What planet is that bright star? A parent's two-minute answer

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The bright 'star' after sunset is often a planet. Three clues to tell, which bright stars fool people in winter, and how to get the name for your ZIP.

If it's the brightest point in the sky apart from the Moon, it's probably a planet: Venus, Jupiter, Mars or Saturn. Planets shine steadily while stars twinkle, and they sit along the same band of sky as the Sun and Moon. For the name tonight, Sky Tonight lists the planets up after dark for your ZIP, brightest first, with which way to face.

Three clues

Twinkling. Stars are so far away that each one is a single point of light, and moving air jostles that point about, so stars twinkle. Planets are tiny discs and their wobbles average out. A bright point that holds steady is very likely a planet.

Place. The planets travel along the ecliptic, roughly where the Sun crosses the sky by day. A bright point well away from that band, say high in the north, is a star.

Brightness. Venus outshines everything except the Sun and Moon, and is only seen in the west after sunset or the east before sunrise. Jupiter comes next. Mars changes a lot from year to year. Saturn is bright but calm and cream-coloured.

This winter

In November and December 2026 the evening planet is Saturn, in the south to south-east after dark. Venus, Jupiter and Mars are morning planets: up before sunrise, with Mars and Jupiter very close together around 15 November. By late winter Jupiter and Mars rise in the evening; Mars is at its brightest around February 2027. The card always has the current answer.

Where each one is this month

From our sky table, for mid-November:

- After dark (7 pm): Saturn, in the south-east, four or five fists up. It is the only bright planet in the evening sky.
- Before sunrise: Venus, low in the east-south-east, one or two fists up and dazzling; Jupiter and Mars together, high in the south-east.

By mid-December Saturn has moved round to the south at 7 pm, and before dawn Jupiter and Mars have swung to the south and south-west. If you see a dazzling light low in the south-east

on an early winter morning, it is Venus.

A two-minute test with a child

1. Point to the brightest thing that isn't the Moon.
2. Watch it for a slow count of thirty. Does it twinkle, or hold steady?
3. Ask where it is. Near where the Sun went down, or along the Moon's path? That's planet country.
4. Check the card. If Sky Tonight puts a planet that way, you've found it. If not, you've found a star, and that's a fine thing to have found too.

Why the planets keep to one band

The planets all go around the Sun in nearly the same flat plane, like marbles rolling on a plate. From Earth we see that plate edge-on, as one line across the sky, the same line the Sun and Moon follow.

What to say when a child asks the difference

"A star is a sun, very far away, making its own light. A planet is a world going around our Sun, and it shines because the Sun lights it, the way it lights the Moon." Planets also wander: night by night they creep along against the stars, and the Greek word that gave us "planet" meant wanderer.

The star that fools people

Sirius, the brightest star of all, rises in the south-east on winter evenings. Low down it flashes red, green and blue. That's the air, and it's the giveaway: it twinkles. To find it, follow Orion's belt down and to the left; our Orion guide shows how.

Three questions grown-ups ask

Can we see Saturn's rings? Not with eyes. A small telescope shows them.

What about a bright light that moves? A steady moving dot is a satellite or the space station; blinking lights are a plane.

Why doesn't Venus show up some months? It's too close to the Sun in the sky, lost in the glare.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026, with no ads and no sign-up, and nothing your child taps on the space pages is sent anywhere. When the planet's been found, the library has stories at your child's reading level.

Sources

- Planet positions from Peabody's sky table, worked out with astronomy-engine (MIT license).

Free at peabody.kids/blog/what-planet-is-that-bright-star