Lecture 10

Astronomical Databases & Telescope Time Proposals

AST-B09 Observational Astronomy

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Goals of Lecture 10

This session bridges the critical gap between archival data mining and the acquisition of novel observational data. As modern astrophysics transitions aggressively into the exascale data regime, proficiency in navigating interconnected archives is just as critical as the ability to successfully request new telescope time. The primary objectives are to:

- Navigate the primary curated metadatabases (SIMBAD, NED, VizieR, HEASARC) and survey-specific archives, mastering their specific use cases and limitations.
- Deconstruct the architecture of the Virtual Observatory (VO), executing server-side relational queries via SQL and Python-based automation using `astroquery`.
- Master the anatomy of a highly competitive Phase I telescope time proposal, distinguishing the nuances between the Scientific Justification and the Technical Justification.
- Justify observational feasibility by accounting for required Signal-to-Noise Ratios (SNR) and comprehensive instrument overheads using modern Exposure Time Calculators (ETCs).
- Analyze the mechanics of the Time Allocation Committee (TAC) review cycle, including the implementation of Dual-Anonymous Peer Review (DAPR) and essential proposal best practices.

Contents

1 Astronomical Databases and the Virtual Observatory

The landscape of observational astronomy has undergone an irreversible phase transition, evolving from a localized "download and analyze" workflow into a decentralized "bring the code to the data" architecture. Historically, astrophysical research was fundamentally limited by data silos. Observers secured isolated, proprietary datasets from individual telescope runs, published their findings, and relegated the raw observations to localized physical archives, such as magnetic tapes or isolated institutional servers. This fragmented approach severely bottlenecked the synthesis of multi-wavelength data and rendered large-scale statistical studies and long-term reproducibility practically impossible.

Today, propelled by rapid advancements in high-throughput instrumentation and next-generation observational facilities, the field operates firmly within the Big Data regime. Legacy mega-surveys such as the Sloan Digital Sky Survey (SDSS) initiated this shift, while contemporary projects like the Dark Energy Survey (DES), the Hyper Suprime-Cam Subaru Strategic Program (HSC-SSP), and the transformative *Gaia* astrometric mission have pushed our catalogs from the terabyte into the petabyte scale. With the imminent operations of the Vera C. Rubin Observatory's Legacy Survey of Space and Time (LSST) and the Square Kilometre Array (SKA), modern astronomy is now grappling not only with unprecedented *data volume*, but also extreme *data velocity* (managing millions of transient stream alerts per night) and *data complexity* (analyzing highly multidimensional parameter spaces and intricate pipeline metadata).

Consequently, the traditional methodology of transferring complete catalogs or raw image footprints across local academic networks is fundamentally intractable due to severe bandwidth, memory, and local compute limitations. The computational paradigm has necessarily inverted: rather than extracting the data, researchers must now deploy their algorithms, machine learning models, and complex relational queries directly to the Data Access Centers (DACs) hosting the archives.

Mastering this server-side data mining requires a rigorous understanding of the interconnected infrastructure known as the Virtual Observatory (VO). The VO is not merely a software tool, but a comprehensive, internationally standardized ecosystem designed to democratize data access and ensure interoperability. By learning to navigate these distributed databases and execute programmatic queries, modern astronomers can cross-match billions of sources across the entire electromagnetic spectrum in a matter of seconds, transforming archival mining from a supplementary exercise into the primary engine for novel astrophysical discovery.

1.1 Curated Metadatabases vs. Survey-Specific Archives

A proficient astronomer must explicitly distinguish between *curated metadatabases* (which continuously aggregate, cross-link, and standardize published data) and *survey-specific data release portals* (which host the raw telemetry, pipeline-reduced products, and Value-Added Catalogs (VACs) of dedicated observational campaigns).

1. Curated Metadatabases (The Bibliographic and Multi-Wavelength Anchors)

- **SIMBAD (CDS):** The gold standard for *Galactic* astrophysics. Its primary architectural strength is cross-identification—resolving the myriad historical catalog names of a single object via hierarchical matching—and linking specific coordinates directly to peer-reviewed bibliographies.
- **NED (NASA/IPAC Extragalactic Database):** The premier repository for extragalactic objects. NED provides heavily curated, multi-wavelength Spectral Energy Distributions (SEDs), compiled spectroscopic and photometric redshifts (z), and calculates luminosity distances dynamically based on customizable ΛCDM cosmological parameters.
- **VizieR (CDS):** The central repository for published, peer-reviewed astronomical catalogs. It standardizes bespoke, author-generated tables into globally queryable, byte-by-byte formats, ensuring long-term data preservation and VO compliance.
- **HEASARC (High Energy Astrophysics Science Archive Research Center):** Hosted by NASA, this is the primary node for X-ray and gamma-ray astronomy, containing data from Chandra, XMM-Newton, Swift, and NuSTAR. It handles specialized high-energy formats, such as event lists and light curves, rather than standard optical images.

