

32

Electrostatics

Chapter 32 is divided into seven sections:

- 32.1 Electrical Forces and Charges
- 32.2 Conservation of Charge
- 32.3 Coulomb's Law
- 32.4 Conductors and Insulators
- 32.5 Charging by Friction and Contact
- 32.6 Charging by Induction
- 32.7 Charge Polarization

After a brief overview of Unit V and an introduction to the study of electricity, this chapter develops the fundamentals of static electricity. Ways of changing the electric charge on objects are also discussed.

Show the videotape "Electrostatics" from the series *Conceptual Physics with Hewitt*.

Electricity in one form or another underlies just about everything around you. It's in the lightning from the sky; it's in the spark beneath your feet when you scuff across a rug; and it's what holds atoms together to form molecules. The control of electricity is evident in technological devices of many kinds, from lamps to computers. In this technological age it is important to have an understanding of how the basics of electricity can be manipulated to give people a prosperity that was unknown before recent times.

This chapter is about **electrostatics**, or electricity at rest. Electrostatics involves electric charges, the forces between them, and their behavior in materials. The next chapter is about the aura that surrounds electric charges—the *electric field*. Chapters 34 and 35 cover moving electric charges, or *electric currents*; the voltages that produce them; and the ways that currents can be controlled. Finally, Chapters 36 and 37 cover the relationship of electric currents to magnetism, and how electricity and magnetism can be controlled to operate motors and other electrical devices.

An understanding of electricity requires a step-by-step approach, for one concept is the building block for the next, and so on. So please put in extra care in the study of this material. It is a good idea at this time to lean more heavily on the laboratory part of your course, for *doing* physics is better than only studying physics. If you're hasty, the physics of electricity and magnetism can be difficult, confusing, and lead to frustration. But with careful effort, it can be comprehensible and rewarding.

32.1 Electrical Forces and Charges

You are familiar with the force of gravity. It attracts you to the earth, and you call it your weight. Now consider a force acting on you that is billions upon billions of times stronger. Such a force should compress you to a size about the thickness of a piece of paper. But suppose that in addition to this enormous force there were a repelling force that is also billions upon billions of times stronger than gravity. The two forces acting on you would balance each other and have no noticeable effect at all. It so happens that there is a pair of such forces acting on you all the time—**electrical forces**.

Electrical forces arise from particles in atoms. In the simple model of the atom proposed about 70 years ago by Ernest Rutherford and Niels Bohr, a nucleus containing protons and neutrons is surrounded by electrons (Figure 32-2). The protons in the nucleus attract the electrons and hold them in orbit, just as the sun holds the planets in orbit. Electrons are attracted to protons, but electrons repel other electrons. This attracting and repelling behavior is attributed to a property called **charge**.^{*} By convention (general agreement), electrons are *negatively* charged and protons *positively* charged. Neutrons have no charge, and are neither attracted nor repelled by charged particles.

Some important facts about atoms are:

1. Every atom has a positively charged nucleus surrounded by negatively charged electrons.
2. All electrons are identical; that is, each has the same mass and the same quantity of negative charge.
3. The nucleus is composed of protons and neutrons. (The

^{*} Why don't protons pull the oppositely charged electrons into the nucleus? According to Bohr's model of the atom, the electrons are not pulled into the nucleus for the same reason that the earth is not pulled into the sun by gravitational force. That is, the electrons are in motion and overshoot the nucleus but are held in orbit by the pull of the protons. This explanation is very oversimplified but serves as a starter for understanding the electrical nature of the atom. You will learn a very different explanation if you continue your study of physics. You will learn to visualize the electron as a wave rather than an orbiting particle. This is *quantum physics*, which is discussed very briefly in Chapter 38.

Why is it that the protons in the nucleus do not mutually repel and fly apart? What holds the nucleus together? The answer is that in addition to electrical forces in the nucleus, there are even **greater** forces that are nonelectrical in nature. These are *nuclear forces* and are discussed in Chapter 39.

Important Terms

charge
electrical force
electrostatics

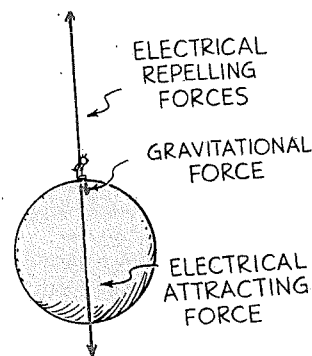


Fig. 32-1 The enormous attractive and repulsive electrical forces between the charges in the earth and the charges in your body balance each other out, leaving the relatively weaker force of gravity, which attracts only. Hence your weight is due only to gravity.

