



PRESENTATION AT

RIVER CITY
AMATEUR RADIO
SOCIETY MEETING

AUGUST 7, 2007

BY G M AMTHOR



What Is Electricity?

Electricity figures everywhere in our lives. Electricity lights up our homes, cooks our food, powers our computers, television sets, and other electronic devices. Electricity from batteries keeps our cars running and makes our flashlights shine in the dark.

Here's something you can do to see the importance of electricity. Take a walk through your school, house or apartment and write down all the different appliances, devices and machines that use electricity. You'll be amazed at how many things we use each and every day that depend on electricity.

But what is electricity? Where does it come from? How does it work? Before we understand all that, we need to know a little bit about atoms and their structure.

All matter is made up of atoms, and atoms are made up of smaller particles. The three main particles making up an atom are the proton, the neutron and the electron.

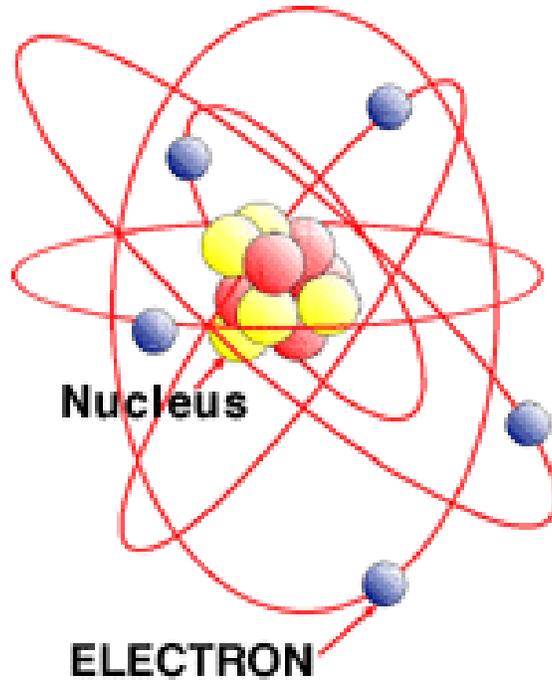
Electrons spin around the center, or nucleus, of atoms, in the same way the moon spins around the earth. The nucleus is made up of neutrons and protons.

Electrons contain a negative charge, protons a positive charge. Neutrons are neutral — they have neither a positive nor a negative charge.

There are many different kinds of atoms, one for each type of element. An atom is a single part that makes up an element. There are 118 different known elements that make up every thing! Some elements like oxygen we breathe are essential to life.

Each atom has a specific number of electrons, protons and neutrons. But no matter how many particles an atom has, the number of electrons usually needs to be the same as the number of protons. If the numbers are the same, the atom is called balanced, and it is very stable.

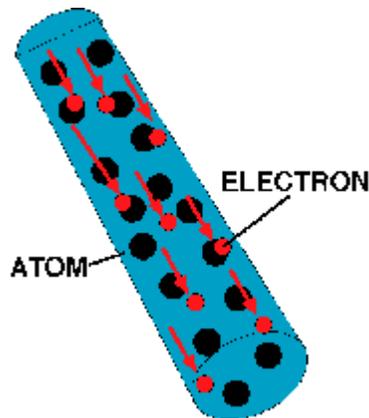
So, if an atom had six protons, it should also have six electrons. The element with six protons and six electrons is called carbon. Carbon is found in abundance in the sun, stars, comets, atmospheres of most planets, and the food we eat. Coal is made of carbon; so are diamonds



Some kinds of atoms have loosely attached electrons. An atom that loses electrons has more protons than electrons and is positively charged. An atom that gains electrons has more negative particles and is negatively charged. A "charged" atom is called an "ion."

Electrons can be made to move from one atom to another. When those electrons move between the atoms, a current of electricity is created. The electrons move from one atom to another in a "flow." One electron is attached and another electron is lost.

This chain is similar to the fire fighter's bucket brigades in olden times. But instead of passing one bucket from the start of the line of people to the other end, each person would have a bucket of water to pour from one bucket to another. The result was a lot of spilled water and not enough water to douse the fire. It is a situation that's very similar to electricity passing along a wire and a circuit. The charge is passed from atom to atom when electricity is "passed."



Scientists and engineers have learned many ways to move electrons off of atoms. That means that when you add up the electrons and protons, you would wind up with one more proton instead of being balanced.

Since all atoms want to be balanced, the atom that has been “unbalanced” will look for a free electron to fill the place of the missing one. We say that this unbalanced atom has a “positive charge” (+) because it has too many protons.

Since it got kicked off, the free electron moves around waiting for an unbalanced atom to give it a home. The free electron charge is negative, and has no proton to balance it out, so we say that it has a “negative charge” (-).

So what do positive and negative charges have to do with electricity?

Scientists and engineers have found several ways to create large numbers of positive atoms and free negative electrons. Since positive atoms want negative electrons so they can be balanced, they have a strong attraction for the electrons. The electrons also want to be part of a balanced atom, so they have a strong attraction to the positive atoms. So, the positive attracts the negative to balance out.

The more positive atoms or negative electrons you have, the stronger the attraction for the other. Since we have both positive and negative charged groups attracted to each other, we call the total attraction “charge.” When electrons move among the atoms of matter, a current of electricity is created. This is what happens in a piece of wire. The electrons are passed from atom to atom, creating an electrical current from one end to other, just like in the picture.

Electricity is conducted through some things better than others do. Its resistance measures how well something conducts electricity. Some things hold their electrons very tightly. Electrons do not move through them very well. These things are called insulators. Rubber, plastic, cloth, glass and dry air are good insulators and have very high resistance.

Other materials have some loosely held electrons, which move through them very easily. These are called conductors. Most metals — like copper, aluminum or steel — are good conductors.

Where Does the Word ‘Electricity’ Come From?

Electrons, electricity, electronic and other words that begin with “electr...” all originate from the Greek word “elektor,” meaning “beaming sun.” In Greek, “elektron” is the word for amber.

Amber is a very pretty goldish brown “stone” that sparkles orange and yellow in sunlight. Amber is actually fossilized tree sap! It’s the stuff used in the movie “Jurassic Park.” Millions of years ago insects got stuck in the tree sap. Small insects which had bitten the dinosaurs, had blood with DNA from the dinosaurs in the insect’s bodies, which were now fossilized in the amber.

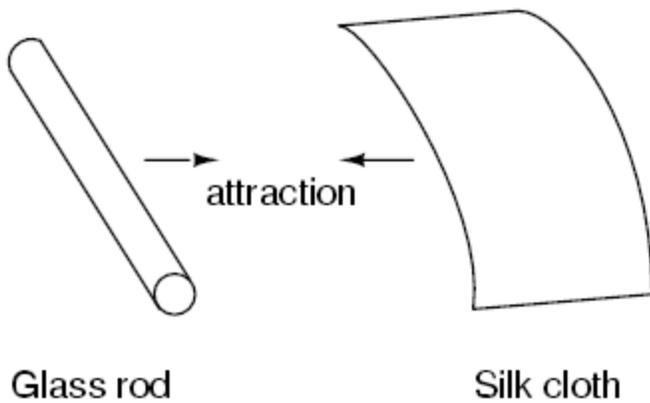
Ancient Greeks discovered that amber behaved oddly - like attracting feathers - when rubbed by fur or other objects. They didn’t know what it was that caused this phenomenon. But the Greeks had discovered one of the first examples of static electricity.

