

EXOPLANETS AND HOW WE COULD GET THERE? GRADE 8 AND UP READING

Improve students'
literacy skills

Science Applicability

Sub Plan



SCROLL
to take a look inside!

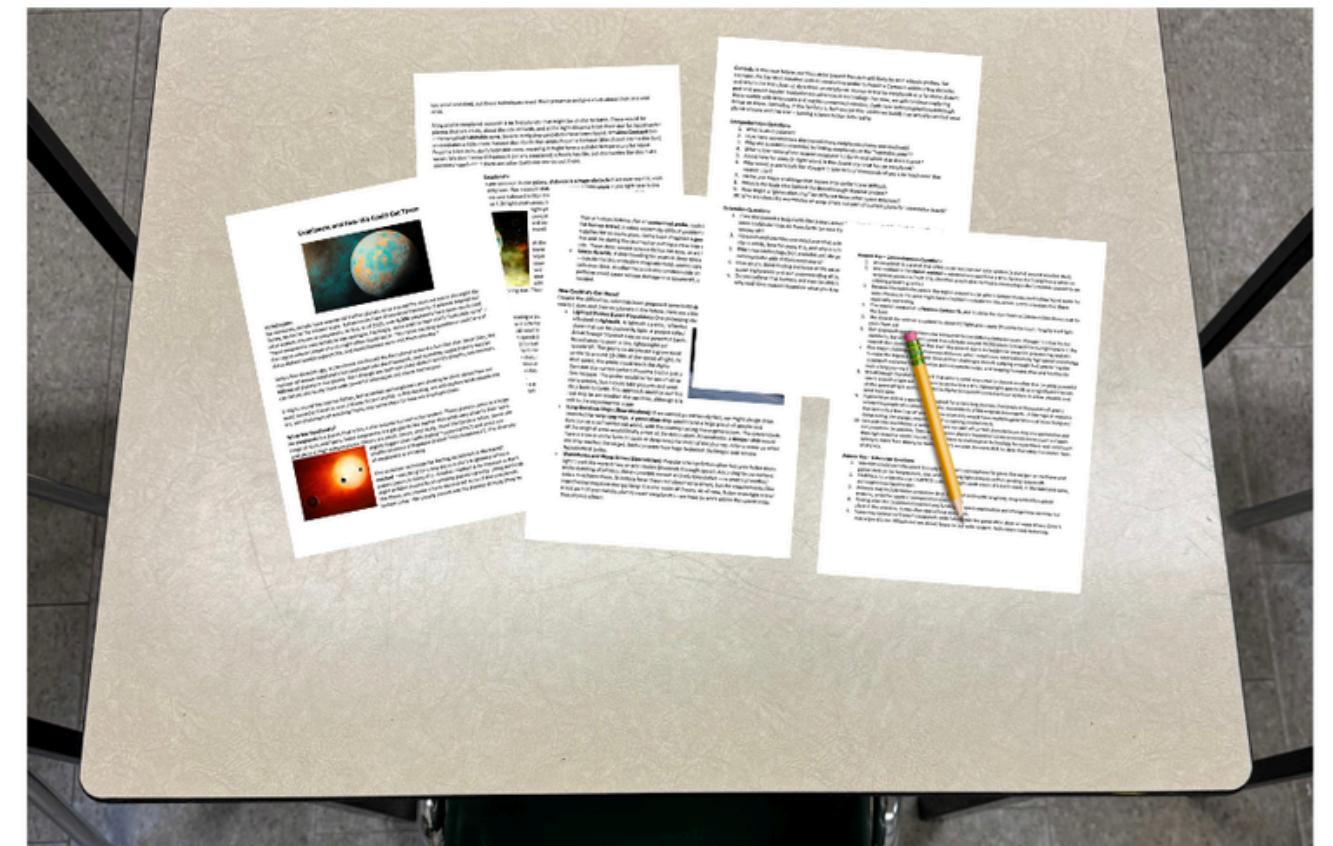


THE PROBLEMS YOU FACE

- Limited time to teach scientific literacy and strengthen students' reading and analysis skills.
- Need meaningful extension activities to engage fast-moving learners.
- Difficulty creating effective last-minute sub plans that still support student learning.

