

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

Astronomy is rich with terminology. 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, which began January 1999 with the letter *a*, is alphabetical but uses successive letters for each month's entry. (We will return to the beginning of the alphabet after twenty-six months.)

Word of the Month for February 1999

Bayer letter Greek letters used by the German astronomer Johann Bayer (1572–1625) in his star atlas *Uranometria* (1603) to designate stars within each constellation according to approximate apparent brightness. Usually, but not always, the brightest appearing star is alpha (α). Sometimes Bayer used position within a star group. For example, stars in the Big Dipper are sequenced α , β , γ , δ , ϵ , ζ and η from the first “pointer star” (*Dubhe*) to the last star in the Dipper's handle (*Alkaid*). This system of designating stars is still used today. (For example, see the monthly sky maps in *Sky & Telescope*.)

The general form of Bayer nomenclature is:

Greek Letter + Constellation Name (in Latin)
(lower case) (genitive case)

(The genitive case is used to show possession.)

Example: *Rigel* in Orion is β Orionis (literally the star “beta” belonging to the constellation Orion).

Note: *Rigel* (mag. +0.12*) is actually slightly brighter appearing than *Betelgeuse* (mag. +0.5), designated by Bayer as α Orionis.

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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* **mag** signifies *magnitude*, a brightness scale where lower numbers indicate brighter objects. (cf. January's word of the month.)