

known as the Magellanic Stream. We will see that this kind of interaction between galaxies will help explain the irregular shapes of this whole category of small galaxies,

LINK TO LEARNING



View this [beautiful album showcasing the different types of galaxies \(https://openstax.org//30galaxphohubb\)](https://openstax.org//30galaxphohubb) that have been photographed by the Hubble Space Telescope.

Galaxy Evolution

Encouraged by the success of the H-R diagram for stars (see [Analyzing Starlight](#)), astronomers studying galaxies hoped to find some sort of comparable scheme, where differences in appearance could be tied to different evolutionary stages in the life of galaxies. Wouldn't it be nice if every elliptical galaxy evolved into a spiral, for example, just as every main-sequence star evolves into a red giant? Several simple ideas of this kind were tried, some by Hubble himself, but none stood the test of time (and observation).

Because no simple scheme for evolving one type of galaxy into another could be found, astronomers then tended to the opposite point of view. For a while, most astronomers thought that all galaxies formed very early in the history of the universe and that the differences between them had to do with the rate of star formation. Ellipticals were those galaxies in which all the interstellar matter was converted rapidly into stars. Spirals were galaxies in which star formation occurred slowly over the entire lifetime of the galaxy. This idea turned out to be too simple as well.

Today, we understand that at least some galaxies have changed types over the billions of years since the universe began. As we shall see in later chapters, collisions and mergers between galaxies may dramatically change spiral galaxies into elliptical galaxies. Even isolated spirals (with no neighbor galaxies in sight) can change their appearance over time. As they consume their gas, the rate of star formation will slow down, and the spiral arms will gradually become less conspicuous. Over long periods, spirals therefore begin to look more like the galaxies at the middle of [Figure 26.6](#) (which astronomers refer to as S0 types).

Over the past several decades, the study of how galaxies evolve over the lifetime of the universe has become one of the most active fields of astronomical research. We will discuss the evolution of galaxies in more detail in [The Evolution and Distribution of Galaxies](#), but let's first see in a little more detail just what different galaxies are like.

26.3 Properties of Galaxies

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the methods through which astronomers can estimate the mass of a galaxy
- Characterize each type of galaxy by its mass-to-light ratio

The technique for deriving the masses of galaxies is basically the same as that used to estimate the mass of the Sun, the stars, and our own Galaxy. We measure how fast objects in the outer regions of the galaxy are orbiting the center, and then we use this information along with Kepler's third law to calculate how much mass is inside that orbit.

Masses of Galaxies

Astronomers can measure the rotation speed in spiral galaxies by obtaining spectra of either stars or gas, and looking for wavelength shifts produced by the Doppler effect. Remember that the faster something is moving toward or away from us, the greater the shift of the lines in its spectrum. Kepler's law, together with such

observations of the part of the Andromeda galaxy that is bright in visible light, for example, show it to have a galactic mass of about $4 \times 10^{11} M_{\text{Sun}}$ (enough material to make 400 billion stars like the Sun).

The total mass of the Andromeda galaxy is greater than this, however, because we have not included the mass of the material that lies beyond its visible edge. Fortunately, there is a handful of objects—such as isolated stars, star clusters, and satellite galaxies—beyond the visible edge that allows astronomers to estimate how much additional matter is hidden out there. Recent studies show that the amount of dark matter beyond the visible edge of Andromeda may be as large as the mass of the bright portion of the galaxy. Indeed, using Kepler’s third law and the velocities of its satellite galaxies, the Andromeda galaxy is estimated to have a mass closer to $1.4 \times 10^{12} M_{\text{Sun}}$. The mass of the Milky Way Galaxy is estimated to be $8.5 \times 10^{11} M_{\text{Sun}}$, and so our Milky Way is turning out to be somewhat smaller than Andromeda.

Elliptical galaxies do not rotate in a systematic way, so we cannot determine a rotational velocity; therefore, we must use a slightly different technique to measure their mass. Their stars are still orbiting the galactic center, but not in the organized way that characterizes spirals. Since elliptical galaxies contain stars that are billions of years old, we can assume that the galaxies themselves are not flying apart. Therefore, if we can measure the various speeds with which the stars are moving in their orbits around the center of the galaxy, we can calculate how much mass the galaxy must contain in order to hold the stars within it.

In practice, the spectrum of a galaxy is a composite of the spectra of its many stars, whose different motions produce different Doppler shifts (some red, some blue). The result is that the lines we observe from the entire galaxy contain the combination of many Doppler shifts. When some stars provide blueshifts and others provide redshifts, they create a wider or broader absorption or emission feature than would the same lines in a hypothetical galaxy in which the stars had no orbital motion. Astronomers call this phenomenon line broadening. The amount by which each line broadens indicates the range of speeds at which the stars are moving with respect to the center of the galaxy. The range of speeds depends, in turn, on the force of gravity that holds the stars within the galaxies. With information about the speeds, it is possible to calculate the mass of an elliptical galaxy.