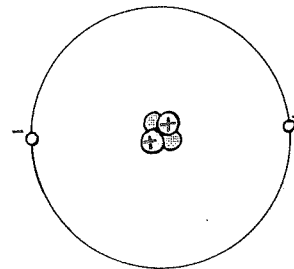


Fig. 32-2 Model of a helium atom. The helium nucleus is composed of two protons and two neutrons. The positively charged protons attract two negative electrons.

Demonstration: To show that like charges repel, crank up a Van de Graaff generator with a dozen aluminum ten-inch pie pans resting upside-down on top of the generator's sphere. The weight of the pans above any pan is greater than the force of repulsion between the pans, and they remain on the sphere—except the pan on the top. Since no pan is holding the top pan down, it floats off. The second pan from the top becomes the top pan, and it floats off. This continues until all the pans have flown off. The students usually laugh and applaud when the last one floats off. It is one of those demos that makes the class shout, "Do it again!"

Demonstration: Amaze the class with a Kelvin water dropper. How to make and operate this clever device may be found in "The Kelvin Water Dropper" in *The Physics Teacher*, November 1984, p. 516.

Experiment: "Electrostatics with Soft-Drink Cans" is an article that shows how to devise cheap experiments for studying static electricity. It can be found in *The Physics Teacher*, September 1984, p. 396.

common form of hydrogen, which has no neutrons, is the only exception.) All protons are identical; similarly, all neutrons are identical. A proton has nearly 2000 times the mass of an electron but its positive charge is equal in magnitude to the negative charge of the electron. A neutron has slightly greater mass than a proton and has no charge.

4. Atoms usually have as many electrons as protons, so the atom has zero *net* charge.

Nobody knows *why* electrons repel electrons and are attracted to protons. At this point we simply say that this is nature as we find it, and since we don't have a deeper understanding of it, we say it is fundamental, or basic. The fundamental rule at the base of all electrical phenomena is:

Like charges repel; opposite charges attract.

The old saying that opposites attract, usually referring to people, was first popularized by public lecturers who traveled about by horse and wagon, entertaining people by demonstrating the scientific marvels of electricity. An important part of these demonstrations was the charging and discharging of pith balls. Pith is a light, spongy plant tissue that resembles Styrofoam, and balls of it were coated with aluminum paint so their surfaces would conduct electricity. When suspended from a silk thread, such a ball would be attracted to a rubber rod just rubbed with cat's fur, but when the two made contact, the force of attraction would change to a force of repulsion. Thereafter, the ball would be repelled by the rubber rod but attracted to a glass rod that had just been rubbed with silk. A pair of pith balls charged in different ways exhibited both attraction and repulsion forces (Figure 32-3). The lecturer pointed out that nature provides two kinds of charge, just as it provides two sexes.

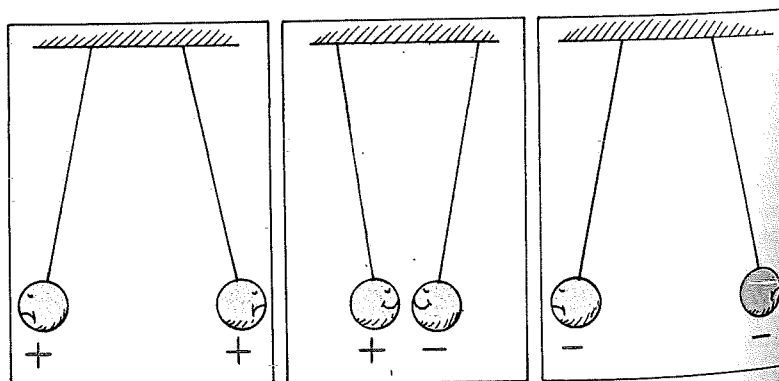


Fig. 32-3 Likes repel and opposites attract.

► Questions

1. Beneath the complexities of electrical phenomena, there lies a fundamental rule from which nearly all other effects stem. What is this fundamental rule?
2. How does the charge of an electron differ from the charge of a proton?

32.2 Conservation of Charge

Electrons and protons have electric charge. In a neutral atom, there are as many electrons as protons, so there is no net charge. The total positive charge balances the total negative charge exactly. If an electron is removed from an atom, the atom is no longer neutral. The atom has one more positive charge (proton) than negative charge (electron) and is said to be positively charged.

A charged atom is called an *ion*. A *positive ion* has a net positive charge; it has lost one or more electrons. A *negative ion* has a net negative charge; it has gained one or more extra electrons.

Matter is made of atoms, and atoms are made of electrons and protons (and neutrons as well). An object that has equal numbers of electrons and protons has no net electric charge. But if there is an imbalance in the numbers, the object is then electrically charged. An imbalance comes about by adding or removing electrons from an object.

