



GCSE Astronomy: New to Edexcel

Welcome to this Professional Development Training

This training is designed to support teachers new to teaching the Pearson Edexcel GCSE Astronomy specification.

You will:

- gain an understanding the role of Pearson Edexcel and the support provided
- identify how the qualification is devised and fundamental documentation
- review the course content for the qualification
- explore how to plan the course and/or lessons
- gain an understanding of the assessment and how to prepare candidates.



Agenda

GCSE Astronomy: New to Edexcel

In this session we are going to look at:

- the structure and content of the GCSE Astronomy specification
- teaching and delivery strategies, including for observational skills
- question papers and mark schemes
- support available to teachers.



Structure and content of GCSE Astronomy

Why study GCSE Astronomy?

Candidates will follow an incredible story of how scientists, from the earliest times to the modern day, have carefully recorded measurements of objects in the sky and used their imagination to explain and explore the Universe in which we live.

The course will enable candidates to understand:

- our position in the Universe
- the movements of planets and stars
- the cycles in the night and daytime sky
- the way in which we use technology to observe and interact with space.

Why study GCSE Astronomy?

Pearson Edexcel GCSE Astronomy:

- builds on candidates' innate fascination for space
- develops and extends ideas that help enrich your science curriculum
- is a unique 'observational' science
- contains clear specifications and assessments for all candidates
- integrates accessible and engaging observational activities
- has trusted expert support when you need it
- is equally accessible to many centres; you don't have to be well-resourced with telescopes to make a success of the specification.

Assessment overview

GCSE Astronomy is assessed using two externally-examined question papers:

- candidates must complete all assessments in May/June in any single year
- each written paper comprises 50% of the qualification.

Paper 1

Paper 1 'Naked-eye Astronomy'
1 hour 45 minutes
100 marks

Paper 2

Paper 2 'Telescopic Astronomy'
1 hour 45 minutes
100 marks

Content – Papers 1 and 2

Paper 1: Naked-eye Astronomy

- Topic 1 – Planet Earth
- Topic 2 – The lunar disc
- Topic 3 – The Earth-Moon-Sun system
- Topic 4 – Time and the Earth-Moon-Sun cycles
- Topic 5 – Solar System observations
- Topic 6 – Celestial observations
- Topic 7 – Early models of the Solar System
- Topic 8 – Planetary motion and gravity

Page 4 of the [specification](#) (with details on each topic from page 9 onwards).

Paper 2: Telescopic Astronomy

- Topic 9 – Exploring the Moon
- Topic 10 – Solar astronomy
- Topic 11 – Exploring the Solar System
- Topic 12 – Formation of planetary systems
- Topic 13 – Exploring starlight
- Topic 14 – Stellar evolution
- Topic 15 – Our place in the Galaxy
- Topic 16 – Cosmology

Page 5 of the [specification](#) (with details on each topic from page 23 onwards).

Observational Tasks

- Uniquely amongst the scientific subjects studied at GCSE, Astronomy allows candidates to experience working with a truly observational science, where some of the most incredible scientific advances in human history have been made despite the fact that basic scientific strategies such as control of variables are usually impossible.
- The central focus on observational astronomy is very evident in the examination papers.
- Questions can be designed around:
 - planning an observational programme
 - presenting candidates with the results of an astronomical observation and asking them to process the information and arrive at scientific conclusions
 - commenting on the conclusions which astronomers (such as archaeoastronomers), have placed on astronomical data.

Assessment overview

Observational skills

- Candidates must undertake at least one unaided and one aided observation from the specification list.
- Candidates will need to use their knowledge and understanding of observational techniques and procedures in the written examinations.

Content – Observational tasks

Unaided tasks	Aided tasks
A1 Demonstrate the changing appearance of lunar features	B1 Demonstrate the changing appearance of lunar features
A2 Finding the radiant point of a meteor shower	B2 Finding the radiant point of a meteor shower
A3 Assess the accuracy of stellar magnitude estimates	B3 Assess the accuracy of stellar magnitude estimates
A4 Estimate a celestial property using drawings of a suitable event	B4 Measure a celestial property using telescopic drawings or photographs of a suitable event
A5 Estimating levels of light pollution	B5 Measuring levels of light pollution
A6 Estimate the solar rotation period using drawings of sunspots	B6 Determine the solar rotation period using photographs of sunspots
A7 Estimating the period of a variable star	B7 Measuring the period of a variable star
A8 Comparing stellar density estimate	B8 Comparing stellar density measurements
A9 Finding longitude using a shadow stick	
A10 Assess the accuracy of a sundial	
	B11 Demonstrate the range of objects in the Messier Catalogue
	B12 Calculation of the length of the sidereal day

Content – Observational skills

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	B11 Demonstrate the range of objects in the Messier Catalogue
	B12 Calculation of the length of the sidereal day

- Candidates must undertake at least one unaided (column A) and one aided (column B) observation from the observational task table.
- There is often an aided and an unaided version of some observational tasks. Therefore, candidates may not select both of their observational tasks from the same row on the observational task table (e.g. A1 and B1 would not be allowed).
- The two mandatory observations are the minimum number of observations that should be taken during the course. However, exposure to more observational tasks will help to prepare candidates more fully for the written papers, which may also examine the observational tasks.
- Centres must confirm that each candidate has completed at least one unaided and one aided observational task via an [online form](#).
- Submission before 15th April in the year that the candidates will sit their examinations.