CLASSROOM READY

- Questions and Answer Key
- **No Prep, Ready-to-Use:** Print or assign digitally with Google Docs, Microsoft Word, and PDF formats for flexible classroom use
- **Includes Varied Question Types:** Knowledge, thinking, connecting, application, and open-ended questions.



What Will Your Students Learn?

READING COMPREHENSION ARTICLE & QUESTION BUNDLE

Article with
Comprehension
Questions

Grade 8 and Up

Print & Digital

- Exoplanets (planets beyond our solar system)
- How Exoplanets Are Discovered (transits, stellar wobble)
- Types of Exoplanets (rocky, gas giants, super-Earths, mini-Neptunes)
- Habitable Zone & Search for Life
- Proxima Centauri b and Nearby Star Systems
- Vast Distances in Space (light-years)
- Challenges of Interstellar Travel (speed, energy, radiation, time)
- Breakthrough Starshot & Lightsail Technology
- Generation Ships & Sleeper Ships
- Why Warp Drives & Wormholes Are Still Theoretical
- Future of Space Exploration

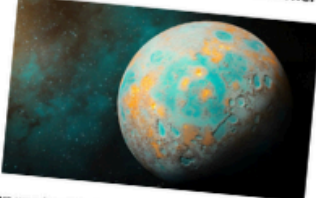
Comprehension Questions

1. What is an exoplanet?
2. How have astronomers discovered many exoplanets (name one method)?
3. Why are scientists interested in finding exoplanets in the "habitable zone"?
4. What is the name of the nearest exoplanet to Earth and which star does it orbit?
5. About how far away (in light-years) is the closest star that has an exoplanet?
6. Why would a spacecraft like Voyager 1 take tens of thousands of years to reach even the nearest star?
7. Name one challenge of interstellar travel.
8. What is the name of the first planet discovered around a Sun-like star?
9. How many exoplanets have been confirmed as of 2025?
10. Why are scientists interested in finding exoplanets in the "habitable zone"?

Extension Questions

1. If we could travel to Proxima Centauri b, what challenges would we face?
2. Research one of the methods used to discover exoplanets and write a short paragraph about it.
3. Why do you think scientists are so interested in finding exoplanets in the "habitable zone"?
4. How do you think the discovery of exoplanets will change our view of the universe?

Exoplanets and How We Could Get There



Introduction

For centuries, people have wondered if other planets exist around the stars we see in the night sky. Today, we know the answer is yes. Astronomers have discovered thousands of planets beyond our solar system, known as exoplanets. In fact, as of 2025, over 6,000 exoplanets have been confirmed. These exoplanets vary widely in size and type. Excitingly, some orbit in their star's "habitable zone" – the region where temperatures might allow liquid water. This raises exciting questions: could any of these distant worlds support life, and could humans ever visit them one day?

Only a few decades ago, astronomers confirmed the first planet around a Sun-like star. Since then, the number of known exoplanets has exploded into the thousands, and scientists suspect there may be billions of planets in our galaxy. Even though we can't see these distant worlds directly, astronomers can detect and study them with powerful telescopes and clever techniques.

It might sound like science fiction, but scientists and engineers are starting to think about how we could someday travel to one of these distant worlds. In this reading, we will explore what exoplanets are, the challenges of reaching them, and some ideas for how we could get there.

What Are Exoplanets?

An exoplanet is a planet that orbits a star outside our own solar system. These planets come in a huge range of sizes and types. Some exoplanets are gas giants like Jupiter that orbit very close to their stars and sizzle at high temperatures. Others are small, dense, and rocky, more like Earth.

One Method: The Transit

One method for finding exoplanets is the transit method. This is when a planet passes in front of its star, causing a slight dip in the star's brightness. If the dip is regular, it could mean there's a planet orbiting. Most of the exoplanets we know today were found this way.

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Your Reading

Exoplanets and How We Could Get There



Introduction

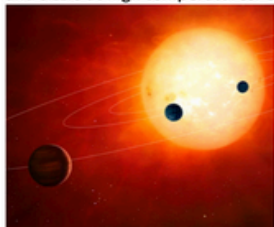
For centuries, people have wondered if other planets exist around the stars. Today, we know the answer is yes. Astronomers have discovered thousands of planets in our galaxy, known as *exoplanets*. In fact, as of 2025, over 6,000 exoplanets have been discovered. These exoplanets vary widely in size and type. Excitingly, some orbit in the region where temperatures might allow liquid water. This raises exciting questions: do these distant worlds support life, and could humans ever visit them one day?

