

# Two Versions of Gravity: Newton and Einstein

Suggested Grade Level(s): 11-12

Estimated class time: 2 45-minute periods

## Summary

Students will be presenting information to their peers about both Newton's Law of Gravitation and Einstein's General Theory of Relativity. Students will need to have either studied both Newton's Law of Gravitation and Einstein's Theory of Relativity or be given the time and resources to look up this information. The lesson plan below assumes that they have been taught both, but it could easily be modified to incorporate an independent research approach to covering Einstein's theory.

## Objectives

- Students will be able to compare and describe the key differences between Einstein's Theory of General Relativity and Newton's Theory of Universal Gravitation.
- Students will be able to organize and be able to orally describe an idea or concept.
- Students will be able to construct and analyze a scientific argument.
- Students will be able to describe science as a process and define the key components that make a theory valid.
- Students will be able to describe the importance of new data as the determining factor as to whether a scientific theory is valid and accurate.
- Students will be able to display analytical and critical questioning skills.

## National Standards

### National Science Standards

- NS.9-12.1 SCIENCE AS INQUIRY  
As a result of activities in grades 9-12, all students should develop
  - Abilities necessary to do scientific inquiry
  - Understandings about scientific inquiry
- NS.9-12.2 PHYSICAL SCIENCE  
As a result of their activities in grades 9-12, all students should develop an understanding of
  - Motions and forces
  - Interactions of energy and matter
- NS.9-12.4 EARTH AND SPACE SCIENCE  
As a result of their activities in grades 9-12, all students should develop an understanding of
  - Origin and evolution of the earth system

- NS.9-12.7 HISTORY AND NATURE OF SCIENCE  
As a result of activities in grades 9-12, all students should develop understanding of
  - Science as a human endeavor
  - Nature of scientific knowledge
  - Historical perspectives

### **National Language Arts Standards**

(From the National Counsel of Teachers of English)

- NL-ENG.K-12.7 EVALUATING DATA  
Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
- NL-ENG.K-12.8 DEVELOPING RESEARCH SKILLS  
Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

### **Knowledge Prerequisite**

- Newton’s Theory of Universal Gravitation
- The fundamental concepts of Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity. (a mathematical understanding is not necessary).
- General knowledge of planetary motion.
- An understanding of how both Einstein’s and Newton’s theories apply to the 1919 solar eclipse

### **Teacher Background**

The goal of this lesson is for two groups of students to exchange information about how two different theories explain a natural phenomenon. This lesson will also illustrate how the scientific process allows a new, more complete theory to take the place of an older theory that does not produce accurate results for a new discovery. The exchange of information can be done in several ways. Some suggestions are poster presentations, Podcasts, debates, or PowerPoint presentations. The main objective is for each group to become an expert on the material for their topic and then present that material to their peers for discussion. Regardless of how the information is presented, the key objectives are:

- 1) Students will be able to research and formulate arguments using both General Relativity and Newtonian mechanics to explain a phenomena.
- 2) Students will be able to describe science as a process and demonstrate the role of data as the guiding force in what is an accepted scientific theory.

It is left open to you whether to impose a limitation of using only data available prior to the 1919 eclipse in their project or not. If you choose to use this limitation, it does make a clear example of how data provides the ultimate answer as to which theory is more complete. Throughout the lesson, pay attention to the **Teacher Note** sections. These sections are for your benefit, with the information contained in them to be revealed to the students, as you deem necessary, to facilitate the flow of the lesson.

## **Materials**

- Books that include descriptions of Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity and Newtonian physics
- Access to research material so that students can do additional research for their arguments

## **Procedure:**

### ***Day 1 Prep***

#### **I. Engagement:**

Have the students think about the differences between Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity and Newton’s Theory of Universal Gravitation. Have them share their ideas with a neighbor.

#### **II. Exploration: in this section students are given time to think, plan, investigate, and organize collected information.**

1. Organize the students so that they form two groups or teams. Group One will represent Einstein’s Theory and Group Two will represent Newton’s Theory. Each group is then comprised of 5 smaller sub-groups.

**Teacher Note:** Be sure that students at this point realize that they will be researching information to present to their peers. It is here that you must decide whether to limit them to only information that was available previous to 1919 or not. If you do, the data about the eclipse is not available and Newtonian mechanics has a strong accepted footing from the data acquired to that point. It is the task of the Newtonian physics groups to work under this old guard mentality, while the General Relativity groups should demonstrate that their theory works as well, and should point out the holes in the Newtonian picture.

2. The main question for the project is whether Newton’s Theory of Gravitation or Einstein’s Theory of Relativity is responsible for the movement of the planets. The students will be making a case for why each theory is valid.