Observational tasks

- Candidates need to record the work that they have undertaken for these observations.
- Undertaking astronomical observations is an iterative cycle of:
 - design observations
 - make observations
 - analyse observations
 - evaluate observations.

Observational tasks

- Teachers should attempt to teach all of the observational tasks to prepare their candidates for the written assessments. However, this does not mean that the candidates need to undertake all these tasks themselves, but rather that they understand their methodology.
- It is strongly advised that the observational tasks are embedded in the scheme of work and linked to the relevant spec point where possible. For example:

Task A5/B5 – Estimating/measuring levels of light pollution can be linked with Topic 6.6 – Understand the causes and effects of light pollution on observations of the night sky.

Possible teaching and delivery strategies

Planning the course

- Schools teach GCSE Astronomy to candidates of very different age ranges, from KS3, through GCSE and A Level candidates, as well as to adult learners.
- There is no 'correct' way to teach the course – each centre will have its own way of ensuring that the content of the course is covered and candidates are supported in their learning.
- Topics can be taught in any order.
- Teaching can be a mix of naked-eye and telescopic astronomy.
For example, it could be logical to teach Topic 2 – The lunar disc (naked-eye astronomy) with Topic 9 – Exploring the Moon (telescopic astronomy).

Delivery mechanisms

- Full-year delivery: Many centres teach the course over one year – possibly only with a full timetable allowance.
- Extra-curricular option: Some offer the qualification as an after-school or lunchtime club.
- Curriculum enrichment: It remains a popular choice to enrich the science curriculum, especially in the 6th Form.
- Accelerated pathway: The course can be delivered to younger students, typically in Years 9 and 10.
- Distance learning: Increasingly, the course is delivered remotely using online platforms and digital resources.
- Adult education: The qualification is also offered to adult learners through continuing education programmes.

Suggested teaching paths

- The specification content is not designed to be taught from Topic 1 in order.
- There are many ways of making engaging learning paths through the specification:
 - historical
 - planet Earth outwards
 - observation-focused.

Stories of Discovery

- **The Copernican Revolution** – geocentric to heliocentric models (7, 8 & ... 11)
- **Cosmology** – finding our place in the universe (15 & 16)
- **Nature of the Stars** – (13 & 14)
- **The Size of the Solar System** – Eratosthenes, Aristarchus and Halley (3 ... 11)
- **The Longitude Problem** (4)

The Copernican Revolution

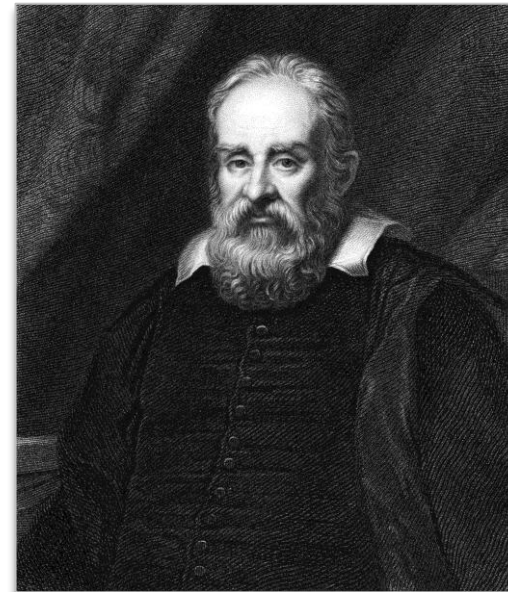
Copernicus's
mathematical
model



Nikolaus Kopernikus.

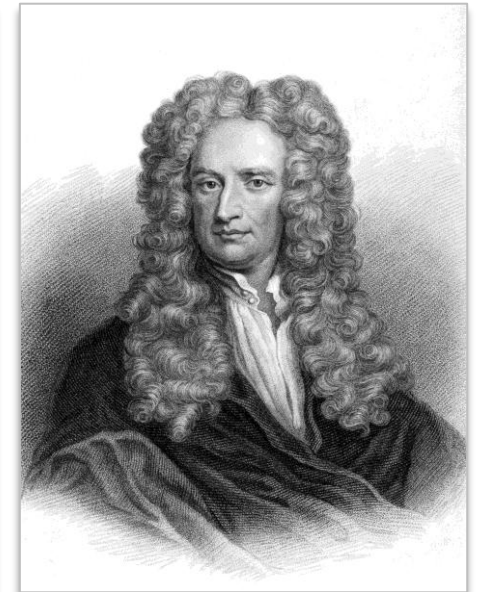
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Galileo's
telescopic
observations