Only a few decades ago, astronomers confirmed the first planet around a Sun-like star. Today, the number of known exoplanets has exploded into the thousands, and scientists estimate there are billions of planets in our galaxy. Even though we can't see these distant worlds, we can detect and study them with powerful telescopes and clever techniques.

It might sound like science fiction, but scientists and engineers are starting to explore the possibility of someday traveling to one of these distant worlds. In this reading, we will explore the challenges of reaching them, and some ideas for how we could get there.

What Are Exoplanets?

An **exoplanet** is a planet that orbits a star outside our own solar system. They come in a wide range of sizes and types. Some exoplanets are gas giants like Jupiter that orbit very close to their stars and sizzle at high temperatures. Others are small, dense, and rocky, more like Earth. Some are even slightly bigger than Earth (called "super-Earths") or smaller versions of Neptune (called "mini-Neptunes"). The discovery of exoplanets is amazing.



One common technique for finding exoplanets is the **transit method** – watching for a tiny dip in a star's brightness when a planet passes in front of it. Another method is the **wobble method**, which looks for a slight wobble caused by an orbiting planet. Astronomers have discovered many exoplanets this way. We usually cannot see these planets directly, but these techniques reveal their presence and give clues about their size and composition.

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A big goal in exoplanet research is to find planets that might be similar to Earth. Astronomers look for planets that are rocky, about the size of Earth, and at the right distance from their star – the so-called **habitable zone**. Several intriguing candidates have been found. One is an exoplanet a little more massive than Earth that orbits Proxima Centauri (the closest star to our solar system). Proxima b lies in its star's habitable zone, meaning it might have a suitable temperature for liquid water. We don't know if Proxima b (or any exoplanet) actually has life, but scientists are hopeful that there are other Earth-like worlds out there.

The Vast Distances to Exoplanets

Even though exoplanets are common in our galaxy, distance is a huge obstacle. Space is unimaginably vast. We measure distances to stars in **light-years** – the distance light travels in one year (about 9 trillion kilometers). The nearest star to our solar system, Proxima Centauri, is about 4.24 light-years away. In kilometers, that's roughly 40 trillion kilometers.



Light-years is extremely far by human comparison. The Moon is only about 1.3 light-seconds away, and even our farthest spacecraft has only traveled a few light-hours.

At the speeds of our current technology, it would take an incredibly long time to reach even the nearest stars. The *Voyager 1*, for instance, would need to travel for tens of thousands of years to reach Proxima Centauri. (By comparison, it took over 4 years to make that trip.) If we could travel at the speed of light, it would take 4.24 years to reach Proxima Centauri. These facts highlight the challenge: the planets are **very, very far away**.

Challenges of Interstellar Travel

Traveling to an exoplanet means making a journey *between stars*, often called *interstellar travel*. There are many challenges we would face in attempting this:

- Speed and Energy:** We would need to accelerate a spacecraft to extremely high speeds (a significant fraction of the speed of light) to reach another star in a reasonable time. Our current rockets are nowhere near fast enough for that. Achieving such speeds would require tremendous energy and entirely new kinds of propulsion beyond the chemical rockets we use today.
- Time and Human Factors:** Even a one-way trip could last many decades or centuries – far longer than a human lifetime.



than a human lifetime. For an **unmanned probe**, such long duration is challenging but possible. For **human travel**, it raises extremely difficult problems: how to keep people alive, healthy, and supplied for so many years. Some have imagined a **generation ship** (where multiple generations live and die during the journey) or putting a crew into suspended animation (deep sleep) for the trip. These ideas remain science fiction for now, as we lack the technology to make them work.

- Space Hazards:** A ship traveling for years in deep space will face hazards. One issue is **radiation** – outside Earth's protective magnetic field, cosmic rays can damage spacecraft and harm living cells over time. Another hazard is micrometeoroids: at very high speeds, even tiny dust particles could cause serious damage to a spacecraft, so some form of shielding or protection is needed.

How Could We Get There?

