tilted on its Side |
| Pluto | Sometimes is farther from the Sun than Pluto |
| | Is no longer a planet |
| | Was hit by Comet Shoemaker/Levy in 1994 |
| | Rusty Planet |
| | These Four Planets All Have Rings |
| | Rains Acid & is Cloudy |
| | 70% Covered with Water |

Making A Scale Model of the Solar System

This exercise is an excellent way for your students to gain a better understanding of the actual scale of our Solar System, in terms of relative sizes, distances, and speeds. The materials needed are simple, inexpensive, and easily obtained. The activity is three-fold. First it deals with relative sizes. Secondly, it covers relative distances. And lastly, it demonstrates relative speeds.

- Materials Needed:**
- 1 Beach ball (preferably yellow or orange)
 - 1 Set of Play Doh® or some other modelling clay
 - 1 String (13 meters or 40 feet long)

Preparation: Take the string and tie a loop about 5 centimeters (2") in diameter in one end. This is where you will place the beach ball Sun later on. Then tie an overhand knot  at the appropriate distances that each succeeding planet will be from the beach ball Sun. Use the following planet scale information chart to tell you how far away from the Sun each knot should be tied.

Planet Scale Information Chart:

| <i>Planet</i> | <i>Scaled Distance from the Sun</i> | | <i>Scaled Diameter</i> |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|---|------------------------|
| Mercury | 13 cm 5 inches | (=58 million kilometers) (=36 million miles) | 1.5 mm 1/16 inch |
| Venus | 23 cm 9 inches | (=108 million kilometers) (=67 million miles) | 6 mm 1/4 inch |
| Earth | 31 cm 12 inches | (=150 million kilometers) (=93 million miles) | 6 mm 1/4 inch |
| Mars | 46 cm 18 inches | (=227 million kilometers) (=141 million miles) | 3 mm 1/8 inch |
| Jupiter | 155 cm 61 inches | (=779 million kilometers) (=483 million miles) | 25 mm 1 inch |
| Saturn | 274 cm 108 inches | (=1428 million kilometers) (= 886 million miles) | 20 mm 3/4 inch |
| Uranus | 572 cm 225 inches | (=2974 million kilometers) (=1782 million miles) | 14 mm 1/2 inch |
| Neptune | 889 cm 350 inches | (=4506 million kilometers) (=2794 million miles) | 13 mm 1/2 inch |
| Pluto | 1174 cm 462 inches | (=5913 million kilometers) (=3666 million miles) | 1.3 mm 1/16 inch |

Scale Model Solar System Continued...

Part One: Size Scale

HINT: You might want to make two or more model Solar Systems so that every student can partake.

Assign every student a planet and give them a lump of clay more than big enough to make their planet. If you are using Play Doh, you might want to use appropriate colors (ie. red for Mars, Blue for Earth, etc.). Explain that you want them to guess how big their planet would be if the beach ball were the size of the Sun. It is best not to have them attempt to make rings for Saturn. Have each student make her planet out of clay according to how big she thinks it should be.

Almost always, everyone's planet will be too big. Once they are done, go through the group and change their planets to the correct size. Correcting the students in this fashion will make the actual size much more impressive. Every student must then be responsible for not losing her planet. This isn't necessarily easy, as some planets, like Mercury and Pluto, are only about the size of a grain of sand!

