

# Understanding Astrology: Planets, Signs, and Houses — A Formula

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*Version 1.1 (posted on 5 September 2017)  
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*[Note: This commentary was written for and included originally as a section of my textbook, **Houses of the Horoscope**. I'm posting it largely intact, with only minor additions.]*

## **Planets**

Planets are symbolic *functions or urges* within the individual psyche; they describe the structure of the human machinery. An automobile has various components — engine, fuel system, transmission, differential, cooling system, brakes, etc. Each component system has a specific function to perform in the overall operation of the vehicle. Although the analogy is admittedly crude, human beings are similar. We embody various functional components at the psychological level, each of which has certain tasks to perform in the overall interaction with Life.

The purpose of an automobile is narrow and well-defined; the various component functions are relatively simple and direct. For instance, the fuel system performs only a few tasks. It stores the gasoline, filters it, and regulates the flow to the engine. On the other hand, our “human vehicle” has a very broad and complex life-purpose; thus, the component functions are more complicated. Each planetary symbol has multileveled functions and performs a veritable rainbow of tasks even in ordinary living. The list of functions for even a single planet can run into the hundreds, limited only by our ability to perceive different levels of operation within the human psyche.

Happily, though, each planet has a characteristic “tone” of operation, so that all the functions of that planet are linked, no matter how different they may seem at first glance. When learning the meanings for each planetary symbol, try to feel the essence of what the planet represents, for an emotional grasp is more important than any rote memorizing of specifics. Ask yourself how the various meanings could possibly be linked; probe the intuitive heart of each planet.

Besides functions or urges, another way to think about planets is as primary motivators. Planets are the symbols in astrology that reveal different kinds of motivation within the human psyche, programmed through our DNA. In a slightly more sophisticated metaphor, planets are part of our basic system software. We can't change or rewrite that core software — each planet always retains its fundamental meanings — but we have application software that rides on top of the system and custom-tailors the expression of planetary urges. This is where Signs and Houses come into play, by modifying the planetary motivations.

### **The Zodiac of Signs**

Signs of the zodiac are a measure of the changing seasons in Mother Nature's year, and as such are a collective factor, representing natural and consecutive phases of growth in the yearly cycle of life on Earth. They are best thought of as *attitudes* — basic methods of approach in manifesting the planetary functions.

Every automobile has an engine, and every engine performs the same basic function, but *how* an engine is designed matters a great deal in terms of the type of performance the vehicle requires. A police car demands a very different engine design than the family station wagon, just as a limousine has different engine requirements than a subcompact. In the same way, the Sun in a horoscope (the engine) performs its basic functions differently in Aries (the "hot rod") than in Cancer (the "family station wagon"), Taurus (the "limousine"), or Virgo (the efficient "subcompact").

Signs are not free agents or independent actors. They don't operate on their own. Instead, the attitudes of signs modify our experience of planetary functions, showing *how* the various urges or motivations will most naturally be experienced — within ourselves as emotional or mental orientations, outwardly in behavior, and socially through relatedness with others.

### **Houses**

Houses are the basic structure of individual personhood — individual because they are based on the exact moment and place of birth, not simply the seasonal phase. In the mass-mind understanding of astrology, they are routinely omitted because their use is dependent upon having an accurate birth time, rather than just a birth date, but their importance in any serious and sensitive interpretation is paramount.

They represent the *environment*, more precisely, our inner relationship to the actual environments within and beyond ourselves, the various "fields" through which we play out our functions and attitudes. They can be seen as *areas of life experience*, the different "arenas of circumstance" where we express ourselves. Houses delineate the whole range of literal and psychological experiences available to each human being, not merely in the sense of external events, but

also internal events. They describe your natural relationship to the worlds around and inside you, revealing how you integrate these different worlds into a single coherent experience of reality.

Houses could be thought of as the road test for any vehicle. On the drawing board, all cars are perfect; in the showroom, each is a shining promise. But the proof of the pudding is in the driving. How does it corner? What's the ride like at 60? Can it brake on wet pavement, handle gravel roads, or start dependably in the winter? Will you spend all your time in the repair shop? Houses reveal the type of environmental challenges your human vehicle will be tested against, the road conditions you naturally tend to "drive" through in discovering and fulfilling your life-purpose.

### **The Formula**

We can condense these three levels to a simple formula: planets reveal *what* physical, psychological, or spiritual function you're working with; signs show *how* those functions characteristically express themselves; and houses define *where* in life they most naturally manifest.

Planets	=	WHAT
Signs	=	HOW
Houses	=	WHERE

As with any such learning device, this simplification is designed as an aid to clarity. It is not hard-and-fast, nor is it the ultimate rule. There is already too much formulaic thinking in astrology, too much rigidity in the way charts are understood and used. Because astrology is so complex, so multileveled, it's a continuing challenge to maintain flexibility and openness, especially when trying to teach the system well.

In grammar, nouns are subjects and verbs are actions. That's the basic structure of the English language. But there are also gerunds, which are verbs acting as nouns. It's the same in the "grammar" of astrology. Planets are certainly more than just urges or functions, signs are much more than mere attitudes, and houses are a great deal more than areas of circumstance. In practice, the clear distinctions between the levels tend to blur as each reflects and absorbs qualities of the others. A good astrologer will weave the levels into a seamless tapestry of individual meaning.

However, a gerund will hardly make sense unless there is first an understanding of the more basic structure of nouns and verbs. In much the same way, comprehension of the interweaving of planets, signs, and houses is unlikely to be

clear and correct unless there is first a basic understanding of their structural differences.

That's what this formula offers. When you're looking at charts and everything begins to blend together in a confusing fog, remember: Planets tell you about urges, Signs tell you about attitudes, and Houses tell you about areas of life experience — *what*, *how*, and *where*. Once you're clear, this formula, like every other "rule" in astrology, becomes irrelevant, mere background, like knowing in your bones that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . But when you need it, it's there to help.