Although the innermost electrons in an atom are bound very tightly to the oppositely charged atomic nucleus, the outermost electrons of many atoms are bound very loosely and can be easily dislodged. How much force is required to tear an electron away from an atom varies for different substances. The electrons are held more firmly in rubber than in fur, for example. Hence, when a rubber rod is rubbed by a piece of fur, electrons transfer from the fur to the rubber rod. The rubber then has an excess of electrons and is negatively charged. The fur, in turn, has a deficiency of electrons and is positively charged. If you rub a glass or plastic rod with silk, you'll find that the rod becomes positively charged. The silk has a greater affinity for electrons than the glass

Important Term

conservation of charge

Point out to the students who have had chemistry that these definitions apply to the ions they studied.

Student might become confused about the idea that more electrons make more negative charge. They usually think "excess" is positive and "take away" is negative. Emphasize that, since the electron is negative, adding negatives results in a less positive number.

Demonstrate the transfer of electrons. One demo is worth a thousand words.

► Answers

1. Like charges repel; opposite charges attract.
2. The charge of an electron is equal in magnitude, but opposite in sign.



Fig. 32-4 Electrons are transferred from the fur to the rod. The rod is then negatively charged. Is the fur charged? Positively or negatively?

You might want to “refresh the students’ memory” on the concepts of conservation of energy and momentum.

or plastic rod. Electrons are rubbed off the rod and onto the silk. In summary:

An object that has unequal numbers of electrons and protons is electrically charged. If it has more electrons than protons, the object is negatively charged. If it has fewer electrons than protons, then it is positively charged.

Notice that electrons are neither created nor destroyed but simply transferred from one material to another. Charge is conserved. In every event, whether large-scale or at the atomic and nuclear level, the principle of **conservation of charge** applies. No case of the creation or destruction of net electric charge has ever been found. The conservation of charge is a cornerstone in physics, and ranks with the conservation of energy and momentum.

Any object that is electrically charged has an excess or deficiency of some number of electrons. This means that the charge of the object is therefore a whole-number multiple of the charge of an electron. It cannot have a charge equal to the charge of $1\frac{1}{2}$ or $1000\frac{1}{2}$ electrons, for example.* All charged objects to date have a charge that is a whole-number multiple of the charge of a single electron.

► **Question**

If you scuff electrons from your feet while walking across a rug, are you negatively or positively charged?

32.3 Coulomb’s Law

Important Terms

coulomb
Coulomb’s law

Recall from Newton’s law of gravitation that the gravitational force between two objects of mass m_1 and mass m_2 is proportional to the product of the masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance d between them:

► **Answer**

You have fewer electrons after you scuff your feet, so you are positively charged (and the rug is negatively charged).

* Within the atomic nucleus, however, elemental charges equal to $\frac{1}{3}$ the electron charge are associated with elemental particles called *quarks*. The charge of three quarks equals the charge of one proton or electron. Since quarks have never been found separated, the whole-number-multiple rule of electron charge holds for nuclear processes as well.

32.3 Coulomb's Law

$$F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{d^2}$$

where G is the universal gravitational constant.

The electrical force between any two objects obeys a similar inverse-square relationship with distance. This relationship was discovered by the French physicist Charles Coulomb (1736–1806) in the eighteenth century. **Coulomb's law** states that for charged particles or objects that are small compared to the distance between them, the force between the charges varies directly as the product of the charges and inversely as the square of the distance between them. The role that charge plays in electrical phenomena is much like the role that mass plays in gravitational phenomena. Coulomb's law can be expressed as:

$$F = k \frac{q_1 q_2}{d^2}$$

where d is the distance between the charged particles; q_1 represents the quantity of charge of one particle and q_2 the quantity of charge of the other particle; and k is the proportionality constant.

The SI unit of charge is the **coulomb**, abbreviated C. Common sense might say that it is the charge of a single electron, but it isn't. For historical reasons, it turns out that a charge of 1 C is the charge of 6.25 billion billion (6.25×10^{18}) electrons. This might seem like a great number of electrons, but it represents only the amount of charge that passes through a common 100-W light bulb in about one second.

The proportionality constant k in Coulomb's law is similar to G in Newton's law of gravitation. Instead of being a very small number like G , the electrical proportionality constant k is a very large number. Rounded off, it equals

$$k = 9\,000\,000\,000 \text{ N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{C}^2$$

or, in scientific notation, $k = 9.0 \times 10^9 \text{ N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{C}^2$. The units $\text{N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{C}^2$ convert the right-hand side of the equation to the unit of force, the newton (N), when the charges are in coulombs (C) and the distance is in meters (m). Note that if a pair of charges of 1 C each were 1 m apart, the force of repulsion between the two charges would be 9 billion newtons.* That would be about ten times the weight of a battleship! Obviously, such amounts of *net* charge do not exist in our everyday environment.

