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Chapter **1**

An Astrological Overview: The Horoscope in Brief

Legend has it that Sir Isaac Newton, one of the greatest scientific geniuses of all time, may have been interested in astrology. Newton had a complex, wide-ranging mind. In addition to inventing calculus, formulating the laws of motion, and discovering the universal law of gravity, he wrote Biblical commentary and speculated about possible dates for the end of the world (all, by the way, in our current century). He experimented with the alchemical quest to turn ordinary metals into gold and may have suffered from mercury poisoning as a result. And he was interested in astrology, claiming that a book he read on the subject while a student at Cambridge University had ignited his interest in science. When his friend Edmund Halley, after whom the comet is named, made a disparaging remark about astrology, Newton, a conservative Capricorn, shot right back, “Sir, I have studied the subject. You have not.” Or so the story goes.

Like every other astrologer, I like to think that story might be true. After all, astrology has faded in and out of fashion, but it has never lacked followers. Twenty-five hundred years ago, Babylonian astrologers were casting individual horoscopes. The Romans consulted astrologers regularly. Emperor Augustus visited an astrologer in 44 BCE, the year Julius Caesar was assassinated, and the orator Cicero, who spoke vehemently against astrology, numbered several well-known practitioners among his friends. In the eighth century, Charlemagne studied astrology under the auspices of an English monk. Catherine de Medici consulted Nostradamus, Queen Elizabeth I sought counsel from the astrologer John Dee, and other astrologers advised Richard the Lion-heart, Napoleon, George Washington, J. P. Morgan, and Ronald Reagan. Yet in all that time, no one has provided a satisfying explanation of why astrology works. Over the centuries, proponents of the ancient art have suggested that gravity must be the motor of astrology . . . or electromagnetism . . . or the metaphysical “law of correspondences.” Carl G. Jung summarized that view when he wrote, “We are born at a given moment, in a given place, and like vintage years of wine, we have the qualities of the year and of the season in which we are born.”

I don’t know why astrology works any more than Sir Isaac did. I do know that the pattern the planets made when you were born — your birth chart or horoscope — describes your abilities, your challenges, and your potential. It doesn’t predict your fate, though it does make some fates more easily achievable than others. The exact shape of your destiny, I believe, is up to you.

In this chapter, I give you an overview of the main components of an astrological chart: the planets, the signs, and the houses. You might think of it this way:

- » The planets represent drives, needs, and basic energies.
- » The signs represent the ways those forces express themselves.
- » And the houses represent areas of life such as career, partnership, sex, money, and health.

Looking at the Starry Sky

Picture, if you will, our solar system. In the middle is the Sun, our star. Spinning around it are the Earth and other planets along with countless asteroids, planets, comets, and a few lonely spacecraft. Their orbits surround the Sun roughly

the way the grooves on a vinyl record album encircle the label in the center. (Although, to be clear, the orbits are not perfectly circular, and the solar system, unlike the record, is not perfectly flat.)

The idea that the planets orbit the Sun, drilled into most of us in childhood, would have astonished ancient stargazers. They never doubted that the Sun, the Moon, and the planets revolved around the Earth. And although we know better, thinking so didn't make them stupid. The Moon does revolve around the Earth — they weren't wrong there — and the Sun certainly looks as if it does. It appears to rise in the east and set in the west, and it always travels along a narrow ribbon of sky that surrounds the Earth like a giant hoop. That pathway is called the *ecliptic*. It maps the annual journey of the Sun.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Following are the most important facts about the ecliptic:

- »» The ecliptic represents the apparent path of the Sun around the Earth — apparent because, in reality, the Sun doesn't spin around the Earth at all. It just looks that way. The Moon and the planets seem to travel a similar path, wandering a little to the north and a little to the south of the Sun but basically following the same route.
- »» Like a circle, the ecliptic has 360 degrees. Those 360 degrees, divided into a dozen equal sections, comprise the signs of the zodiac. The first 30 degrees — one-twelfth of the whole — are given to Aries, the next 30 degrees belong to Taurus, and so on. Each sign receives the same amount of space.
- »» The stars, which are scattered like dust along the ecliptic, form the constellations of the zodiac. They are the background, a sort of celestial wallpaper against which the Sun, the Moon, and the planets move.



