

DIFFRACTION

36-1 WHAT IS PHYSICS?

One focus of physics in the study of light is to understand and put to use the diffraction of light as it passes through a narrow slit or (as we shall discuss) past either a narrow obstacle or an edge. We touched on this phenomenon in Chapter 35 when we looked at how light flared—diffracted—through the slits in Young’s experiment. Diffraction through a given slit is more complicated than simple flaring, however, because the light also interferes with itself and produces an interference pattern. It is because of such complications that light is rich with application opportunities. Even though the diffraction of light as it passes through a slit or past an obstacle seems awfully academic, countless engineers and scientists make their living using this physics, and the total worth of diffraction applications worldwide is probably incalculable.

Before we can discuss some of these applications, we first must discuss why diffraction is due to the wave nature of light.

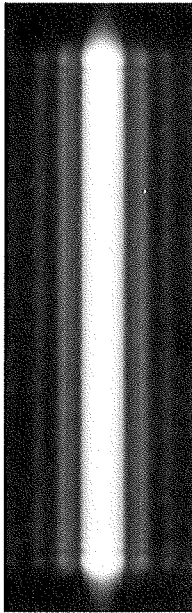


Fig. 36-1 This diffraction pattern appeared on a viewing screen when light that had passed through a narrow vertical slit reached the screen. Diffraction caused the light to flare out perpendicular to the long sides of the slit. That flaring produced an interference pattern consisting of a broad central maximum plus less intense and narrower secondary (or side) maxima, with minima between them. (Ken Kay/Fundamental Photographs)

36-2 Diffraction and the Wave Theory of Light

In Chapter 35 we defined diffraction rather loosely as the flaring of light as it emerges from a narrow slit. More than just flaring occurs, however, because the light produces an interference pattern called a **diffraction pattern**. For example, when monochromatic light from a distant source (or a laser) passes through a narrow slit and is then intercepted by a viewing screen, the light produces on the screen a diffraction pattern like that in Fig. 36-1. This pattern consists of a broad and intense (very bright) central maximum plus a number of narrower and less intense maxima (called **secondary** or **side** maxima) to both sides. In between the maxima are minima. Light flares into those dark regions, but the light waves cancel out one another.

Such a pattern would be totally unexpected in geometrical optics: If light traveled in straight lines as rays, then the slit would allow some of those rays through to form a sharp rendition of the slit on the viewing screen instead of a pattern of bright and dark bands as we see in Fig. 36-1. As in Chapter 35, we must conclude that geometrical optics is only an approximation.

Diffraction is not limited to situations when light passes through a narrow opening (such as a slit or pinhole). It also occurs when light passes an edge, such as the edges of the razor blade whose diffraction pattern is shown in Fig. 36-2. Note the lines of maxima and minima that run approximately parallel to the edges, at both the inside edges of the blade and the outside edges. As the light passes, say, the vertical edge at the left, it flares left and right and undergoes interference, producing the pattern along the left edge. The rightmost portion of that pattern actually lies behind the blade, within what would be the blade’s shadow if geometrical optics prevailed.

You encounter a common example of diffraction when you look at a clear blue sky and see tiny specks and hairlike structures floating in your view. These *floaters*, as they are called, are produced when light passes the edges of tiny deposits in the vitreous humor, the transparent material filling most of the eyeball. What you are seeing when a floater is in your field of vision is the diffraction pattern produced on the retina by one of these deposits. If you sight through a pinhole in a piece of cardboard so as to make the light entering your eye approximately a plane wave, you can distinguish individual maxima and minima in the patterns.

Diffraction is a wave effect. That is, it occurs because light is a wave and it occurs with other types of waves as well. For example, you have probably seen diffraction in action at football games. When a cheerleader near the playing field yells up at several thousand noisy fans, the yell can hardly be heard because the sound waves diffract when they pass through the narrow opening of the cheerleader's mouth. This flaring leaves little of the waves traveling toward the fans in front of the cheerleader. To offset the diffraction, the cheerleader can yell through a megaphone. The sound waves then emerge from the much wider opening at the end of the megaphone. The flaring is thus reduced, and much more of the sound reaches the fans in front of the cheerleader.

The Fresnel Bright Spot

Diffraction finds a ready explanation in the wave theory of light. However, this theory, originally advanced in the late 1600s by Huygens and used 123 years later by Young to explain double-slit interference, was very slow in being adopted, largely because it ran counter to Newton's theory that light was a stream of particles.

Newton's view was the prevailing view in French scientific circles of the early 19th century, when Augustin Fresnel was a young military engineer. Fresnel, who believed in the wave theory of light, submitted a paper to the French Academy of Sciences describing his experiments with light and his wave-theory explanations of them.

In 1819, the Academy, dominated by supporters of Newton and thinking to challenge the wave point of view, organized a prize competition for an essay on the subject of diffraction. Fresnel won. The Newtonians, however, were not swayed. One of them, S. D. Poisson, pointed out the "strange result" that if Fresnel's theories were correct, then light waves should flare into the shadow region of a sphere as they pass the edge of the sphere, producing a bright spot at the center of the shadow. The prize committee arranged a test of Poisson's prediction and discovered that the predicted *Fresnel bright spot*, as we call it today, was indeed there (Fig. 36-3). Nothing builds confidence in a theory so much as having one of its unexpected and counterintuitive predictions verified by experiment.

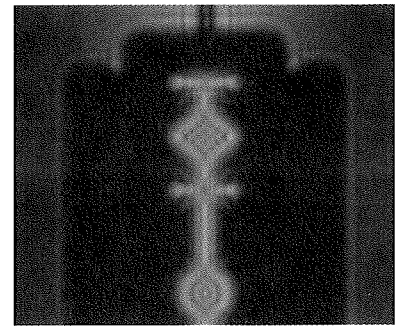


Fig. 36-2 The diffraction pattern produced by a razor blade in monochromatic light. Note the lines of alternating maximum and minimum intensity. (Ken Kay/Fundamental Photographs)

Fig. 36-3 A photograph of the diffraction pattern of a disk. Note the concentric diffraction rings and the Fresnel bright spot at the center of the pattern. This experiment is essentially identical to that arranged by the committee testing Fresnel's theories, because both the sphere they used and the disk used here have a cross section with a circular edge. (Jearl Walker)