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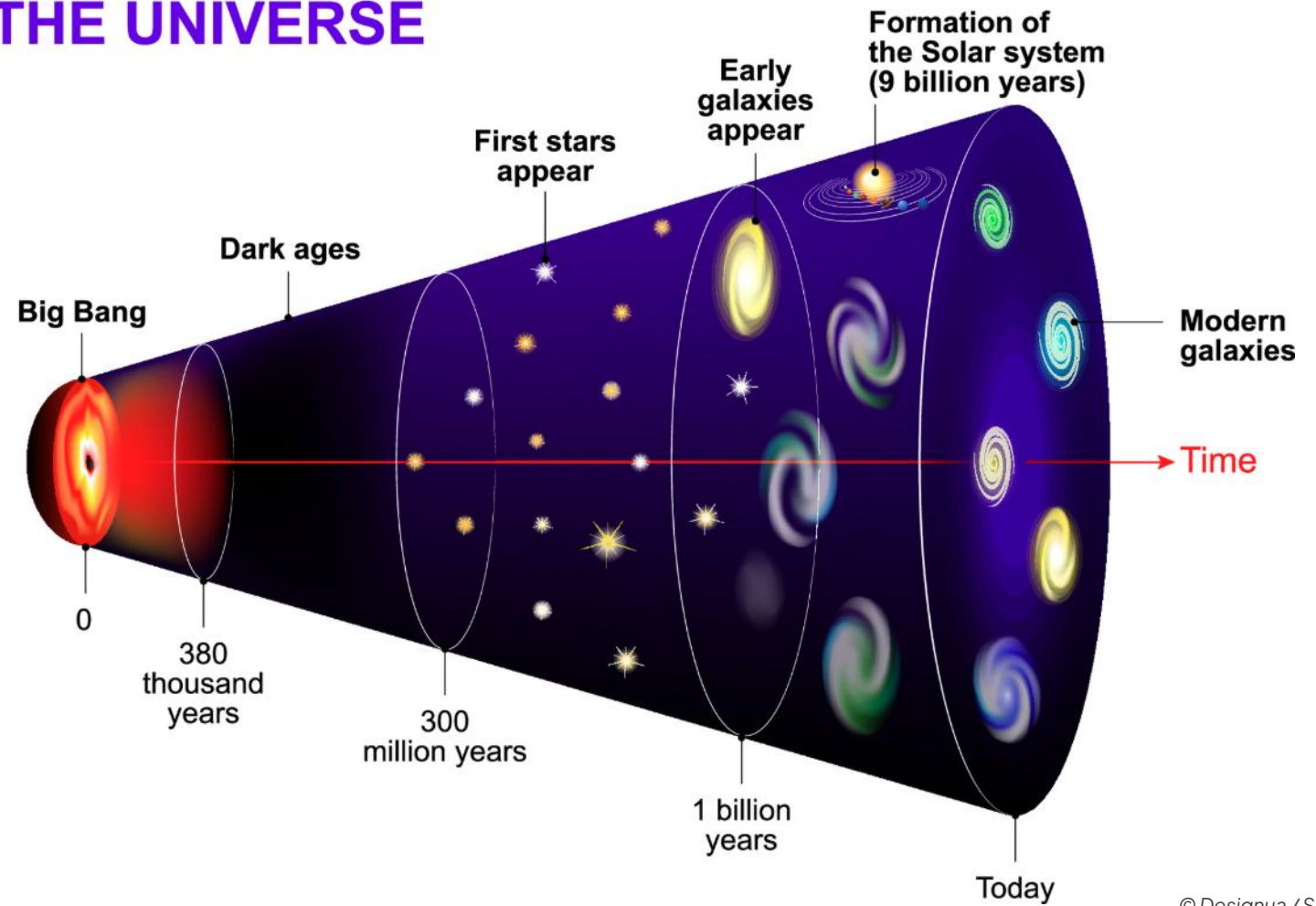
Modern
'Newtonian'
astrophysics



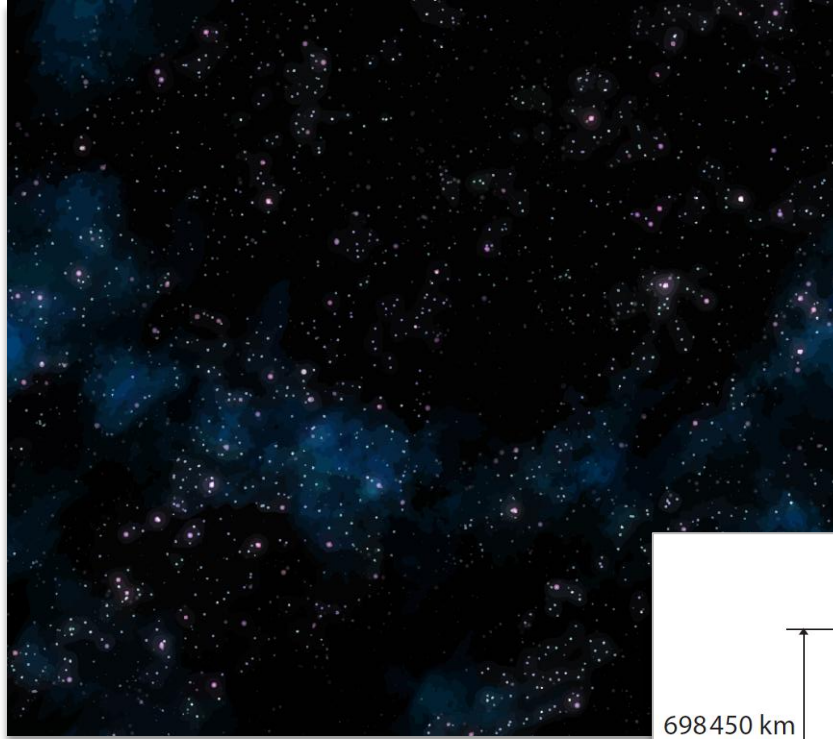
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Cosmology