REMEMBER

Here comes the confusing part: The signs of the zodiac and the constellations that share their names are not the same. The signs are geometric divisions of the ecliptic, each one covering 30 degrees, each one precisely the same size. In contrast, the constellations vary in size from sprawling Virgo, the second largest constellation in the sky, to Capricorn, a faint collection of stars less than one third the size of Virgo. Although the signs of the zodiac take their names from the constellations, the signs and the stars have nothing to do with one another. I explain this sorry state of affairs in the nearby sidebar titled “The signs, the constellations, and the precession of the equinoxes.”

THE SIGNS, THE CONSTELLATIONS, AND THE PRECESSION OF THE EQUINOXES

Thousands of years ago, when the Babylonians were establishing the principles of astrology, the constellations and the signs of the zodiac were roughly in alignment. On the *vernal equinox* (the first day of spring), the Sun was “in” the constellation Aries. That is, if you could observe the Sun and the stars simultaneously, you’d see the Sun amidst the stars of the Ram. In those happy days, known as the Age of Aries, the signs and the constellations more or less coincided.

Alas, this is no longer the case. On the vernal equinox today, the Sun appears amidst the (dim) stars of Pisces the Fish — a very different kettle indeed. The reason for this shift is that the Earth is not a perfect sphere. It’s fatter around the middle, and its mass is distributed unequally. So it wobbles on its axis, which traces a circle in space like the spindle of a spinning top. As the Earth revolves around the Sun, the axis gradually shifts its orientation. Over the years, the constellations seem to slip backwards, a phenomenon first identified by the Greek astronomer Hipparchus in the second century BCE. The amount of slippage over a lifetime is minuscule — about one degree every 72 years — but over generations it adds up. Every equinox takes place slightly earlier in the zodiac than the one before. This process is called the *precession of the equinoxes*. It explains why the vernal equinox, which used to occur in the constellation Aries, now technically takes place in Pisces. It also explains why the signs and the constellations are no longer aligned.

One of these days, the equinox will slip back even further, to the constellation of the Water Bearer, and the Age of Aquarius will officially begin. Astrologers differ as to when that will happen because it depends on how you measure the constellations. If only they were neater! If only they were the same size! Instead, they bump into each other and overlap, and their boundaries are a matter of opinion. Do you use the artificial, right-angled, patchwork-like borders assigned to each constellation by the International Astronomical Union in 1930? Or do you look to the ecliptic, which has been artificially divided into 12 equal sections, one per sign? A Belgian astronomer, using the IAU measurements, suggests that the Age of Aquarius will begin in 2597. Another Belgian, writing in February 1890, announced that the Age of Aquarius would begin the very next month. 1844 has been nominated, along with 1962, 2012, and 3573. I cast with my vote with the English astronomer Nicholas Campion, who believes that the Age of Aquarius will begin — or has begun — between 1447 and 3596. Sounds right to me.

In short, there is no agreement except on this one point: Eventually, the equinox point will cycle backwards through the zodiac, all the way to Aries. That process takes about 25,800 years and is known as the Great Year. Our current Great Year began around 2000 BCE. Around the year 23800, the next one will begin. The vernal equinox will return to Aries. The constellations and the divisions of the ecliptic will align, and astrologers will be able to skip this entire explanation. Meanwhile, the constellations and the signs of the zodiac are not the same.

Skeptics who attack astrology — and for some reason, these wary souls can be amazingly hostile — often point to the changing position of the constellations and the precession of the equinoxes as proof that astrology is bogus. The truth is that astrologers are well aware of this phenomenon. In western astrology, the constellations are signposts or symbols. What matters is the division of the ecliptic. The stars, glorious though they are, have nothing to do with your sign.

For that reason, I avoid the term “star sign.” It’s an enchanting phrase, and I wish I could use it in good conscience. I don’t because it misrepresents astrology as it is usually practiced. I prefer the accuracy and simplicity of “Sun sign,” and that is the phrase I use in this book.

Identifying the Signs of the Zodiac

There are twelve signs in the wheel of the zodiac, each one named after a constellation, each with its own style and substance. Together they weave a narrative of human life, a progression that goes something like this:

