

# Sun Sign Astrology

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A R T H U R M A T H E R , A N D R U D O L F S M I T

These days, superstition is a boom industry and comes in many guises. Some are strange and unfamiliar, but everyone seems to know about sun signs, also called birth signs or star signs. Your sun sign is the sun's position in the tropical zodiac when you were born, and it is supposed to describe your character, your abilities, and your relationships. Sun sign astrology is an oversimplified astrology (see the "Astrology" entry in this encyclopedia) that became popular in the 1930s. It generally requires only a birth date regardless of year and is easy to commercialize, so it has become by far the most common kind of astrology in the Western world. It has no validity whatever—in sun sign astrology, the only thing that matters is whether it sells.

## Sun Sign Columns

In Western countries, most newspapers and almost all women's magazines carry sun sign columns, which pretend to tell those born under each sun sign what their character or future is. There are two types of columns—*forecasts* ("Aquarius, romance improves after the 16th") and *delineations* or attributes of each sun sign ("Taureans are stubborn"). Delineations include compatibility ("Geminis and Librans make beautiful music together").

Sometimes, the two types of columns overlap ("Ariens are born to win").

Forecasts and their associated dial-a-horoscope phone lines are common in newspapers (daily and weekly forecasts), women's magazines (monthly forecasts), and sun sign annuals (yearly forecasts). Delineations are almost as common, appearing in weekend supplements, women's magazines ("secrets of your man's star sign"), and books. Typically, half of the astrology titles on display in New Age bookshops are on sun signs; for example, recent titles include *Sun Signs*, *Star Signs*, *Baby Signs*, *Cat Signs*, *Diet Signs*, *Fun Signs*, *Life Signs*, *Love Signs*, *Money Signs*, *Sex Signs*, and *Success Signs*.

## Popularity

According to opinion polls, typically 50 percent of the population read sun sign columns at least sometimes, but only 5 percent take them seriously, so they are mostly seen as entertainment. Nevertheless, 1 percent read them often and take them very seriously, like horoscope junkies unable to exist without their daily fix. For such people, horoscopes are anything but entertainment.

Sun signs are a modern invention. If the history of astrology is represented by a loaf of bread, sun sign columns do not appear until

halfway through the last slice, forecasts being generally unknown before the 1930s and delineations before the 1960s. Until then, the only sign that could be legitimately considered on its own was the rising sign, which was the original source of the word *horoscope*, from the Greek *horoskopos*, or watcher of the hour. But sun signs rapidly became part of Western culture. Today, they are frequently used to promote the sale of goods such as clothing, jewelry, pillows, curtains, tableware, TV dinners, soft drinks, posters, calendars, stationery, and especially women's magazines (but not men's magazines) and sun sign books. A sun sign supplement in a newspaper can boost sales by more than 10 percent.

The mass marketing of sun signs has tied them to fixed dates regardless of year; for example, Cancer's dates are June 22 to July 22. But such dates are only approximations. If the calendar year exactly matched the solar year, the dates on which the sun changed sign would be exactly the same from one year to the next. But because of the slight mismatch that leads to leap years, the dates can be a day off, which is why dates in sun sign books sometimes disagree. Those born near a cusp can look up their exact sun sign in an astrological ephemeris (a calendar of planetary positions), in the tables given in some do-it-yourself astrology books, or in some sun sign astrology books, such as that by Sasha Fenton (1992) (see any astrology bookstore). Some astrologers say the attributes of each sun sign change abruptly at a cusp; others say the attributes change gradually so that people born near a cusp are a mixture. But because sun signs have no validity, the difference is of no consequence.

### Delineations

Sun sign delineations set out basic astrological tradition, and they tend to be our first contact

with astrology. We hear or read what our sun sign is supposed to mean, compare it with what we see in ourselves, and proceed from there. But look at the meaning of each sun sign from Aries through Pisces—*assertive, possessive, versatile, sensitive, creative, critical, harmonious, secretive, adventurous, prudent, detached, impressionable*. (These meanings are sometimes expressed as *I am, I have, I think, I feel, I command, I analyze, I balance, I desire, I see, I use, I know, I believe*.) Because we are interested only in our own sign, we fail to notice that these traits are universal—everyone behaves in each of these ways at various times. Similarly, no matter what our sign is, we can always find matching behaviors, so we will conclude (wrongly) that sun sign astrology works. Furthermore, we tend to use only confirming strategies: if astrology says a person is extraverted, we tend to ask that person extraverted questions (“Do you go to parties?”) rather than introverted questions (“Do you read books?”). Because even introverts occasionally do extraverted things, the answers cannot fail to confirm astrology. So we will again conclude (wrongly) that sun sign astrology works.