*The Latin word, **electricus**, means to “produce from amber by friction.”*

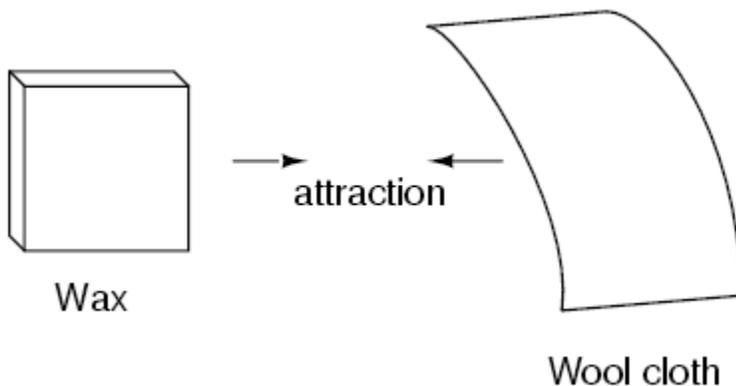
So, we get our English word electricity from Greek and Latin words that were about amber.

Static electricity

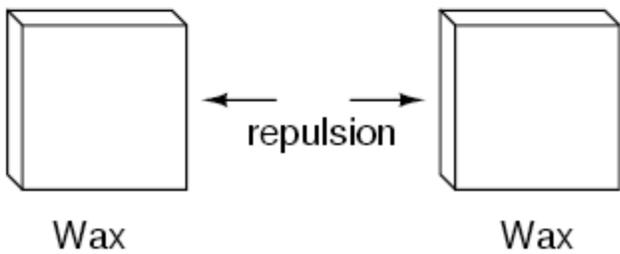
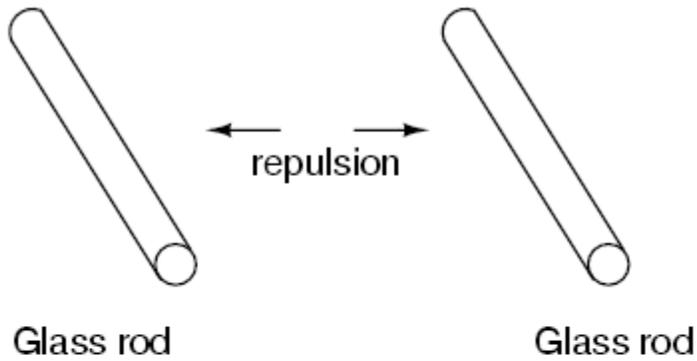
It was discovered centuries ago that certain types of materials would mysteriously attract one another after being rubbed together. For example: after rubbing a piece of silk against a piece of glass, the silk and glass would tend to stick together. Indeed, there was an attractive force that could be demonstrated even when the two materials were separated:



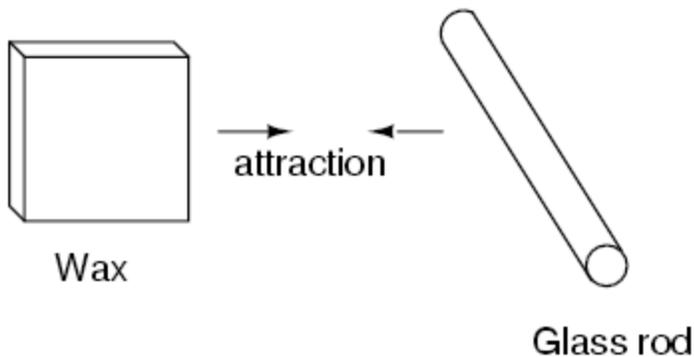
Glass and silk aren't the only materials known to behave like this. Anyone who has ever brushed up against a latex balloon only to find that it tries to stick to them has experienced this same phenomenon. Paraffin wax and wool cloth are another pair of materials early experimenters recognized as manifesting attractive forces after being rubbed together:



This phenomenon became even more interesting when it was discovered that identical materials, after having been rubbed with their respective cloths, always repelled each other:

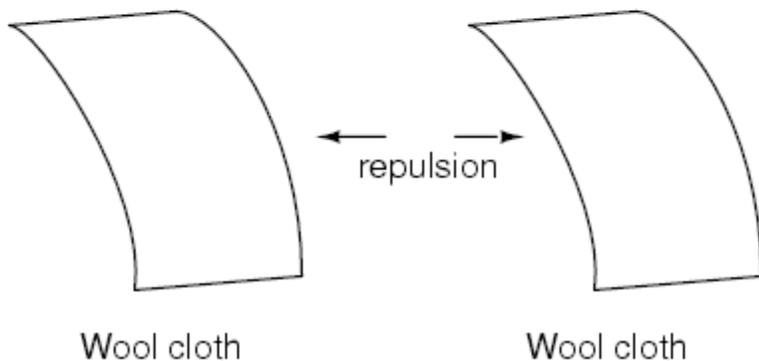
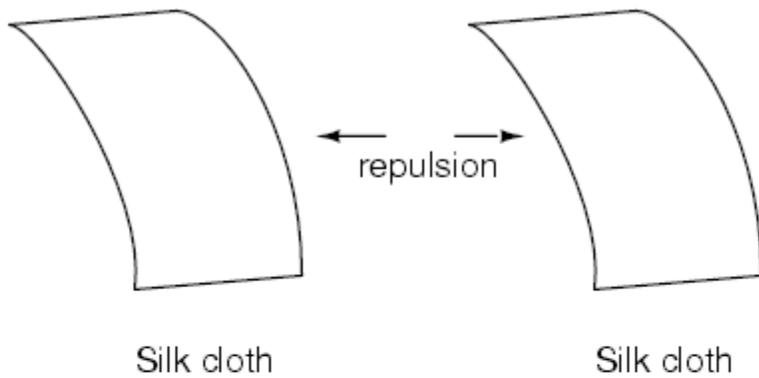


It was also noted that when a piece of glass rubbed with silk was exposed to a piece of wax rubbed with wool, the two materials would attract one another:



Furthermore, it was found that any material demonstrating properties of attraction or repulsion after being rubbed could be classed into one of two distinct categories: attracted to glass and repelled by wax, or repelled by glass and attracted to wax. It was either one or the other: there were no materials found that would be attracted to or repelled by both glass and wax, or that reacted to one without reacting to the other.

More attention was directed toward the pieces of cloth used to do the rubbing. It was discovered that after rubbing two pieces of glass with two pieces of silk cloth, not only did the glass pieces repel each other, but so did the cloths. The same phenomenon held for the pieces of wool used to rub the wax:



Now, this was really strange to witness. After all, none of these objects were visibly altered by the rubbing, yet they definitely behaved differently than before they were rubbed. Whatever change took place to make these materials attract or repel one another was invisible.

Some experimenters speculated that invisible “fluids” were being transferred from one object to another during the process of rubbing, and that these “fluids” were able to effect a physical force over a distance. Charles Dufay was one of the early experimenters who demonstrated that there were definitely two different types of changes wrought by rubbing certain pairs of objects together. The fact that there was more than one type of change manifested in these materials was evident by the fact that there were two types of forces produced: *attraction* and *repulsion*. The hypothetical fluid transfer became known as a *charge*.

One pioneering researcher, Benjamin Franklin, came to the conclusion that there was only one fluid exchanged between rubbed objects, and that the two different “charges” were nothing more than either an excess or a deficiency of that one fluid. After experimenting with wax and wool, Franklin suggested that the coarse wool removed some of this invisible fluid from the smooth wax, causing an excess of fluid on the wool and a deficiency of fluid on the wax. The resulting disparity in fluid content between the wool and wax would then cause an attractive force, as the fluid tried to regain its former balance between the two materials.