Part Two: Distance Scale

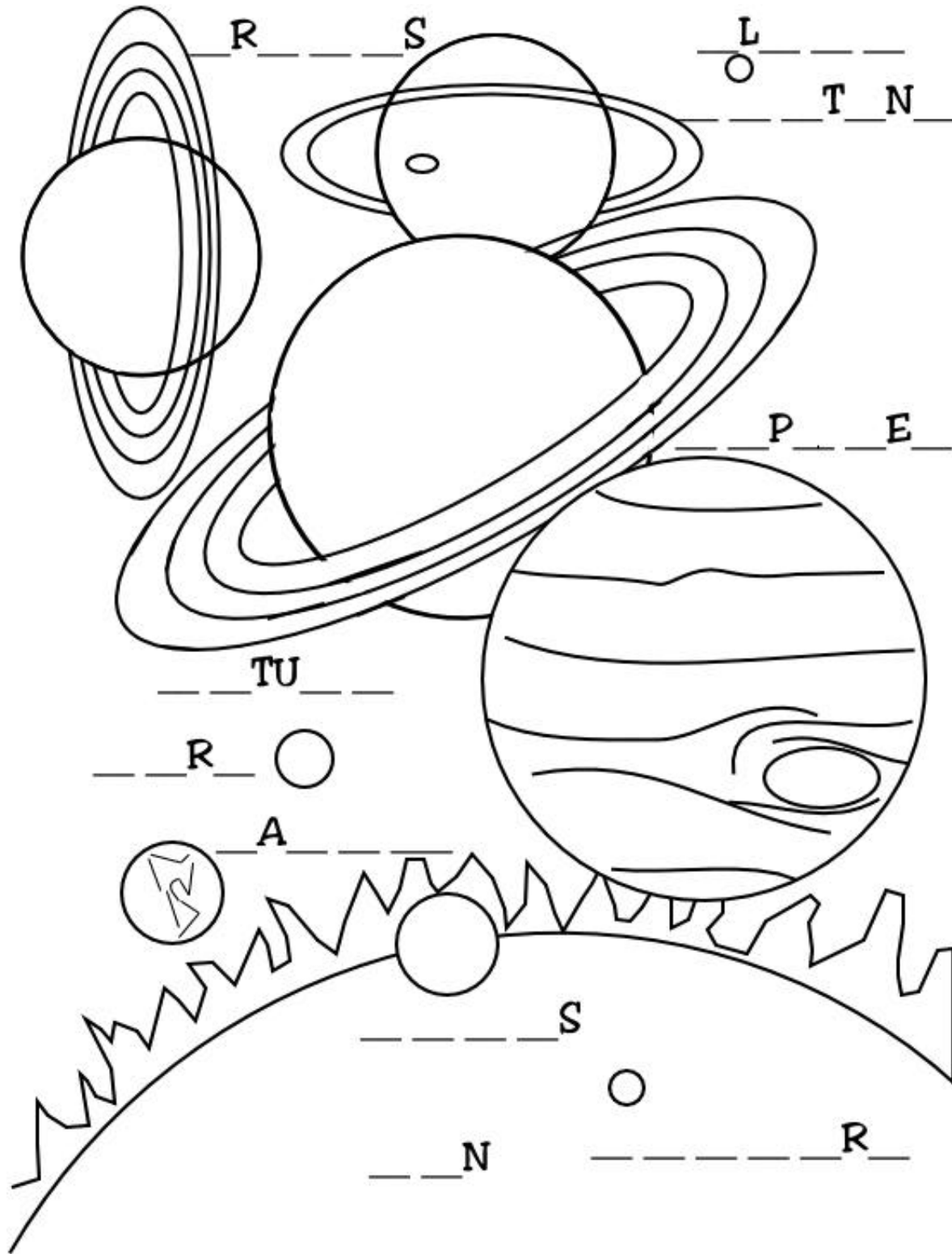
This part of the model should be done either in the gymnasium, cafeteria, or outside. In order to make the distance scale workable within a school environment, we found it best to represent distance on a smaller scale than that used to illustrate size (See the footnote on the previous page).

Separate your students into their various Solar Systems (if you have more than one). Have each student take her clay planet and place it where she thinks the appropriate distance for that planet should be from the beach ball Sun. Once each student has placed her planet down where she thinks it belongs, take out the string with the proper distance scale measured out in knots. Then, one at a time, beginning with Mercury, have each student move her planet to its proper position. Again, this makes the students aware that their perspectives are different from reality. The Solar System is probably much larger than any of them had guessed.

Part Three: Relative Motion

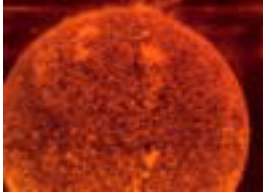
Now that your model Solar System is laid out properly, have your students pick up their respective planets. Tell them to try to keep the same distance from the Sun and have them walk at approximately the same speed around the Sun (in their respective orbits!). Which planet goes around the Sun first? Once Mercury makes one revolution, have them all stop and examine how much of their own orbits they have covered compared to Mercury's complete orbit. *(In actuality the distance is not the only factor in different period orbits. Inner planets do move faster than outer planets. However, for demonstration purposes, having the students all walk at about the same speed works well.)*

*The size scale is 1 cm=140,000 km (1"=225,000 miles) while the distance scale is about 32 times smaller with 1 cm=4,500,000km (1"=7,000,000 miles). We found it best to represent distance on a smaller scale than used for size. If we maintained the same scale for distance as for size, the string would have been 420 meters long rather than 13 meters!