Despite the difficulties, scientists have proposed some bold ideas for how we might travel to the nearest stars and their exoplanets in the future. Here are a few leading concepts:

- Lightsail Probes (Laser Propulsion):** One promising idea is to send very small, unmanned probes attached to **lightsails**. A lightsail is a thin, reflective sheet that can be pushed by light. A project called *Breakthrough Starshot* aims to use powerful Earth-based lasers to push a tiny, lightweight sail spacecraft. The goal is to accelerate a gram-sized probe to around 15–20% of the speed of light. At that speed, the probe could reach the Alpha Centauri star system (where Proxima b is) in just a few decades. The probe would be far too small to carry people, but it could take pictures and send data back to Earth. This approach could be our first real step to see another star up close, although it is still in the experimental stage.
- Long-Duration Ships (Slow Missions):** If we cannot go extremely fast, we might design ships intended for **very long trips**. A **generation ship** would carry a large group of people and function as a self-contained world, with the journey lasting many generations. The descendants of the original crew would finally arrive at the destination. Alternatively, a **sleeping ship** would have a crew in some form of stasis or deep sleep for most of the journey, only to wake up when the ship reaches the target. Both concepts face huge technical challenges and remain hypothetical today.
- Wormholes and Warp Drives (Speculation):** Popular science fiction often features faster-than-light travel like warp drives or wormholes (shortcuts through space). According to our current understanding of physics, these concepts remain entirely speculative – no practical method exists to achieve them. Scientists have theorized about warp drives, but the requirements (like hypothetical negative energy) keep it in the realm of theory. As of now, faster-than-light travel is not part of any realistic plan to reach exoplanets – we have to work within the limits that physics allows.



In the near future, our first steps toward the stars will likely be with robotic probes. The *Starshot* initiative aims to send a tiny probe to Proxima Centauri within a few decades. The first close-up data from an exoplanet. Human travel to exoplanets is a far more distant prospect, requiring revolutionary advances in technology. For now, we will continue exploring with telescopes and maybe unmanned missions. Each new technological breakthrough brings us closer. Someday, in the far future, humans (or the robots we build) may actually set foot on another star – turning science fiction into reality.

Questions

1. Name one exoplanet?

2. How did astronomers discover many exoplanets (name one method)?

3. What is the "habitable zone"?

4. What is the name of the nearest exoplanet to Earth and which star does it orbit?

5. How far away (in light-years) is the closest star that has an exoplanet?

6. How long would it take a spacecraft like Voyager 1 to take tens of thousands of years to reach even the nearest stars?

7. What is the major challenge that makes interstellar travel difficult?

8. What is the basic idea behind the Breakthrough Starshot project?

9. How might a "generation ship" be different from other space missions?

10. What ideas like wormholes or warp drives are not part of current plans for interstellar travel?

Extensions

1. How would you describe a truly Earth-like planet around another star, what kinds of observations would you want to make?

2. How would scientists do from Earth (or near Earth) to learn more about it before sending any probes?

3. How would you describe one exoplanet that scientists think might be habitable. Include which planet it is, how far away it is, and why it's considered potentially habitable.

4. What technology (not available yet) do you think would most help humans travel to or communicate with distant exoplanets?

5. How would you think finding evidence of life on an exoplanet would affect humanity's plans for exploration and our understanding of our place in the universe?

6. Do you believe that humans will ever be able to live on a planet around another star? Why or why not?

7. Give reasons based on what you know about the challenges and potential solutions.

Comprehension Questions

1. What is an exoplanet? (A planet that orbits a star outside our solar system.)

2. How do astronomers find exoplanets? (One method is the **transit method** – watching for a tiny dip in a star's brightness when a planet passes in front of it. Another method is the **wobble method** – measuring a star's wobble caused by a planet's gravity.)

3. What is the habitable zone? (The region around a star where temperatures could allow liquid water to exist.)

4. Why is Proxima Centauri b important? (It's the closest exoplanet to our solar system.)

5. How far away is Proxima Centauri b? (About 4.24 light-years away.)

6. Why is distance such a challenge for interstellar travel? (Space is so vast that even the closest star is incredibly far away for present-day rockets.)

7. What are some challenges of interstellar travel? (Carrying enough fuel, protecting the crew from radiation and micrometeoroids, keeping humans alive and healthy for the journey.)

