

ASTR 201 — Midterm 2 Exam Solutions

Astronomy for Science Majors — Spring 2026

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Instructions:

- There are **two parts** to this exam, worth **50 points** total. Answer all questions in the space provided.
- Show your work in a clear and orderly fashion, including all unit conversions, for full credit on calculation-based questions. **Circle your final answers clearly.**
- Partial credit will be awarded where appropriate.
- A formula sheet is provided; identify and use the appropriate equations where necessary. CGS units are used throughout.
- Use **proportional reasoning, ratio methods**, and scaling arguments wherever possible — full derivations are not required unless specifically requested.

Part I: Multiple Choice Questions

Please show your work in the space provided if necessary and provide your answer on the line provided. (14 points, 2 points each)

1. For a main-sequence star, which of the following is the correct ordering of the three fundamental stellar timescales from **shortest to longest**?

- (a) $\tau_{\text{nuc}} < \tau_{\text{KH}} < \tau_{\text{dyn}}$
- (b) $\tau_{\text{KH}} < \tau_{\text{dyn}} < \tau_{\text{nuc}}$
- (c) $\tau_{\text{dyn}} < \tau_{\text{KH}} < \tau_{\text{nuc}}$
- (d) $\tau_{\text{dyn}} < \tau_{\text{nuc}} < \tau_{\text{KH}}$
- (e) All three are comparable on the main sequence.

Answer: _____

Answer: (c)

The **dynamical timescale** $\tau_{\text{dyn}} \sim 1/\sqrt{G\rho} \approx 30$ min (Sun) is set by free-fall under gravity alone — the shortest. The **Kelvin-Helmholtz timescale** $\tau_{\text{KH}} \sim GM^2/(RL) \approx 30$ Myr (Sun) is the time to radiate away the star's gravitational binding energy. The **nuclear timescale** $\tau_{\text{nuc}} \sim \epsilon f M c^2 / L \approx 10$ Gyr (Sun) is set by available fusion fuel.

Hierarchy: $\tau_{\text{dyn}} \ll \tau_{\text{KH}} \ll \tau_{\text{nuc}}$. The large separation is why stars can be treated as in hydrostatic equilibrium on nuclear-burning timescales.

2. A $10 M_{\text{sun}}$ main-sequence star has a lifetime approximately how long compared to the Sun's?

- (a) $10 \times$ longer (100 Gyr).
- (b) $\approx 3 \times$ shorter (3 Gyr).
- (c) $\approx 300 \times$ shorter (30 Myr).
- (d) $\approx 3 \times 10^5 \times$ shorter (30 kyr).
- (e) Its lifetime is independent of mass.

Answer: _____

Answer: (c)

Main-sequence lifetime scaling: $\tau_{\text{MS}} \propto M/L \propto M/M^{3.5} = M^{-2.5}$.

$$\tau_{\text{MS}} \frac{10M_{\text{sun}}}{\tau_{\text{MS}}}(M_{\text{sun}}) = (10)^{-2.5} \approx \frac{1}{316} \approx 3 \times 10^{-3}$$

With $\tau_{\text{MS,sun}} \approx 10$ Gyr $\implies \tau_{\text{MS}}(10M_{\text{sun}}) \approx 30$ Myr. More massive stars burn fuel vastly faster because L rises faster than M .

3. If mass is gradually added to a main-sequence star (assume R stays roughly constant), how does the core respond to maintain hydrostatic equilibrium?

- (a) Core expands; T_c decreases; P_c decreases.
- (b) Core contracts; T_c decreases; P_c increases.
- (c) Core expands; T_c increases; P_c decreases.
- (d) Core contracts; T_c increases; P_c increases.
- (e) Core properties remain unchanged.

Answer: _____

Answer: (d)

Holding the **stellar** radius R fixed while adding mass, the homologous one-zone scalings immediately give

$$P_c \sim GM^2/R^4 \implies P_c \uparrow \text{ when } M \uparrow$$

$$T_c \sim \mu GMm_p/(k_B R) \implies T_c \uparrow \text{ when } M \uparrow$$

$$\rho_c \sim M/R^3 \implies \rho_c \uparrow \text{ when } M \uparrow$$

Physically, the **core itself contracts** (a sub-region of the star shrinks while the envelope adjusts to keep R fixed): more mass means more weight to support, so ρ_c must rise — and gravitational compression of the core heats it ($T_c \uparrow$) by the virial theorem.

