

Name: _____
Date: _____

7 Scale Model of the Solar System

7.1 Introduction

The Solar System is large, at least when compared to distances we are familiar with on a day-to-day basis. Consider that for those of you who live here in Las Cruces, you travel 2 kilometers (or 1.2 miles) on average to campus each day. If you go to Albuquerque on weekends, you travel about 375 kilometers (232.5 miles), and if you travel to Disney Land for Spring Break, you travel $\sim 1,300$ kilometers (~ 800 miles), where the ‘ \sim ’ symbol means “approximately.” These are all distances we can mentally comprehend.

Now, how large is the Earth? If you wanted to take a trip to the center of the Earth (the very hot “core”), you would travel 6,378 kilometers (3954 miles) from Las Cruces down through the Earth to its center. If you then continued going another 6,378 kilometers you would ‘pop out’ on the other side of the Earth in the southern part of the Indian Ocean. Thus, the total distance through the Earth, or the **diameter** of the Earth, is 12,756 kilometers ($\sim 7,900$ miles), or 10 times the Las Cruces-to-Los Angeles distance. Obviously, such a trip is impossible—to get to the southern Indian Ocean, you would need to travel on the surface of the Earth. How far is that? Since the Earth is a sphere, you would need to travel 20,000 km to go halfway around the Earth (remember the equation $\text{Circumference} = 2\pi R$?). This is a large distance, but we’ll go farther still.

Next, we’ll travel to the Moon. The Moon, Earth’s natural satellite, orbits the Earth at a distance of $\sim 400,000$ kilometers ($\sim 240,000$ miles), or about 30 times the diameter of the Earth. This means that you could fit roughly 30 Earths end-to-end between here and the Moon. This Earth-Moon distance is $\sim 200,000$ times the distance you travel to campus each day (if you live in Las Cruces). So you can see, even though it is located very close to us, it is a long way to the Earth’s nearest neighbor.

Now let’s travel from the Earth to the Sun. The *average Earth-to-Sun distance*, ~ 150 million kilometers (~ 93 million miles), is referred to as one **Astronomical Unit** (AU). When we look at the planets in our Solar System, we can see that the planet Mercury, which orbits nearest to the Sun, has an average distance of 0.4 AU and Pluto, the planet almost always the furthest from the Sun, has an average distance of 40 AU. Thus, the Earth’s distance from the Sun is only 2.5 percent of the distance between the Sun and planet Pluto!! Pluto is very far away!

The purpose of today’s lab is to allow you to develop a better appreciation for the distances between the largest objects in our solar system, and the physical sizes of these objects relative to each other. To achieve this goal, we will use the length of the football field in Aggie Memorial Stadium as our platform for developing a scale model of the Solar System. A *scale*

model is simply a tool whereby we can use manageable distances to represent larger distances or sizes (like the road map of New Mexico used in Lab #1). We will properly distribute our planets on the football field in the same *relative* way they are distributed in the real Solar System. *The length of the football field will represent the distance between the Sun and the planet Pluto.* We will also determine what the sizes of our planets should be to appropriately fit on the same scale. Before you start, what do you think this model will look like?

Below you will proceed through a number of steps that will allow for the development of a scale model of the Solar System. For this exercise, we will use the convenient unit of the Earth-Sun distance, the Astronomical Unit (AU). Using the AU allows us to keep our numbers to manageable sizes.

SUPPLIES: a calculator, Appendix E in your textbook, the football field in Aggie Memorial Stadium, and a collection of different sized spherical-shaped objects

7.2 The Distances of the Planets From the Sun

Fill in the first and second columns of Table 2.1. In other words, list, in order of increasing distance from the Sun, the planets in our solar system and their average distances from the Sun in Astronomical Units (usually referred to as the “semi-major axis” of the planet’s orbit). You can find these numbers in back of your textbook. **(21 points)**

Table 7.1: Planets’ average distances from Sun.