* Contrast this to the gravitational force of attraction between two masses of 1 kg each a distance 1 m apart: 6.67×10^{-11} N. This is an extremely small force. For the force to be 1 N, two masses 1 m apart would have to be about 8 million kilograms each! Gravitational forces between ordinary objects are much too small to be detected except in delicate experiments. Electrical forces (noncancelled) between ordinary objects are large enough to be commonly experienced.

Show the PSSC film "Coulomb's Law." Although dated, this film is excellent. Eric Rogers' beautiful scientific philosophy is seen throughout the film. It can be rented from Indiana University, Audio-Visual Center, Bloomington, IN 47401.

Demonstration: Show the class the enormous difference in strength between the forces of electricity and gravity. Use a charged comb to pick up a confetti-sized piece of paper. Now elaborate on what has happened. The huge earth with its gravitational force is pulling down on the paper. The small electric charge on the comb is pulling up on the paper. We have the huge earth vs. the small charge on the comb. It seems that the underdog, electricity, won. Stress that this is not true. The underdog is gravity, which is a billion, billion times weaker than electricity. (The purist will notice that the force of electricity had the extra advantage of the smaller distance since both forces follow the inverse-square law.)

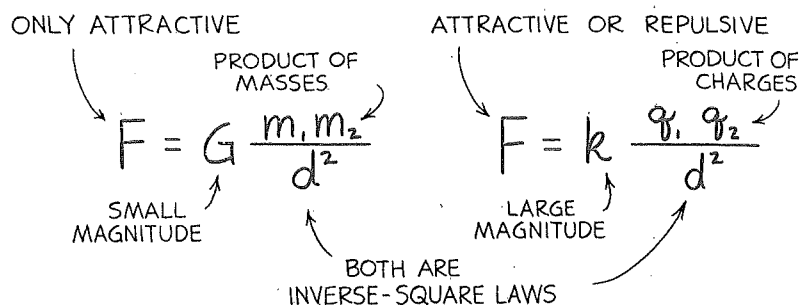


Fig. 32-5 Comparison of Newton's law of gravitation and Coulomb's law.

So Newton's law of gravitation for masses is similar to Coulomb's law for electric charges.* Whereas the gravitational force of attraction between a pair of one-kilogram masses is extremely small, the electrical force between a pair of one-coulomb charges is extremely large. The greatest difference between gravitation and electrical forces is that while gravity only attracts, electrical forces may either attract or repel.

Because most objects have equal numbers of electrons and protons, electrical forces usually balance out. Any electrical

► Questions

1. What is the chief significance of the fact that G in Newton's law of gravitation is a small number and k in Coulomb's law is a large number?
2. a. If an electron at a certain distance from a charged particle is attracted with a certain force, how will the force compare at twice this distance?
b. Is the charged particle in this case positive or negative?

► Answers

1. The small value of G indicates that gravity is a weak force; the large value of k indicates that the electrical force is enormous in comparison.
2. a. In accord with the inverse-square law, at twice the distance the force will be one fourth as much.
b. Since there is a force of attraction, the charges must be opposite in sign, so the charged particle is positive.

* The similarities between these two forces have made some physicists think they may be different aspects of the same thing. Albert Einstein was one of these people; he spent the later part of his life searching with little success for a "unified field theory." In recent years, the electrical force has been unified with the *weak force*, which plays a role in radioactive decay. Physicists are still looking for a way to unify electrical and gravitational forces.

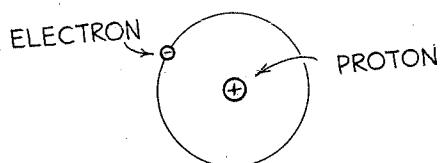
32.3 Coulomb's Law

forces between the earth and the moon, for example, are balanced. In this way the much weaker gravitational force, which attracts only, is the predominant force between astronomical bodies.

Although electrical forces balance out for astronomical and everyday objects, at the atomic level this is not always true. The negative electrons of one atom may at times be closer to the positive protons of a neighboring atom than to the electrons of the neighbor. Then the attractive force between these charges is greater than the repulsive force. When the net attraction is sufficiently strong, atoms combine to form molecules. The chemical bonding forces that hold atoms together to form molecules are electrical forces acting in small regions where the balances of attractive and repelling forces is not perfect. It makes good sense for anyone planning to study chemistry to know something about electricity.

Computational Example

The hydrogen atom has the simplest structure of all atoms. Its nucleus is a proton (mass 1.7×10^{-27} kg), outside of which there is a single electron (mass 9.1×10^{-31} kg) at an average separation distance of 5.3×10^{-11} m. Compare the electrical and gravitational forces between the proton and the electron in a hydrogen atom.