4. Quantum tunneling allows protons to fuse in the Sun's core, even though the classical thermal energy ($k_B T_c \approx 1$ keV) is far below the Coulomb barrier ($E_C \approx 1$ MeV). Why is this possible?

- (a) Protons have zero size and so do not feel the Coulomb barrier.
- (b) Gravity is strong enough at the core to push protons together.
- (c) Protons behave as quantum waves, giving a nonzero probability of penetrating the Coulomb barrier.
- (d) Magnetic fields in the core channel protons toward one another.
- (e) The CNO cycle lowers the temperature threshold for fusion.

Answer: _____

Answer: (c)

At $T_c \approx 1.5 \times 10^7$ K, $k_B T_c \approx 1$ keV — three orders of magnitude below the Coulomb barrier (~ 1 MeV). Classically, protons never fuse. But each proton has a de Broglie wavelength $\lambda_{dB} = h/p$ comparable to the nuclear-approach distance, so the proton has a nonzero **amplitude** to be found on the other side of the barrier. The Gamow factor $\Gamma \propto e^{-2G}$ quantifies this tunneling probability.

5. Fusion of elements heavier than iron (^{56}Fe) does not release energy in stellar cores. Why?

- (a) The Coulomb barrier becomes infinitely large for $Z > 26$.
- (b) Nuclei heavier than iron have lower binding energy per nucleon, so fusing them absorbs rather than releases energy.
- (c) All available fuel is locked up in iron.
- (d) Neutrino losses prevent further reactions.
- (e) Heavy nuclei spontaneously fission before they can fuse.

Answer: _____

Answer: (b)

The binding energy per nucleon peaks near ^{56}Fe . For $A < 56$, fusion **releases** energy (exothermic, $\Delta m > 0$). For $A > 56$, fusion **absorbs** energy — so it cannot be a stellar energy source. Iron is the “ash” of stellar burning.

6. Light travels from the Sun’s core to its surface in roughly 100,000 years, even though light travels at speed c and $R_{\text{sun}} \approx 7 \times 10^{10}$ cm (a light-crossing time of ~ 2 s). What is the physical reason?

- (a) Photons slow down when passing through dense plasma.
- (b) The photons lose energy and are recreated at each absorption.
- (c) Photons undergo a random walk, being absorbed and re-emitted $\sim 10^{24}$ times, so energy diffuses outward rather than streaming.
- (d) Gravitational time dilation slows photons near the core.
- (e) Convection carries photons slowly from the core.

Answer: _____

Answer: (c)

Photon mean free path in the solar core is $\ell = 1/(\kappa\rho) \approx 0.02$ cm. To traverse $R_{\text{sun}} = 7 \times 10^{10}$ cm by random walk requires $N \sim (R/\ell)^2 \approx 10^{24}$ steps, giving a diffusion time $\sim R^2/(\ell c) \sim 10^5$ yr. Photons travel at c between scatterings, but the **energy** diffuses slowly because the walk is random.

7. Which is the correct evolutionary sequence for a $1M_{\text{sun}}$ star **after** it leaves the main sequence?

- (a) Main-sequence turnoff → red giant branch → helium flash → horizontal branch → AGB → planetary nebula → white dwarf.
- (b) Main-sequence turnoff → white dwarf → red giant → planetary nebula.
- (c) Red giant → main sequence → horizontal branch → white dwarf.
- (d) Main-sequence turnoff → AGB → red giant → helium flash → white dwarf.
- (e) Main-sequence turnoff → supernova → neutron star.

Answer: _____

Answer: (a)

Low-mass post-MS evolution: core H is exhausted, the core contracts and H-shell burning begins, the envelope expands up the **red giant branch**. The He core becomes degenerate; when T_c reaches 10^8 K, **helium flash** ignites triple- α briefly. The star settles on the **horizontal branch** (core He burning). After core He exhausts, H + He shell burning drives the **asymptotic giant branch**; intense mass loss ejects the envelope as a **planetary nebula**, leaving a hot C/O **white dwarf** to cool. Option (e) is for massive stars ($M \gtrsim 8M_{\text{sun}}$), which are not on this exam.