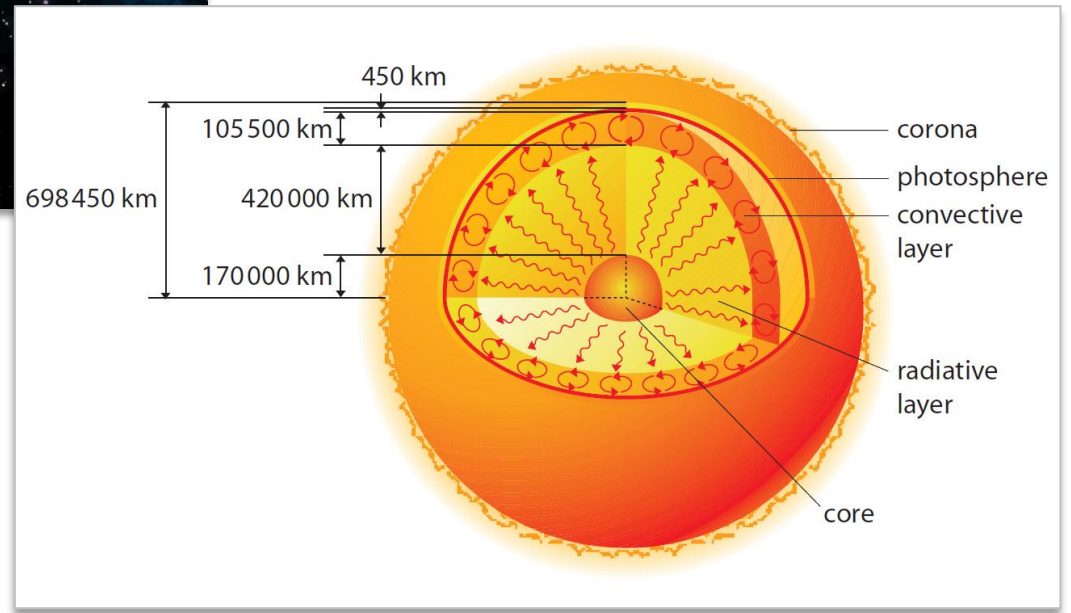
EVOLUTION OF THE UNIVERSE



The Nature of the Stars



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The Size of the Solar System

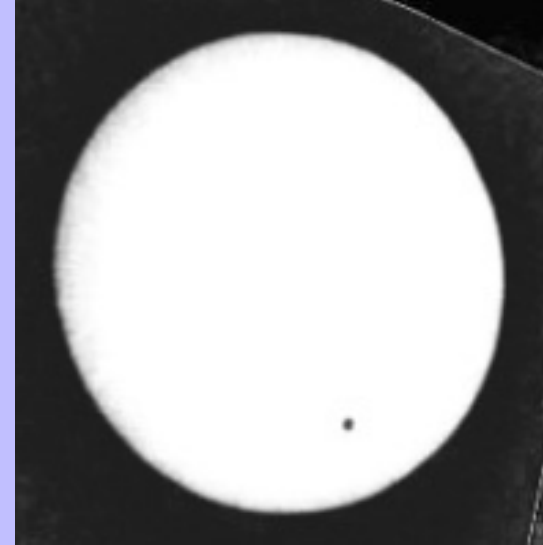
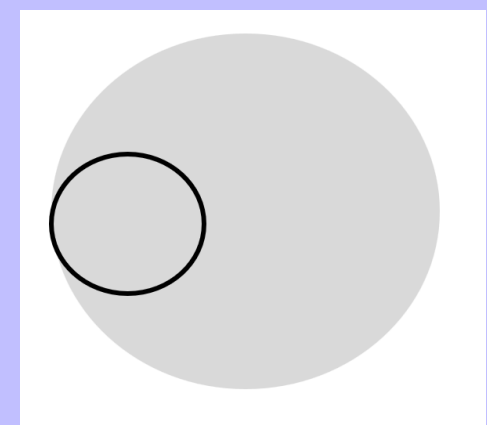
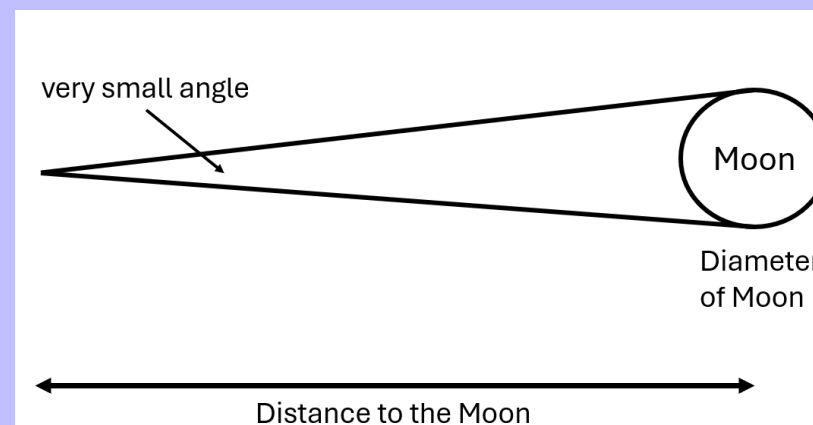
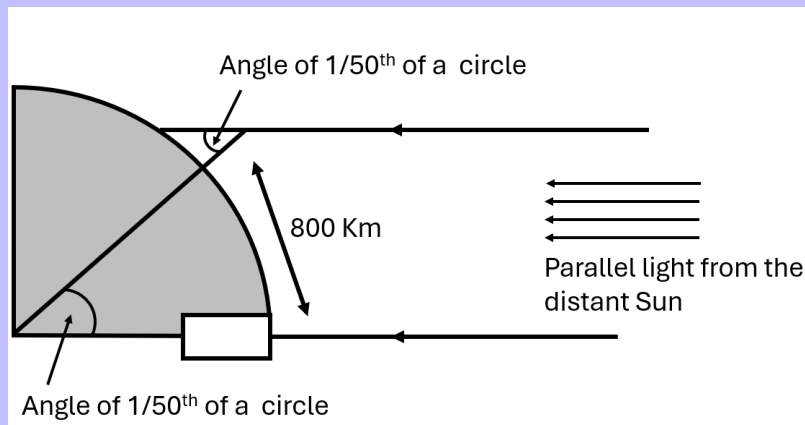