**Teacher Note:** If used as a pre-1919 project, it should be clear to the students that Newtonian mechanics has had recent success with the discovery of Neptune based on gravitational perturbations observed in the motion of Uranus. In fact, all planetary motion as of the early 1900s had indeed been shown to follow the Newtonian model, the only exception to this rule being the precessions of the planet Mercury. It should be noted that General Relativity did correctly predict the precession and that this knowledge was known at the time. However, several ad-hoc fixes were attempted to counter this notion, such as the belief of dust particles between Mercury and the Sun, and even the belief that a planet nicknamed Vulcan, were responsible for the discrepancy between data and theory. A search was actually conducted for the planet Vulcan at the time, using the same technique that was used to discover Neptune. Obviously, no planet was ever found, but this clearly illustrates the confidence in Newtonian physics at that time.

3. Each group will be responsible for developing 5 components (introduction, history, theoretical description, testing the theory, and closing argument) to justify the validity of their chosen theory.
4. The ideal size for each sub- group is 2-3 students.
  - a. Sub-group 1 will create an introduction for their theory. They will introduce the claims to be made by their group.
  - b. Sub-group 2 will create the argument concerning the history of the formulation of the theory. The argument must explain the historical context of how the theory came to be written. The argument must explain what evidence and experiments went into the theory's formulation.

**Teacher Note:** For the historical content, both groups should relate how their theories came to be founded. This does not include how the theory directly relates to planetary motion but rather how both Newton and Einstein formulated their ideas.

- c. Sub-group 3 will create the argument addressing the theoretical description of the theory. They must explain to the class how the theory relates to the data gathered about planetary movements of the planets.

**Teacher Note:** In this section, the students explain how each theory addresses planetary motion. The Newton group should include the leap made by Newton that falling objects and planets are subject to the same forces. Einstein's group should include discussion of mass as a Space-Time warping agent. The Newton group can also include information about the success of Newtonian ideas with regard to planetary discovery, while the Einstein group can point out the problem of Mercury.

- d. Sub-group 4 will create the argument that focuses on how the theory can be tested with regard to the 1919 eclipse. They must describe how their theory relates to the upcoming eclipse of 1919 and why they believe that their theory will yield the actual result.

**Teacher Note:** If using a pre-1919 format, it should be made clear to the students that no results have been obtained at this point. They are just making a case for how the upcoming 1919 eclipse data will yield a final solution to the debate. If not, this group should include references to success by Einstein’s theory regardless of time period. It should also be noted here that the bending of light as explained by Newton has to do with the momentum of the light, and it because of this momentum that light “feels” gravity.

- e. Sub-group 5 will create a closing statement for their group. They will summarize the ideas put forth and come up with a strong ending statement.

**Teacher Note:** Both Introduction and Conclusion groups should make sure they communicate with the other sub-groups about what is to be presented, so that strong opening and closing presentations can be made that demonstrate the usefulness of their groups’ theory.

### **III. Explanation: Students are now involved in an analysis of their exploration. Their understanding is clarified and modified because of reflective activities.**

5. Each group must prepare a statement describing what they are going to cover for their argument. The statement should take about 3-5 minutes. They must then be prepared to answer any questions issued by the other side about what they talked about with their argument. Each argument should be supported with ideas from their theory. Because of this questioning opportunity, both sides should be familiar, to a degree, with both theories.

**Closure:** Have the students share with other members of their group what they learned through the creation of their piece about their part of the presentation.

### ***Day 2 Presentation***

Have the students review what they did the day before. Then set up the students for the presentation.

**Teacher Note:** The students present their information according to the format decided earlier. Either one group can completely present, followed by the other, or you can do a back and forth method. What follows below is an example of a back and forth method.

1. Split the room in half with the groups on either side.
  - a. Newton’s group will present their opening presentation.
  - b. Einstein’s group will present their opening presentation.

2. Each group will then take turns presenting their information.
  - a. They will alternate presentations of their work for Newton or Einstein for each sub-group.
  - b. During the presentation, the other group should develop questions to ask the presenting group. After each presentation, the other group should ask their questions.
    - i. The questions should either be a clarification of what they presented, (i.e. did they explain it correctly?)
    - ii. They should ask questions regarding validity of the ideas, addressing the orbit of the planet.
3. The presentation will then finish with the closing statements.
4. At the conclusion of the presentations, the students will write a 1-page summary describing the ideas presented by each theory during the debate and how the ideas relate to the upcoming eclipse (**If done using a pre-1919 format., you could also do just a comparison of the theories here.**)

**Teacher Note:** At the conclusion of the presentations, the idea that science is a process and that the 1919 eclipse yields the data necessary to prove which theory is valid should be reinforced. The main objective of the activity is to develop the idea that the process of science is reinforced through the debates of various theories. Yet in the end, it is the data and observations that yield the actual accepted theory. Hence as data improves, theories change. The idea that the story is never over should be made clear and that from 1919 onward to today, the ideas behind how our world behaves have changed. As we move into the future they will continue to do so. At this point, the idea that the 1919 debate data proves Einstein right should be made clear to the students.

**Closure:** To bring closure to the presentation activity, students should share what they learned about the scientific process and the theories as a result of the debate activity.