[Table 26.1](#) summarizes the range of masses (and other properties) of the various types of galaxies.

Interestingly enough, the most and least massive galaxies are ellipticals. On average, irregular galaxies have less mass than spirals.

Characteristics of the Different Types of Galaxies

Characteristic	Spirals	Ellipticals	Irregulars
Mass (M_{Sun})	10^9 to 10^{12}	10^5 to 10^{13}	10^8 to 10^{11}
Diameter (thousands of light-years)	15 to 150	3 to >700	3 to 30
Luminosity (L_{Sun})	10^8 to 10^{11}	10^6 to 10^{11}	10^7 to 2×10^9
Populations of stars	Old and young	Old	Old and young
Interstellar matter	Gas and dust	Almost no dust; little gas	Much gas; some have little dust, some much dust

Table 26.1

Characteristic	Spirals	Ellipticals	Irregulars
Mass-to-light ratio in the visible part	2 to 10	10 to 20	1 to 10
Mass-to-light ratio for total galaxy	100	100	?

Table 26.1

Mass-to-Light Ratio

A useful way of characterizing a galaxy is by noting the ratio of its mass (in units of the Sun's mass) to its light output (in units of the Sun's luminosity). This single number tells us roughly what kind of stars make up most of the luminous population of the galaxy, and it also tells us whether a lot of dark matter is present. For stars like the Sun, the **mass-to-light ratio** is 1 by our definition.

Galaxies are not, of course, composed entirely of stars that are identical to the Sun. The overwhelming majority of stars are less massive and less luminous than the Sun, and usually these stars contribute most of the mass of a system without accounting for very much light. The mass-to-light ratio for low-mass stars is greater than 1 (you can verify this using the data in [Table 18.3](#)). Therefore, a galaxy's mass-to-light ratio is also generally greater than 1, with the exact value depending on the ratio of high-mass stars to low-mass stars.

Galaxies in which star formation is still occurring have many massive stars, and their mass-to-light ratios are usually in the range of 1 to 10. Galaxies consisting mostly of an older stellar population, such as ellipticals, in which the massive stars have already completed their evolution and have ceased to shine, have mass-to-light ratios of 10 to 20.

But these figures refer only to the inner, conspicuous parts of galaxies ([Figure 26.10](#)). In [The Milky Way Galaxy](#) and above, we discussed the evidence for dark matter in the outer regions of our own Galaxy, extending much farther from the galactic center than do the bright stars and gas. Recent measurements of the rotation speeds of the outer parts of nearby galaxies, such as the Andromeda galaxy we discussed earlier, suggest that they too have extended distributions of dark matter around the visible disk of stars and dust. This largely invisible matter adds to the mass of the galaxy while contributing nothing to its luminosity, thus increasing the mass-to-light ratio. If dark invisible matter is present in a galaxy, its mass-to-light ratio can be as high as 100. The two different mass-to-light ratios measured for various types of galaxies are given in [Table 26.1](#).



Figure 26.10 M101, the Pinwheel Galaxy. This galaxy is a face-on spiral at a distance of 21 million light-years. M101 is almost twice the diameter of the Milky Way, and it contains at least 1 trillion stars. (credit: NASA, ESA, K. Kuntz (Johns Hopkins University), F. Bresolin (University of Hawaii), J. Trauger (Jet Propulsion Lab), J. Mould (NOAO), Y.-H. Chu (University of Illinois, Urbana), and STScI)

These measurements of other galaxies support the conclusion already reached from studies of the rotation of our own Galaxy—namely, that most of the material in the universe cannot at present be observed directly in any part of the electromagnetic spectrum. An understanding of the properties and distribution of this invisible matter is crucial to our understanding of galaxies. It’s becoming clearer and clearer that, through the gravitational force it exerts, dark matter plays a dominant role in galaxy formation and early evolution. There is an interesting parallel here between our time and the time during which Edwin Hubble was receiving his training in astronomy. By 1920, many scientists were aware that astronomy stood on the brink of important breakthroughs—if only the nature and behavior of the nebulae could be settled with better observations. In the same way, many astronomers today feel we may be closing in on a far more sophisticated understanding of the large-scale structure of the universe—if only we can learn more about the nature and properties of dark matter. If you follow astronomy articles in the news (as we hope you will), you should be hearing more about dark matter in the years to come.

26.4 The Extragalactic Distance Scale

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- › Describe the use of variable stars to estimate distances to galaxies
- › Explain how standard bulbs and the Tully-Fisher relation can be used to estimate distances to galaxies

To determine many of the properties of a galaxy, such as its luminosity or size, we must first know how far away it is. If we know the distance to a galaxy, we can convert how bright the galaxy appears to us in the sky