

Astrological Elements and Modes in Chart Analysis

by Bill Herbst

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Among my biggest gripes as an astrologer (I have many) is what passes for Element and Mode “analysis” in computer-generated charts.

The four Elements (fire, earth, air, and water) and three Modes (cardinal, fixed, and mutable, also called common) are among the basic ways that astrology determines the archetypal meanings of the twelve signs of the Zodiac. Other factors contribute as well — the planetary rulers of each sign, as well as the sign’s position in the linear sequence of twelve (signs 1-4 are personal, 5-8 are interpersonal, and 9-12 are collective), but Elements and Modes are fundamental.

In a sense, the reason the zodiac is divided into twelve sections or signs is because twelve is the lowest multiple of three and four (i.e., $3 \times 4 = 12$). Other rationales also incline toward the use of a twelve-fold division for the zodiac of signs, such as our measurement of time in 24-hour days (essentially 12 hours of day and 12 of night), but four Elements and three Modes are the predominant underpinning of twelve signs. By contrast, astrological Cycle Theory uses a four-fold or eight-fold division of the circle into either 90° quarters or 45° eighths. The Zodiac uses 30° sections. All of those divisions, by four, eight, or twelve, are meaningful mathematically, and also in terms of celestial geometry.

About once each decade, some bogus article appears in mass media about the discovery of a “thirteenth” sign, usually as a “missing” constellation, and how astrology has had it wrong forever. Of course, the authors of these pieces and the editors who approve them know nothing about astrology and are completely unaware that the tropical zodiac is based on seasons, not on constellations. Apparently they are also unaware that the symbolism of numbers is why we divide the ecliptic into twelve signs.

Each sign of the zodiac has a unique combination of one Element and one Mode. Aries is cardinal fire, Taurus is fixed earth, Gemini is mutable air, Cancer is again cardinal, but this time cardinal water, and so on. No two signs are the same.

Below is a table of brief, shorthand meanings for each Element and Mode. Most of my readers are probably way past this basic level of learning astrology, but it may serve as a refresher:

Elements

Fire	Earth	Air	Water
kinetic action	practicality	communication	emotion
physical activity	material security	thinking	intuition
enthusiasm	stability	interaction	protection
passionate assertion	endurance	socialization	inclusion
self-reliance	organization	comparison	flow

Modes

Cardinal	Fixed	Mutable
crisis-oriented	goal-oriented	stimulus-oriented
problem-solving	impersonal	adaptable
assertive	faithful to principles	ever-changing
urgent	loyal	interested
frenetic	stubborn	confused

Characteristically, Elements are archetypal qualities, while Modes are processes, but that's not cut-and-dried. As the lists indicate, some crossover of qualities and processes occurs for both Elements and Modes.

The four elements can be grouped into a couple of different contrasting pairs. Fire and Air are considered active or centrifugal, meaning that they indicate direction from the self into the environment through outward push. Earth and Water are classed as passive or centripetal, meaning that they imply direction from the environment into the self through inward pull. In addition, Fire and Water are considered independent Elements, in that the self is paramount, either as the source of action (fire) or the empathic center (water). Earth and Air are classed as dependent, in that relatedness is paramount, either with the physical environment (earth) or the social/mental world (air).

One of the many techniques used to better understand whole charts (and thus, the living subjects they describe) is to quantify the overall balance of Elements and Modes. Almost every computer-generated chart offers this "analysis." Typically, each planet is tallied in terms of the sign it occupies. If the Sun is in Cancer in the chart, one point is given for Cardinality and one point for Water. If Uranus is in Sagittarius in the chart, one point is given for Mutability and one for Fire. Then, all the points are added up and listed.

Unfortunately, that method is, at best, nearly useless, and, at worst, downright misleading. There is a natural hierarchy of importance among the planets. The

Sun's sign is much more important in astrological "weight" than that of Uranus. In addition, just adding up planets in signs doesn't take into account the personal importance of Angles, most particularly the Ascendant and Midheaven. Why astrologers allow programmers to code such a simplistic Element and Mode "analysis" is astonishing to me. This should be child's play, not rocket science.

Early in my career, I developed a more sophisticated technique for assessing the overall emphases of Elements and Modes. It's based on my understanding of the natural hierarchy of importance. I allot a certain number of points — from 1 to 5 — to each major planet or angle. I also add additional weight to the planetary rulers of the most important signs — those of the Sun, Ascendant, and Midheaven. Finally, I factor in cuspal transitions.

Here's the breakdown of emphasis, with the number of points assigned to each sensitive position:

<u>Points</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Points</u>	<u>Position</u>
5.....	Sun	1	Uranus
5.....	Moon	1	Neptune
5.....	Ascendant	1	Pluto
2.....	Mercury	1	Chiron
2.....	Venus	+1	Midheaven ruler
2.....	Mars	+2	Ascendant ruler
2.....	Jupiter	+2	Sun ruler
2.....	Saturn		
2.....	Midheaven		

The total number of points in my technique is 36. I like that number because it's divisible by both 3 and 4. This means that a perfectly balanced chart in Element and Mode emphasis would have 9 points in each Element and 12 in each Mode. Then deviations are noted, either through preponderance or absence.