Image: Karen Fisher



The Longitude Problem



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Course Planner and Scheme of Work

- A suggested course planner and scheme of work is available on the [Pearson Edexcel GCSE Astronomy website](#).
- The [Course Planner](#) is a high-level overview, showing how the teaching content for GCSE Astronomy can be split up over a number of weeks.
- The Course Planner gives guidance to the number of teaching weeks that should be spent on each of the 16 topics in the specification (as well as a suggested teaching order).
- The [Scheme of Work](#) is based on the Course Planner. It adds more detail, on a week-by-week basis, to the Course Planner, therefore helping you to plan each of your lessons effectively.

Mathematical skills

- Examination papers allocate a minimum of 20% of marks to the assessment of mathematical skills.
- The range of mathematical skills to be tested can be found in Appendix 1 of the GCSE Astronomy specification.
- The right-hand column for each Topic in the main body of the specification shows where mathematical skills can be introduced alongside the astronomical content. This can be at the discretion of the teacher.
- There are two areas of mathematics that may be assessed at a higher level than that equivalent to GCSE Foundation tier Mathematics:
 - logarithms
 - indices (cubes).
- Candidates are not required to recall any astronomical equations.

Question papers and mark schemes

Externally-examined papers

- GCSE (9-1) Astronomy consists of two externally-examined question papers.
- Each written paper:
 - comprises 50% of the qualification
 - is 1 hour 45 minutes in duration
 - consists of 10 questions
 - is out of 100 marks.
- Candidates must answer all questions.

Externally-examined papers

- Question types in the written papers include:
 - multiple-choice
 - short-answer
 - calculation
 - graphical
 - extended-open-response.
- Synoptic assessment requiring candidates to work across different parts of the qualification. This enables candidates to show their ability to combine their skills, knowledge and understanding across the full breadth and depth of the subject.

Assessment Objectives

The Assessment Objectives are:

AO1	Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• scientific ideas• scientific techniques and procedures.	40%
AO2	Apply knowledge and understanding of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• scientific ideas• scientific enquiry, techniques and procedures.	40%
AO3	Analyse information and ideas to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• interpret and evaluate astronomical observations and methods• make judgements and draw conclusions• develop and improve observational procedures.	20%

‘Ramping’ in questions

- To try to improve responses to the paper, each one is ramped so that there is an:
 - increase in demand through a paper
 - increase in demand within a question.
- Candidates should attempt all questions – instructed to do so on the front cover of each paper.

Diagrams in questions

- The majority of concepts involved in the [GCSE Astronomy Specification](#) can be made clearer with the use of diagrams so they are always strongly recommended in candidates' answers.
- It will be made clear in the question whether a diagram is required or optional. However, even if an option, diagrams are recommended.
- All parts of a diagram must be clearly labelled if it is to support a candidates' response.

Formulae and Data Sheet

- For each written paper, no more than 20% of the marks are 'recall'.
- The exam questions are designed to apply candidate knowledge.
- Each question paper will have a Formulae and Data Sheet, containing equations and data.
- Candidates will not need to recall these tables of data about planets.
- Candidates are not required to recall any equations. Equations and data are provided in the Formulae and Data Sheet.

