

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 March 1999

conjunction **1.** The position of two celestial bodies when they have the same *ecliptic longitude** so they appear to be nearly at the same place in the sky as seen from the Earth. **2. Loose Definition.** The position of two celestial bodies when they seem to be near one another on the sky. **3. Conjunction with the Sun.** The position of a celestial body when it has the same *ecliptic longitude as the Sun* so the object appears to be near the Sun in the sky as seen from the Earth.

In all cases, the celestial bodies only *seem* to be near

**Ecliptic longitude* is similar to *longitude* on the Earth's surface but is a celestial coordinate where angular distance is measured around the *ecliptic* (Sun's apparent path on the sky).

each other in the sky for they actually may be separated in space by large distances.

Conjunctions of Mercury or Venus with the Sun can occur in two ways. **Superior conjunction** The planet is on the *other side* of the Sun from the Earth. **Inferior conjunction** The planet is on the *same side* of the Sun from the Earth. These two types of conjunctions are possible because both Mercury and Venus have orbits smaller than the orbit of the Earth.†

Technically conjunctions of planets other than Mercury and Venus are only *superior* (because their orbits are larger than the Earth's orbit) and are just called *conjunctions*.‡

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

✧

†Mercury and Venus are called *inferior planets* because their orbits are inferior (interior) to the Earth's orbit. This usage should not be confused with the term "inferior conjunction."

‡Planets with orbits larger than the Earth's orbit are called *superior planets*, a usage that should not be confused with "superior conjunction."