Part II: Problems

Tip: Solve algebraically (using ratio/scaling methods) before plugging in numbers. This minimizes arithmetic errors and earns credit for correct setup even if the final number is off.

1) Stellar Structure Under a Hypothetical Scenario. Suppose a main-sequence star doubles its mass while somehow keeping its central temperature T_c **fixed**. Assume the mean molecular weight μ and composition remain constant throughout.

(a) Determine how the star's radius R must change to keep T_c fixed. Express R_2 (after) in terms of R_1 (before). **(4 pts)**

Solution:

Given: $M_2 = 2M_1$; μ , m_p , G , k_B unchanged; $T_{c,1} = T_{c,2}$.

Find: R_2/R_1 .

Equation: $T_c \sim \frac{\mu GMm_p}{k_B R} \implies T_c \propto M/R$

Steps (ratio method):

$$\frac{T_{c,2}}{T_{c,1}} = \left(\frac{M_2}{M_1}\right) \left(\frac{R_1}{R_2}\right) = 1$$

Using $M_2/M_1 = 2$:

$$2 \cdot \left(\frac{R_1}{R_2}\right) = 1 \implies \frac{R_2}{R_1} = 2$$

$R_2 = 2 R_1$ — the radius must double.

Unit check: T_c has units K on both sides; the ratio is dimensionless. ✓

Sanity check: Doubling M alone would **increase** T_c (hotter core). To cancel that effect and keep T_c fixed, the star must **expand** proportionally — which it does: R doubles. ✓

(b) How do the central pressure P_c and central density ρ_c change under this scenario? Express $P_{c,2}/P_{c,1}$ and $\rho_{c,2}/\rho_{c,1}$ as numerical ratios. **(4 pts)**

Solution:

Equations (from formula sheet):

$$P_c \sim \frac{GM^2}{R^4} \implies P_c \propto M^2/R^4$$

$$\rho_c \sim \frac{M}{R^3} \implies \rho_c \propto M/R^3$$

Given: $M_2/M_1 = 2$, $R_2/R_1 = 2$ (from part (a)).

Steps:

$$\frac{P_{c,2}}{P_{c,1}} = \left(\frac{M_2}{M_1}\right)^2 \left(\frac{R_1}{R_2}\right)^4 = 2^2 \cdot \left(\frac{1}{2}\right)^4 = \frac{4}{16} = \frac{1}{4}$$

$$\frac{\rho_{c,2}}{\rho_{c,1}} = \left(\frac{M_2}{M_1}\right) \left(\frac{R_1}{R_2}\right)^3 = 2 \cdot \left(\frac{1}{2}\right)^3 = \frac{2}{8} = \frac{1}{4}$$

$$P_{c,2} = \frac{1}{4} P_{c,1}, \quad \rho_{c,2} = \frac{1}{4} \rho_{c,1}$$

Unit check: Both are ratios of like quantities, so dimensionless. ✓

Sanity check: A bigger, fluffier star at the same T_c has **lower** central pressure and density — consistent with the ideal-gas relation $P_c \sim \rho_c k_B T_c / (\mu m_p)$, where P_c and ρ_c scale together when T_c is held fixed. ✓

(c) Is this scenario physically realistic for a main-sequence star? If not, describe what a real star **actually** does when mass is gradually added — how do R , T_c , P_c , and the fusion rate respond? Justify your reasoning. (4 pts)

Solution:

No, this scenario is not physically realistic for a main-sequence star.

Why the scenario fails: HSE requires the central pressure to support the column weight, which scales as $P_c \propto M^2/R^4$. Doubling M at fixed R would therefore demand P_c rise by $4 \times$. But the hypothetical (which holds T_c fixed and forces R to double, part (a)) gives P_c **decreasing** by $4 \times$ (part (b)) — leaving the core unable to support the extra mass against gravity.

What a real star does: the core **contracts** (opposite of the hypothetical). From the scalings:

$$M \uparrow, R \downarrow \implies \rho_c \propto M/R^3 \uparrow \quad \text{and} \quad T_c \propto M/R \uparrow$$

So both ρ_c and T_c increase. This is a direct consequence of the virial theorem — **gravitational contraction heats the core** (the famous “negative heat capacity” of self-gravitating systems).

