

DOES OUR SUN HAVE A NAME?

Most of the brighter stars we can see with the naked eye in the sky have names, such as Sirius, Rigel and Betelgeuse. But what about the closest star, our star? Does the Sun have a name, and if so what is it?

Strange as it may sound, our local star does not have a generally accepted and unique proper name in English. English speakers just call it the Sun. The capitals giving it the special significance, as does Earth (the planet) in contrast to earth (just soil). As the power source of our planetary system, the term sun has become a generic concept with the centre of any other planetary system. The same reasoning can be applied for the term moon also being spelt Moon when referring specifically to Earth's companion.

But you sometimes hear English-speakers use the name Sol for our Sun. Especially in a referral sense, as in solar system, solar wind, solar panels, solar eclipse and solstice.

It is also found in poetry and song; I am old enough to remember the very popular "O sole mio..." Sol is the Roman equivalent of the Greek sun god Helios (Solis is Latin for Sun), who with his chariot took the flaming light across the sky from East to West every day.

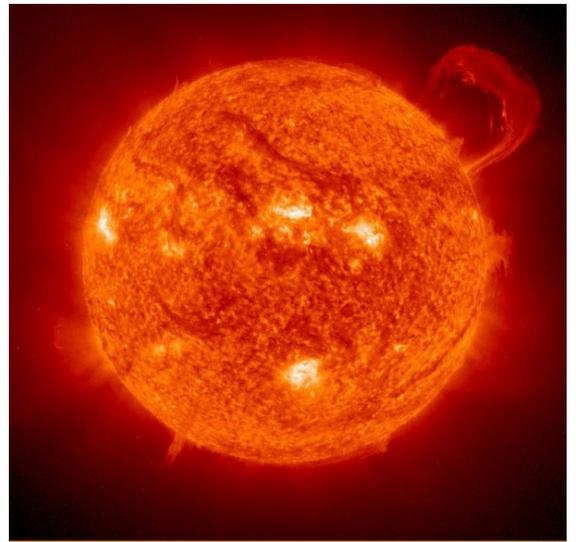
The International Astronomical Union (IAU) is the international body of astronomers that, since 1922, has given itself the responsibility for naming celestial bodies. And the IAU does recognize official names for the major planets (Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune) and Earth's satellite (Moon). It also officially names dwarf planets such as Pluto and Ceres, moons of planets, minor planets (asteroids), comets and – beyond our solar system – distant stars, the exoplanets that orbit them, and vast nebulae, galaxies and other objects. But, it appears the IAU has never officially sanctioned a name for our Sun.

Just to confuse things, though, the IAU suggests we all use Sun and Moon, rather than the lowercase sun and moon. As a result, most astronomers do capitalize these words (frequently along with other non-standard capitalizations, such as Galaxy, Solar System and Universe, meaning "our" in each case), but most media organizations (which tend to use media stylebooks such as the AP Style Book) don't. So people don't agree on whether our Sun has its own name, or what that name might (or should) be.

Meanwhile, our Sun does have a symbol that's exclusively its own. The Sun's symbol is a circle with a dot in the centre (a bit like the symbol Target Stores uses in their commercials) – used in mathematical formulas as a convenient shorthand for mass or size of the Sun.

The principal modern English adjective pertaining to the Moon is lunar, as in lunar eclipse, lunar landscape, lunar landing and lunar month, derived from the Latin Luna. A less common adjective is selenic, derived from the Ancient Greek Selene. Both the Greek Selene and the Roman goddess Diana were alternatively called Cynthia. The names Luna, Cynthia, and Selene are reflected in terminology for lunar orbits in words such as apolune, pericynthion, and selenocentric.

Well, if it has to be nameless, our Sun has lots of company. There are several thousand stars visible to the eye, and only a few hundred of them have actual names, as opposed to designations. Astronomers use the Greek alphabet to order (and name) visible stars in each constellation, according to their brightness. To identify stars invisible to the eye, astronomers turn to star catalogues (such as NGC), which assign a number to each star according to its position in the sky. Nowadays, we even know there are planets orbiting many, if not most stars, and very few of these have yet been given proper names either.



Our sun. By any other name, it's still awesome, and the ultimate source of light and heat for us on Earth.



Helios in his chariot, early 4th century BC, Athena's temple, Ilion

