

Exploring Orbits

Introduction

In 1609, the German mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler deciphered a major puzzle of the solar system. The strange back-and-forth motions of the planets in the sky were nearly impossible to predict until Kepler figured out the true shapes of the planetary orbits around the sun. Orbits were always believed to be circular, but Kepler used mathematics to discover they were actually **elliptical**.

An **ellipse** is an oval that is characterized by two quantities. The first quantity is the width of the ellipse, which is called the **major axis**. The second quantity is called the **eccentricity**, which is a measure of how stretched out the ellipse is. Eccentricity is defined by the distance between two mathematically determined points within the ellipse called the **foci**.

For planets, one focus of their orbital ellipse is the sun. The other is an empty point in space. The orbit of each planet is an ellipse, but each planet's elliptical orbit has different major axes and eccentricities. Once Kepler understood the proper nature of orbits, the movements of the planets in the sky could be predicted with precision.

In this investigation, you will draw ellipses, calculate their eccentricities, observe an interesting property of ellipses, and compare the ellipses you draw with the orbital eccentricities of Earth and other planets in the solar system.



Figure 1

Problem

What do the elliptical orbits of the planets look like?

Pre-Lab Discussion

Read the entire investigation. Then work with a partner to answer the following questions.

1. Predicting: Each planet's orbit is shaped like an ellipse. Predict whether the shapes of the planet's orbits will be more circular or more elongated. _____

2. Applying Concepts: What is the one thing that the elliptical orbits of all planets, asteroids, and most comets have in common? _____

Lab Answer Key Exploring Orbits

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