



Decolonising Your Planetarium



The lasting effects of colonisation continue to impact the way we discuss science today. Our words can create unintended barriers to efforts to widen participation and diversify audiences.

This guide aims to support science communicators to reflect on their engagement activities through a decolonising lens. Although the guide focuses on scripted planetarium shows, the principles discussed can be applied more broadly across our sector.

In the guide, we offer a practical checklist to help review language choices, narrative structures, and assumptions embedded within activities. The aim is not to prescribe a single “correct” way of speaking, but to support thoughtful, transparent, and inclusive storytelling that reflects the richness of scientific knowledge and the diversity of audiences.

The guide was developed through a review of existing scripts from several contributing planetariums alongside a review of existing academic research. Throughout, the focus is on language as a tool that shapes meaning, authority, and belonging.

Background

What do we mean by “decolonising”?

In this guide, decolonising refers to examining how historical power structures — particularly those linked to European colonialism — continue to influence how science is described and presented in planetarium shows. This influence is often subtle.

Decolonising does **not** mean rejecting contemporary astronomical knowledge or assigning blame to individuals or institutions. Instead, it is about:

- **Noticing patterns** in language that centre certain worldviews as default or neutral
- **Making room** for multiple ways of knowing, past and present
- **Being clear and intentional** about whose perspectives are and are not being represented, and why

At its core, this approach recognises that language is never purely neutral: the words we choose help shape how audiences understand science, history, and their own place in the universe.

Using language to decolonise your planetarium

The checklist included in this guide focuses specifically on language. That means paying attention to how meaning is created through:

- **Vocabulary and metaphors**
- **Grammatical choices**
- **Narrative structures and framing devices**

By working at the level of language, we can make meaningful changes without needing to completely rewrite shows or add large amounts of new content. Small, considered adjustments can increase clarity, accuracy, and inclusivity, and can help a wider range of audiences feel that science is relevant to them.

How to use this checklist

The checklist is designed as a reflective tool rather than a test to be passed or failed. It can be used collaboratively by writers, presenters, educators, and producers at any stage of script development. The checklist can also be used for less formally scripted shows by keeping the points in mind during presentation. Not every point will apply to every show, and not all changes will be appropriate in every context.

Engaging with this process is an opportunity to:

- **Strengthen scripts** through clearer and more precise language
- **Build trust with audiences** by being transparent about knowledge sources
- **Align planetarium practice** with wider sector conversations about equity and inclusion

Decolonising scripts is an ongoing practice rather than a one-time task. This guide is intended to support that journey with practical, accessible guidance grounded in care for both science and audiences.

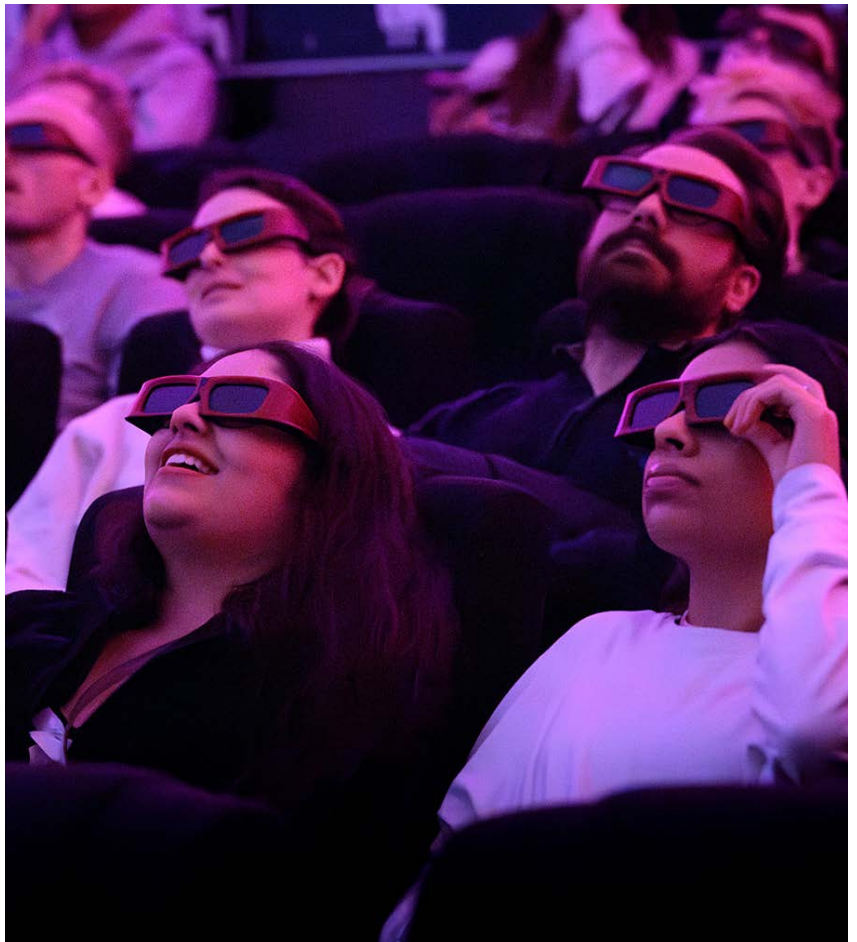
Decolonising Checklist

1 Be attentive to collective language

Reflect on how terms such as “we,” “us,” and “our” are used. Consider who is implicitly included or excluded by these collective statements, who you are assuming to have shared knowledge, and whether the intended audience is clear.

