

Transit of Venus Activity: Transit Frequency



On June 5-6, 2012, Venus will pass in front of the Sun and we will be able to see this from Earth (don't ever look right at the Sun!). This is a very rare event, and this activity explores why this is a twice in a lifetime event (the last time this happened was in 2004 and was not visible in Montana).

The Race

Imagine that daughter Venus and her mother Earth are going to race around their house. The young daughter, faster of the two, will run close to the house, while Mom will encircle the whole yard further out. As seen from above, they run anti-clockwise (i.e., "planetwise").

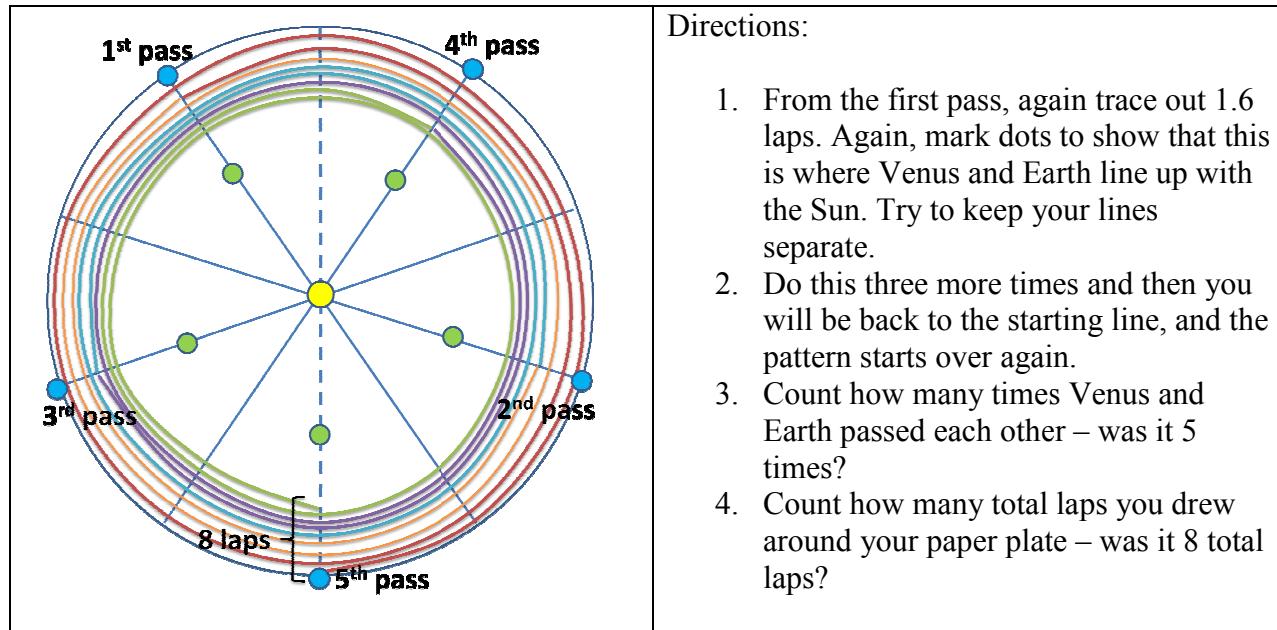
A diagram of a paper plate divided into 10 equal segments by radial lines. A vertical dotted line passes through the center. Two green dots are placed on the plate: one near the edge and one closer to the center, representing Earth and Venus respectively.	<p>Directions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Draw a dot in the middle of your paper plate for the Sun.2. Draw a dotted line across the plate and through the Sun.3. Separate your paper plate into 10 equal segments, as shown in the circle picture.4. Draw two dots - one at the edge of the paper plate to represent Earth, and one closer to your Sun to represent Venus.
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Earth and Venus line up at the dotted line to start the race. "On your mark...get set...GO!" Because daughter Venus is closer to the Sun, she runs around it faster than Mother Earth. Daughter Venus runs one lap in about 8/13ths of Mom's time. (Planet Venus orbits the sun in 225 days; planet Earth orbits the sun in 365 days. Dividing 225 by 365 equals 8/13.)

After running only 1.6 laps, mother Earth sees daughter Venus overtake her. At that moment, Mom has completed 1.6 laps while daughter has completed 2.6 laps. Mom notes her and daughter Venus' positions.

A diagram of the paper plate showing the paths of Earth and Venus. The Earth path is a red circle, and the Venus path is a smaller blue circle nested inside. The first point where they align with the Sun is marked with a label "1st pass".	<p>Directions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Note that each segment of your grid represents 0.1 laps.2. Use your grid to trace out 1.6 laps for Earth. Don't bother tracing Venus's path, or your paper plate will start to look messy!3. At the 1.6 lap mark, draw dots to show that this is where Venus and Earth line up with the Sun.
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The race continues. Each time mother Earth completes another 1.6 laps, daughter Venus catches up to and overtakes her on the inside track. Finally, after mother Earth has completed eight laps around the Sun, daughter Venus catches up to Mom for the fifth time. Conveniently, the finish line coincides with the original starting line.