Fusion response: since the pp-chain rate scales steeply with temperature ($\varepsilon \propto \rho T^4$), even a modest rise in T_c dramatically accelerates fusion — which raises L until a new hydrostatic equilibrium is found, with the star settling at a new point higher up the main sequence. This self-regulation is precisely why fusion is stable: any perturbation that heats the core increases the luminosity, which lets the core radiate away the excess energy.

2) Fusion Sensitivity & The Radiation Limit. In this problem you will investigate two effects that together shape the upper end of the stellar mass distribution: the temperature sensitivity of hydrogen fusion and the limit set by radiation pressure.

(a) Consider the pp-chain hydrogen-fusion rate per unit mass, ϵ_{pp} , deep in a stellar core. Suppose the core density **doubles** and the core temperature increases by 50% (i.e., $T \rightarrow 1.5T$). By what factor does ϵ_{pp} change? **(4 pts)**

Solution:

Given: $\epsilon_{\text{pp}} \propto \rho T^4$; $\rho \rightarrow 2\rho$; $T \rightarrow 1.5T$.

Find: $\epsilon_{\text{new}}/\epsilon_{\text{old}}$.

Steps (ratio method):

$$\frac{\epsilon_{\text{new}}}{\epsilon_{\text{old}}} = \frac{(2\rho)(1.5T)^4}{\rho T^4} = 2 \cdot (1.5)^4 = 2 \cdot 5.0625 \approx 10.1$$

$\epsilon_{\text{new}} \approx 10 \epsilon_{\text{old}}$ — the fusion rate increases by a factor of ~ 10 .

Unit check: All factors are dimensionless ratios. ✓

Sanity check: Even a modest 50% temperature rise — with the density only doubling — increases fusion by an order of magnitude. The T^4 dependence is what makes stellar fusion exquisitely temperature-sensitive and self-regulating. ✓

(b) For a $M = 100M_{\text{sun}}$ main-sequence star with a fully ionized hydrogen envelope, compute the ratio $L_{\text{MS}}/L_{\text{Edd}}$. Is this star super-Eddington ($L_{\text{MS}} > L_{\text{Edd}}$) or sub-Eddington ($L_{\text{MS}} < L_{\text{Edd}}$)? **(4 pts)**

Solution:

Given: $M = 100M_{\text{sun}}$; fully ionized H envelope (so κ is the same as the Sun's — κ_{es} — and cancels). From the formula sheet: $L_{\text{MS}} \propto M^{3.5}$, $L_{\text{Edd}} \propto M/\kappa$, $L_{\text{Edd,sun}} \approx 3.9 \times 10^4 L_{\text{sun}}$.

Find: $L_{\text{MS}}/L_{\text{Edd}}$ for this star.

Steps (ratio method): Combined scaling (at fixed κ):

$$\frac{L_{\text{MS}}}{L_{\text{Edd}}} \propto \frac{M^{3.5}}{M} = M^{2.5}$$

Using the Sun as reference:

$$\frac{(L_{\text{MS}}/L_{\text{Edd}})_{\text{star}}}{(L_{\text{MS}}/L_{\text{Edd}})_{\text{sun}}} = \left(\frac{M}{M_{\text{sun}}}\right)^{2.5} = (100)^{2.5} = 10^5$$

For the Sun:

$$(L_{\text{MS}}/L_{\text{Edd}})_{\text{sun}} = L_{\text{sun}}/L_{\text{Edd,sun}} = 1/(3.9 \times 10^4) \approx 2.6 \times 10^{-5}$$

Combining:

$$\left(\frac{L_{\text{MS}}}{L_{\text{Edd}}}\right)_{\text{star}} \approx 10^5 \times (2.6 \times 10^{-5}) \approx 2.6$$

$$L_{\text{MS}}/L_{\text{Edd}} \approx 2.6 > 1 \text{ — the star is super-Eddington.}$$

