What we see in the night sky

Planets
• Mercury is difficult to see because it is always close to the sun.
• Venus is white and very bright. It is always seen right after sunset or right before sunrise, near the horizon in the direction of the sun.
• Mars is red.
• Jupiter is yellow and very bright.
• Saturn is also yellow, but not as bright as Jupiter.

How to tell the difference between stars and planets
• Stars stay fixed in their positions relative to one another. They rise and set a bit earlier each night but otherwise, in the short term, nothing much changes about their positions.
• Planets, if you observe them night after night, have complicated paths that change a lot and they can even appear to change the direction they are moving across the sky.
• Planets almost never twinkle in the sky, whereas stars do.

What are constellations?
Constellations are patterns of stars shaped like animals, objects, or people. They are created by people and they help us find and identify stars by connecting them into smaller groups. The constellations visible in the sky change from month to month and most historians think farmers originally created constellations so that they would know what time of year it was and when to plant or harvest their crops.

The patterns people make in the stars and the shapes and meanings they attribute to them have changed over time and differ among various cultures. For example, the constellation we call the Big Dipper or Ursa Major is known as the Plough in Great Britain and it is thought of as a wagon in Scandinavia. In Holland they see it as a saucepan, in some Native American tribes they view the stars as a bear, and in Hindu Astronomy they call the stars the Seven Great Sages. Now constellations have been redefined so every star in the sky is in exactly one constellation. In 1929, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) adopted 88 official constellations.

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