The technique takes about five minutes to calculate for a given chart. On a piece of paper (or computer spreadsheet), make seven columns — four for Elements (one each for Fire, Earth, Air, and Water) and three for Modes (one each for Cardinal, Fixed, and Mutable). Find the Sun in the chart. What sign does it occupy? If the Sun is in Virgo, put five points in the columns for Earth and Mutable. Do the same with the Moon, then the Ascendant, and down the line of planets right through Chiron. Finally, look to the sign position of the planetary ruler of the Midheaven, Ascendant, and Sun. Add one extra point for the Midheaven ruler and two extra points for the Ascendant and Sun rulers. If the Sun is in Capricorn, its ruler is Saturn. Find Saturn's sign and add 2 points to the columns for that sign's Element and Mode.

Add up all the points in each of the seven columns. Make sure they total 36 points for Elements and 36 for Modes.

The technique can be even further refined for even more sophistication and accuracy by taking into account cuspal zones and co-rulers. In the zodiac, the last two degrees of each sign — from 28° 01' to 29° 59' — are considered cuspal zones of transition from the sign occupied to the next sign. When a planet reaches the beginning cusp of the next sign — at 0° 01' — the previous sign is gone. (In other words, cuspal zones in the zodiac are, in my opinion, one way only. A planet in the first degree of any sign is not cuspal.)

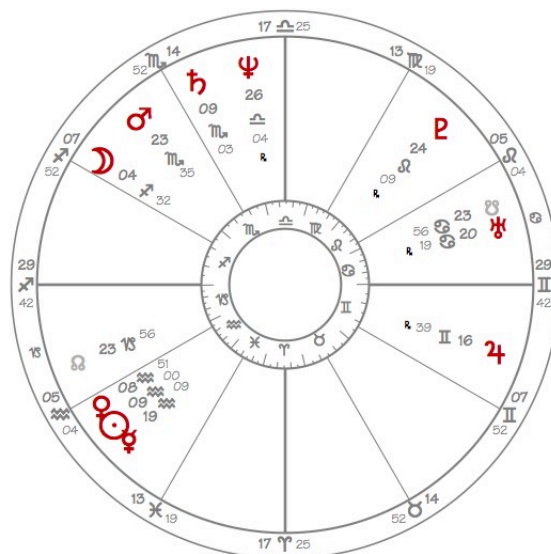
If a planet is in a cuspal zone, its points can be divided between the occupied sign and the oncoming sign. For instance, if the Sun is at 28° 42' of Libra, closing in on the beginning of Scorpio I would divide the Sun's five points, giving three points to Cardinal and Air and two points to Fixed and Water. If the Sun were in the final degree at 29° 17' of Libra, I'd give only two points to Cardinal and Air and three points to Fixed and Water. At 29° 50', I'd change the division to only one point for the occupied sign's Element and Mode, with four points for the oncoming sign.

Finally, if the ruling planet of the Ascendant or Sun is in a cuspal zone, you can subdivide the additional two points, giving one each to the occupied and oncoming signs.

Subdividing the points is optional, of course. I do it because I want the best accuracy I can get.

All of that is the calculation phase — compiling the data. When you're done, you'll have two tables, one each for Elements and Modes. That's when the real interpretation begins.

I'll use the natal chart of Oprah Winfrey as an example. Here's the chart itself:



Below are the tables with the results:

<u>Elements</u>	<u>Modes</u>
9 Fire	7 Cardinal
3 Earth	21 Fixed
16 Air	8 Mutable
8 Water	

What can we make of these results? Well, Oprah has a preponderance of both the Air element and the Fixed mode. Not many people have a sufficient preponderance of one element and one mode to be considered as prime representatives of a specific sign archetype, but Oprah does. She is distinctly Aquarian in character (since Aquarius is the Fixed Air sign).

Oprah also has a significant lack of Earth in her overall chart. This has nothing to do with business or wealth — other factors in Oprah’s chart indicate very strongly that she is a tireless worker and a very ambitious business woman. What it means (to me, at least) is that she doesn’t want to be concerned with matters of practicality and organization. She delegates those tasks to others.

With this technique, perfect balance of Elements and Modes is exceedingly rare. In all the thousands of charts I’ve done this for, I can’t remember a single chart with perfect balance. Most charts deviate in one or more ways. Sometimes no obvious preponderance or absence is revealed. In those cases, we look to other factors of the chart — planetary patterns, aspect formations, significant transits, etc. — to pinpoint emphasis.

Even in charts that indicate an overwhelming preponderance of a given Element or Mode, and/or a conspicuous lack of one, we still need to consider the chart as a whole and apply all the other techniques we use. This particular Element-Mode analysis is only one component of the astrological toolkit we use to decipher meaning.

Sometimes we might calculate this assessment and come up with nothing very meaningful to add to our understanding of a given chart. That’s OK. Getting a handle on what a chart implies about its subject (very often a human life) is a little like an Easter egg hunt. Sometimes the eggs are right there, in plain sight. Other times we have to hunt for them. It’s all part of the game.