Unit check: Ratio of luminosities is dimensionless. ✓

Sanity check: $L_{\text{MS}}/L_{\text{Edd}} \propto M^{2.5}$ grows rapidly with mass; the Sun is **deeply** sub-Eddington ($L_{\text{sun}}/L_{\text{Edd,sun}} \sim 10^{-5}$), but by $100M_{\text{sun}}$ the ratio crosses unity — consistent with the observed upper stellar mass limit near $\sim 100\text{--}150M_{\text{sun}}$. ✓

(c) Explain **why very massive stars ($M \gtrsim 100M_{\text{sun}}$) are rare and short-lived**. Use your results from parts (a) and (b) to justify both claims quantitatively. **(4 pts)**

Solution:

Massive stars are short-lived because fusion rates scale steeply with core temperature (pp-chain $\varepsilon \propto T^4$; CNO $\varepsilon \propto T^{17}$). Higher-mass stars have hotter cores, so they burn through their hydrogen fuel enormously faster than the Sun — $\tau_{\text{MS}} \propto M^{-2.5}$ implies a $100M_{\text{sun}}$ star lives only $\sim 10 \text{ Gyr} \times (100)^{-2.5} \approx 100 \text{ kyr}$.

Massive stars are rare because they are **super-Eddington** (part (b)): radiation pressure on electron-scattering opacity exceeds gravity, driving violent line-driven winds that shed the envelope on timescales comparable to the nuclear lifetime. Above $\sim 100\text{--}150M_{\text{sun}}$, the star cannot hold itself together long enough to form in the first place — this sets the observed upper mass cutoff.

Together, the T -sensitivity of fusion and the Eddington limit conspire to make high-mass stars both cosmically rare **and** fleeting.

3) The Chandrasekhar Mass & White Dwarf Structure. When gravity fully compresses the electrons in a white dwarf until they become relativistic, a fundamental mass scale emerges that can be built from only three fundamental constants — \hbar , c , G — together with the mass of a proton m_p .

(a) Using **dimensional analysis**, construct a combination of \hbar , c , G , and m_p that has the units of mass and is expected to yield the Chandrasekhar mass scale. Evaluate your expression numerically (in grams and in M_{sun}). Show that it yields a value of order $\sim 1M_{\text{sun}}$. **(4 pts)**

Solution:

Given: $\hbar = 1.05 \times 10^{-27}$ erg s; $c = 3.0 \times 10^{10}$ cm s⁻¹; $G = 6.67 \times 10^{-8}$ cm³g⁻¹s⁻²; $m_p = 1.67 \times 10^{-24}$ g; $M_{\text{sun}} = 2.0 \times 10^{33}$ g.

Find: A combination of these constants with units of mass [g].

Dimensional analysis: In base CGS:

$$[\hbar c] = \text{erg cm} = \text{g cm}^3 \text{s}^{-2}$$

$$[G] = \text{cm}^3 \text{g}^{-1} \text{s}^{-2}$$

$$[\hbar c/G] = \text{g cm}^3 \frac{\text{s}^{-2}}{\text{cm}^3 \text{g}^{-1} \text{s}^{-2}} = \text{g}^2$$

So $\sqrt{\hbar c/G}$ has units of mass — this is the **Planck mass**, M_{Pl} . To build a larger mass scale involving m_p , use the combination $M_{\text{Ch}} \sim M_{\text{Pl}}^3/m_p^2$:

$$M_{\text{Ch}} \sim \frac{(\hbar c/G)^{3/2}}{m_p^2} [\text{g}]$$

Numerical evaluation:

$$\hbar c/G = \frac{3.15 \times 10^{-17} \text{ erg cm}}{6.67 \times 10^{-8} \text{ cm}^3 \text{g}^{-1} \text{s}^{-2}} = 4.72 \times 10^{-10} \text{ g}^2$$

$$M_{\text{Pl}} = \sqrt{4.72 \times 10^{-10}} \text{ g} = 2.17 \times 10^{-5} \text{ g}$$

$$M_{\text{Ch}} \sim \frac{(2.17 \times 10^{-5} \text{ g})^3}{(1.67 \times 10^{-24} \text{ g})^2} = \frac{1.02 \times 10^{-14} \text{ g}^3}{2.79 \times 10^{-48} \text{ g}^2} \approx 3.7 \times 10^{33} \text{ g}$$

