

ASTR 4 – Solar System Astronomy

Spring 2026

Class format: Asynchronous online (no required meeting times)

Instructor: Caitlin Kepple (she/they)

Contact: Canvas Inbox Message preferred, or kepplecaitlinmarie@fhda.edu

In-Person Office hours: Tu 11:30am-12:30pm, Wed 2-3pm in S55

Tu 3:45-4:15pm in ADM 119

Zoom Office hours: Wed 2-3pm, Th 12:30-1pm

Welcome to Solar System Astronomy! In this course, we will explore current and historical understandings of astronomy from a variety of perspectives. We'll use real-world data to build knowledge and skills around astronomy as a science, while also interrogating the traditional view of science as an "objective" pursuit. We will also draw on knowledge from several disciplines and cultures to help us understand the forces that shape our view of science as individuals and broadly in the US.

Course Learning Goals

Throughout this course, we will pursue the following set of skills related to studying astronomy:

- Appraise the benefits to society of planetary research and exploration
- Compare and contrast the development of planetary systems and of the major planet types, including those factors that have led to Earth's unique characteristics
- Evaluate astronomical news items or theories concerning solar system astronomy based upon the scientific method
- Describe ethical dilemmas arising out of contemporary scientific research and application from a variety of perspectives among local and/or global communities
- Understand and articulate the relevance and impact of astronomy research on an individual, community, and societal level
- Draw on and integrate lived experiences related to science to construct a shared understanding of astronomical knowledge and research

Inclusivity Statement

As a starting point for creating a welcoming learning environment, we will refer to the [Inclusive Astronomy Recommendations](#) and actively work to improve on the practices they recommend. Materials in this course will strive to center the experiences of historically marginalized groups in astronomy using an intersectional lens. We will draw on different ways of knowing and learning astronomy, both historically and today. Additionally, we will work as a class to further identify how we are maintaining internalized biases about scientific knowledge and what perspectives are being left out of the conversation.

Course Texts

- Astronomy*, by OpenStax (available in print for \$60 or as a free [PDF here](#))
- Selected readings available on Canvas each week

Important College Dates

April 19: Last day to add classes

April 19: Last day to drop classes with no record

May 23-25: Memorial Day Weekend (no classes)

May 29: Last Day to withdraw ("W") from courses

June 19: Juneteenth Holiday (no classes)

June 22-26: Final Exams (see the schedule below for this class's specific exam date)

Grade Breakdown

Grades are based on a combination of participation, homework assignments, a special interest project, and the final exam. Each assignment type is constructed so that success in the class is possible via a wide variety of methods (not just one make-or-break assignment).

Discussion/Participation (lowest dropped) - 20%

Homework Assignments - 40%

Special Interest Project - 20%

Reflections - 5%

Final Exam - 15%

Late work policy: There is a 24-hour buffer period for most assignments, with no penalty (excluding assignments that involve peer feedback). If it is between 1-10 days late, there is a 5% penalty. For more than 10 days late there is a 10% penalty. You can submit any assignment up until Friday of Week 11 at 11:59pm. *This is a hard cutoff date at the end of the quarter.*

Grading Scale: 97-100=A+, 93-96=A, 89-92=A-, 86-88=B+, 83-85=B, 79-82=B-, 76-78=C+, 69-75=C, 66-68=D+, 58-65=D, <58=non-passing. Grades rounded to nearest % at the end of the quarter.

Course Structure

Our course is designed so that everyone can construct their astronomy knowledge from the ground up and access the material with a variety of learning styles, starting with short in-class assignments before moving on to the quizzes and special interest project. For more details, rubrics, and make-up options for each item, see the Canvas page.

Reading, Discussion and Participation (20%)

- You can find the assigned reading for each week on Canvas, which will usually consist of a chapter from the OpenStax *Astronomy* text and also a separate article. I will also post one or two video recordings each week, which will add detail from the readings.
- Discussions are a chance for us to engage with and get to know one another. By Wednesday (11:59pm) each week, I ask that you complete the Discussion or other Participation assignment that is posted in the weekly module. If assigned, replies to someone else are due Friday (11:59pm). These assignments will vary, but you can expect to spend between 10-30 minutes maximum on them each week.

Homework (40%)

- Homework in this class serves two purposes. 1: It will go into more depth on the concepts and skills that are covered in the readings and videos. 2: They are your *best* reference in preparing for the final. That being said, make sure to complete them as thoroughly as possible, as they account for the largest percent of the grade. Homework is generally due on Friday at 11:59pm.

Special Interest Project (20%)

- During the second half of the quarter, you'll choose a topic to research and create a shareable "portfolio" for. The topic must relate to Solar System Astronomy in some way, but otherwise is fairly open-ended. More info on this will come in Week 3.

Reflections (5%)

- After you have completed all of the required reading and assignments for the week, this is your chance to put some of your own voice and personal perspective into what you have learned. Whereas the other required assignments are meant to go into the “nitty gritty” of the content, reflections are meant to be more introspective about how *you* have connected with the material for that week.

Final exam (15%)

- We will have one cumulative final exam at the end of the quarter during finals week. The format will be the same as quizzes, with multiple choice/fill in the blank/short-answer style questions. You will need a calculator, which can be borrowed from the Campus [Library](#).