- » **Aries** initiates the cycle with a rush of activity. Like the Big Bang, it kicks everything into motion. It is the sign of action.
- » **Taurus** calms and consolidates that ferocious energy, bringing it down to earth in a tangible form and into the body. Taurus is the sign of the senses.
- » **Gemini** activates the mind, stimulates curiosity, and forges connections through communication. It is the sign of language.
- » **Cancer** turns inward, bringing feelings into consciousness, cultivating the idea of home and family, and seeking security. It is the sign of emotion.
- » **Leo** celebrates, dramatizes, and creates. It is the sign of self-expression.
- » **Virgo** organizes, evaluates, develops techniques, and attends to details. It is the sign of analysis.
- » **Libra** reaches beyond itself, striving for balance through interaction with others and through the power of ideas. It is the sign of relationship.
- » **Scorpio** investigates the mysteries of human nature, diving deep into the inner world and the hidden self. It is the sign of transformation.
- » **Sagittarius** pursues independence, adventure, education, and the wisdom of philosophy or religion. It is the sign of the seeker.
- » **Capricorn** elevates purpose, shoulders responsibility, and creates civilization. It is the sign of structure.

- » **Aquarius** seeks liberation, focuses on society, and simultaneously supports individuality. It is the sign of community.
- » **Pisces** embodies compassion and the spiritual side of life. It is the sign of dreams and the imagination. It also oversees chaos, out of which will arise the creative fire of Aries. And so the cycle will begin anew.

OPHIUCHUS AND THE 13TH SIGN

It happens every few years, as reliable as the force of gravity: Someone announces that there are 13 constellations in the zodiac, not 12. Uproar ensues.

This folly became a story in 1970, when a book called *Astrology 14* by Steven Schmidt argued that two large constellations — Cetus the Whale, and Ophiuchus the Serpent Bearer — lie along the band of the ecliptic and therefore the zodiac should be expanded to include them. The book received enormous publicity, including a write-up in *Time* magazine, and the idea caught on, although not entirely. Cetus, which barely grazes the ecliptic, never inspired much of a following. But Ophiuchus, a large constellation squeezed in between Scorpius and Sagittarius, did.

Since then, books advocating for the addition of Ophiuchus as the 13th sign have appeared with thudding regularity. In 1995, British astrologer Walter Berg published *The 13 Signs of the Zodiac*, which sold respectably in the United Kingdom but became a giant bestseller when it was translated into Japanese and published there. In 2011, the story flared up again when the Minnesota Planetarium Society announced that the constellations had moved. Ophiuchus was now part of zodiac, they said, and astrologers ought to sit up and pay attention. The BBC reported the findings. Fox news reported the findings. Even *Time*, which first publicized the story in 1970, weighed in. Their article began, “The cosmic news broke without warning.”

For the zillionth time, astrologers responded. They acknowledged that due to the precession of the equinoxes, the constellations have shifted (a fact I discuss on a previous page). It’s not news to astrologers.

Nor does it matter, because in western astrology, the signs are determined by the Sun’s position on the ecliptic, not by the stars. On the vernal equinox, when day and night are roughly equal, the Sun enters the portion of the ecliptic known as Aries and the astrological year begins. The other signs follow, 30 degrees at a time. The stars and constellations do not determine sign.

So might you be an Ophiuchan? In a word, no. Not in this world.



REMEMBER

The sign that the Sun occupied at the instant of your birth is the most basic astrological fact about you. It defines your ego, motivations, and approach to life. But the Sun isn't the only planet, and your Sun sign isn't your only sign. (For astrological purposes, both luminaries — the Sun and the Moon — are called planets. Do yourself a favor and don't use this terminology when talking to astronomers.) Mercury, Venus, the Moon, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto represent distinct types of energy, each of which expresses itself in the style of the sign it happens to occupy. When you look at your chart, you will see that not every sign has a planet within its borders. Nonetheless, every sign is in your chart somewhere. The entire zodiac resides within each of us.



REMEMBER

Astrologically speaking, your Sun sign is the most essential fact about you. To determine your sign, use Table 1-1. But remember that the dates vary slightly from year to year. That's because a circle has 360 degrees, with each sign allotted precisely 30 degrees. But a year has 365 days, not counting leap years. Thanks to that inconvenient difference, the signs don't divide into days as neatly as one might wish, and minor variations pop up regularly. Take the first day of Cancer the Crab. Usually it's June 21. But in 2012, 2016, and occasional other years, it was June 20. The bottom line? If you were born on the first or final day of any sign — that is, if you were born "on the cusp" — I advise caution. Before you don that Sagittarian sweatshirt or invest in that Scorpio tattoo, get an accurate copy of your natal chart and check your Sun sign.