To solve for the electrical force, simply substitute the appropriate values in Coulomb's law.

$$\text{distance } d = 5.3 \times 10^{-11} \text{ m}$$

$$\text{proton charge } q_p = +1.6 \times 10^{-19} \text{ C}$$

$$\text{electron charge } q_e = -1.6 \times 10^{-19} \text{ C}$$

The electric force F_e is:

$$F_e = k \frac{q_e q_p}{d^2}$$

$$= (9.0 \times 10^9 \text{ N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{C}^2) \frac{(1.6 \times 10^{-19} \text{ C})^2}{(5.3 \times 10^{-11} \text{ m})^2}$$

$$= 8.2 \times 10^{-8} \text{ N}$$

(continued)

The gravitational force F_g between them is:

$$\begin{aligned}
 F_g &= G \frac{m_c m_p}{d^2} \\
 &= (6.7 \times 10^{-11} \text{ N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{kg}^2) \frac{(9.1 \times 10^{-31} \text{ kg})(1.7 \times 10^{-27} \text{ kg})}{(5.3 \times 10^{-11} \text{ m})^2} \\
 &= 3.7 \times 10^{-47} \text{ N}
 \end{aligned}$$

A comparison of the two forces is best shown by their ratio:

$$\frac{F_e}{F_g} = \frac{8.2 \times 10^{-8} \text{ N}}{3.7 \times 10^{-47} \text{ N}} = 2.2 \times 10^{39}$$

The electrical force is more than 10^{39} times greater than the gravitational force. In other words, the electric forces which subatomic particles exert on one another are so much stronger than their mutual gravitational forces that gravitation can be completely neglected.

32.4 Conductors and Insulators

Important Terms

conductor
insulator
semiconductor
superconductor

Electrons are more easily moved in some materials than in others. Outer electrons of the atoms in a metal are not anchored to the nuclei of particular atoms, but are free to roam in the material. Such materials are good **conductors**. Metals are good conductors for the motion of electric charges for the same reason they are good conductors of heat; Their electrons are "loose."

Electrons in other materials—rubber and glass, for example—are tightly bound and remain with particular atoms. They are not free to wander about to other atoms in the material. These materials are poor conductors of electricity; for the same reason they are generally poor conductors of heat. Such materials are good **insulators**.

All substances can be arranged in order of their ability to conduct electric charges. Those at the top of the list are the conductors, and those at the bottom are the insulators. The ends of the list are very far apart. The conductivity of a metal, for example, can be more than a million trillion times greater than the conductivity of an insulator such as glass. In a power line, charge flows much more easily through hundreds of kilometers of metal wire than through the few centimeters of insulating material that separates the wire from the supporting tower. In a common appliance cord, charges will flow through several meters of wire to the appliance, and then through its electrical network, and then back through the return wire rather than flow directly

32.5 Charging by Friction and Contact

across from one wire to the other through the tiny thickness of rubber insulation.

Whether a substance is classified as a conductor or an insulator depends on how tightly the atoms of the substance hold their electrons. Some materials, such as germanium and silicon, are good insulators in their pure crystalline form but increase tremendously in conductivity when even one atom in ten million is replaced with an impurity that adds or removes an electron from the crystal structure. These materials can be made to behave sometimes as insulators and sometimes as conductors. Such materials are **semiconductors**. Thin layers of semiconducting materials sandwiched together make up *transistors*, which are used in a variety of electrical applications. How transistors and other semiconductor devices work will not be covered in this book.

At temperatures near absolute zero, certain metals acquire near infinite conductivity. That is, charge flows through them completely freely. These metals are **superconductors**. Once electric current is established in a superconductor, the electrons will flow indefinitely. Why certain materials become superconducting at low temperatures has to do with the wave nature of matter (quantum mechanics) and is still being studied.

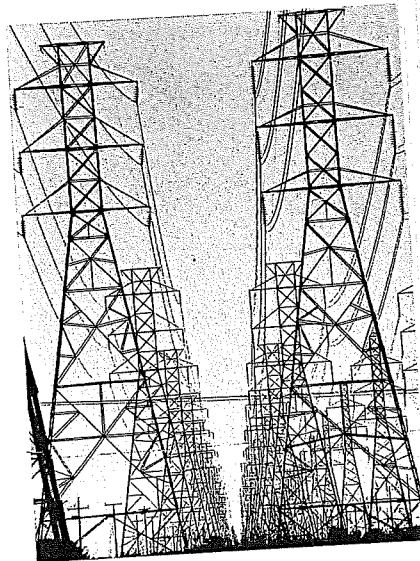


Fig. 32-6 It is easier for electric charge to flow through hundreds of kilometers of metal wire than through a few centimeters of insulating material.