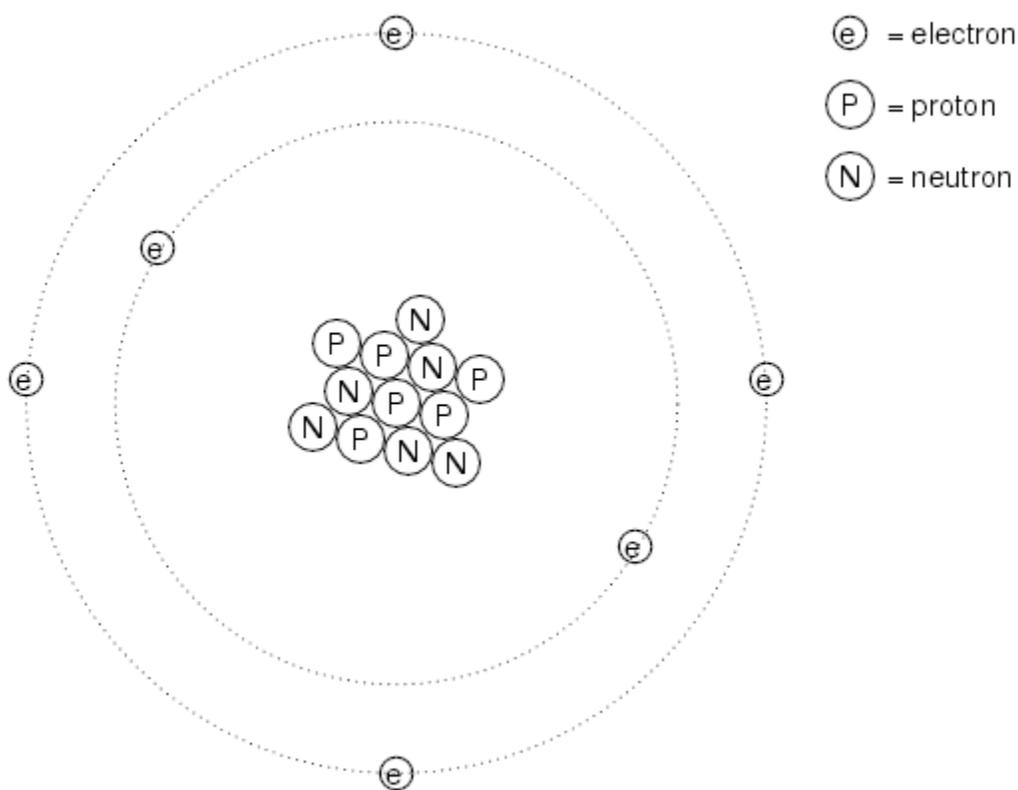
Postulating the existence of a single “fluid” that was either gained or lost through rubbing accounted best for the observed behavior: that all these materials fell neatly into one of two categories when rubbed, and most importantly, that the two active materials rubbed against each other *always fell into opposing categories* as evidenced by their invariable attraction to one another. In other words, there was never a time where two materials rubbed against each other *both* became either positive or negative.

Following Franklin’s speculation of the wool rubbing something off of the wax, the type of charge that was associated with rubbed wax became known as “negative” (because it was supposed to have a deficiency of fluid) while the type of charge

associated with the rubbing wool became known as “positive” (because it was supposed to have an excess of fluid). Little did he know that his innocent conjecture would cause much confusion for students of electricity in the future!

Precise measurements of electrical charge were carried out by the French physicist Charles Coulomb in the 1780’s using a device called a *torsional balance* measuring the force generated between two electrically charged objects. The results of Coulomb’s work led to the development of a unit of electrical charge named in his honor, the *coulomb*. If two “point” objects (hypothetical objects having no appreciable surface area) were equally charged to a measure of 1 coulomb, and placed 1 meter (approximately 1 yard) apart, they would generate a force of about 9 billion newtons (approximately 2 billion pounds), either attracting or repelling depending on the types of charges involved.

It was discovered much later that this “fluid” was actually composed of extremely small bits of matter called *electrons*, so named in honor of the ancient Greek word for amber: another material exhibiting charged properties when rubbed with cloth. Experimentation has since revealed that all objects are composed of extremely small “building-blocks” known as *atoms*, and that these atoms are in turn composed of smaller components known as *particles*. The three fundamental particles comprising atoms are called *protons*, *neutrons*, and *electrons*. Atoms are far too small to be seen, but if we could look at one, it might appear something like this:



Even though each atom in a piece of material tends to hold together as a unit, there’s actually a lot of empty space between the electrons and the cluster of protons and neutrons residing in the middle.

This crude model is that of the element carbon, with six protons, six neutrons, and six electrons. In any atom, the protons and neutrons are very tightly bound together, which is an important quality. The tightly-bound clump of protons and neutrons in the center of the atom is called the *nucleus*, and the number of protons in an atom’s nucleus determines its elemental identity: change the number of protons in an atom’s nucleus, and you change the type of atom that it is. In fact, if you could remove three protons from the nucleus of an atom of lead, you will have achieved the old alchemists’ dream of producing an atom of gold! The tight binding of protons in the nucleus is responsible for the stable identity of chemical elements, and the failure of alchemists to achieve their dream.

Neutrons are much less influential on the chemical character and identity of an atom than protons, although they are just as hard to add to or remove from the nucleus, being so tightly bound. If neutrons are added or gained, the atom will still retain

the same chemical identity, but its mass will change slightly and it may acquire strange *nuclear* properties such as radioactivity.

However, electrons have significantly more freedom to move around in an atom than either protons or neutrons. In fact, they can be knocked out of their respective positions (even leaving the atom entirely!) by far less energy than what it takes to dislodge particles in the nucleus. If this happens, the atom still retains its chemical identity, but an important imbalance occurs. Electrons and protons are unique in the fact that they are attracted to one another over a distance. It is this attraction over distance which causes the attraction between rubbed objects, where electrons are moved away from their original atoms to reside around atoms of another object.

Electrons tend to repel other electrons over a distance, as do protons with other protons. The only reason protons bind together in the nucleus of an atom is because of a much stronger force called the *strong nuclear force* which has effect only under very short distances. Because of this attraction/repulsion behavior between individual particles, electrons and protons are said to have opposite electric charges. That is, each electron has a negative charge, and each proton a positive charge. In equal numbers within an atom, they counteract each other's presence so that the net charge within the atom is zero. This is why the picture of a carbon atom had six electrons: to balance out the electric charge of the six protons in the nucleus. If electrons leave or extra electrons arrive, the atom's net electric charge will be imbalanced, leaving the atom "charged" as a whole, causing it to interact with charged particles and other charged atoms nearby. Neutrons are neither attracted to or repelled by electrons, protons, or even other neutrons, and are consequently categorized as having no charge at all.

The process of electrons arriving or leaving is exactly what happens when certain combinations of materials are rubbed together: electrons from the atoms of one material are forced by the rubbing to leave their respective atoms and transfer over to the atoms of the other material. In other words, electrons comprise the "fluid" hypothesized by Benjamin Franklin. The operational definition of a coulomb as the unit of electrical charge (in terms of force generated between point charges) was found to be equal to an excess or deficiency of about 6,250,000,000,000,000 electrons. Or, stated in reverse terms, one electron has a charge of about 0.000000000000000016 coulombs. Being that one electron is the smallest known carrier of electric charge, this last figure of charge for the electron is defined as the *elementary charge*.

The result of an imbalance of this "fluid" (electrons) between objects is called *static electricity*. It is called "static" because the displaced electrons tend to remain stationary after being moved from one material to another. In the case of wax and wool, it was determined through further experimentation that electrons in the wool actually transferred to the atoms in the wax, which is exactly opposite of Franklin's conjecture! In honor of Franklin's designation of the wax's charge being "negative" and the wool's charge being "positive," electrons are said to have a "negative" charging influence. Thus, an object whose atoms have received a surplus of electrons is said to be *negatively* charged, while an object whose atoms are lacking electrons is said to be *positively* charged, as confusing as these designations may seem. By the time the true nature of electric "fluid" was discovered, Franklin's nomenclature of electric charge was too well established to be easily changed, and so it remains to this day.

• **REVIEW:**

- All materials are made up of tiny "building blocks" known as *atoms*.
- All atoms contain particles called *electrons*, *protons*, and *neutrons*.
- Electrons have a negative (-) electric charge.
- Protons have a positive (+) electric charge.
- Neutrons have no electric charge.
- Electrons can be dislodged from atoms much easier than protons or neutrons.
- The number of protons in an atom's nucleus determines its identity as a unique element.