TABLE 1-1 The Sun Signs

Sign	Dates	Symbol
Aries the Ram	March 20–April 18	♈
Taurus the Bull	April 19–May 20	♉
Gemini the Twins	May 21–June 20	♊
Cancer the Crab	June 21–July 22	♋
Leo the Lion	July 23–August 22	♌
Virgo the Virgin	August 23–September 22	♍
Libra the Scales	September 23–October 22	♎
Scorpio the Scorpion	October 23–November 21	♏
Sagittarius the Archer	November 22–December 21	♐

(continued)

TABLE 1-1 (continued)

Sign	Dates	Symbol
Capricorn the Goat	December 22–January 19	♄
Aquarius the Water Bearer	January 20–February 18	♁
Pisces the Fish	February 19–March 19	♓

Understanding the Sun Signs

Like any truly satisfying system, astrology classifies and interprets its basic components in a number of ways. The twelve signs can be split into two groups, each of which is associated with a positive or negative *polarity*. They can be organized into three groups, each of which has been assigned a quality or *modality* — cardinal, fixed, or mutable. Most famously, they can be divided into four groups, each of which is associated with an *element*: fire, earth, air, or water.

Polarity: Dividing the zodiac by two

Beginning with Aries, six *positive* or *masculine* signs alternate with six *negative* or *feminine* signs. The sexist language, I regret to say, is traditional. Many astrologers use the terms *yin* and *yang* instead. Call them what you will, both qualities are part of every individual's chart. The meanings are as follows:

- » **Positive or yang** signs — Aries, Gemini, Leo, Libra, Sagittarius, and Aquarius — are more extroverted, objective, assertive, feisty, energetic, and determined.
- » **Negative or yin** signs — Taurus, Cancer, Virgo, Scorpio, Capricorn, and Pisces — are more introverted, subjective, receptive, reflective, open, and nurturing.

Modality: Dividing the zodiac by three

The zodiac can also be divided into three groups, each with its own way of interacting with the world, its own mode of operation or *modality*. The three modalities — cardinal, fixed, and mutable — occur in a repeating sequence: first a cardinal sign, then a fixed sign, then a mutable sign.

- » **The Cardinal signs** are natural leaders, enterprising and encouraging, initiating change, and making things happen. The cardinal signs are Aries, Cancer, Libra, and Capricorn.
- » **The Fixed signs** are focused, persistent, and firm. They are Taurus, Leo, Scorpio, and Aquarius.
- » **The Mutable signs** adapt and adjust. They are known for flexibility and resilience. Those signs are Gemini, Virgo, Sagittarius, and Pisces.

Elements: Dividing the zodiac by four

Allocating each sign to one of the four ancient elements of Western thought is probably the most well-known and evocative method of classification. The four elements are fire, earth, air, and water.

- » **Fire** is the first of the traditional elements, and you don't need to be an astrologer to guess what it means. Ancient astrologers associated fire with the forces of creation. That association stands. Fire brings vitality, activity, and desire. It generates heat. People born under these dynamic signs are vigorous and courageous. They're also restless and impatient. And they have trouble accepting limits — which may be why they're prone to burn out. The fire signs are Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius.
- » **Earth** signs turn the spark of fire into something tangible. Cautious where fire is bold, earth signs are sensible, productive, and materialistic — and I don't mean that in a bad way. Sensuous and responsive, they understand and respect material things, including nature. They are attuned to reality, and they get things done. The earth signs are Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn.
- » **Air** enlivens the intellect and enhances sociability. Those born under its influence are bright, curious, versatile, and intellectually restless, always collecting information, trying out ideas, and connecting people. They revel in conversation and are supremely social. The air signs are Gemini, Libra, and Aquarius.
- » **Water** amplifies emotions and awareness. Vulnerable and receptive, those born under its influence are highly sensitive and often swamped by their feelings. They're intuitive, empathetic, and instinctively responsive to the emotional atmosphere. They also tend to have a spiritual bent. The water signs are Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces.

Putting the zodiac back together

Once you know the order of the signs, it's easy to assign them their correct polarity, modality, and element. You don't have to bother memorizing them because those classifications always occur in sequence, as you can clearly see in Table 1-2. Even if you know nothing else about a sign, those classifications tell you a lot.