Name	Type of body	Mean distance from Sun/AU	Sidereal period/Earth year	Mean temperature /°C	Diameter /1000 km	Mass/ Earth mass	Ring system	Moons
Mercury	planet	0.38	0.24	170	4.9	0.055	no	none
Venus	planet	0.72	0.62	470	12.1	0.82	no	none
Earth	planet	1.0	1.0	15	12.8	1.00	no	1: the Moon
Mars	planet	1.5	1.9	-50	6.9	0.11	no	2 small moons: Deimos and Phobos
Ceres	dwarf planet	2.8	4.6	-105	0.95	1.5×10^{-4}	no	none
Jupiter	planet	5.2	11.9	-150	143	318	yes	4 major moons: Ganymede, Callisto, Europa, Io > 60 others
Saturn	planet	9.5	29.5	-180	121	95	yes	5 major moons: including Titan, Iapetus > 55 others
Uranus	planet	19.1	84.0	-210	51	15	yes	5 major moons: including Titania, Oberon > 20 others
Neptune	planet	30.0	165	-220	50	17	yes	1 major moon: Triton > 12 others
Pluto	dwarf planet	39.5	248	-230	2.4	2.2×10^{-3}	no	1 major moon: Charon > 4 other moons
Haumea	dwarf planet	43.1	283	-241	1.4	6.7×10^{-4}	no	2
Eris	dwarf planet	67.8	557	-230	2.3	2.8×10^{-3}	no	at least 1

Formulae and Data Sheet

Formulae

Equation of Time = Apparent Solar Time (AST) – Mean Solar Time (MST)

Kepler's 3rd law: $\frac{T^2}{r^3} = \text{a constant}$

Magnification of telescope: $\text{magnification} = \frac{f_o}{f_e}$

Distance modulus formula: $M = m + 5 - 5 \log d$

Redshift formula: $\frac{\lambda - \lambda_0}{\lambda_0} = \frac{v}{c}$

Hubble's law: $v = H_0 d$

Data

Mass of Earth 6.0×10^{24} kg

Mean diameter of Earth 13 000 km

Mean diameter of Moon 3500 km

Mean diameter of Sun 1.4×10^6 km

One Astronomical Unit (AU) 1.5×10^8 km

Mean Earth to Moon distance 380 000 km

One light year (l.y.) 9.5×10^{12} km

One parsec (pc) 3.1×10^{13} km = 3.26 l.y.

Sidereal day of Earth 23 h 56 min

Synodic day of Earth 24 h 00 min

Temperature of solar photosphere 5800 K

Hubble Constant 68 km/s/Mpc

Speed of light in vacuum 3.0×10^8 m/s

Command words

- Each question usually begins with a command word.
- This should help candidates produce answers which the examiners wish to see.
- Command words determine the structure of the mark scheme.
- The command words:
 - are used in the same way across all sciences
 - are reflected in the mark scheme for each question.
- Appendix 4: Taxonomy in the Specification sets out the expectation of each command word.

Command words

- Command words such as 'Describe' focus on AO1 (Knowledge and Understanding).
- 'Explain' will focus on either AO1 or AO2 (Application).
- Questions which ask candidates to 'Explain...' will require a justification/exemplification of a point. The answer must contain some element of reasoning/justification (including mathematical explanations). Candidates should ensure that their answer gives material additional to that in the question and avoid just repeating the question.
- Questions which ask candidates to 'Compare...' will require both sides of the particular argument involved to be stated for full marks.
- Questions which ask candidates to 'Evaluate...' will require them to come to some kind of judgement or conclusion after having looked at both sides of the information presented.

Command words – ‘Explain’ You’re the Examiner...

