

What are Constellations?

A star is a bright ball of plasma held together by a large center of gravity. For purposes of explaining it to students at the elementary level, it is a bright ball of burning gas that shines light.

The sun is the closest star to us, and it appears to be the biggest star because of its relative distance. However, the sun is actually average size for a star.

A constellation is a group of stars that look like something in nature or mythology. They're not actual things, like a star, a black hole or a planet. They are merely a group of stars that ancient people looked like something and decided to name this "group" of stars. The stars themselves are light-years apart from each other in real life, but from Earth they look relatively close and thus form the basis for these pictures.

Many stars have myths associated with them. For example, the story of Ursa Major in Greek Mythology states that Ursa Major originally was a beautiful woman that Zeus had a love affair with. Zeus's wife Hera found out about this affair, and cursed Ursa Major to take the form of a bear, and tricked her own son to kill her. Zeus saw this and immortalized the two by turning Hera's son into a bear as well and casting both of them into the heavens.

The Big Dipper is a very important constellation throughout all of history. Even the Bible mentions it in Amos 5:8, as it is commonly used as a guide to find other stars. Technically a part of Ursa Major, these seven bright stars easily point to Polaris, the North Star, which has been used for centuries as a guide to finding one's way around the world.

Constellations no longer have mythical meaning in today's society, but the history behind them is an important thing for students to learn, and hearing the stories our ancestors told for that constellation is sure to intrigue elementary school students, making it a very good topic to discuss with them.

Sources

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