### Forecasts

In contrast to delineations, sun sign forecasts bear no relation to any astrological tradition. They can be derived in various ways, from simple sign symbolism (so Leos can expect Leonian events) to planetary emphasis (so Mars currently in your sun sign might indicate a busy period). Or they can be pure invention, which explains why many forecasts have no discernible link with astrology (“The letter E is important this week” or “Peace and tranquility are worth a thousand gold pieces”). Regardless of how they are derived, these forecasts attract readers more by their style than by their astrology, that is, by their capacity for conveying maximum generality with maximum sincerity.

## The Precession Argument

The most common argument against sun signs is that, due to precession, they are moving further and further away from the constellations that gave them their names. So today's Virgos are actually Leos, and in due course, they will be Cancerians, Geminis, Taureans, and so on, becoming Virgos again by roughly A.D. 26,000. But the argument is invalid. In Western astrology, the signs are measured in the tropical zodiac, not the sidereal zodiac of the constellations. Tropical signs begin at the vernal point (0 Aries), the first moment of spring, so it makes no difference where the constellations are. Nevertheless, if signs begin in springtime, they should reverse in the Southern Hemisphere. But astrologers ignore this complication; for them, the signs do not reverse. So in Australia and Brazil and South Africa, supposedly wintry Capricorns are born in the heat of summer. Perhaps astrologers hope that nobody will notice.

## Validity of Sun Signs

Does using sun sign astrology add validity to sun sign forecasts and delineations, as compared to simply making them up? Or does it merely mislead readers into believing that their "thought for the day" in a forecast or delineation is more meaningful than one in, say, a desk calendar? The verdict of half a century of research is clear and consistent: sun sign astrology has no validity whatever (Fichten and Sunerton 1983; Culver and Ianna 1988; Dean and Mather 1996, 2000). Indeed, formal studies can be superfluous—columns have appeared on the wrong day due to a filing error or because old columns were being recycled to save money, but readers noticed no difference. And we need only look around us to see that people absolutely do not come in just twelve varieties.

Among astrologers, the verdict is less clear. In fact, since the 1960s, violent arguments over sun signs have periodically erupted in astrological journals. The arguments invariably repeat the same issues, ignore research findings, and therefore achieve nothing (Dean and Mather 1996, 2000). Some astrologers see sun signs as valid and good publicity; others see them as nonsense and exploitation. Critics point out that astrology can hardly be taken seriously when astrologers themselves show such a major division of opinion over such a basic issue.

## Newspaper Disclaimers

In 1984, the U.S.-based Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) urged newspapers and magazines to label their sun sign columns with a disclaimer saying they were for entertainment only and had no basis in fact. The 1,200 U.S. newspapers with horoscope columns were slow to respond—by 1986, 0.5 percent had adopted a disclaimer, rising to 5 percent by 1994 but no further by 2000. In 1987, no New Zealand newspapers adopted the disclaimer when urged to do so by scientists, but one did add the caveat "for entertainment," and two major dailies did change the title of their columns to "Stars for Fun." This suggests that disclaimers will not be adopted unless brief and to the point.

## Sun Signs and Self-Image

Interestingly, a weak but statistically significant link between sun sign and extraversion was reported in 1978, advance notice of which was hailed by astrologers as "possibly the most important development for astrology in this century" (Phenomena 1977). But the effect

disappeared when people unfamiliar with sun signs were tested, so the finding had a simple explanation—prior knowledge of astrology. Ask Sagittarians (who are supposedly sociable and outgoing) whether they like going to parties, and their answer might be tipped by astrology in favor of yes rather than no. The bias may be unconscious and very slight, but it is there nonetheless. When combined with the findings of national opinion polls, the results suggest that roughly one person in four believes sufficiently in astrology to measurably shift their self-image in the corresponding direction.