TABLE 1-2 The Qualities of the Signs

Sign	Polarity	Modality	Element
Aries	Positive	Cardinal	Fire
Taurus	Negative	Fixed	Earth
Gemini	Positive	Mutable	Air
Cancer	Negative	Cardinal	Water
Leo	Positive	Fixed	Fire
Virgo	Negative	Mutable	Earth
Libra	Positive	Cardinal	Air
Scorpio	Negative	Fixed	Water
Sagittarius	Positive	Mutable	Fire
Capricorn	Negative	Cardinal	Earth
Aquarius	Positive	Fixed	Air
Pisces	Negative	Mutable	Water

Consider, for example, Cancer the Crab. It's the sign of negative cardinal water. This tells you that Crabs tend to be introverted and receptive (negative or yin), with a propensity for taking the initiative (cardinal), and a profound sense of emotional awareness (water).

Or look at Leo, which lives next door to Cancer but boasts a very different personality, as is always the case with adjacent signs. Leo is the sign of positive fixed fire. Its natives tend to be outgoing and assertive (positive or yang), determined (fixed), warm, and full of personality (fire).



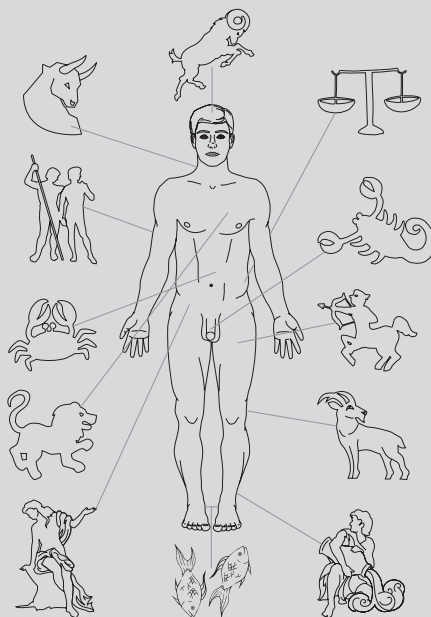
REMEMBER

The polarity, modality, and element provide a rudimentary sense of what each sign is about. For a detailed description of the signs, turn to Part 2.

THE ZODIAC AND THE BODY

The zodiac arcs across the cosmos, huge and impossibly remote. Its symbolic equivalent, small and incredibly close, is the human form. About two thousand years ago, the Roman astrologer Marcus Manilius correlated each sign of the zodiac with a part of the body in a sequence that starts at the head with Aries and runs down to the feet, which belong to Pisces. Medieval art, both European and Islamic, includes many fine renderings of the so-called Zodiac Man, a figure that also appears in ancient medical texts. Indeed, medicine as it was once practiced looked to astrology not only for an understanding of disease — the Black Death that swept across Europe between 1347 and 1351 was widely blamed on a planetary conjunction and an eclipse — but also for cures. Throughout the Middle Ages (and beyond), medical students at the University of Bologna and elsewhere were required to study astrology.

I have concerns about medical astrology. I have seen cases in which astrological diagnosis has proven to be weirdly accurate. Still, it's not a sport for amateurs. To make an accurate diagnosis through astrology requires serious expertise. I love this diagram anyway because it reminds us that the spectrum of experience represented by the signs of the zodiac is universal and lives in each one of us.



Considering the Sun, the Moon, the Planets, and more

The Sun, the Moon, and the planets play individual parts in your horoscope. Each one carries a certain kind of energy and represents a different facet of what it means to be human. Their meanings are as follows:

- » **The Sun** represents your essential self, will, and individuality. More than any other celestial body, it represents who you are.
- » **The Moon** represents your emotions, subconscious, instincts, habits, and memory.
- » **Mercury** symbolizes your approach to communication, your reasoning ability, the way you think, and your curiosity.
- » **Venus** represents your approach to love, attraction, beauty, money, possessions, and the arts.
- » **Mars** is the planet of action, desire, and aggression. It represents your physical energy, combativeness, enterprise, and courage.
- » **Jupiter** is the planet of expansion and good fortune. It represents growth, prosperity, abundance, generosity, religion, philosophy, and wisdom. (Jupiter is said to represent the “higher mind” while Mercury, the planet of gossip and word games, must make do with the “lower mind.”) Jupiter’s position in a horoscope tells you where you’re lucky and where your efforts are most likely to be rewarded.
- » **Saturn** represents limitation, caution, organization, endurance, and discipline. It tells you where you have to face your fears — and also where you’re ambitious.
- » **Uranus** represents rebellion, revolutionary change, originality, independence, and everything unexpected or unconventional. It also represents technology, electricity, and invention.
- » **Neptune** represents spirituality, dreams, psychic ability, intuition, disintegration, compassion, self-sacrifice, deception, illusion, and imagination.
- » **Pluto**, which was officially relegated to a dwarf planet in 2006 but maintains its status within the astrological community, represents destruction, regeneration, renewal, and transformation.

