

A Brief Column for the Beginning Stargazer Introducing a New Astronomical Term Each Month

Astronomy is rich with terminology. Common dictionaries contain many of these terms because the English language includes many astronomical words in popular speech. (For example, *elongation*, *gibbous*, *menses*, *star* and *synodic* are all in unabridged English dictionaries.) However, astronomical terms keep expanding like the universe and modern astronomy dictionaries often contain thousands of entries! This column will help beginning stargazers ease into the world of astronomy by *briefly introducing* a new but *basic astronomical term* (word, acronym or abbreviation) each month. This list, beginning January 1999 with the letter *a*, is alphabetical but uses successive letters for each month's entry only returning to the beginning of the alphabet after twenty-six months. So, each letter of the alphabet has an equal turn during this period! (The thousands of astronomical items in current astronomy dictionaries are sufficient to keep this column going for more than three centuries of monthly *FirstLight* issues.) However, since this article introduces only basic or

elementary terms, our list excludes highly technical or specialized words, expressions or acronyms.

Word of the Month for January 1999

absolute magnitude (symbol *M*) 1. Brightness of a star if viewed from a 10 *parsec* distance (about 32.5 *light years*) assuming no intervening material that would absorb its light. Absolute magnitudes are a method of comparing stellar luminosities so we can judge the true or intrinsic brightness of stars. 2. Brightness of a solar system object (asteroid, comet, etc.) if seen fully illuminated by the Sun and placed at a distance of one *astronomical unit* (about 150 million kilometers or 93 million miles) from both the Earth and the Sun.

References. J. Mitton 1991, *Concise Dictionary of Astronomy* (Oxford Univ. Press); I. Ridpath 1997, *A Dictionary of Astronomy* (Oxford Univ. Press).

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