## Popularity Revisited

Why are sun signs, a mere fragment of astrology, so hugely popular, and why are they remembered when so much other information about ourselves is forgotten? The reason may lie in our search for personal identity, the way in which we see ourselves in the world. Modern living is characterized by change, speed, and a loss of spiritual values. In the old days, our clues to finding a personal identity were taken from stable family and social settings. Today, this stability is greatly reduced, and traditional clues may well be less important than clues provided by films, TV, celebrities, and the occult. Whatever we may think of sun signs, they provide millions of people with a rich source of clues for constructing their identities—names (nothing impersonal here), personality, lifestyle, romance, occupation, everything. Even if the clues are false, the belief in their truth can make them true in their consequences, so they become a self-fulfilling prophecy in the same way that a sound bank can collapse if people believe it is unsound.

As well as providing clues for our personal identity, sun signs have other attractive features. They address ourselves and our relation-

ships in a positive and nonjudgmental way; they help us talk about ourselves, thus creating closeness; they require only a birth date and are easy to learn; they are perceived to be mostly true; and they are highly available—only weather forecasts are more pervasive. Sun signs are popular because they fill a need, are dead simple, and appear to work. They are also big business. No other system comes close.

### References:

- Culver, R. G., and P. A. Ianna. 1988. *Astrology: True or False? A Scientific Evaluation*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books. A clear and very readable critique by astronomers, with much useful information and the results of their own extensive sun sign tests. Concludes that astrology (including sun sign astrology) is neither scientifically sound nor scientifically useful.
- Dean, G., and A. Mather. 1996. "Sun Sign Columns: An Armchair Invitation." *Astrological Journal* 38: 143–155. An expanded version is at URL: <http://www.astrology-and-science.com/>. The authors survey the history of sun sign columns, the results of tests, and the disagreeing views of astrologers as expressed in astrological journals. To try to advance the debate, they invite astrologers and interested scientists to submit new ideas for testing sun sign columns.
- . 2000. "Sun Sign Columns: Response to an Invitation." *Skeptical Inquirer* 24, no. 5: 36–40. An expanded version is at URL: <http://www.astrology-and-science.com/>. The responses suggest that the negative results achieved to date are unlikely to change. Perhaps the most telling response is from Australian philosopher William Grey, one of the few philosophers to have interacted with astrologers and to have initiated a national survey of belief in astrology: "Astrologers have had plenty of opportunity to establish the validity of sun sign astrology via double-blind tests. That they have not done so is most easily explained by the hypothesis that they cannot do so. Sun sign astrology is not knowledge but epistemological hallucination" (p. 38).
- Fenton, S. 1992. *Sun Signs: Discover Yourself and*

- Others through Astrology*. London: Aquarian. One of many similar books that describe at length how people born under each sun sign are supposed to look, love, work, and play. The author is a British consulting astrologer who at the time was the sun sign columnist for *Woman's Own*. She describes her book as "probably the simplest book I have ever written" (p. 11). The time and date of sun sign changes during 1930–1993 are listed on pp. 226–228.
- Fichten, C. S., and B. Sunerton. 1983. "Popular Horoscopes and the Barnum Effect." *Journal of Psychology* 114: 123–134. Tests using 366 Canadian college students showed that daily and monthly sun sign columns were neither valid nor in agreement.
- Phenomena. 1977. Editorial comment. *Phenomena: The Bulletin of Astrological News & Information* 1, no. 1: 1.
- Occasionally, books appear that claim to validate sun signs. But in every case, a critical examination has revealed mistakes and procedural blunders. A best-selling example is:
- Sachs, G. 1998. *The Astrology File: Scientific Proof of the Link between Star Signs and Human Behavior*. London: Orion Books. The author uses samples of up to several millions of cases—samples so huge that even the most trivial of errors (for example, in matching the sample to controls) becomes enormously inflated in statistical significance. So his conclusions are misleading. Otherwise, the book is readable and well set out. Two critiques that expertly reveal the book's mistakes and procedural blunders appear in *Correlation* 17, no. 1 (1998): 41–49, and also at URL: <http://www.astrology-and-science.com/>.