In solar units:

$$\frac{M_{\text{Ch}}}{M_{\text{sun}}} \approx \frac{3.7 \times 10^{33}}{2.0 \times 10^{33}} \approx 1.8$$

$$M_{\text{Ch}} \sim 3.7 \times 10^{33} \text{ g} \approx 1.8 M_{\text{sun}}$$

Unit check: $[M_{\text{Ch}}] = \text{g}^3/\text{g}^2 = \text{g}$. ✓

Sanity check: The accepted value is $M_{\text{Ch}} \approx 1.4 M_{\text{sun}}$. Dimensional analysis is expected to match the order of magnitude but miss the $\mathcal{O}(1)$ prefactor (here, a factor involving the electron fraction Y_e and numerical coefficients). Agreement within $\sim 30\%$ is excellent. ✓

(b) Two (non-relativistic) white dwarfs have masses $M_1 = 0.6 M_{\text{sun}}$ and $M_2 = 1.2 M_{\text{sun}}$. Determine (i) which has the larger **radius** and by what factor, and (ii) which has the larger **average density** and by what factor. (4 pts)

Solution:

Given: $M_1 = 0.6M_{\text{sun}}$, $M_2 = 1.2M_{\text{sun}}$. From the formula sheet: $R_{\text{WD}} \propto M^{-1/3}$ (non-relativistic degenerate matter); average density $\rho \propto M/R^3$.

Find: R_1/R_2 and ρ_1/ρ_2 .

Steps — radius ratio (ratio method):

$$\frac{R_1}{R_2} = \left(\frac{M_1}{M_2}\right)^{-1/3} = \left(\frac{M_2}{M_1}\right)^{1/3} = (2)^{1/3} \approx 1.26$$

$R_1 \approx 1.26 R_2$ — the less-massive WD (M_1) has the larger radius.

Steps — density ratio: Combine the scalings:

$$\rho \propto \frac{M}{R^3} \propto \frac{M}{(M^{-1/3})^3} = \frac{M}{M^{-1}} = M^2$$

So $\rho_{\text{WD}} \propto M^2$ (more massive WDs are denser and also smaller). Then

$$\frac{\rho_1}{\rho_2} = \left(\frac{M_1}{M_2}\right)^2 = \left(\frac{0.6}{1.2}\right)^2 = \left(\frac{1}{2}\right)^2 = \frac{1}{4}$$

$\rho_1 = \frac{1}{4} \rho_2$ — the more-massive WD (M_2) is $4 \times$ denser.

Unit check: Both are dimensionless ratios of like quantities. ✓

Sanity check: The WD mass-radius relation is **inverted** — adding mass makes the star smaller. Since density piles up both from more mass **and** less volume, $\rho \propto M^2$ grows quickly. As $M \rightarrow M_{\text{Ch}} \approx 1.4M_{\text{sun}}$, $\rho \rightarrow \infty$ in the non-relativistic limit — which is precisely where that limit breaks down (relativistic electrons, part (c)). ✓

(c) The Chandrasekhar mass $M_{\text{Ch}} \approx 1.4M_{\text{sun}}$ is an **upper limit** on white-dwarf masses: no stable WD can exceed it. Explain **why this limit exists** physically, and justify your reasoning quantitatively. (4 pts)

Solution:

As a WD is compressed, electrons are packed more tightly; by the uncertainty principle their momenta — and hence their speeds — grow. Below $\sim 1.4M_{\text{sun}}$, electron speeds remain non-relativistic ($v \ll c$) and degeneracy pressure scales steeply as $P_{\text{deg}} \propto \rho^{5/3}$, rising fast enough to resist gravity.

When the density is so high that electrons become **relativistic** ($v \rightarrow c$), their speeds approach the cosmic speed limit even though their momenta can still increase. The pressure law therefore softens to $P_{\text{deg}} \propto \rho^{4/3}$. Crucially, **the rate at which P_{deg} grows with added mass can no longer outpace the rate at which gravity grows**: doubling the mass increases gravitational compression faster than the relativistic degeneracy pressure can respond. No stable equilibrium exists — the star collapses to a neutron star or black hole.

Physically, M_{Ch} marks the mass at which electrons are forced to become fully relativistic before they can support the star.

— *End of Exam* —

Formula sheet provided separately.