8. What is the Breakthrough Starshot project? (It aims to send very small probes to another star by using powerful lasers to push a lightsail.)

9. How would a generation ship be different from other space missions? (It would have multiple generations of crew living and working on the ship for the entire journey.)

10. Why are ideas like wormholes or warp drives not part of current plans? (They are speculative and require physics beyond what we currently know.)

11. How would you describe a truly Earth-like planet around another star? (Include which planet it is, how far away it is, and why it's considered potentially habitable.)

12. What technology do you think would most help humans travel to or communicate with distant exoplanets? (Include which technology it is and why it's considered potentially helpful.)

13. How would you think finding evidence of life on an exoplanet would affect humanity's plans for exploration and our understanding of our place in the universe? (Include which technology it is and why it's considered potentially helpful.)

14. Do you believe that humans will ever be able to live on a planet around another star? Why or why not? (Include which technology it is and why it's considered potentially helpful.)

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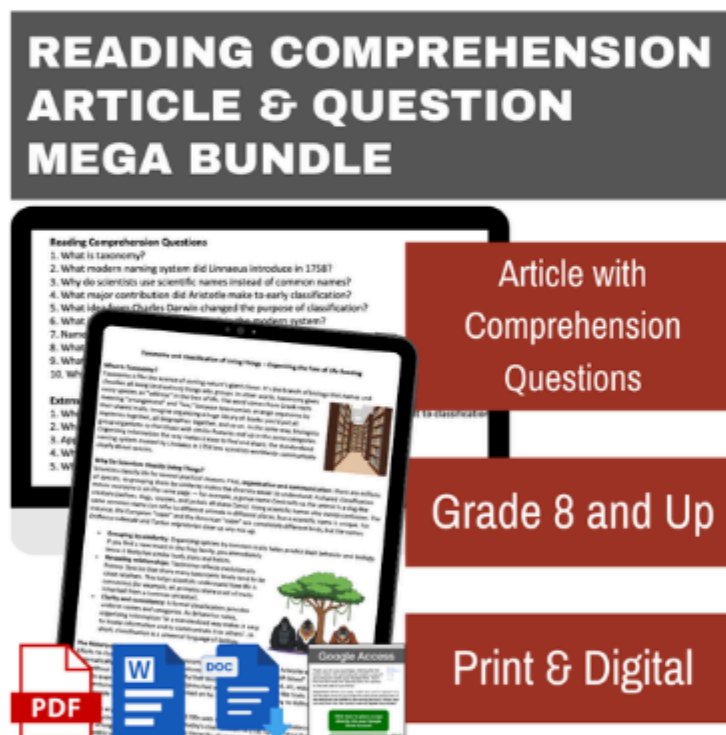
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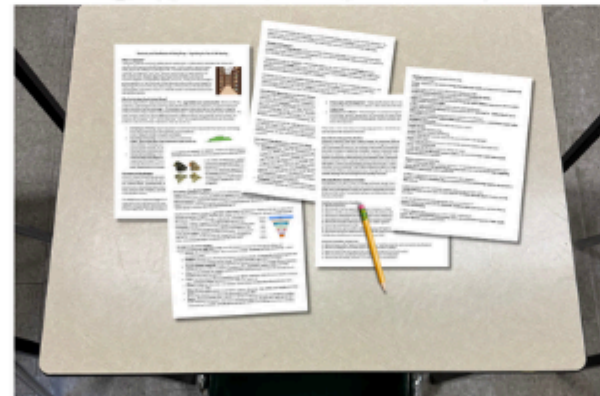
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★★★★★ Extremely satisfied - It is a good supplemental activity either for review and at the same time introducing some concept. I also use this for sub plan. It is well presented, organized and interesting.

★★★★★ Extremely satisfied - This a great resource. I used this for a sub plan. It was fun and engaging for my students.

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Natural Disasters
Physics



Improve your students' **Literacy and Analysis Skills**, use as an **Emergency Substitute Plan** or create **Applicability** in your classroom

**Click to
learn more!**

As a special bonus, I want to send you a few resources that you can use in your classroom tomorrow. Completely free and geared towards what you teach!



Just



and then choose what you teach!

thanks
**for your interest
in this resource!**



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