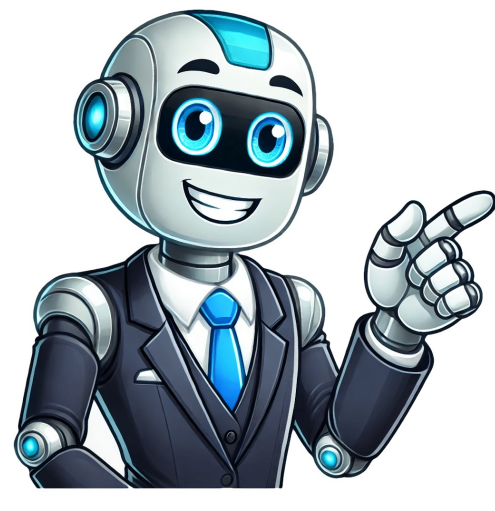


I'm not a robot



Equivale a 3 26 anni luce

Helix Nebula, pictured here by NASA's Spitzer space telescope, is 200 parsecs away from Earth (one parsec = 3.26 light-years). In fact, one parsec is approximately 3.26 light-years, or almost 19 trillion miles (31 trillion km), according to the California Institute of Technology (Caltech). The term parsec is a combination of "parallax" and "arcsecond," which derives from the use of triangulation when measuring the distance between two stars. You may like Related: Sounds in space? What noises do planets make? Astronomers use arcseconds to measure very small angles, with 3,600 seconds making up one degree, just as there are 3,600 seconds in one hour. These small angles help astronomers measure large distances using something called the parallax effect. If you hold a pencil up at arm's length and alternately close your left and right eyes, you'll notice that the pencil appears to move left and right relative to more distant objects even if you keep it perfectly stationary. Parallax can be demonstrated by looking at a pencil with one eye or the other. (Image credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech) The International Astronomical Union (IAU) defines the parsec as the distance at which one astronomical unit subtends an angle of one arcsecond. The IAU also defines the light-year as the distance that light travels in one year. The parsec is used to measure the distance to nearby stars. They take a photograph of a patch of sky containing the star they're interested in and then have it taken again six months later, when the Earth is on the opposite side of the sun, they take another photograph of the same bit of sky, according to NASA. The star will appear to have moved through a small angular distance relative to the background objects. Measuring that angle and then halving it (because we have two equal and opposite offsets relative to the Sun) gives us the star's parallax. So that's where the parsec comes from: it's the hypothetical distance at which a star would show a parallax of exactly one second. In fact, real stellar parallaxes are smaller than that, meaning that their distances are always greater than a parsec. Parsec vs light-year As long as the definition of a parsec is, it's still likely to come across as unnecessarily complicated to most people. By contrast, the light-year is much easier to understand. It's simply the distance that light travels in a year, and it's been in use since at least 1838. The light-year even has a usefulness that goes beyond simple measurement, because it tells us that when we observe an object X light-years away, we're seeing as it was X years in the past. So why would anyone want to use parsecs instead? The answer seems to be that, when astronomers first started measuring stellar distances using the parallax method, they simply presented their results in terms of "a parallax of X seconds" rather than converting to light-years. Then around 1913 Herbert Hall Turner had the idea of shortening this to parsec – and the name stuck, even when other, non-parallax-based methods of measuring stellar distance were developed. Today, the International Astronomical Union recommends the use of parsecs in scientific papers, though the latter is still common in popular science writing. Additional information The International Astronomical Society has information and articles on its site related to parsecs. The International Astronomical Union similarly maintains a wealth of information about the metric system. Bibliography: The NIST Reference on Constants, Units, and Uncertainty. NIST. "H. E. Smith. 'The Scale of the Universe'." JCDSD. Retrieved 10 February 2009. 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