32.5 Charging by Friction and Contact

We are all familiar with the electrical effects produced by friction. We can stroke a cat's fur and hear the crackle of sparks that are produced, or comb our hair in front of a mirror in a dark room and see as well as hear the sparks of electricity. We can scuff our shoes across a rug and feel the tingle as we reach for the doorknob, or do the same when sliding across plastic seat covers while parked in an automobile (Figure 32-7). In all these cases electrons are being transferred by friction when one material rubs against another.

Demonstration: In a completely darkened room, quickly pull the tape off a roll of friction tape in a way such that the class can see where the tape leaves the roll. The students should see sparks.

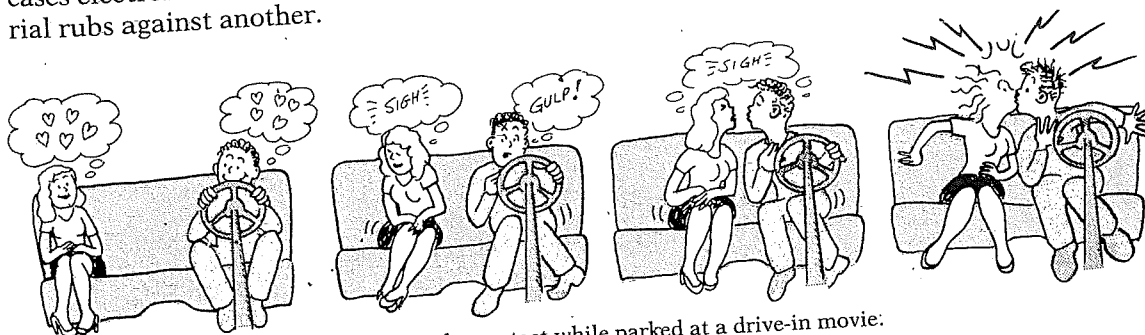


Fig. 32-7 Charging by friction and then by contact while parked at a drive-in movie.

Demonstrate charging by contact.

Electrons can be transferred from one material to another by simply touching. When a charged rod is placed in contact with a neutral object, some charge will transfer to the neutral object. This method of charging is simply called *charging by contact*. If the object is a good conductor, the charge will spread to all parts of its surface because the like charges repel each other. If it is a poor conductor, it may be necessary to touch the rod at several places on the object in order to get a more or less uniform distribution of charge.

32.6 Charging by Induction

Important Terms

grounding
induced
induction

Demonstrate charging by induction.

If we bring a charged object *near* a conducting surface, even without physical contact, electrons will move in the conducting surface. Consider the two insulated metal spheres, A and B, in Figure 32-8. In sketch *a*, the uncharged spheres touch each other, so in effect they form a single noncharged conductor. In sketch *b*, a negatively charged rod is near sphere A. Electrons in the metal are repelled by the rod, and excess negative charge has moved onto sphere B, leaving sphere A with excess positive charge. The charge on the two spheres has been redistributed. A charge is said to have been **induced** on the spheres. In sketch *c*, spheres A and B are separated while the rod is still present. In sketch *d*, the rod has been removed. The spheres are charged equally and oppositely. They have been charged by **induction**. Since the charged rod never touched them, it retains its initial charge.

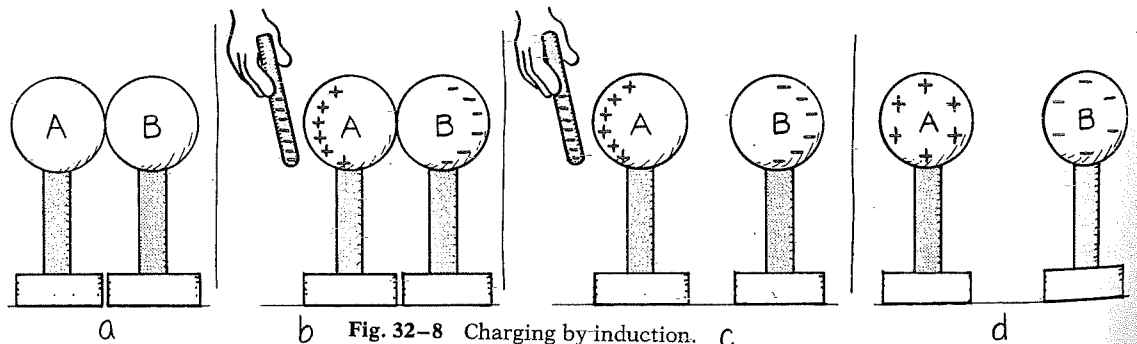


Fig. 32-8 Charging by induction.

A single sphere can be charged similarly if we touch it when the charges are separated by induction. Consider a metal sphere that hangs from a nonconducting string, as shown in Figure 32-9. In sketch *a*, the net charge on the metal sphere is zero. In sketch *b*, a charge redistribution is induced by the presence of

32.6 Charging by Induction

the charged rod. The net charge on the sphere is still zero. In sketch *c*, touching the negative side of the sphere removes electrons by contact. In sketch *d*, the sphere is left positively charged. In sketch *e*, the sphere is attracted to the negative rod; it swings over to it and touches it. Now electrons move onto the sphere from the rod. The sphere has been negatively charged by contact. In sketch *f*, the negative sphere is repelled by the negative rod.