2. Survey-Specific Archives (The Primary Data Engines)
For cutting-edge research, astronomers bypass metadatabases and query the dedicated portals of massive surveys directly. This provides access to the latest Data Releases (DR), raw data cubes, and highly specific pipeline quality flags (e.g., bitmasks).

- **NOIRLab Astro Data Lab:** The primary computational hub for massive imaging campaigns like the Dark Energy Survey (DES) and the DESI Legacy Imaging Surveys. It provides SQL interfaces and server-side Jupyter Notebooks, allowing users to query billions of rows of photometry and execute machine-learning classifications directly adjacent to the data cluster.
- **HSC-SSP (Hyper Suprime-Cam Subaru Strategic Program) CAS:** The Catalog Archive Server for HSC provides incredibly deep optical photometry (reaching $r \sim 26$ mag). Meaningful access to HSC data requires querying complex pipeline flags directly through their PostgreSQL portal (e.g., isolating objects free of cosmic rays, saturated pixels, or the optical ghosts of bright stars).
- **MAST (Mikulski Archive for Space Telescopes):** Hosted by STScI, this is the definitive archive for NASA optical/UV/IR space missions. MAST utilizes advanced cloud computing architectures to host raw, calibrated, and High-Level Science Products (HLSPs) from HST, JWST, Kepler, and TESS.
- **ALMA Science Archive:** The dedicated repository for the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array. Uniquely, querying ALMA requires dealing with 3D

and 4D data cubes (spatial coordinates + frequency/velocity + polarization), necessitating specialized VO protocols for interferometric data.

1.2 Programmatic Access and Server-Side Processing: ADQL and Python

While web interfaces (GUIs) are useful for investigating a single source, they are computationally intractable for sample sizes exceeding a few dozen objects. Modern researchers utilize dialects of **SQL (Structured Query Language)**, such as T-SQL for SDSS or ADQL for VO services, to interact with databases programmatically.

1.3 The Anatomy of an Astronomical SQL Query

Before executing complex cross-matches, one must master the fundamental grammar of SQL. Astronomical queries scale from simple retrievals to computing complex statistical aggregates natively on the server using these core clauses:

- `SELECT`: Defines the specific columns to retrieve, such as right ascension (`ra`) and declination (`dec`). More importantly, it supports direct mathematical operations (e.g., calculating color indices dynamically via `u - g`) and aggregate functions (e.g., `COUNT()`, `AVG()`, `MAX()`) to return statistical summaries rather than raw rows.
- `FROM`: Specifies the exact table or catalog being queried (e.g., `PhotoObj` for imaging data or `SpecObj` for spectra). It is standard practice to assign shorthand aliases here (e.g., `FROM PhotoObj AS p`) to keep code readable.
- `JOIN`: The cornerstone of relational databases. `JOIN` allows you to merge distinct tables based on a shared key (like an `objid`). This is essential for combining multi-wavelength data or linking photometric properties with spectroscopic redshifts in a single server-side step.
- `WHERE`: Applies logical and mathematical conditions to filter the rows, ensuring only objects meeting specific science criteria are returned. In astronomy, this heavily relies on operators like `BETWEEN`, `IN`, and complex bitwise operations to check pipeline quality flags (e.g., rejecting saturated pixels or cosmic ray hits).
- `GROUP BY` & `ORDER BY`: `GROUP BY` aggregates data into discrete bins (e.g., counting the number of galaxies in specific redshift intervals), while `ORDER BY` sorts the final returned array sequentially.

The true power of these queries lies in leveraging **server-side processing**. Massive databases like the Sloan Digital Sky Survey (SDSS) use indexing schemes to divide the celestial sphere into a searchable grid, allowing for blazingly fast data retrieval.

Instead of downloading massive survey catalogs to your local machine, you execute the search directly on the server via portals like SDSS CasJobs. For example, if you simply want to retrieve the coordinates and r-band magnitudes of the 100 brightest galaxies in the database, the query is incredibly straightforward:

Example: A Simple SDSS SQL Query

```
SELECT TOP 100 objid, ra, dec, r
FROM PhotoObj
WHERE type = 3      -- In SDSS, type 3 indicates a 'galaxy'
  AND r < 17.0      -- Only return bright objects
ORDER BY r ASC;     -- Sort from brightest (lowest magnitude) to faintest
```

Downloading the full SDSS photometric catalog (terabytes of data) to your laptop just to filter out the brightest objects would take days and overwhelm your local hard drive. By executing this basic filter directly on the server, you leverage the data center's immense computing power and only download the 100 requested rows—a process that finishes in milliseconds.