2 Interrogate claims of universality

When describing “global,” “human,” or “world” achievements, consider who was able to participate and who was excluded, and why. Where relevant, briefly acknowledge these limitations to avoid presenting partial participation as universal experience.



3 Avoid unintentionally speaking of living knowledge systems as historical

When referring to stories, beliefs, or interpretations of the universe, check whether they are still practised or held today. Avoid framing them solely as relics or myths of the past if they remain part of living cultures.

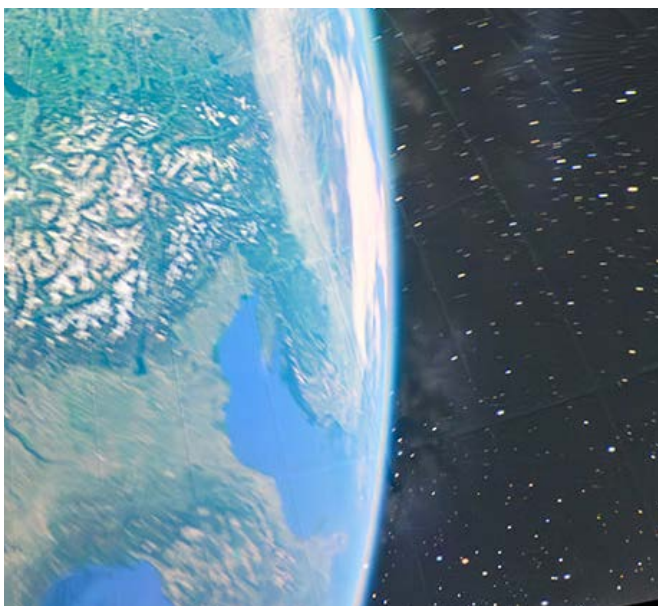
4 Be specific about origins and contexts

Where possible, clearly name the cultures, communities, or traditions from which particular stories, names, or interpretations of the sky originate, rather than presenting them as anonymous or universal.



5 Support accurate pronunciation and consider language choice

When scripts include words or names from languages other than English, provide pronunciation guidance or phonetic spellings to support presenters in using them respectfully and accurately. Consider when key terms or concepts could be presented in their original language or in direct translation versus the English paraphrased equivalent, and acknowledge any limitations or shifts in meaning that may result.



6 Reflect on why particular cultural examples are included

Consider the purpose of using specific cultures as examples. Check for romanticisation, exoticisation, or reliance on unexamined stereotypes. Avoid positioning non-Western knowledge solely as a contrast to a perceived Western “norm.” Using multiple cultural examples can help highlight shared practices and avoid presenting any single culture as an exception or curiosity.

7 Examine how expertise, authority, and “discovery” are assigned

Pay attention to who is described as holding scientific knowledge and how that knowledge is validated. Reflect on the status implicit in the titles you use and to whom they apply, such as “astronomers” versus “people who observed the sky.” Also reflect on language used around “discovery,” “first observed,” or “first known.” Consider whether these terms implicitly centre European scientific traditions as the starting point of knowledge, or suggest that other knowledge systems were incomplete, lacking, or needed “correction”. Where helpful, clarify the context of a “first” (for example, first recorded in a particular scientific tradition) and avoid reinforcing an unexamined science-versus-belief hierarchy.

8 Use active and accountable language

Be cautious with passive constructions such as “it is believed” or “it is thought that” when referring to cultural knowledge. Where possible, specify who holds or held these views, to avoid obscuring agency or ownership.



9 Name colonial processes clearly

Avoid euphemistic language that softens or obscures histories of colonialism, conquest, or coercion (for example, “absorbed into” or “merged with”). Clear language can support more accurate and honest storytelling.

10 Reflect on future-facing narratives and metaphors

When discussing future space projects such as planetary settlement, migration to Mars, or terraforming, pay attention to the language and metaphors used. Consider whether these narratives rely on ideas of inevitability, conquest, ownership, or extraction (for example, “colonising,” “claiming,” or “using up” other worlds). Where appropriate, acknowledge the ethical questions and historical mindsets that shape these framings, and make space for alternative ways of imagining humanity’s relationship with space.



Resources

Bristol University Press

Race and Sociocultural Inclusion in Science Communication: Innovation, Decolonisation, and Transformation Edited by Elizabeth Rasekoala

The Brilliant Club

Decolonising Your Course Toolkit – STEM Courses by The Brilliant Club

Inlibra

Science Communication and Public Engagement: Evolving toward Science-Society Participation by Denisse Vásquez-Guevara

Scnat network

Decolonising Language & Word Choice: The Case for Linguistic Equity

This guide was prepared by Reo Lewis, an AHRC SWWDTP funded PhD researcher of postcolonial linguistics at University of Exeter and University of Bristol.

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