Conductors, insulators, and electron flow

The electrons of different types of atoms have different degrees of freedom to move around. With some types of materials, such as metals, the outermost electrons in the atoms are so loosely bound that they chaotically move in the space between the atoms of that material by nothing more than the influence of room-temperature heat energy. Because these virtually unbound electrons are free to leave their respective atoms and float around in the space between adjacent atoms, they are often called *free electrons*.

In other types of materials such as glass, the atoms' electrons have very little freedom to move around. While external forces such as physical rubbing can force some of these electrons to leave their respective atoms and transfer to the atoms of another material, they do not move between atoms within that material very easily.

This relative mobility of electrons within a material is known as electric *conductivity*. Conductivity is determined by the types of atoms in a material (the number of protons in each atom's nucleus, determining its chemical identity) and how the atoms are linked together with one another. Materials with high electron mobility (many free electrons) are called *conductors*, while materials with low electron mobility (few or no free electrons) are called *insulators*.

Here are a few common examples of conductors and insulators:

- **Conductors:**

- silver
- copper
- gold
- aluminum
- iron
- steel
- brass
- bronze
- mercury
- graphite
- dirty water
- concrete

- **Insulators:**

- glass
- rubber
- oil
- asphalt
- fiberglass
- porcelain
- ceramic
- quartz
- (dry) cotton
- (dry) paper
- (dry) wood
- plastic
- air
- diamond
- pure water

It must be understood that not all conductive materials have the same level of conductivity, and not all insulators are equally resistant to electron motion. Electrical conductivity is analogous to the transparency of certain materials to light: materials that easily "conduct" light are called "transparent," while those that don't are called "opaque." However, not all transparent materials are equally conductive to light. Window glass is better than most plastics, and certainly better than "clear" fiberglass. So it is with electrical conductors, some being better than others.

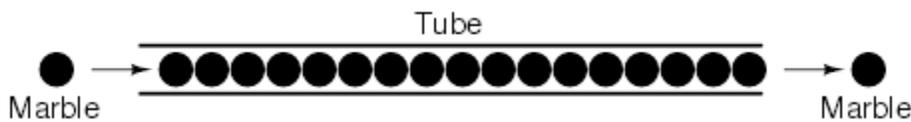
For instance, silver is the best conductor in the "conductors" list, offering easier passage for electrons than any other material cited. Dirty water and concrete are also listed as conductors, but these materials are substantially less conductive than any metal.

Physical dimension also impacts conductivity. For instance, if we take two strips of the same conductive material — one thin and the other thick — the thick strip will prove to be a better conductor than the thin for the same length. If we take another pair of strips — this time both with the same thickness but one shorter than the other — the shorter one will offer easier passage to electrons than the long one. This is analogous to water flow in a pipe: a fat pipe offers easier passage than a skinny pipe, and a short pipe is easier for water to move through than a long pipe, all other dimensions being equal.

It should also be understood that some materials experience changes in their electrical properties under different conditions. Glass, for instance, is a very good insulator at room temperature, but becomes a conductor when heated to a very high temperature. Gases such as air, normally insulating materials, also become conductive if heated to very high temperatures. Most metals become poorer conductors when heated, and better conductors when cooled. Many conductive materials become perfectly conductive (this is called *superconductivity*) at extremely low temperatures.

While the normal motion of “free” electrons in a conductor is random, with no particular direction or speed, electrons can be influenced to move in a coordinated fashion through a conductive material. This uniform motion of electrons is what we call *electricity*, or *electric current*. To be more precise, it could be called *dynamic* electricity in contrast to *static* electricity, which is an unmoving accumulation of electric charge. Just like water flowing through the emptiness of a pipe, electrons are able to move within the empty space within and between the atoms of a conductor. The conductor may appear to be solid to our eyes, but any material composed of atoms is mostly empty space! The liquid-flow analogy is so fitting that the motion of electrons through a conductor is often referred to as a “flow.”

A noteworthy observation may be made here. As each electron moves uniformly through a conductor, it pushes on the one ahead of it, such that all the electrons move together as a group. The starting and stopping of electron flow through the length of a conductive path is virtually instantaneous from one end of a conductor to the other, even though the motion of each electron may be very slow. An approximate analogy is that of a tube filled end-to-end with marbles:

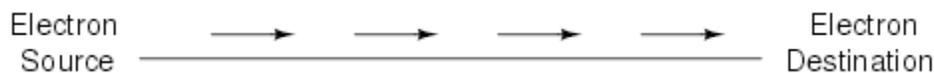


The tube is full of marbles, just as a conductor is full of free electrons ready to be moved by an outside influence. If a single marble is suddenly inserted into this full tube on the left-hand side, another marble will immediately try to exit the tube on the right. Even though each marble only traveled a short distance, the transfer of motion through the tube is virtually instantaneous from the left end to the right end, no matter how long the tube is. With electricity, the overall effect from one end of a conductor to the other happens at the speed of light: a swift 186,000 miles per second!!! Each individual electron, though, travels through the conductor at a *much* slower pace.

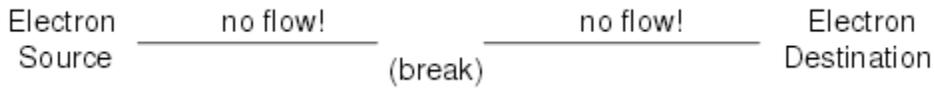
If we want electrons to flow in a certain direction to a certain place, we must provide the proper path for them to move, just as a plumber must install piping to get water to flow where he or she wants it to flow. To facilitate this, *wires* are made of highly conductive metals such as copper or aluminum in a wide variety of sizes.

Remember that electrons can flow only when they have the opportunity to move in the space between the atoms of a material. This means that there can be electric current *only* where there exists a continuous path of conductive material providing a conduit for electrons to travel through. In the marble analogy, marbles can flow into the left-hand side of the tube (and, consequently, through the tube) if and only if the tube is open on the right-hand side for marbles to flow out. If the tube is blocked on the right-hand side, the marbles will just “pile up” inside the tube, and marble “flow” will not occur. The same holds true for electric current: the continuous flow of electrons requires there be an unbroken path to permit that flow. Let’s look at a diagram to illustrate how this works:

A thin, solid line (as shown above) is the conventional symbol for a continuous piece of wire. Since the wire is made of a conductive material, such as copper, its constituent atoms have many free electrons which can easily move through the wire. However, there will never be a continuous or uniform flow of electrons within this wire unless they have a place to come from and a place to go. Let’s add an hypothetical electron “Source” and “Destination:”

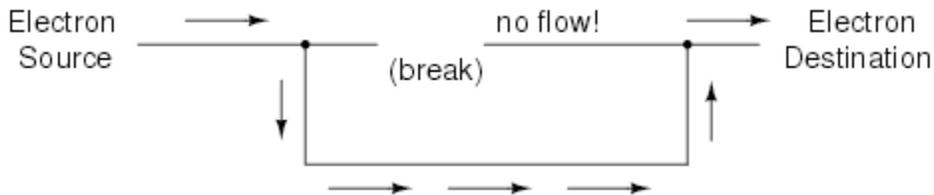


Now, with the Electron Source pushing new electrons into the wire on the left-hand side, electron flow through the wire can occur (as indicated by the arrows pointing from left to right). However, the flow will be interrupted if the conductive path formed by the wire is broken:



Since air is an insulating material, and an air gap separates the two pieces of wire, the once-continuous path has now been broken, and electrons cannot flow from Source to Destination. This is like cutting a water pipe in two and capping off the broken ends of the pipe: water can't flow if there's no exit out of the pipe. In electrical terms, we had a condition of electrical *continuity* when the wire was in one piece, and now that continuity is broken with the wire cut and separated.