1. Figure 1 shows a star map of the area around the constellation of Gemini.

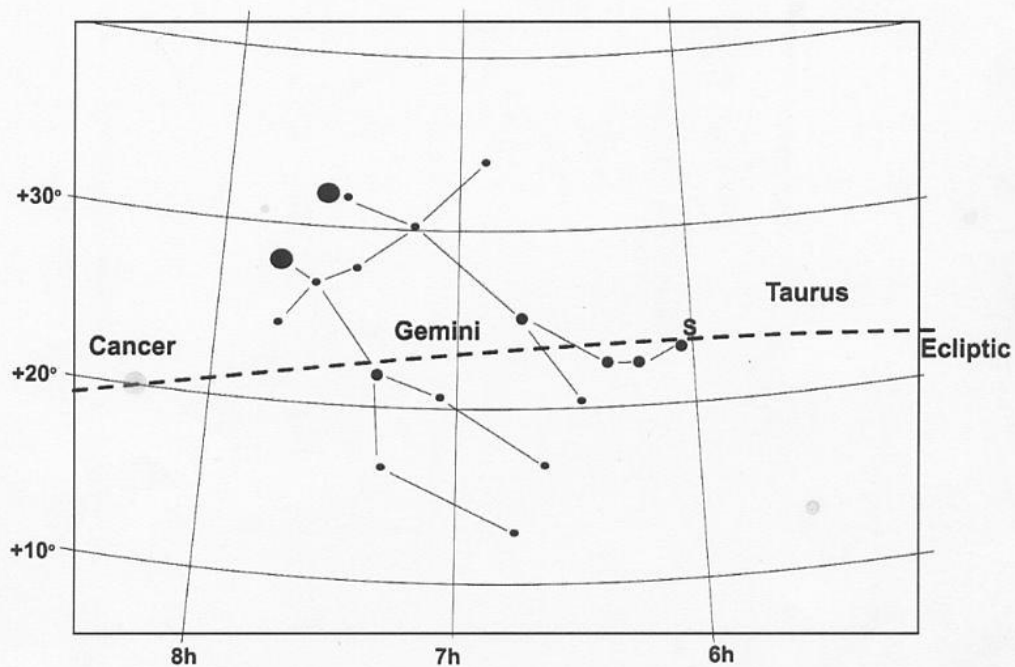


Figure 1

The ecliptic passes through this area of the sky.

On 21st June, the Sun reaches the most northerly point on the ecliptic, labelled 'S' in Figure 1.

(a) Explain why the point 'S' is in the constellation of Gemini and not Cancer. (2)

It has moved to Gemini.
This is called precession.

Mark Scheme

Question number	Answer	Mark
1(a)	Precession	(1)
	Any one of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'wobbling' of Earth's axis• movement of celestial equator/poles/ecliptic (relative to stars)• movement of First Point of Aries/Libra (relative to stars).	(1)

Command words – ‘Explain’ You’re the Examiner...

Mark awarded = 1

- The candidate’s first sentence is simply **describing** instead of **explaining** – a common error.
- Their first point is also largely repeating what is already stated in the question.
- Their second sentence contains a correct usage of the relevant astronomical term and thus gains the first marking point on the Mark Scheme.
- When answering ‘Explain...’ questions, a good technique is to start answers with ‘This is because...’

Marking exemplar answers like these is a useful way to help candidates improve their examination technique – a resource containing further ‘Exemplar’ answers with a marking commentary is now available on the Pearson Edexcel website.

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‘Analyse’ questions

- Sometimes a question will have the phrase ‘Analyse the data to...’ or ‘Analyse the information to...’
- Analyse is not a command word.
- These will be AO3 questions where the expectation is to follow a command word such as ‘Explain’ , ‘Comment’ or ‘Determine’ but to use the data or information given.

'Analyse' questions

Question number	Answer	Additional guidance	Mark
5(e)	An answer that combines points of analysis to come to a conclusion: Day length = 12h so Equinox (1) Day length increasing so must be Vernal/Spring (Equinox) (1) So the date must be March 21st (1)	Accept: ± 1 day from March 21st, Spring/Vernal Equinox Reject: First Point of Aries	(3)

(e) A student in the northern hemisphere observed the times of sunrise and sunset for a week.

Figure 5 shows the results.

Day	Sunrise	Sunset	Day length
1	06:14	18:03	11 h 49 min
2	06:12	18:04	11 h 52 min
3	06:09	18:06	11 h 57 min
4	06:07	18:07	12 h 00 min
5	06:05	18:10	12 h 05 min
6	06:02	18:11	12 h 09 min
7	06:00	18:13	12 h 13 min

Figure 5

Analyse the data in Figure 5 to determine the date of Day 4.

(3)

(Total for Question 5 = 10 marks)

Calculation questions

- Examination papers allocate a minimum of 20% of marks to the assessment of mathematical skills.
- Candidates are not required to recall any astronomical equations or constants – these are given on the Formulae and data sheet.
- Space is provided for candidates to perform their working, and a line is given to present their answer.
- In all scientific qualifications it is good practice for candidates' numerical answers to match the number of significant figures used by the data in the question.
- Questions will indicate clearly if a mark is to be awarded for the correct number of significant figures. Allowance will be made for candidates who round intermediate answers within a calculation.

Calculation questions

Question number	Answer	Additional guidance	Mark
8(c)(ii)	Rearrangement of $v = Hd$ $d = \frac{v}{H}$ (1) $distance = \frac{20\,000}{68}$ (1) Evaluation (1) 294.1 (Mpc)	Award full marks for correct numerical answer without working Accept answers that round to 294 (Mpc)	(3)

(ii) A galaxy has a measured velocity of 20 000 km/s.

Use the formulae and data sheet to estimate the distance from the Earth to the galaxy, in Mpc.

(3)

Distance from Earth Mpc

Extended-open-response questions

- It is an Ofqual requirement that some questions assess extended writing by candidates.
- There are two six-mark EOR questions on each GCSE Astronomy paper.
- These questions are marked in a different way. The mark scheme uses levels to reward both the content and structure of candidates' answers.
- Marks are awarded for the candidate's ability to structure their answer logically, showing how the points that they make are related or follow on from each other where appropriate.