Besides the planets, many astrologers sneak a few other celestial bodies into their charts. The most notable is Chiron, which was discovered in 1977. It has been classified as an asteroid, a minor planet, a comet, and finally a centaur. Like the

mythological half man/half horse for whom they are named, centaurs are hybrids, part asteroid and part comet. **Chiron** represents past wounds and pathways to healing. Many astrologers associate it with holistic medicine.



REMEMBER

In every chart, some planets are more powerful than others. But every chart includes every planet, and every planet has its own meaning. One way to summarize all this is to associate a single word with each planet. These keywords appear in Table 1-3.

TABLE 1-3 **Keywords for the Planets**

Planet	Keyword	Symbol
Sun	Self	☉
Moon	Emotion	☾
Mercury	Communication	☿
Venus	Love	♀
Mars	Action	♂
Jupiter	Expansion	♃
Saturn	Restriction	♄
Uranus	Revolution	♅
Neptune	Imagination	♆
Pluto	Transformation	♇
Chiron	Healing	♁

Who Rules? Discovering the Rulers of the Signs

In an ideal universe, each planet would function perfectly well in each sign. But astrologers have long noted that some placements seem to work better than others. The sign in which a planet is most effective — that is, the sign with which it shares the greatest affinity, the sign whose style is most like its own — is the sign that it is said to rule. Two thousand years ago, when astrologers only had to

worry about the Sun, the Moon, and five planets, they connected the planets and the signs this way:

- » The Sun ruled Leo.
- » The Moon ruled Cancer.
- » Mercury ruled Gemini and Virgo.
- » Venus ruled Taurus and Libra.
- » Mars ruled Aries and Scorpio.
- » Jupiter ruled Pisces and Sagittarius.
- » Saturn ruled Aquarius and Capricorn.

After Uranus was discovered in 1781, followed by Neptune in 1846 and Pluto in 1930, astrologers modified the system, allotting one sign to each of the newly discovered planets. Uranus was designated the ruler of Aquarius, Neptune was pronounced the lord of Pisces, and Pluto was delegated to Scorpio. Mercury and Venus continued to rule two signs each. Until recently, the most commonly accepted planetary rulers were as follows:

- » The Sun rules Leo.
- » The Moon rules Cancer.
- » Mercury rules Gemini and Virgo.
- » Venus rules Taurus and Libra.
- » Mars rules Aries.
- » Jupiter rules Sagittarius.
- » Saturn rules Capricorn.
- » Uranus rules Aquarius.
- » Neptune rules Pisces.
- » Pluto rules Scorpio.

Today, the consensus surrounding rulers has begun to unravel, with many astrologers giving more weight to traditional rulers than was the fashion only a few decades ago. Some astrologers have reverted entirely to the pre-industrial rulers, eliminating Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. Other astrologers have decided to keep the old rulers plus the new planets. The signs most affected by that approach are Scorpio, Aquarius, and Pisces, each of which can now boast two rulers, one traditional and one modern:

- » Scorpio is ruled by Mars, its traditional ruler, and Pluto.
- » Aquarius is ruled by Saturn, its traditional ruler, and Uranus.
- » Pisces is ruled by Jupiter, its traditional ruler, and Neptune.

As for Chiron, some astrologers believe that it rules Virgo, Pisces, or both. Others associate it with Sagittarius. Many don't bother with it at all, and it has not been officially assigned to a sign. The same is true for other asteroids, dwarf planets, and astronomical points. Astrologers might pop them into a chart, but they have not given them dominion over particular signs.

Determining Planetary Dignities

Astrological tradition holds that, in addition to the sign it rules, each planet earns high grades in another sign — the sign of its *exaltation*. The planet operates less well in two other signs: the sign of its *detriment*, which is opposite the sign it rules, and the sign of its *fall*, which opposes the sign of its exaltation. Table 1-4 gives you the details.

How does this affect your chart? A planet exalted or in its home sign (or domicile) expresses itself with ease and is accorded “dignity.” A planet in its detriment or fall — positions sometimes referred to as debilities — may feel impeded or weak. Take Mars. In Aries, Mars has no trouble being assertive. Aries supports that. In diplomatic Libra, the opposite sign, the warrior spirit of Mars feels tamped down, stifled. Each planet is happiest in the signs where it can best express its essential nature.