If we were to take another piece of wire leading to the Destination and simply make physical contact with the wire leading to the Source, we would once again have a continuous path for electrons to flow. The two dots in the diagram indicate physical (metal-to-metal) contact between the wire pieces:



Now, we have continuity from the Source, to the newly-made connection, down, to the right, and up to the Destination. This is analogous to putting a “tee” fitting in one of the capped-off pipes and directing water through a new segment of pipe to its destination. Please take note that the broken segment of wire on the right hand side has no electrons flowing through it, because it is no longer part of a complete path from Source to Destination.

It is interesting to note that no “wear” occurs within wires due to this electric current, unlike water-carrying pipes which are eventually corroded and worn by prolonged flows. Electrons do encounter some degree of friction as they move, however, and this friction can generate heat in a conductor. This is a topic we'll explore in much greater detail later.

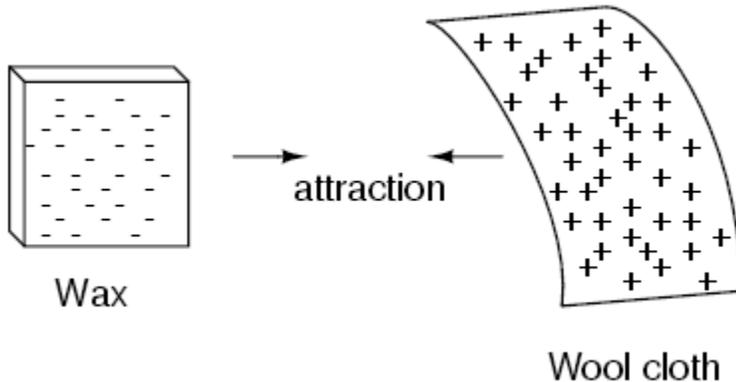
• **REVIEW:**

- In *conductive* materials, the outer electrons in each atom can easily come or go, and are called *free electrons*.
- In *insulating* materials, the outer electrons are not so free to move.
- All metals are electrically conductive.
- *Dynamic electricity*, or *electric current*, is the uniform motion of electrons through a conductor. *Static electricity* is an unmoving, accumulated charge formed by either an excess or deficiency of electrons in an object.
- For electrons to flow continuously (indefinitely) through a conductor, there must be a complete, unbroken path for them to move both into and out of that conductor.

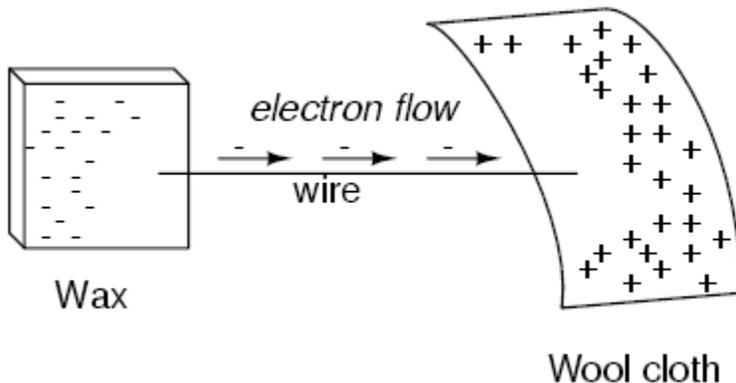
Voltage and current

As was previously mentioned, we need more than just a continuous path (circuit) before a continuous flow of electrons will occur: we also need some means to push these electrons around the circuit. Just like marbles in a tube or water in a pipe, it takes some kind of influencing force to initiate flow. With electrons, this force is the same force at work in static electricity: the force produced by an imbalance of electric charge.

If we take the examples of wax and wool which have been rubbed together, we find that the surplus of electrons in the wax (negative charge) and the deficit of electrons in the wool (positive charge) creates an imbalance of charge between them. This imbalance manifests itself as an attractive force between the two objects:

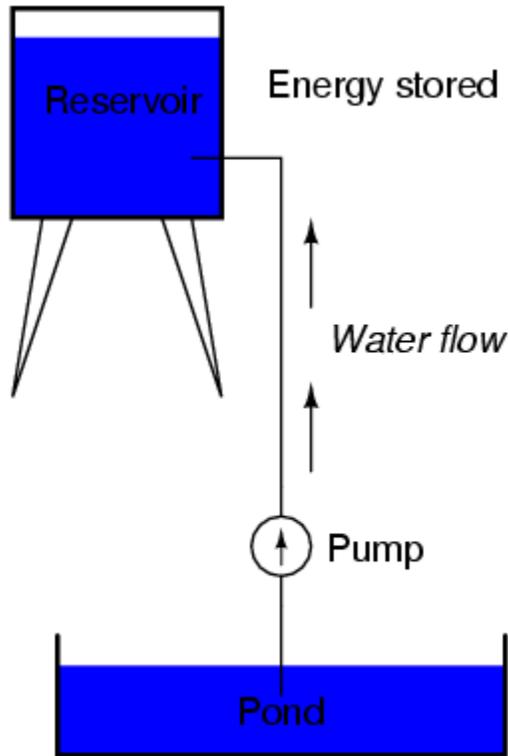


If a conductive wire is placed between the charged wax and wool, electrons will flow through it, as some of the excess electrons in the wax rush through the wire to get back to the wool, filling the deficiency of electrons there:

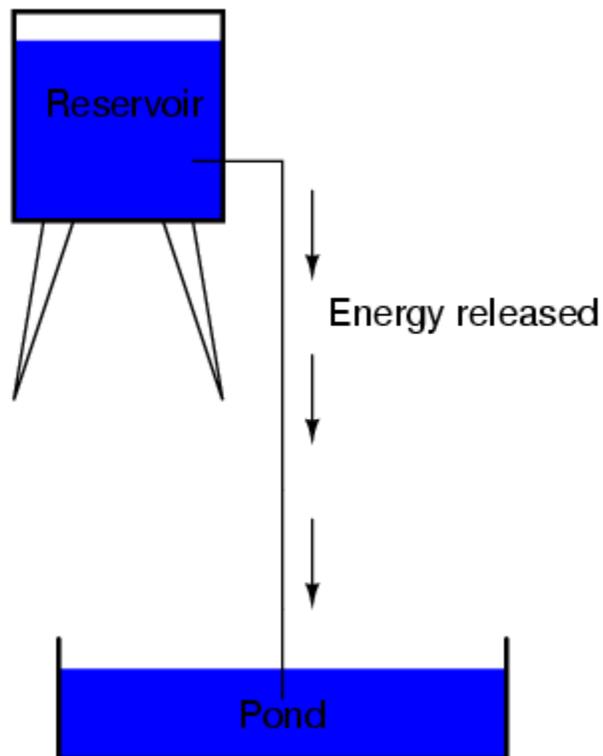


The imbalance of electrons between the atoms in the wax and the atoms in the wool creates a force between the two materials. With no path for electrons to flow from the wax to the wool, all this force can do is attract the two objects together. Now that a conductor bridges the insulating gap, however, the force will provoke electrons to flow in a uniform direction through the wire, if only momentarily, until the charge in that area neutralizes and the force between the wax and wool diminishes.