Solar System Facts

The Solar System's Only Star:



SUN Rotates: 26 days. Surface Temp: 12,000°F (6000°C) Core Temp: 27 Million°F (15 Million°C) Diameter: 865,000 mi. (1,395,161 km) A middle aged (4.5 Billion yrs. old), average sized star. It's outer atmosphere "the heliosphere" extends beyond Pluto.

The Inner Planets:



MERCURY Rotates: 58 days 16 hrs. Revolves: 88 days. High Temp: 700°F (350°C) Low Temp: -270° F (-170° C). Diameter: 3,031 mi. (4,878 km.) Gravity: 0.38 X Earth's. No moons, rings or atmosphere. Dominant feature is craters. Visited by the Mariner and Messenger space probes.



VENUS Rotates: 243 days. Revolves: 224.7 days. Average Temp: 900°F (480°C) Diameter: 7,541 mi. (12,104 km.) Gravity: 0.9 X Earth's. Thick Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) atmosphere. No Moons or rings. Visited by Pioneer Venus, Venera, Magellan, Galileo, and several other space probes.



EARTH Rotates: 23 hrs. 56 min. Revolves: 365.25 days. High Temp: 130°F (58°C) Low Temp: -126°F (-88°C). Gravity: 1 X Earth's. Diameter: 7,927 mi. (12,756 km.) Nitrogen & Oxygen atmosphere. 1 moon, no rings. The Earth's surface is 75% covered with water.



MARS Rotates: 24 hrs. 37 min. Revolves: 1.88 yrs. High Temp: 80°F (27°C). Low Temp: -190°F (-123°C). Diameter: 4,197 mi. (6,794 km). Gravity: 0.38 X Earth's. Thin Carbon Dioxide atmosphere. 2 moons, no rings. In 1996 scientist found evidence of fossilized bacteria in a meteorite believed to have originated on Mars-- perhaps long ago Mars had life! Visited by Viking 1 & 2, Pathfinder, Sojourner, Mars Global Surveyor, Spirit, Opportunity, Phoenix and most recently the Curiosity Rover.

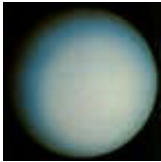
The Outer Planets:



JUPITER Rotates: 9 hrs. 48 min. Revolves: 11.86 yrs. Cloud top Temp: -140°F (-95°C) Diameter: 88,733 mi. (142,796 km.). Gravity: 3 X Earth's. Composition: Mostly Hydrogen, Helium. 67 moons, 1 small ring. Visited by Pioneers 10 & 11, Voyagers 1 & 2, and Galileo space probes.



SATURN Rotates: 10 hrs. 39 min. Revolves: 29.46 yrs. Cloud top Temp: -292°F (-180°C) Diameter: 74,600 mi. (120,000 km.). Gravity: 1.32 X Earth's. Composition: Mostly Hydrogen, Helium. 62 moons. It has a large ring system. Visited by Pioneers 10 & 11, Voyager 1 & 2, and coming soon the Cassini Space Probe.

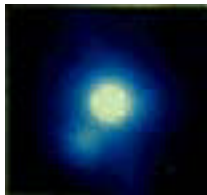


URANUS Rotates: 16 hrs. 48 min. Revolves: 84 yrs. Cloud top Temp: -346°F (-210°C). Diameter: 31,600 mi. (50,800 km.). Gravity: 0.93 X Earth's. Composition: Mostly Hydrogen, Helium, some Ammonia, and Methane. 27 moons, about a dozen thin rings. Uranus is tipped on its side. Visited by Voyager 2 in 1986.



NEPTUNE Rotates: 16 hrs 3 min. Revolves: 164.8 yrs. Cloud top Temp: -364°F (-220°C). Diameter: 30,200 mi. (48,600 km.). Gravity: 1.23 X Earth's. Composition: Mostly Hydrogen, Helium, some Methane and Ammonia. 13 moons, 3 thin rings, 2 broad rings. Visited by Voyager 2 in 1989.

The Dwarf Planets: This term designates objects that 1) orbit the Sun, 2) are round, and 3) do not have enough mass to have cleared their orbits of boulders and debris (Planets all do this).



PLUTO Rotates: 6 days, 9 hrs. Revolves: 248 yrs. Temp: -400°F (-238°C). Diameter: 1900 mi. (3,000 km.). Gravity: 0.03 X Earth's. Has a very thin atmosphere. 5 moons. The largest moon, Charon, is half the size of Pluto. Pluto's orbit is very elliptical and tilted; it actually crossed inside Neptune's orbit from 1979-1999. Pluto is no longer classified as a planet, it is a "dwarf planet."