Planet	Average Distance From Sun	
	AU	Yards
Earth	1	
Pluto	40	100

Next, we need to convert the distance in AU into the unit of a football field: the yard. This is called a “scale conversion”. Determine the SCALED orbital semi-major axes of the planets, based upon the assumption that the Sun-to-Pluto average distance in Astronomical Units (which is already entered into the table, above) is represented by 100 yards, or goal-line to goal-line, on the football field. To determine similar scalings for each of the planets, you

must figure out how many yards there are per AU, and use that relationship to fill in the values in the third column of Table 2.1.

7.3 Sizes of Planets

You have just determined where on the football field the planets will be located in our scaled model of the Solar System. Now it is time to determine how large (or small) the planets themselves are on the **same** scale.

We mentioned in the introduction that the diameter of the Earth is 12,756 kilometers, while the distance from the Sun to Earth (1 AU) is equal to 150,000,000 km. We have also determined that in our scale model, 1 AU is represented by 2.5 yards (= 90 inches).

We will start here by using the largest object in the solar system, the Sun, as an example for how we will determine how large the planets will be in our scale model of the solar system. The Sun has a diameter of $\sim 1,400,000$ (1.4 million) kilometers, more than 100 times greater than the Earth's diameter! Since in our scaled model 150,000,000 kilometers (1 AU) is equivalent to 2.5 yards, how many inches will correspond to 1,400,000 kilometers (the Sun's actual diameter)? This can be determined by the following calculation:

$$\text{Scaled Sun Diameter} = \text{Sun's true diameter (km)} \times \frac{(90 \text{ in.})}{(150,000,000 \text{ km})} = \mathbf{0.84 \text{ inches}}$$

So, on the scale of our football field Solar System, the *scaled Sun* has a diameter of only 0.84 inches!! Now that we have established the scaled Sun's size, let's proceed through a similar exercise for each of the nine planets, and the Moon, using the same formula:

$$\text{Scaled object diameter (inches)} = \text{actual diameter (km)} \times \frac{(90 \text{ in.})}{(150,000,000 \text{ km})}$$

Using this equation, fill in the values in Table 2.2 (**8 points**).

Now we have all the information required to create a scaled model of the Solar System. Using any of the items listed in Table 2.3 (spheres of different diameter), select the ones that most closely approximate the sizes of your scaled planets, along with objects to represent both the Sun and the Moon.

Designate one person for each planet, one person for the Sun, and one person for the Earth's Moon. Each person should choose the model object which represents their solar system object, and then walk (or run) to that object's scaled orbital semi-major axis on the football field. The Sun will be on the goal line of the North end zone (towards the Pan Am Center) and Pluto will be on the south goal line.

Table 7.2: Planets' diameters in a football field scale model.

Object	Actual Diameter (km)	Scaled Diameter (inches)
Sun	~ 1,400,000	0.84
Mercury	4,878	
Venus	12,104	
Earth	12,756	0.0075
Moon	3,476	
Mars	6,794	
Jupiter	142,800	
Saturn	120,540	
Uranus	51,200	
Neptune	49,500	
Pluto	2,200	0.0013

Table 7.3: Objects that Might Be Useful to Represent Solar System Objects

Object	Diameter (inches)
Basketball	15
Tennis ball	2.5
Golf ball	1.625
Marble	0.5
Sesame seed	0.07
Poppy seed	0.04
Ground flour	0.001

7.4 Questions About the Football Field Model

When all of the “planets” are in place, note the relative spacing between the planets, and the size of the planets relative to these distances.

1) Is this spacing and planet size distribution what you expected when you first began thinking about this lab today? Why or why not? **(10 points)**

Answer the following questions using the information you have gained from this lab and your own intuition **(20 points)**:

2) Which planet would you expect to have the warmest surface temperature? Why?

3) Which planet would you expect to have the coolest surface temperature? Why?