Generative Artificial Intelligence Use and Academic Integrity

I encourage every person reading this text to think about the implications of using generative artificial intelligence (AI) from multiple standpoints. **While it can be used as a tool for learning, there are ethical and educational considerations we should all take into account each time we use AI.**

There are certain points in the course I give the option to experiment with using AI as a tool to help you solidify your understanding of the material. Otherwise, I specifically discourage the use of AI to search for answers, write up assignments, or complete any portion of the work for you. **I intentionally create and grade assignments assuming that you are human, and that the outcome will not be perfect from the start. I ask that you also allow yourself to make mistakes and take time to sit with new material.**

As your instructor, my priority is to give you ample space and time to grow your scientific literacy and knowledge—no matter where you are beginning from at the start of the quarter. Plagiarism or cheating explicitly violates De Anza’s [Student Code of Conduct](#) guidelines and will result in a zero on that assignment, or further action if necessary.

There are several *free* resources at De Anza to provide extra support, to prevent cheating and plagiarism (listed below). Additionally, please do not hesitate to reach out to me if there is another way I can support your learning that has not already been made available.

Resources for this Class and Beyond

Math, Science & Technology Resource Center

De Anza's Math, Science & Technology Resource Center offers *free* [peer tutoring and workshops](#). Additionally, the [Student Success Center](#) provides help with general college skills, writing, Canvas, and much more. They have drop-in tutoring via Zoom, or Weekly Individual tutoring (see updates for this quarter's schedule on their website).

Disability Access and Support

If you have registered with the [Disability Support Services](#) (DSS; located in RSS 141; dss@deanza.edu) or need alternate support for creating an accessible learning experience, please do not hesitate to communicate with me about this. DSS staff can meet with students, review the documentation of their disabilities, and discuss services that De Anza offers and any ADA accommodations for specific courses. Additionally, I will do whatever I can to ensure these needs are met during your time in my class.

Pride Center

The De Anza Pride Center provides a safe, supportive and welcoming space for students across the gender and sexuality spectrum to build community, find resources and connect with the support needed to thrive in their college experience. You can visit the Pride Center at LIB 138 and see additional details about hours and points of contact on the [Pride website here](#).

Student disclosures of sexual violence

De Anza College strives to foster a campus free of sexual violence including sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and/or any form of sex or gender discrimination. Please note, if you disclose a personal experience as a De Anza student, the course instructor is required to notify the Title IX Coordinator (Laureen Balducci).

To disclose any such violence confidentially, contact the Title IX coordinator using the following forms or by phone at 408-864-8945

- [Reporting Sexual Misconduct or Concern](#)
- [Contacts Page](#)

Mental Health and Counseling Services

The De Anza [Mental Health and Wellness Center](#) provides a wide variety of counseling services for students or groups **free for students**. Please see their website for their current schedule and list of contacts. They can be contacted at 408-864-8868 or by emailing mhwc@deanza.edu.

Resources for Basic Needs

If you or someone you know are in need of housing assistance, food assistance, baby supplies and resources (along with many other services), the [Resources for Basic Needs page](#) has a wide range of support for De Anza students and family members.

Academic Advising

For more general advice on setting up a study schedule, choosing a major/classes, and navigating other logistics of your degree, you can visit the [General Counseling Division](#). There are several other resources related to academics and other resources for De Anza students in this [General Guide](#).

Course Schedule*

Date	Topics	Reading	Notable Dates
Week 1	Syllabus; Intro to astronomy; Units and Math skills	Syllabus, **OS 1.3, 1.4, 1.6, 1.9 (others optional from Ch 1), 2.1	
Week 2	Navigation, Cultural and historical astronomy, Intro to the Solar System	OS Ch. 2.2-2.4, 7.1, 7.2, Canvas Reading	
Week 3	Planetary motion; Gravity	OS Ch. 3, Canvas reading	
Week 4	Seasons and Calendars; The Moon	OS Ch. 4, Canvas reading	
Week 5	Radiation and Spectra	OS Ch. 5, Canvas reading	Project Idea due Friday
Week 6	Telescopes; Science Ethics	OS Ch. 6, Canvas reading	
Week 7	Earth as a Planet, The Sun	OS Ch. 8, Canvas reading	
Week 8	Cratered Worlds and Rocky Planets	OS Ch. 9 & 10, (7.3, 7.4 Optional)	Project Draft due Friday
Week 9	Outer Planets and Space Debris	OS Ch. 11, 12, Canvas Reading	Peer Feedback due Sunday
Week 10	Origins and Evolution of Solar Systems	OS Ch. 13, 14, Canvas reading	Final Project due Friday
Week 11	Exoplanets and Life on Other Worlds	OS Ch. 21 selected sections	
Finals Week	2 hour Exam, Open June 22-23 (48 hours)		

Student Learning Outcome(s):

- Appraise the benefits to society of planetary research and exploration.
- Compare and contrast the development of planetary systems and of the major planet types, including those factors that have led to Earth's unique characteristics.
- Evaluate astronomical news items or theories concerning solar system astronomy based upon the scientific method.

Office Hours:

T	11:30 AM - 12:30 PM	S55
W	2:00 PM - 3:00 PM	S55
TH	12:30 PM - 1:00 PM	Zoom