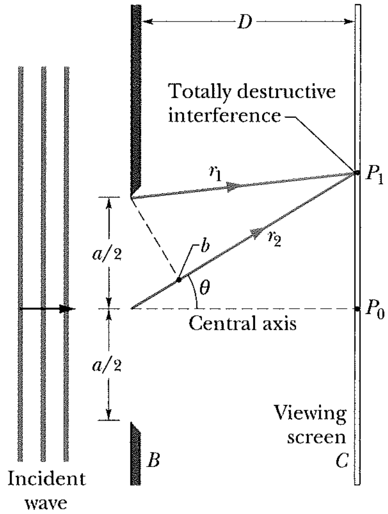
36-3 Diffraction by a Single Slit: Locating the Minima

Let us now examine the diffraction pattern of plane waves of light of wavelength λ that are diffracted by a single long, narrow slit of width a in an otherwise opaque screen B, as shown in cross section in Fig. 36-4. (In that figure, the slit's length extends into and out of the page, and the incoming wavefronts are parallel to screen B.) When the diffracted light reaches viewing screen C, waves from different points within the slit undergo interference and produce a diffraction pattern of bright and dark fringes (interference maxima and minima) on the screen. To locate the fringes, we shall use a procedure somewhat similar to the one we used to locate the fringes in a two-slit interference pattern. However, diffraction is more mathematically challenging, and here we shall be able to find equations for only the dark fringes.

Before we do that, however, we can justify the central bright fringe seen in Fig. 36-1 by noting that the Huygens wavelets from all points in the slit travel about the same distance to reach the center of the pattern and thus are in phase there. As for the other bright fringes, we can say only that they are approximately halfway between adjacent dark fringes.

To find the dark fringes, we shall use a clever (and simplifying) strategy that involves pairing up all the rays coming through the slit and then finding what conditions cause the wavelets of the rays in each pair to cancel each other. We apply this strategy in Fig. 36-4 to locate the first dark fringe, at point P_1. First, we mentally divide the slit into two *zones* of equal widths $a/2$. Then we extend to P_1 a light ray r_1 from the top point of the top zone and a light ray r_2 from the top point of the bottom zone. We want the wavelets along these two rays to cancel each other when they arrive at P_1. Then any similar pairing of rays from the two zones will give cancellation. A central axis is drawn from the center of the slit to screen C, and P_1 is located at an angle θ to that axis.

The wavelets of the pair of rays r_1 and r_2 are in phase within the slit because they originate from the same wavefront passing through the slit, along the width of the slit. However, to produce the first dark fringe they must be out of phase by $\lambda/2$ when they reach P_1; this phase difference is due to their path length difference, with the path traveled by the wavelet of r_2 to reach P_1 being longer than the path traveled by the wavelet of r_1. To display this path length difference, we find a point b on ray r_2 such that the path length from b to P_1 matches the path length of ray r_1. Then the path length difference between the two rays is the distance from the center of the slit to b.



This pair of rays cancel each other at P_1. So do all such pairings.

Fig. 36-4 Waves from the top points of two zones of width $a/2$ undergo fully destructive interference at point P_1 on viewing screen C.

When viewing screen C is near screen B, as in Fig. 36-4, the diffraction pattern on C is difficult to describe mathematically. However, we can simplify the mathematics considerably if we arrange for the screen separation D to be much larger than the slit width a. Then we can approximate rays r_1 and r_2 as being parallel, at angle θ to the central axis (Fig. 36-5). We can also approximate the triangle formed by point b, the top point of the slit, and the center point of the slit as being a right triangle, and one of the angles inside that triangle as being θ. The path length difference between rays r_1 and r_2 (which is still the distance from the center of the slit to point b) is then equal to $(a/2)\sin\theta$.

We can repeat this analysis for any other pair of rays originating at corresponding points in the two zones (say, at the midpoints of the zones) and extending to point P_1. Each such pair of rays has the same path length difference $(a/2)\sin\theta$. Setting this common path length difference equal to $\lambda/2$ (our condition for the first dark fringe), we have

$$\frac{a}{2}\sin\theta = \frac{\lambda}{2},$$

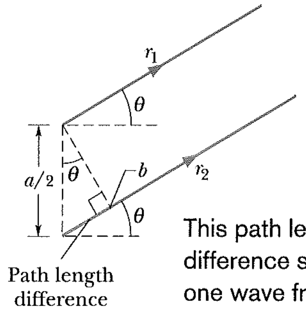
which gives us

$$a\sin\theta = \lambda \qquad \text{(first minimum)}. \tag{36-1}$$

Given slit width a and wavelength λ, Eq. 36-1 tells us the angle θ of the first dark fringe above and (by symmetry) below the central axis.