4) Which planet would you expect to have the greatest mass? Why?

5) Which planet would you expect to have the longest orbital period? Why?

6) Which planet would you expect to have the shortest orbital period? Why?

Extra Credit (5 points)

Later this semester (see lab #15) we will talk about comets, objects that reside on the edge of our Solar System. Most comets are found either in the “Kuiper Belt”, or in the “Oort Cloud”. The Kuiper belt is the region that starts near Pluto’s orbit, and extends to about 100 AU. The Oort cloud, however, is enormous: it is estimated to be 40,000 AU in radius! Using your football field scale model answer the following questions:

- 1) How many yards away would the edge of the Kuiper belt be from the northern goal line at Aggie Memorial Stadium?
- 2) How many football fields does the radius of the Oort cloud correspond to? If there are 1760 yards in a mile, how many miles away is the edge of the Oort cloud from the northern goal line at Aggie Memorial Stadium?

Possible Quiz Questions

- 1) What is the approximate diameter of the Earth?
- 2) What is the definition of an Astronomical Unit?
- 3) What value is a “scale model”?

7.5 Take-Home Questions

Now you will work out the numbers for a scale model of the Solar System for which the size of New Mexico along Interstate Highway 25 will be the scale.

Interstate Highway 25 begins in Las Cruces, just southeast of campus, and continues north through Albuquerque, all the way to the border with Colorado. The total distance of I-25 in New Mexico is 455 miles. Using this distance to represent the Sun to Pluto distance (40 AU), and assuming that the Sun is located at the start of I-25 here in Las Cruces and Pluto is located along the Colorado-New Mexico border, you will determine:

- the scaled locations of each of the planets in the Solar System; that is, you will determine the city along the highway (I-25) each planet will be located nearest to, and how far north or south of this city the planet will be located. If more than one planet is located within a given city, identify which street or exit the city is nearest to.
- the size of the Solar system objects (the Sun, each of the planets) on this same scale, for which 455 miles (~ 730 kilometers) corresponds to 40 AU. Determine how large each of these scaled objects will be (probably best to use feet; there are 5280 feet per mile), and suggest a real object which well represents this size. For example, if one of the scaled Solar System objects has a diameter of 1 foot, you might suggest a soccer ball as the object that best represents the relative size of this object.

If you have questions, this is a good time to ask!!!!!!

1. List the planets in our solar system and their average distances from the Sun in units of Astronomical Units (AU). Then, using a scale of $40 \text{ AU} = 455 \text{ miles}$ ($1 \text{ AU} = 11.375 \text{ miles}$), determine the scaled planet-Sun distances and the city near the location of this planet's scaled average distance from the Sun. Insert these values into Table 2.4, and draw on your map of New Mexico (on the next page) the locations of the solar system objects. **(22 points)**
2. Determine the scaled size (diameter) of objects in the Solar System for a scale in which $40 \text{ AU} = 455 \text{ miles}$, or $1 \text{ AU} = 11.375 \text{ miles}$. Insert these values into Table 2.5. **(19 points)**

$$\text{Scaled diameter (feet)} = \text{actual diameter (km)} \times \frac{(11.4 \text{ mi.} \times 5280 \text{ ft/mile})}{150,000,000 \text{ km}}$$

Table 7.4: Planets' average distances from Sun.

Planet	Average Distance from Sun		Nearest City
	in AU	in Miles	
Earth	1	11.375	
Pluto	40	455	3 miles north of Raton

Table 7.5: Planets' diameters in a New Mexico scale model.

Object	Actual Diameter (km)	Scaled Diameter (feet)	Object
Sun	~ 1,400,000	561.7	
Mercury	4,878		
Venus	12,104		
Earth	12,756	5.1	height of 12 year old
Moon	3,476		
Mars	6,794		
Jupiter	142,800		
Saturn	120,540		
Uranus	51,200		
Neptune	49,500		
Pluto	2,200		