A planet can gain dignity in at least five ways. I'm only going to consider two: essential dignity, which depends upon the sign the planet occupies, and accidental dignity, which depends upon the house placement.

Essential dignities

This isn't the first thing to consider when doing a chart. But it does provide an additional bit of information, another point to consider. I pay particular attention when a planet occupies its home sign or sign of exaltation. No matter what else is happening with that planet, it is stronger than it might appear. The dignities are listed in Table 1-4.

TABLE 1-4

Table of Essential Planetary Dignities

Planet	Rulership	Detriment	Exaltation	Fall
Sun	Leo	Aquarius	Aries	Libra
Moon	Cancer	Capricorn	Taurus	Scorpio
Mercury	Gemini	Sagittarius	Aquarius	Leo
	Virgo	Pisces		
Venus	Taurus	Scorpio	Pisces	Virgo
	Libra	Aries		
Mars	Aries	Libra	Capricorn	Cancer
	Scorpio	Taurus		
Jupiter	Sagittarius	Gemini	Cancer	Capricorn
	Pisces	Virgo		
Saturn	Capricorn	Cancer	Libra	Aries
	Aquarius	Leo		
Uranus*	Aquarius	Leo		
Neptune*	Pisces	Virgo		
Pluto*	Scorpio	Taurus		

* Although astrologers have confidently named Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto as rulers or co-rulers of Aquarius, Pisces, and Scorpio, those planets have not been given signs of exaltation or fall. These things take time.

Accidental dignities

Another way to dignify a planet is by house placement. Imagine that the first house is equivalent to Aries, the first sign. If Mars, the ruler of Aries, happens to be in the first house, it is accidentally dignified, regardless of the sign it occupies. Similarly, Saturn is the ruler of Capricorn, the tenth sign, so it is accidentally dignified in the tenth house, no matter what sign it's in. Table 1-5 shows you where each planet is accidentally dignified.



REAL LIFE
EXAMPLE

What do Muhammad Ali, Albert Einstein, and Kim Kardashian have in common? On the face of it, not much. But all three have Saturn accidentally dignified in the tenth house, a placement that correlates with success, public recognition, and fame.

TABLE 1-5**Table of Accidental Planetary Dignities**

House	Accidental planetary dignity
1	Mars
2	Venus
3	Mercury
4	Moon
5	Sun
6	Mercury
7	Venus
8	Mars and Pluto
9	Jupiter
10	Saturn
11	Saturn and Uranus
12	Neptune and Jupiter

Assessing the Ascendant

Another major component of your chart is the *Ascendant* or *rising sign* — the sign that was climbing over the eastern horizon at the moment of your birth. It describes your mask or persona, the surface personality that you show the world.

Have you ever had a friend who was Miss Congeniality — until you got to know her? Did you ever encounter anyone who seemed standoffish and cold at first but warmed up later on? Do you know anyone whose devil-may-care, lighthearted attitude masks a calculating, manipulative mind? And have you ever wondered how you strike other people, especially when they don't know you well? Your horoscope provides the answer. While your Sun sign may not be apparent to people, they definitely notice your Ascendant. It's your image, your facade, your surface. Whether it clashes or harmonizes with your Sun sign, it describes the way people see you and the impression that you make. Indeed, some astrologers consider the ruler of the Ascendant — that is, the planet that rules your rising sign — to be the overall ruler of your chart.

No matter what your Sun sign is, any one of the 12 signs might have been rising over the eastern horizon at the moment of your birth. If you were born at dawn, when the Sun was just peeking over the horizon, you already know your rising sign: It's the same as your Sun sign. If you were born at any other time of day, your rising sign and Sun sign differ.

For those people whose Sun signs and rising signs are identical, the surface and the substance are the same. For everyone else, what you see isn't necessarily what you get.



REAL LIFE
EXAMPLE

Consider the artist Vincent Van Gogh. With Cancer rising, his emotional sensitivity was obvious. We can see it even now in the wary expression (and bandaged ear) of his many self-portraits. But his extreme vulnerability was only part of his nature. Beneath the insecurity, he was an Aries, restless, competitive, and courageous. His pioneering, energetic nature is clearly visible in the confident, quick brushstrokes, churning colors, and wild vigor of his groundbreaking canvases.



REMEMBER

If you have a copy of your chart, it's easy to figure out your Ascendant: it's the sign at the nine o'clock spot on the wheel. If you don't have your chart, you can get one by going to one of the websites listed in Chapter 2 and entering your birth data as instructed. And if you don't have a reliable birth time? Don't worry about it. Even without a correct Ascendant, your birth chart is a map of your deepest self, and it offers whole continents of information to be explored.