The electric charge formed between these two materials by rubbing them together serves to store a certain amount of energy. This energy is not unlike the energy stored in a high reservoir of water that has been pumped from a lower-level pond:

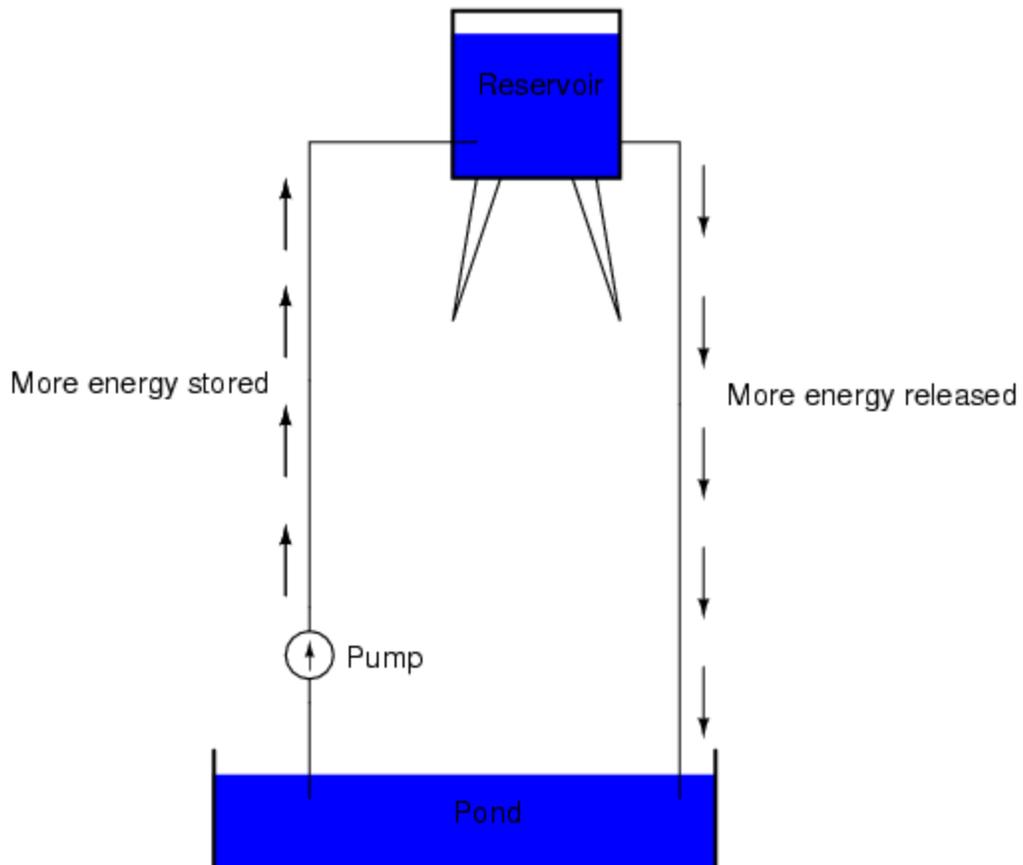
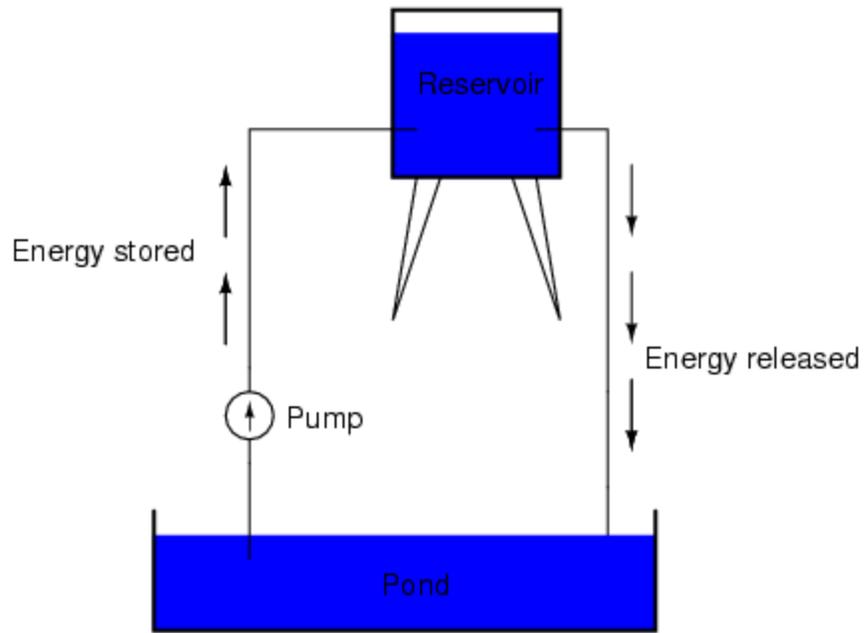


The influence of gravity on the water in the reservoir creates a force that attempts to move the water down to the lower level again. If a suitable pipe is run from the reservoir back to the pond, water will flow under the influence of gravity down from the reservoir, through the pipe:



It takes energy to pump that water from the low-level pond to the high-level reservoir, and the movement of water through the piping back down to its original level constitutes a releasing of energy stored from previous pumping.

If the water is pumped to an even higher level, it will take even more energy to do so, thus more energy will be stored, and more energy released if the water is allowed to flow through a pipe back down again:



Electrons are not much different. If we rub wax and wool together, we “pump” electrons away from their normal “levels,” creating a condition where a force exists between the wax and wool, as the electrons seek to re-establish their former positions (and balance within their respective atoms). The force attracting electrons back to their original positions around the positive nuclei of their atoms is analogous to the force gravity exerts on water in the reservoir, trying to draw it down to its former level.

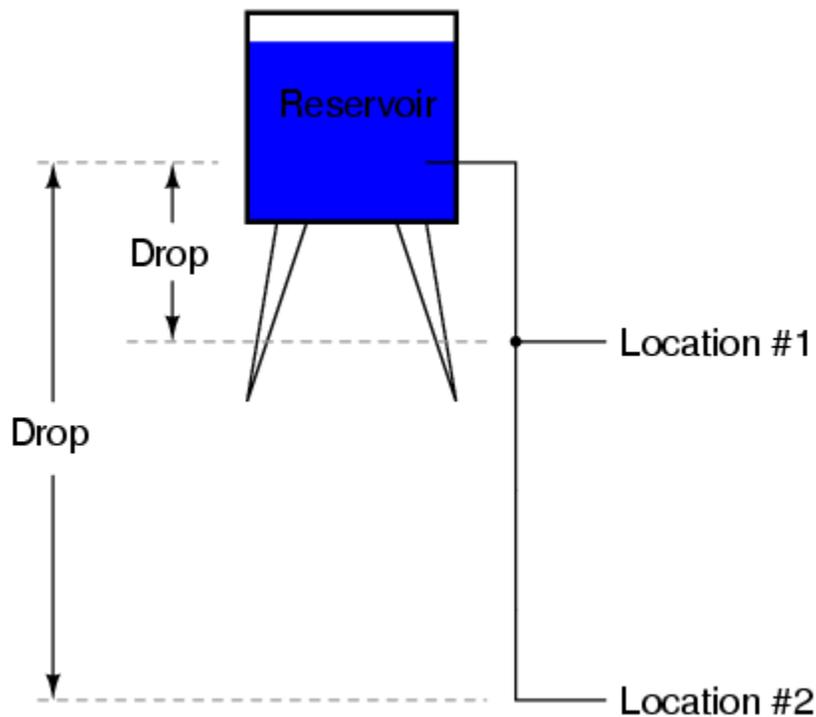
Just as the pumping of water to a higher level results in energy being stored, “pumping” electrons to create an electric charge imbalance results in a certain amount of energy being stored in that imbalance. And, just as providing a way for water to flow back down from the heights of the reservoir results in a release of that stored energy, providing a way for electrons to flow back to their original “levels” results in a release of stored energy.

:registers

When the electrons are poised in that static condition (just like water sitting still, high in a reservoir), the energy stored there is called *potential energy*, because it has the possibility (potential) of release that has not been fully realized yet. When you scuff your rubber-soled shoes against a fabric carpet on a dry day, you create an imbalance of electric charge between yourself and the carpet. The action of scuffing your feet stores energy in the form of an imbalance of electrons forced from their original locations. This charge (static electricity) is stationary, and you won’t realize that energy is being stored at all. However, once you place your hand against a metal doorknob (with lots of electron mobility to neutralize your electric charge), that stored energy will be released in the form of a sudden flow of electrons through your hand, and you will perceive it as an electric shock!