To automate these workflows, the Astropy-affiliated package `astroquery` acts as a Python wrapper for these database protocols (including dedicated modules for querying SDSS). It allows researchers to submit SQL scripts, download targeted FITS cutouts, and seamlessly convert retrieved data into memory-mapped Astropy DataTables. Furthermore, observatories are increasingly moving toward **Science Platforms** (e.g., the Rubin Science Platform, ESA Datalabs), which provide researchers with cloud-based compute environments physically co-located with the multi-petabyte datasets, completely eliminating the need to transfer large data volumes over the internet.

2 Securing the Data: Preparing a Telescope Time Proposal

When archival data is fundamentally insufficient to answer your scientific question, astronomers must secure dedicated telescope time. A telescope proposal effectively acts as your "visa application" to access the world's most advanced observational facilities. High-impact observatories (such as ALMA, JWST, ESO VLT, and Gemini) operate with profound oversubscription rates, generally ranging from 3:1 to exceeding 10:1 for specific Right Ascension (RA) ranges. Given that operational costs for these observatories run into tens of thousands of dollars per night, the proposal process is not merely an academic exercise; it is an act of rigorous scientific persuasion, strategic marketing, and flawless technical precision. A poorly presented proposal will instantly sink a brilliant scientific idea, potentially jeopardizing a graduate student's thesis or a junior researcher's career trajectory.

Proposals generally fall into distinct tiers: **Normal Programs** for standard, single-semester observations; **Large Programs** for multi-semester, legacy-class datasets; **Target of Opportunity (ToO)** for unpredictable, time-sensitive transients; and fast-tracked **Director's Discretionary Time (DDT)** for extraordinarily urgent, high-impact discoveries.

2.1 The Observation Cycle, Triage, and Dual-Anonymous Peer Review

The telescope allocation process is a grueling, heavily regulated endeavor that culminates in a highly structured evaluation. It follows a strict, competitive timeline designed to filter out all but the most technically flawless and scientifically urgent requests:

1. **Call for Proposals (CfP):** Issued semi-annually (e.g., SOAR Period A in March, Period B in September). The CfP is not merely an announcement; it is a comprehensive document detailing available instruments, dark/bright time fractions, and policy updates. Because investigators must utilize specialized software, such as the Astronomer's Proposal Tool (APT) for JWST/HST or specific Phase 1 tools for ESO/Gemini, to calculate exact instrument overheads and simulate required observing conditions, preparation must begin weeks in advance of the deadline.
2. **Phase I (The Pitch):** Submission of the formal Scientific and Technical Justifications. Modern Phase I submissions are often bifurcated: an anonymized PDF containing the core science case, and a secondary, non-anonymous digital form detailing the team's expertise and target lists. PIs must strictly adhere to provided templates (typically strictly limiting the science justification to exactly two or three pages). Any deviation from formatting guidelines (e.g., altering margins or font sizes to squeeze in more text) is considered disrespectful to the panel and is grounds for immediate administrative rejection.
3. **TAC Review and The Triage Process:** The Time Allocation Committee (TAC) or Observing Programmes Committee (OPC) grades the proposals. Crucially, pan-

elists evaluate between 60 and 80 proposals in a single cycle. Because reviewers must fit these evaluations around their demanding primary academic responsibilities, they can typically dedicate only 15 to 20 minutes to read and grade each proposal. To handle the immense volume of submissions, the review process begins with panelists thoroughly reading and assigning preliminary grades to every proposal prior to the meeting. Because major observatories operate under intense oversubscription rates, the evaluation is fiercely competitive. In such a high-stakes environment, a weak, poorly justified, or poorly formatted proposal will inevitably receive a low grade. During the live panel meetings, the committee focuses its limited and precious face-to-face time on rigorously debating the scientific merits of the most highly competitive and borderline cases to finalize the ultimate rankings. Regardless of a project's final standing, the Principal Investigator (PI) will always receive formal written feedback synthesized from the committee's comprehensive evaluations to help them improve future submissions.

4. **Dual-Anonymous Peer Review (DAPR):** Historically, proposal success rates revealed systemic biases that disproportionately favored established, senior researchers and Principal Investigators affiliated with highly prestigious institutions. To eliminate this bias and ensure that time is allocated strictly based on scientific merit rather than an author's reputation or institutional resources, modern observatories strictly utilize DAPR. The identities and affiliations of the proposing team are completely hidden from the reviewers, and vice versa.