Extended-open-response questions

Question number	Indicative content	Mark
9(c)	<p>Marking instructions Markers must apply the descriptors in line with the general marking guidance and the qualities outlined in the levels-based mark scheme below.</p> <p>Indicative content guidance The indicative content below is not prescriptive and candidates are not required to include all of it. Other relevant material not suggested below must also be credited. Relevant points may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Messier objects do not have a high magnitude so need a large aperture to collect sufficient light to give a bright image Telescopes C and D provide suitable aperture size Messier objects are diffuse (not pin point objects) so need a large field of view to observe the whole object Telescopes C and D provide a suitable field of view Most of the Messier objects can be found with the naked eye so an app to find them is not essential Telescopes A, B and C are suitable because they don't contain a non-essential feature The electric drive allows you to track the object over a period of time which is important for taking photographs Telescopes C and D are suitable as they include this feature that supports the astronomer's intended observations Overall, telescope C fulfils all the criteria without including non-essential features Telescope D would also fulfil the astronomer's needs, but is listed as the most expensive 	(6)

Level	Mark	Descriptor
	0	No rewardable material.
Level 1	1–2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic interpretation and evaluation of the data/information may be attempted but will be limited and narrow in scope. (AO3) The response will contain basic information with little linkage between points made. Lines of reasoning may be attempted but are incomplete or lack clarity. A conclusion may be attempted but lacks support. (AO3)
Level 2	3–4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpretation and evaluation of the data/information that attempts to synthesise and integrate relevant knowledge. (AO3) The response shows some linkages and lines of reasoning with some structure, leading to a conclusion that is partially supported. (AO3)
Level 3	5–6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive interpretation and evaluation of the data/information that demonstrates the skills of synthesising and integrating relevant knowledge throughout the response. (AO3) The response shows a well-developed, sustained line of scientific reasoning which is clear, coherent and logically structured, leading to a supported conclusion. (AO3)

- (c) An astronomer wants to buy a telescope to take photographs of Messier objects, such as the Pleiades and the Orion Nebula.

Figure 16 gives the details of four telescopes.

The telescopes are listed in order of cost, with **A** being the cheapest and **D** the most expensive.

Telescope	Aperture / cm	Field of view / arcmin	Accessories
A	5	30	Zoom eyepiece – for greater magnification
B	15	30	Finderscope an additional telescope with wider field of view
C	20	150	Electric drive – to track celestial objects
D	40	150	Electric drive – to track celestial objects App – to automatically position telescope

Figure 16

Evaluate which telescope would be most appropriate for the astronomer to buy.

(6)

(Total for Question 9 = 13 marks)

Summary and support

Edexcel support material

Pearson Edexcel GCSE Astronomy support material can be found online and include:

- [Specification](#)
- [Getting Started Guide](#)
- [Course Planner](#)
- [Scheme of Work](#)
- [Topic Support Guides](#)
- [Observational Skills guide](#)
- [Sample Assessment Material for both Paper 1 and Paper 2](#)
- [Exemplars of typical candidate responses with Examiner commentary](#)
- [Useful Resources list](#)

Topic support guides

Topic Support Guides have been written to help teachers with subjects that they may be unfamiliar with and include:

Naked Eye Astronomy	Telescopic Astronomy
Sailing by the Stars	Building Planetary Systems
The Celestial Sphere	Stellar Evolution
Measuring the Solar System	
Archaeoastronomy	

All topic guides can be found on the qualifications page under [course materials/teaching and learning materials/Topic Support](#).

Robotic telescopes

- There are now many robotic telescopes which can be used to support GCSE Astronomy.
- Use of a robotic telescope will require registration but are often free for educational establishments.
- There are a variety of publicly-available telescopes, situated in some of the world's premier observing platforms.
- Examples include:
 - Faulkes Telescope, based in Hawaii
 - Open University Telescope (formerly Bradford Radio Telescope)
 - National Schools' Observatory (Liverpool Telescope)
 - NASA MicroObservatory in the USA.

Summary

In this session we looked at the following objectives:

- the structure and content of the GCSE Astronomy specification
- teaching and delivery strategies, including for observational skills
- question papers and mark schemes
- support available to teachers.



Subject Advisor Support



Our subject advisors are experts in their fields and are here to support you throughout the year.

Email: teachingscience@pearson.com

Phone: +44 (0) 344 463 2535 (Mon–Fri, 9:00–17:00)

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Science
Irine Muhiuddin



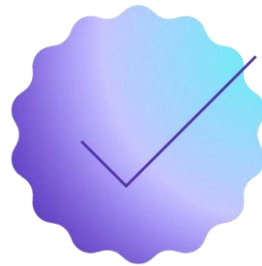
Qualification Services

The following services are included as part of your qualification fees:



examWizard

An online resource bank of past paper questions and support materials, enabling you to create customised mock exams and tests tailored to your students' needs.



ResultsPlus

An online results analysis tool that provides a detailed breakdown of students' performance in our exams, helping you identify areas for improvement and track progress effectively.



Access To Scripts

An online service that allows you to view and download your candidates' marked scripts. This tool offers transparency and insight into the marking process.

Find out more

For more professional development courses please see [Pearson's Professional Development Academy](#).

You can also download a copy of Pearson Edexcel's [A Guide to Professional Development Training](#) from the PD Academy website.



Following this event, you will receive a survey to share your thoughts about the session. Please let us know what you'd like to see more of and what areas could be improved.





Thank you.