This potential energy, stored in the form of an electric charge imbalance and capable of provoking electrons to flow through a conductor, can be expressed as a term called *voltage*, which technically is a measure of potential energy per unit charge of electrons, or something a physicist would call *specific potential energy*. Defined in the context of static electricity, voltage is the measure of work required to move a unit charge from one location to another, against the force which tries to keep electric charges balanced. In the context of electrical power sources, voltage is the amount of potential energy available (work to be done) per unit charge, to move electrons through a conductor.

Because voltage is an expression of potential energy, representing the possibility or potential for energy release as the electrons move from one “level” to another, it is always referenced between two points. Consider the water reservoir analogy:

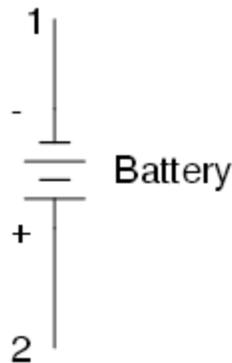


Because of the difference in the height of the drop, there’s potential for much more energy to be released from the reservoir through the piping to location 2 than to location 1. The principle can be intuitively understood in dropping a rock: which

results in a more violent impact, a rock dropped from a height of one foot, or the same rock dropped from a height of one mile? Obviously, the drop of greater height results in greater energy released (a more violent impact). We cannot assess the amount of stored energy in a water reservoir simply by measuring the volume of water any more than we can predict the severity of a falling rock's impact simply from knowing the weight of the rock: in both cases we must also consider how *far* these masses will drop from their initial height. The amount of energy released by allowing a mass to drop is relative to the distance *between* its starting and ending points. Likewise, the potential energy available for moving electrons from one point to another is relative to those two points. Therefore, voltage is always expressed as a quantity *between* two points. Interestingly enough, the analogy of a mass potentially "dropping" from one height to another is such an apt model that voltage between two points is sometimes called a *voltage drop*.

Voltage can be generated by means other than rubbing certain types of materials against each other. Chemical reactions, radiant energy, and the influence of magnetism on conductors are a few ways in which voltage may be produced. Respective examples of these three sources of voltage are batteries, solar cells, and generators (such as the "alternator" unit under the hood of your automobile). For now, we won't go into detail as to how each of these voltage sources works — more important is that we understand how voltage sources can be applied to create electron flow in a circuit.

Let's take the symbol for a chemical battery and build a circuit step by step:

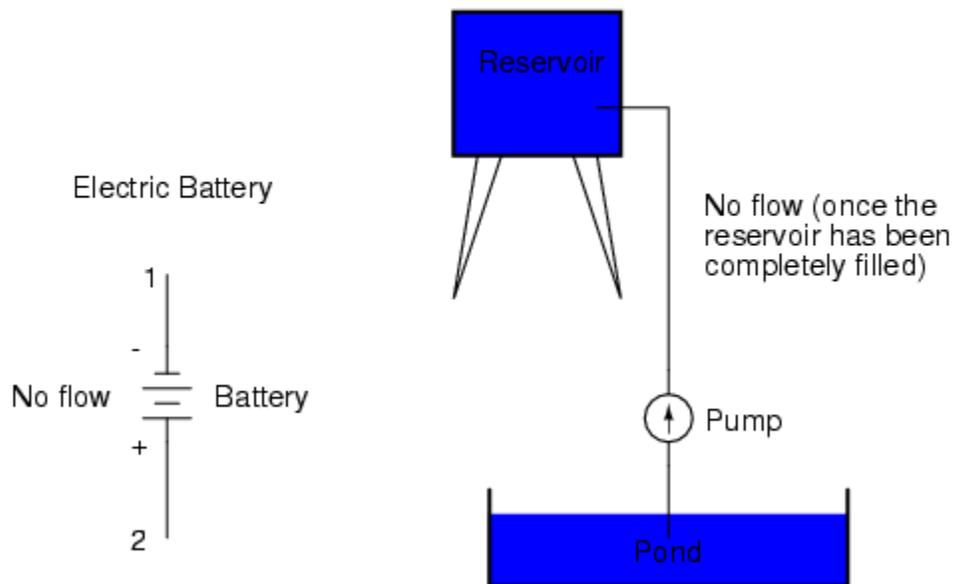


Any source of voltage, including batteries, have two points for electrical contact. In this case, we have point 1 and point 2 in the above diagram. The horizontal lines of varying length indicate that this is a battery, and they further indicate the direction which this battery's voltage will try to push electrons through a circuit. The fact that the horizontal lines in the battery symbol appear separated (and thus unable to serve as a path for electrons to move) is no cause for concern: in real life, those horizontal lines represent metallic plates immersed in a liquid or semi-solid material that not only conducts electrons, but also generates the voltage to push them along by interacting with the plates.

Notice the little "+" and "-" signs to the immediate left of the battery symbol. The negative (-) end of the battery is always the end with the shortest dash, and the positive (+) end of the battery is always the end with the longest dash. Since we have decided to call electrons "negatively" charged (thanks, Ben!), the negative end of a battery is that end which tries to push electrons out of it. Likewise, the positive end is that end which tries to attract electrons.

With the "+" and "-" ends of the battery not connected to anything, there will be voltage between those two points, but there will be no flow of electrons through the battery, because there is no continuous path for the electrons to move.

