

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 letter *a* after twenty-six months.)

Word of the Month for May 1999

elongation The angular (i.e., apparent) separation between two celestial objects on the sky. Most often this is the angle between the Sun and a celestial body measured from 0° to 180° east or west of the Sun.

Approximate elongations for celestial bodies

corresponding to various *aspects* (positions) include:

conjunction 0° , *quadrature* 90° , *opposition* 180°

The two *inferior planets* (Mercury and Venus, planets with orbits inside the Earth's orbit) reach maximum or *greatest elongations* from the Sun (either East or West) that are always less than 180° :

Mercury: 18 to 28 degrees

Venus: 45 to 47 degrees

The *superior planets* (orbits larger than the Earth's orbit) have elongations up to 180° .

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