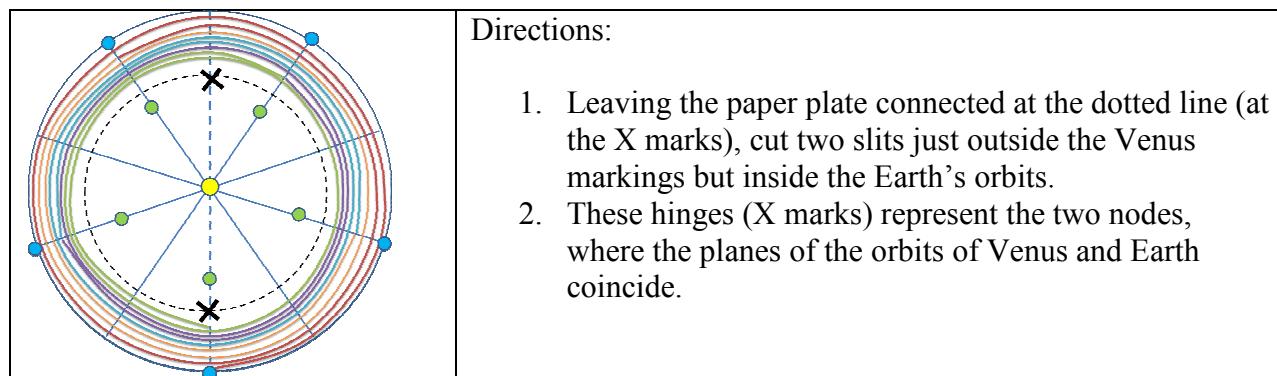


Mother Earth ran 8 total laps around the Sun in the time it took Daughter Venus to run 13 total laps (which weren't drawn). In that time, Earth and Venus lined up five times.

It would seem daughter Venus passes between mother Earth and the Sun five times in eight years. So why don't we see transits every 1.6 years? Two major factors interfere...

Factor One: The Inclined Orbit

First, daughter and mother are not running on a level surface.





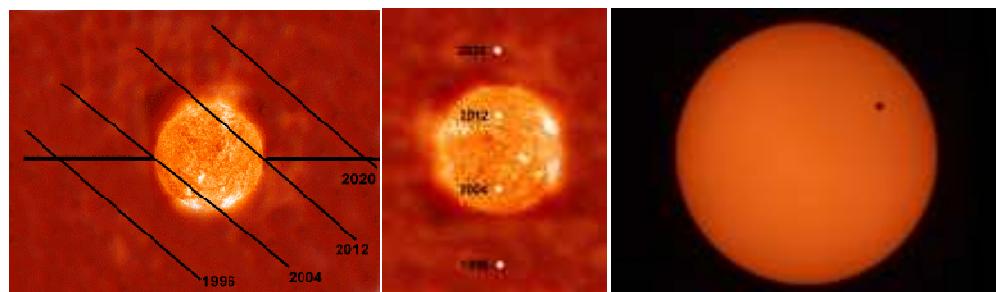
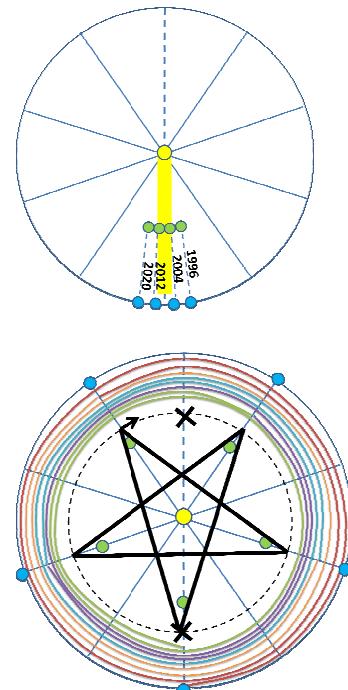
Push the right half of the paper plate down, below the Earth's orbital plane, and the left half up, above the Earth's orbital plane. Only when the Sun, Venus and Earth are in a straight line can we see Venus pass in front of the Sun. The rest of the time, when Venus passes us it is either above or below the Sun from Earth.

Now we see why there are not transits every 1.6 years, but why don't we see transits every 8 years?

Factor Two: The Orbital Speed

Venus actually makes it to the finish line just before mother Earth finishes her 8 laps.

So each fifth alignment is a little short of the dotted line. The whole five-point star of passes is rotating clockwise a little bit every year. In 2004 the 5th pass alignment was just ahead of the dotted line, and Venus passed across one edge of the Sun, so we saw a transit. In 2012 Venus will pass across the other edge of the Sun for a transit. But after the next 8 year cycle, in 2020, Venus will be too far from the Sun for a transit. We will have to wait until the alignment from the 1st pass shifts all the way to the next node to see a transit again. This will happen in 2117 and 2125, and because the alignment is on the opposite side of the Sun, the transits will be in December rather than June. **That's why transits happen so rarely!!!**



(Not to scale; angles are exaggerated.)

[Note: This activity ignores several important factors, including the eccentricity of orbits, the planet's varying orbital velocity along an ellipse, and precession.]

Adapted from material by Peter Langford at

<http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/town/estate/vs76/trans.htm>. and contributed by Chuck Bueter.

World Visibility of the Transit of Venus

2012 June 5–6