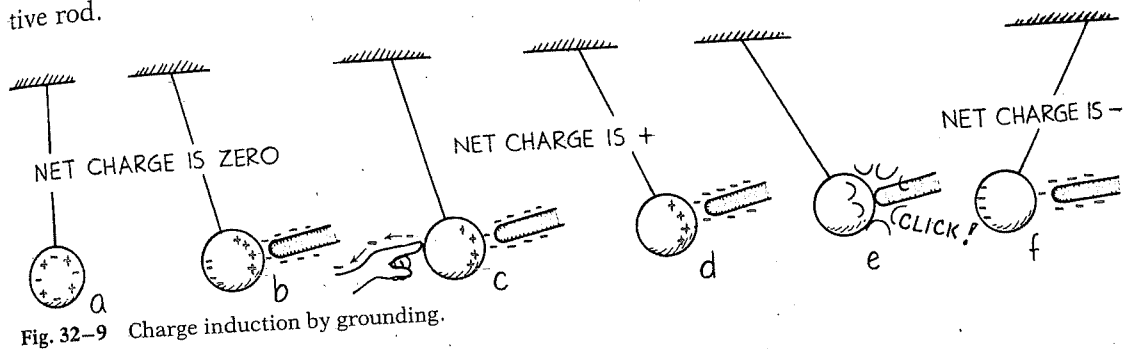


Fig. 32-9 Charge induction by grounding.

When we touch the charged part of the metal surface with a finger (sketch *c*), charges that repel each other have a conducting path to a practically infinite reservoir for electric charge—the ground. When we allow charges to move off (or onto) a conductor by touching it, it is common to say that we are **grounding** it. Chapter 34 returns to this idea of grounding in the discussion of electric currents.

► Questions

1. Would the charges induced on spheres A and B of Figure 32-8 necessarily be exactly equal and opposite?
2. Why does the negative rod in Figure 32-8 have the same charge before and after the spheres are charged, but not when charging takes place as in Figure 32-9?

► Answers

1. The charges must be equal and opposite on both spheres, because each single positive charge on sphere A is the result of a single electron being taken from A and moved to B. This is like taking bricks from the surface of a brick road and putting them all on the sidewalk. The number of bricks on the sidewalk will be exactly matched by the number of holes in the road. Similarly, the number of extra electrons on sphere B will exactly match the number of "holes" (positive charges) left in sphere A. Remember that a positive charge is the absence of an electron.
2. In the charging process of Figure 32-8, no contact was made between the negative rod and either of the spheres. In the charging process of Figure 32-9, however, the rod touched the sphere when it was positively charged. A transfer of charge by contact reduced the negative charge on the rod.

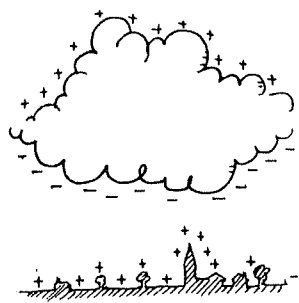


Fig. 32-10 The bottom of the negatively-charged cloud induces a positive charge at the surface of the ground below.

Charging by induction occurs during thunderstorms. The negatively charged bottoms of clouds induce a positive charge on the surface of the earth below. Benjamin Franklin was the first to demonstrate this in his famous kite-flying experiment, in which he proved that lightning is an electrical phenomenon.* Most lightning is an electrical discharge between oppositely charged parts of clouds. The kind we are most familiar with is the electrical discharge between the clouds and the oppositely charged ground below.

Franklin also found that charge leaks off sharp points, and fashioned the first lightning rod. If the rod is placed above a structure connected to the ground, charge leaks off instead of building up due to induction. This continual leaking of charge prevents a charge buildup that would otherwise lead to a sudden discharge between the cloud and the ground. The primary purpose of the lightning rod, then, is to prevent a lightning discharge from occurring. If for any reason sufficient charge does not leak off the rod, and lightning strikes anyway, it will be attracted to the rod and shortcircuited to the ground, thereby sparing the structure.

32.7 Charge Polarization

Important Term
electrically polarized

Charging by induction is not restricted to conductors. When a charged rod is brought near an insulator, there are no free electrons to migrate throughout the insulating material. Instead, there is a rearrangement of the positions of charges within the atoms and molecules themselves (Figure 32-11 left). One side of the atom or molecule is induced to be slightly more positive (or negative) than the opposite side. The atom or molecule is said to be **electrically polarized**. If the charged rod is negative, say, then the positive side of the atom or molecule is toward the rod, and the negative side of the atom or molecule is toward the rod, and the atoms or molecules near the surface all become aligned this way (Figure 32-11 right).