Taking the House Tour

Whether you're a workaholic Virgo or a spiritually inclined Pisces, you still have to deal with money, work, health, siblings, and everything else that's part of life. Those areas are described by the *houses*. The houses slice the sky into 12 parts, beginning with the Ascendant and the first house. Their meanings are described in Table 1-6.

Just as every chart includes all the planets, every horoscope has all 12 houses. Not every house will be occupied by a planet. But every house will have a sign on the *cusp*, or beginning of the house, that describes your approach to the concerns of that house. For instance, if Taurus is on the cusp of your sixth house of health and

work, you are likely to be dependable, productive, and patient on the job, even if that house is empty. You're a hard worker. And one more thing: you'd probably enjoy having a dog.



REMEMBER

The word *cusps* is used in two ways in astrology. When astrologers refer to the cusp of a house, they are talking about the gateway to that house, the place where it begins. When people say they were born “on the cusp,” they usually mean that their birthday falls at the end of one sign or the start of another, and they’re not sure what sign is theirs, an issue I discuss in the nearby sidebar “Questlove on the cusp.”

Now you’ve got the basics. Together, the signs, planets, and houses make up the basic vocabulary of astrology. There’s more. (There’s always more.) But for now, you have everything you need to begin the excavation of your chart. If you don’t have a copy of it, the next chapter will tell you how to remedy that situation.

TABLE 1-6 Houses and Their Significance

House	Areas of Concern
First house	Appearance, surface personality, and the impression you make on others
Second house	Money, possessions, wealth; the things you value; your urge to acquire
Third house	Communication, language, short journeys, brothers and sisters, neighbors, early education, attitude toward learning
Fourth house	Home, roots, real estate, security, one parent (usually the mother); also, circumstances at the end of life
Fifth house	Romance, children, recreation, creativity, self-expression
Sixth house	Work, health and healing, service, habits and routines; also, pets
Seventh house	Relationships, partnerships, open enemies, and the general public
Eighth house	Sex, death, transformation, joint resources, other people’s money, mystery, magic, and occult interests
Ninth house	Higher education, long journeys, travel, religion, philosophy, and publishing
Tenth house	Career, vocation, status, reputation, one parent (usually the father)
Eleventh house	Friends, community, teamwork, hopes, wishes, and aspirations
Twelfth house	Seclusion, secrets, the subconscious, hidden enemies, spiritual interests

QUESTLOVE ON THE CUSP

Take the case of Ahmir Khalib Thompson, aka Questlove, the Grammy-winning drummer and co-founder of The Roots, the hip-hop house band for *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. He is a DJ, a record producer, an entrepreneurial foodie, an author, an adjunct professor, and more. But what's his sign? He was born on January 20, 1971, time unknown. And therein lies the problem. Is he a goal-oriented, disciplined Capricorn, a sign known for its work ethic, or a rebellious, iconoclastic Aquarian? He can't be both . . . or can he?

If he was born before 12:13 p.m., he's a Capricorn, which would certainly explain his ambition and productivity. If he was born after 12:13, he's a freedom-loving, highly individual Aquarian.

So which is it? The variety of his accomplishments, musical and otherwise, and his interest in collaboration argue in favor of Aquarius. Compared to Capricorn, Aquarius is quirkier and more individualistic, the sign of the maverick and the avant-garde. On paper, it sounds hipper and more creative. I suspect the man himself might prefer it.

On the other hand, he did not come to music as a form of rebellion. On the contrary, music was, in his phrase, the "family business." (His father was a well-known doo-wop singer.) He came to it as a responsible Capricorn, not a rebellious Aquarian. An indefatigable worker, he has built his brand with care, touring relentlessly and aligning himself with established institutions such as *The Tonight Show* and New York University.

So what's his sign? In the absence of a complete birth certificate, a clarifying word from his mother, or a rectification by an astrologer who specializes in that technique, only he can decide which sign sounds more like the person he knows himself to be.

If your situation is similar, the same holds true for you. Astrologers will tell you that your Sun is in one sign or the other, not both. That's true. But there are other planets, and they also bring something to the party. Questlove has Mercury in Capricorn and the North Node of the Moon in Aquarius. Even without the Sun, he has a touch of both signs. So where is his Sun? In his heart of hearts, he probably knows.