

Universal Elements

Purpose

The purpose of these activities is to integrate lessons in literature and space science. Students will be able to

1. Use literature as a launching point for deeper discussion about the universe.
2. Define story elements.
3. Write analytically about literature (book reviews).
 - a. Identify the elements of a specific story.
 - b. Summarize that story.
 - c. Reflect on and share an opinion of that story.

Important Vocabulary (key terms in bold)

book review
theme
opinion

story elements
plot

character
summary

setting
reflection

Story Elements Defined: Learning about Story Elements

Students engage in a brief discussion about the elements of a story, defining each in their notes.

(** See below for printable activity sheet.)

Understanding Story Elements

Part One: Students read a short story, noting the story elements on a worksheet.

Part Two: After reading three to five book reviews, students outline the story elements discussed in each. This activity can be completed individually or as a whole class. (Note: For both parts of this activity, students use the same worksheet as used in the “Story Elements Defined” activity.)

(** See below for printable activity sheet.)

The Universe in Review: Book Reviews

Students write book reviews of space-related texts. Use in conjunction with the lessons on story elements. (Students can use blank copies of the “Understanding Story Elements” worksheet as an organizational tool, to help them write their reviews.) Students should be given ample time for this activity—remember, they have to read on their own time! (Modification: All students write reviews of the same text, read in class over an extended period.)

(** See below for printable activity sheet.)

NOTE: A brief list of literature selections is included below. Some may not be suitable for the activities outlined here, but might be useful at another time.

The Universe in Review

Book Review
of

by

Name

Class/Teacher

Date

Story Elements

Character

Setting

Theme

Plot

Summary

Reflection

Literature Selections

Planet of Exile

by Ursula LeGuin

Ace Books, New York. 1966

Grades: 6–Adult

Cooperation is the central theme of this thin but gripping book about the clash of three cultures—two that have inhabited a harsh planet for eons, and the one that has been exiled only a few generations. Difficult seasonal conditions on the planet are the result of how long it takes the planet to revolve once around its central star. Because one “year” is equivalent to many Earth years, people only live through a very small number of winters.

The Planet of Junior Brown

by Virginia Hamilton

Macmillan Publishing, New York. 1971

Grades: 5–12

This unusual and moving book begins with three people (two students who regularly cut eighth grade classes and a school custodian who was formerly a teacher) in a secret room in a school basement with a working model of the solar system. The model has one incredible addition—a giant planet named for one of the students, Junior Brown. How can the Earth’s orbit not be affected by this giant planet? Is there a belt of asteroids that balances it all out? How does this relate to equilateral triangles? From these subjects, the universe of the book expands outward into the Manhattan streets and inward into the hearts, minds, and friendship of the two students who are both African-American. After the first chapter, the solar system becomes more metaphor than scientific model, until the end of the book when the real model must be dismantled and the three must find a way to help Junior Brown and to affirm their solidarity against all odds. Powerfully and poetically written, this book humanizes the statistics about homelessness and the educational crisis in a profound and unforgettable way.

The Planets

edited by Byron Preiss

Bantam Books, New York. 1985

Grades: 8–Adult

This extremely rich, high-quality anthology pairs a nonfiction essay with a fictional work about the earth, moon, each of the planets, and asteroids and comets. Introductory essays are by Issac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and others. The material is dazzlingly illustrated with color photographs from the archives of NASA and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and paintings by astronomical artists such as the movie production designers of 2001 and Star Wars.

Sky Songs

by Myra Cohn Livingston; illustrated by Leonard E. Fisher

Holiday House, New York. 1984

Grades: 5–12

Fourteen poems about various aspects of the sky such as the moon, clouds, stars, storms, and sunsets. Wonderful images portray the planets as “wanderers of night,” shooting stars are “bundled up in interstellar dust and bright icy jackets,” and the morning sky is “earth’s astrodome, floodlit.”

Space Songs

by Myra Cohn Livingston; illustrated by Leonard E. Fisher

Holiday House, New York. 1988

Grades: 5–12

Series of short poems about aspects of outer space including the Milky Way, moon, sun, stars, planets, comets,

meteorites, asteroids, and satellites. The astronomy content is accurate. The black background illustrations are dynamic and involving.

Star Tales: North American Indian Stories

by Gretchen W. Mayo

Walker & Co., New York. 1987

Grades: 5–12

The nine legends in this collection explain observations of the stars, moon, and night sky. Accompanying each tale is information about the constellation or other heavenly observation and how various tribes perceived it. In *More Star Tales*, the same author includes “The Never-Ending Bear Hunt” and seven other tales.