* Benjamin Franklin was most fortunate that he was not electrocuted as were others who attempted to duplicate his experiment. In addition to being a great statesman, Franklin was a first-rate scientist. He introduced the terms *positive* and *negative* as they relate to electricity and established the "one-fluid theory" of electric currents. He also contributed to our understanding of grounding and insulation. As Franklin approached the height of his scientific career, a more compelling task was presented to him—helping to form the system of government of the newly independent United States. A less important undertaking would not have kept him from spending more of his energies on his favorite activity—the scientific investigation of nature.

32.7 Charge Polarization

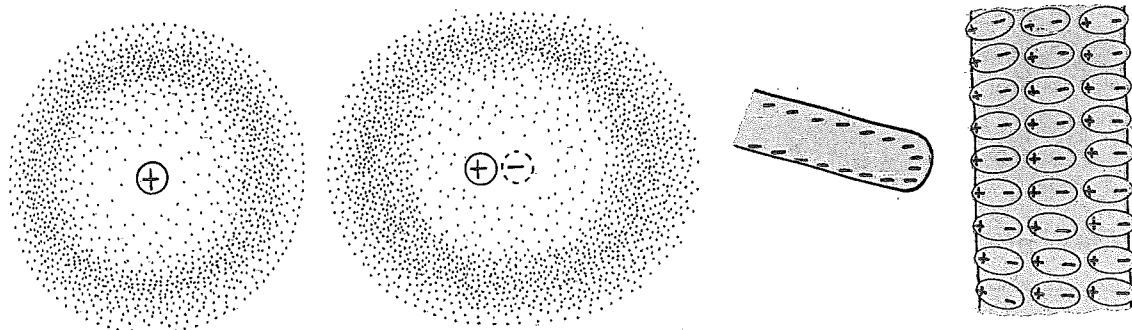


Fig. 32-11 (Left) When an external negative charge is brought closer from the left, the charges within a neutral atom or molecule rearrange so that the left-hand side is slightly more positive and the right-hand side is slightly more negative. (Right) All the atoms or molecules near the surface become electrically polarized.

This explains why electrically neutral bits of paper are attracted to a charged object. Molecules are polarized in the paper, with the oppositely-charged sides of molecules closest to the charged object. Closeness wins, and the bits of paper experience a net attraction. Sometimes they will cling to the charged object and suddenly fly off. This indicates that charging by contact has occurred; the paper bits have acquired the same sign of charge as the charged object and are then repelled.

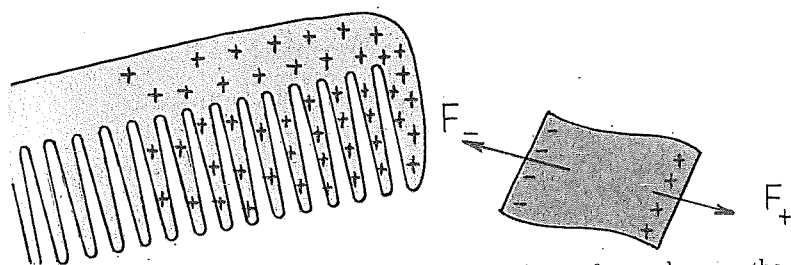


Fig. 32-12 A charged comb attracts an uncharged piece of paper because the force of attraction for the closer charge is greater than the force of repulsion for the farther charge. Closeness wins, and there is a net attraction.

Rub an inflated balloon on your hair and it becomes charged. Place the balloon against the wall and it sticks. This is because the charge on the balloon induces an opposite surface charge on the wall. Closeness wins, for the charge on the balloon is slightly closer to the opposite induced charge than to the charge of same sign (Figure 32-13).

Many molecules— H_2O for example—are electrically polarized in their normal states. The distribution of electric charge is not perfectly even. There is a little more negative charge on one side of the molecule than on the other (Fig. 32-14). Such molecules are said to be *electric dipoles*.

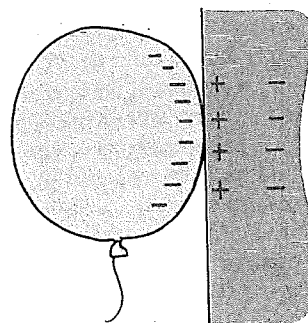


Fig. 32-13 The negatively charged balloon polarizes molecules in the wooden wall and creates a positively charged surface, so the balloon sticks to the wall.

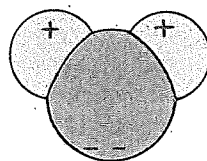


Fig. 32-14 An H_2O molecule is an electric dipole.