    - *Stylistic Shift:* Proposals must be written meticulously in the third person to avoid deanonymization. Instead of writing *"As we demonstrated in Smith et al. (2022),"* authors must objectively state *"As demonstrated by Smith et al. (2022)."*
    - *Strict Penalties:* Observatories employ dedicated policy groups to monitor DAPR compliance. Major violations result in immediate and final disqualification. Examples of these violations include claiming ownership of proprietary datasets (for instance, writing *"We will combine this with our unpublished Keck spectra"*), adding grant funding acknowledgments, or providing links to preprints that reveal author identities.

5. **Phase II (Execution Plan):** If a proposal survives triage, passes the TAC, and is awarded time, the PI enters Phase II. The PI must construct detailed Observing Blocks (OBs) using dedicated observatory software (e.g., Gemini Observing Tool). This is a rigid, programmatic phase specifying exact guide stars, dither patterns, instrument configurations, and calibration protocols for Service Mode (queue) execution. Phase II locks in the science: you cannot arbitrarily change targets or drastically alter the instrument setup from what was approved by the TAC in Phase I without formal approval from the Observatory Director. Furthermore, if the Phase II OBs request more stringent weather conditions (e.g., better seeing or less cloud cover) than what the TAC originally approved, the observatory will reject the blocks.

2.2 Anatomy of a Phase I Proposal: Writing for the Reviewer

A standard Phase I proposal is brutally page-limited (typically 3 to 5 pages) and must instantly captivate an exhausted reviewer who is likely an astrophysicist, but *not* necessarily an expert in your specific sub-field.

A. The Abstract (The Punchline)
The abstract is arguably the most critical component of the entire proposal. It is the *only* paragraph guaranteed to be read by every single panel member. It must immediately summarize the "Big Picture", explicitly state the open question, and deliver the core scientific punchline. Many reviewers will form their baseline grade entirely on the clarity and excitement generated by this single paragraph.

B. Scientific Justification (The "Why") A successful scientific justification tells a consistent, complete, and thrilling story without relying on dense, hyper-specific jargon.

- **The Immediate Impact:** You must clearly define the broader context, but more importantly, aggressively isolate the specific sub-problem. You must explicitly answer the TAC's primary question: *Why this target, with this exact instrument, right now?* Vague fishing expeditions ("we will observe this to see what we find") will not survive triage.
- **Sample Size Justification:** Every single hour requested must be defended mathematically. If you are requesting observations of 30 stars to test a rotatonal decay law, you must explain exactly why 15 stars are statistically insufficient, and why 60 stars are unnecessary.
- **The "Killer" Figure:** Successful proposals invariably feature a meticulously crafted, highly aesthetic figure on the first page. For example, a low-resolution spectrum demonstrating the deficiency of current archival data boldly overlaid with a simulated model of what the proposed high-resolution observation will unequivocally resolve.

C. Technical Justification (The "How") The TAC will immediately discard a Nobel-worthy scientific idea if the technical execution is flawed, inefficient, or physically impossible.

- **Rigorous SNR Proof:** You must definitively prove that the requested exposure time will yield the exact Signal-to-Noise Ratio (SNR) required to achieve the stated science goals. PIs cannot guess; they must use official Exposure Time Calculators (ETCs) to model target brightness, extended source geometry, and required atmospheric seeing.
- **Comprehensive Overheads:** A rigorous proposal accounts for everything beyond the raw shutter-open integration time. This includes target visibility, airmass constraints, lunar phase (requesting "dark time" for faint optical targets vs. "bright time" for infrared), and all instrument overheads (CCD readout time, telescope slewing, active optics corrections).

- **Facility Match:** You must justify why you need *this specific telescope*. Requesting time on an 8-meter or 10-meter class facility for a project that could technically be accomplished on a 4-meter telescope is an automatic rejection.

2.3 Best Practices and Post-Observation Protocols

Writing a highly competitive proposal requires extreme attention to observatory policies and strategic planning.

- **The Archival Duplication Check:** Before writing a single word, you are ethically and formally required to thoroughly search the relevant observatory data archives. If your requested data (or data of similar quality) already exists and is public, your proposal will be flagged as a duplicate and rejected.
- **Language and Formatting:** Proposals must be exceptionally easy to read. For non-native English speakers, recent literature highly recommends utilizing modern Large Language Models (LLMs) strictly to polish grammar and improve sentence flow, ensuring the reviewer remains focused on the astrophysics rather than struggling with the prose.
- **The Observer's Comment Sheet:** The responsibility of the PI does not end when the telescope dome closes. Following a successful observing run, observers are strongly urged to submit formal feedback to the observatory. Providing detailed notes on what hardware worked and what software failed is the primary mechanism by which observatories improve their multi-million-dollar infrastructure for the entire community.

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These course notes were refined with the assistance of Gemini 3.1 Pro. Unless otherwise cited, all figures were generated using this tool.
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