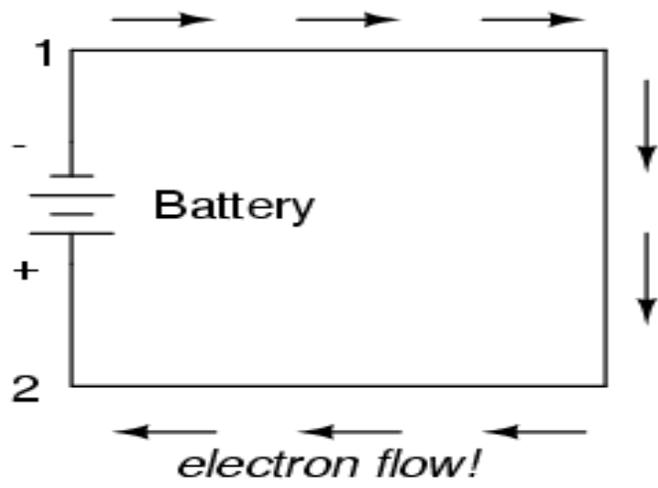
Water analogy



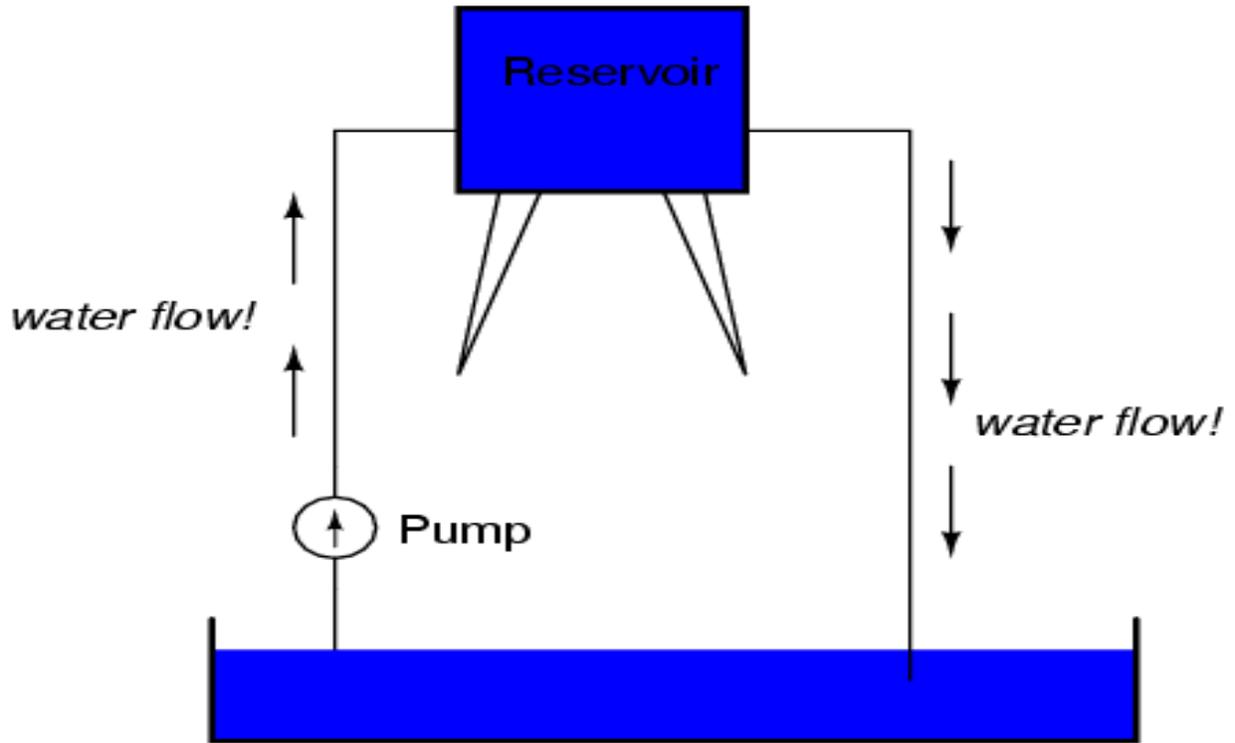
The same principle holds true for the water reservoir and pump analogy: without a return pipe back to the pond, stored energy in the reservoir cannot be released in the form of water flow. Once the reservoir is completely filled up, no flow can occur, no matter how much pressure the pump may generate. There needs to be a complete path (circuit) for water to flow from the pond, to the reservoir, and back to the pond in order for continuous flow to occur.

We can provide such a path for the battery by connecting a piece of wire from one end of the battery to the other. Forming a circuit with a loop of wire, we will initiate a continuous flow of electrons in a clockwise direction:

Electric Circuit



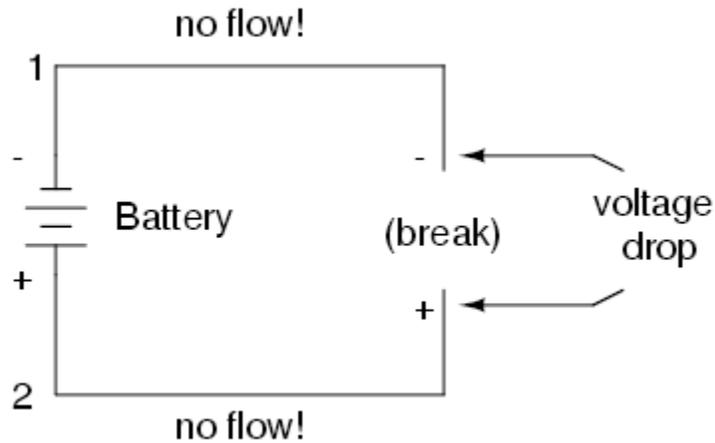
Water analogy



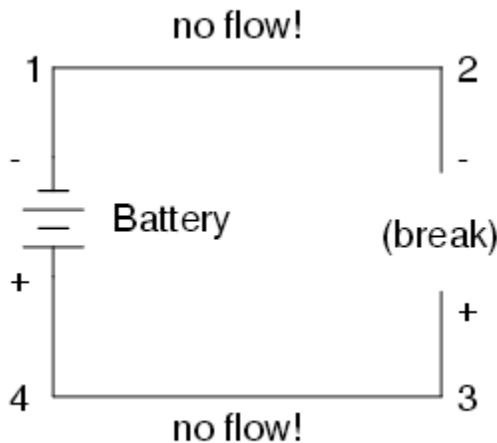
So long as the battery continues to produce voltage and the continuity of the electrical path isn't broken, electrons will continue to flow in the circuit. Following the metaphor of water moving through a pipe, this continuous, uniform flow of electrons through the circuit is called a *current*. So long as the voltage source keeps "pushing" in the same direction, the electron flow will continue to move in the same direction in the circuit. This single-direction flow of electrons is called a *Direct Current*, or DC. In the second volume of this book series, electric circuits are explored where the direction of current switches back and forth: *Alternating Current*, or AC. But for now, we'll just concern ourselves with DC circuits.

Because electric current is composed of individual electrons flowing in unison through a conductor by moving along and pushing on the electrons ahead, just like marbles through a tube or water through a pipe, the amount of flow throughout a single circuit will be the same at any point. If we were to monitor a cross-section of the wire in a single circuit, counting the electrons flowing by, we would notice the exact same quantity per unit of time as in any other part of the circuit, regardless of conductor length or conductor diameter.

If we break the circuit's continuity *at any point*, the electric current will cease in the entire loop, and the full voltage produced by the battery will be manifested across the break, between the wire ends that used to be connected:

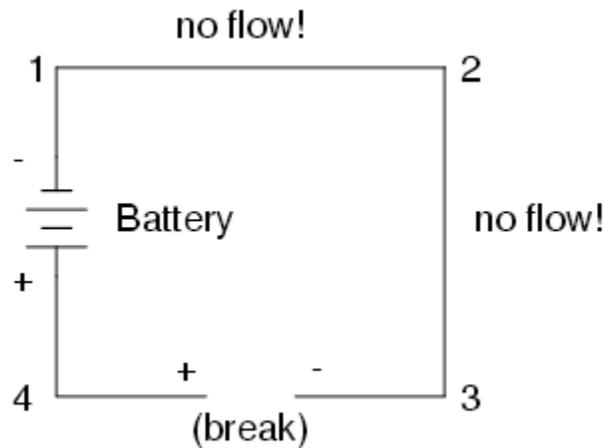


Notice the "+" and "-" signs drawn at the ends of the break in the circuit, and how they correspond to the "+" and "-" signs next to the battery's terminals. These markers indicate the direction that the voltage attempts to push electron flow, that potential direction commonly referred to as *polarity*. Remember that voltage is always relative between two points. Because of this fact, the polarity of a voltage drop is also relative between two points: whether a point in a circuit gets labeled with a "+" or a "-" depends on the other point to which it is referenced. Take a look at the following circuit, where each corner of the loop is marked with a number for reference:



With the circuit's continuity broken between points 2 and 3, the polarity of the voltage dropped between points 2 and 3 is "-" for point 2 and "+" for point 3. The battery's polarity (1 "-" and 4 "+") is trying to push electrons through the loop clockwise from 1 to 2 to 3 to 4 and back to 1 again.

Now let's see what happens if we connect points 2 and 3 back together again, but place a break in the circuit between points 3 and 4:



With the break between 3 and 4, the polarity of the voltage drop between those two points is "+" for 4 and "-" for 3. Take special note of the fact that point 3's "sign" is opposite of that in the first example, where the break was between points 2 and 3 (where point 3 was labeled "+"). It is impossible for us to say that point 3 in this circuit will always be either "+" or "-", because polarity, like voltage itself, is not specific to a single point, but is always relative between two points!

• **REVIEW:**

- Electrons can be motivated to flow through a conductor by the same force manifested in static electricity.
- *Voltage* is the measure of specific potential energy (potential energy per unit charge) between two locations. In layman's terms, it is the measure of "push" available to motivate electrons.
- Voltage, as an expression of potential energy, is always relative between two locations, or points. Sometimes it is called a voltage "drop."
- When a voltage source is connected to a circuit, the voltage will cause a uniform flow of electrons through that circuit called a *current*.
- In a single (one loop) circuit, the amount of current at any point is the same as the amount of current at any other point.
- If a circuit containing a voltage source is broken, the full voltage of that source will appear across the points of the break.
- The +/- orientation a voltage drop is called the *polarity*. It is also relative between two points.