



The InSight Lander needs to be in constant communication with Earth every day the data it gathers can be sent back to Earth. As viewed from the surface of Mars, Earth never gets very far from the sun. Over the course of about 780 days, Earth travels from its farthest westward position in the sky (morning star) of 46° W, to its farthest eastward position (evening star) of 41° E and back in about 780 days.

When the Earth-Sun angle is near zero as viewed from Mars, Earth can either be between Mars and the sun (called Inferior Conjunction) or Earth can be on the opposite side of the sun as viewed from Mars (called Superior Conjunction).

When Mars and Earth are in inferior conjunction, Earth can receive signals from the Lander, but the Lander will have to broadcast its data almost directly at the sun, which is a hazard for the transmitter. When Earth and Mars are in superior conjunction, Neither InSight nor the Earth radar can transmit or receive data with Earth behind the sun.

Problem 1 – The following table gives the Earth-Sun angle viewed from Mars during the time InSight is operating on the martian surface. During this time, inferior conjunction occurred on May 22, 2016 and July 26, 2018, with superior conjunction on July 27, 2017. When will the next inferior conjunction occur after July 26, 2018?

Month	Angle	Month	Angle	Month	Angle	Month	Angle
9/16	+46	3/17	+24	9/17	-10	3/18	-40
10/16	+45	4/17	+18	10/17	-17	4/18	-41
11/16	+42	5/17	+13	11/17	-23	5/18	-37
12/16	+38	6/17	+7	12/17	-28	6/18	-27
1/17	+34	7/17	+1	1/18	-33	7/18	-7
2/17	+29	8/17	-5	2/18	-38		

Angular data obtained from *Eyes on the Solar System* (February 28, 2013).

Problem 2 – InSight will end its operations after one full martian year (687 days). If it lands on September 20, 2016, during which months of operation will Earth be within 10 degrees of the sun at conjunction, and unable to communicate with Earth?

Problem 3 - Graph the data in the table. During which months will the Earth-Mars angle A) be changing the most rapidly? B) the slowest?

Problem 1 – When will the next superior conjunction occur after July 26, 2018?

Answer: Each pair of superior and inferior conjunctions happen in cycles. The time for one cycle can be found by the time between the dates of the two listed inferior conjunctions on 5/22/2016 and 7/26/2018. Students can find the number of days between these dates manually (hard), or they can use an online calculator (fun!) like <http://www.timeanddate.com/date/duration.html> to get 796 days. To find the next superior conjunction, add 796 days to July 27, 2017 (eg. <http://www.timeanddate.com/date/dateadd.html>) to get **May 4, 2019**.

Problem 2 – InSight will end its operations after one full martian year (687 days). If it lands on September 20, 2016, during which months of operation will Earth be within 10 degrees of the sun at conjunction, and unable to communicate with Earth?

Answer: Conjunction occurs on July 27, 2017. From the table, Earth is within 10 degrees of the sun during the months of **June 2017 to August 2017** so it will be difficult to directly transmit or receive data during this time.

Problem 3 - Graph the data in the table. During which months will the Earth-Mars angle A) be changing the most rapidly? B) the slowest?

Answer: Students may use Microsoft Excel. X-axis may be the month number.

A) June-July, 2018.

B) During September-November, 2016 and February-April, 2018. Slow changes correspond to a nearly flat 'slope' while fast changes correspond to the steepest slope.

