

## **Astro 16 – Astrophysics: Stars, ISM, and Galaxies**

Fall 2017

Prof. David Cohen

### **Syllabus**

This semester-long course is a survey of central topics in astrophysics, with an emphasis on stars, but also covering the interstellar medium (ISM) out of which stars are formed, and galaxies (including our own Milky Way) – large organized systems in which stars live their lives. We will introduce and/or review the underlying physics concepts (and mathematical techniques) necessary to understand the properties and functioning of stars, the interstellar medium, and galaxies. These include gravity, mechanics, thermal physics, and radiation (light) and matter (atomic physics), with a little bit of gas dynamics, statistical mechanics, and nuclear physics, too. We'll derive some key physical equations. Basic calculus will sometimes be used. We'll do a few integrals and solve a couple of simple differential equations by integrating them. The occasional derivative will need to be computed. Most important will be working to develop a sense of the correspondence between the math and the physical world of forces, matter, and energy.

Much of our study will be from a theoretical point of view (e.g. how do stars 'work?') but a significant amount will be observational (e.g. how do we determine the properties of stars?).

We will all work hard to ensure that the class does not revolve around memorization of isolated facts, but rather involves developing integrated understanding of concepts (that then can be applied to different situations, systems, and problems). This will give students a bigger-picture view of stars and their lives from formation to death, cycling material through the galactic interstellar medium, producing heavy elements as well as light as a byproduct of their efforts to prevent gravitational collapse. It will also demonstrate how interesting physics concepts students have learned – or are learning – in other classes can be applied to real-world (if cosmic) systems, often in combination with each other.

Classes will include a fair amount of lecture, but also some discussion and in-class student work. Students will be expected to read about the material for a given day's class *ahead of time*, and sometimes to do a pre-class problem or two, based on that reading. Class itself will be for asking and answering questions and delving deeper into material that students will already be thinking about.

We will use a good textbook, "Foundations of Astrophysics" by Barbara Ryden and Bradley Peterson, lightly supplemented by other material. We will cover roughly one chapter per week. And we will have a homework assignment roughly once per week. (A subset of the homework problems will be graded, and students will be expected to look over the solutions to all the problems and make sure they can do all

the problems, even the ones that aren't graded. There will be opportunities in class to discuss problems – and their solutions – from the previous week's homework.)

We will have four to six nighttime lab meetings (on Tuesday nights) roughly every other week, on a pre-determined schedule. Please leave Tuesday nights from 8pm to 11pm free. We will use the 24-inch telescope in the Peter van de Kamp Observatory on the roof of the science center for these labs. Senior Laboratory Lecturer, Mary Ann Klassen and I will be running the labs together.

There will sometimes be additional reading from the textbook – on observational techniques and data analysis – (as well as lab manuals), assigned in preparation for the labs. And sometimes the nighttime lab sessions will be used to cover/review material, work on data taken previously (after all, we can only use the telescope when the skies are clear), or even to take midterm exams. Again, students should assume Tuesday nights from 8pm to 11pm will be occupied by Astro 16 activities, but ultimately a few of them will not be used. Please talk to Prof. Cohen as soon as possible if you have known Tuesday night conflicts.

Homework, pre-class problems, and lab work will count for a significant fraction of students' final grades (at least 50%), with two midterms (25% total) and a final exam (25%) composing the remainder.

Resources, information, and assignments (reading and homework, as well as labs) will be available primarily via the class website: [astro.swarthmore.edu/astro16/](http://astro.swarthmore.edu/astro16/) and Moodle will be used as a secondary repository.

I will accept homework up to 24 hours late and assess a 10% penalty; or up to 48 hours late with a 20% penalty. No permission needs to be asked; no excuses need to be given. If you have a true emergency, please get in touch with me. I will do whatever I can to accommodate you. Students will not be allowed to make up missed labs or exams. Please let me know if I seem unaware of religious holidays and observance that might prevent a student from handing in an assignment on time. I will be glad to accommodate religious observance.

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact Leslie Hempling in the Office of Student Disability Services (Parrish 113) or email [lhempli1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:lhempli1@swarthmore.edu) to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs. As appropriate, she will issue students with documented disabilities a formal Accommodations Letter. Since accommodations require early planning and are not retroactive, please contact her as soon as possible. For details about the accommodations process, visit the Student Disability Service Website at <http://www.swarthmore.edu/academic-advising-support/welcome-to-student-disability-service>. You are also welcome to contact me, Prof. Cohen, privately to discuss your academic needs. However, all disability-related accommodations must be arranged through the Office of Student Disability Services.

## **Topics and Readings**

*v.0, subject to change/updates, including particular lab nights*

### **week 1:**

sky position and motion characterization; angular measure  
brief historical context of modern astronomy (Greeks, Kepler, Newton)  
gravity, mechanics, uniform circular motion  
shell theorem  
Kepler's laws

[parts of Chs. 1, 2, & 3 of R&P, supplemented with a few pages of Bennett]

### **week 2:**

parallax  
inverse square law  
electromagnetic spectrum, light as wave and as photon  
Doppler shift  
spectroscopy, Kirchoff's laws

[beginning of Ch. 13, first half of Ch. 5]

*lab 1:* basic use of telescope, camera, and filters [Ch. 6]

### **week 3:**

atomic processes, more spectroscopy  
spectral line profiles  
Maxwell-Boltzmann  
LTE, Saha, Boltzmann, Planck

[rest of Ch. 5]

### **week 4:**

pure absorption radiation transport, optical depth  
solid angle  
review, wrap-up, discussion

*lab 2:* image analysis

### **week 5:**

star properties: masses (binary stars), radii, temperatures

magnitudes, colors, extinction and reddening

[rest of Ch. 13]

*lab 3*: finishing up image processing; could also include a review session for midterm

**week 6:**

hydrostatic equilibrium  
stellar spectra (Eddington-Barbier)

[part of Ch. 7]

*midterm* on Thursday, October 13 in class

*fall break*

**week 7:**

stellar atmospheres  
spectral types  
luminosity classes  
Hertzsprung-Russell diagram

[Ch. 14]

*lab 4*: exoplanets part 1

**week 8:**

stellar structure equations  
energy sources and nuclear fusion  
modeling and test of stellar structure

[Ch. 15]

**week 9:**

evidence for dust and gas in the ISM  
absorption line diagnostics  
H II regions  
thermal balance

[Ch. 16]

*lab 5: exoplanets part 2*

**week 10:**

star formation  
post-main-sequence evolution  
including supernovae  
variable stars

[Ch. 17]

**week 11:**

*second midterm* (Tue night in lab time-slot)

white dwarfs  
degeneracy pressure  
neutron stars

[Ch. 18]

**week 12:**

Milky Way morphology  
stellar populations  
rotation curve and dark matter  
central black hole

[Ch. 19]

**week 13:**

external galaxies  
galaxy clusters  
Hubble law

[Ch. 20]