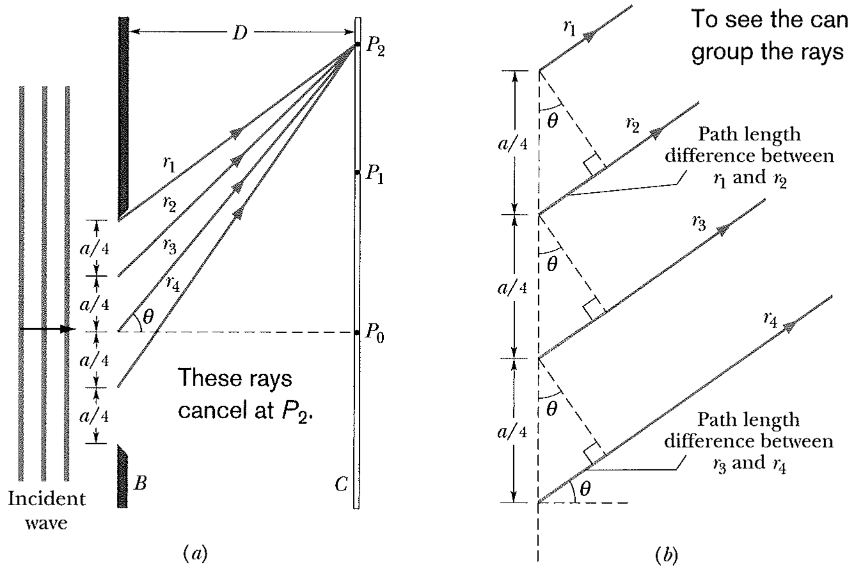
Note that if we begin with $a > \lambda$ and then narrow the slit while holding the wavelength constant, we increase the angle at which the first dark fringes appear; that is, the extent of the diffraction (the extent of the flaring and the width of the pattern) is *greater* for a *narrower* slit. When we have reduced the slit width to the wavelength (that is, $a = \lambda$), the angle of the first dark fringes is 90°. Since the first dark fringes mark the two edges of the central bright fringe, that bright fringe must then cover the entire viewing screen.

We find the second dark fringes above and below the central axis as we found the first dark fringes, except that we now divide the slit into *four* zones of equal widths $a/4$, as shown in Fig. 36-6*a*. We then extend rays r_1, r_2, r_3, and r_4 from the top points of the zones to point P_2, the location of the second dark fringe above the central axis. To produce that fringe, the path length difference



This path length difference shifts one wave from the other, which determines the interference.

Fig. 36-5 For $D \gg a$, we can approximate rays r_1 and r_2 as being parallel, at angle θ to the central axis.



These rays cancel at P_2.

To see the cancellation, group the rays into pairs.

(*a*) (*b*)

Fig. 36-6 (*a*) Waves from the top points of four zones of width $a/4$ undergo fully destructive interference at point P_2. (*b*) For $D \gg a$, we can approximate rays r_1, r_2, r_3, and r_4 as being parallel, at angle θ to the central axis.

between r_1 and r_2, that between r_2 and r_3, and that between r_3 and r_4 must all be equal to $\lambda/2$.

For $D \gg a$, we can approximate these four rays as being parallel, at angle θ to the central axis. To display their path length differences, we extend a perpendicular line through each adjacent pair of rays, as shown in Fig. 36-6*b*, to form a series of right triangles, each of which has a path length difference as one side. We see from the top triangle that the path length difference between r_1 and r_2 is $(a/4)\sin\theta$. Similarly, from the bottom triangle, the path length difference between r_3 and r_4 is also $(a/4)\sin\theta$. In fact, the path length difference for any two rays that originate at corresponding points in two adjacent zones is $(a/4)\sin\theta$. Since in each such case the path length difference is equal to $\lambda/2$, we have

$$\frac{a}{4}\sin\theta = \frac{\lambda}{2},$$

which gives us

$$a\sin\theta = 2\lambda \qquad \text{(second minimum).} \tag{36-2}$$

We could now continue to locate dark fringes in the diffraction pattern by splitting up the slit into more zones of equal width. We would always choose an even number of zones so that the zones (and their waves) could be paired as we have been doing. We would find that the dark fringes above and below the central axis can be located with the general equation

$$a\sin\theta = m\lambda, \qquad \text{for } m = 1,2,3,\ldots \quad \text{(minima—dark fringes).} \tag{36-3}$$

You can remember this result in the following way. Draw a triangle like the one in Fig. 36-5, but for the full slit width a, and note that the path length difference between the top and bottom rays equals $a\sin\theta$. Thus, Eq. 36-3 says:

> In a single-slit diffraction experiment, dark fringes are produced where the path length differences ($a\sin\theta$) between the top and bottom rays are equal to $\lambda, 2\lambda, 3\lambda, \ldots$.

This may seem to be wrong because the waves of those two particular rays will be exactly in phase with each other when their path length difference is an integer number of wavelengths. However, they each will still be part of a pair of waves that are exactly out of phase with each other; thus, *each* wave will be canceled by some other wave, resulting in darkness. (Two light waves that are exactly out of phase will always cancel each other, giving a net wave of zero, even if they happen to be exactly in phase with other light waves.)

Equations 36-1, 36-2, and 36-3 are derived for the case of $D \gg a$. However, they also apply if we place a converging lens between the slit and the viewing screen and then move the screen in so that it coincides with the focal plane of the lens. The lens ensures that rays which now reach any point on the screen are *exactly* parallel (rather than approximately) back at the slit. They are like the initially parallel rays of Fig. 34-14*a* that are directed to the focal point by a converging lens.

CHECKPOINT 1

We produce a diffraction pattern on a viewing screen by means of a long narrow slit illuminated by blue light. Does the pattern expand away from the bright center (the maxima and minima shift away from the center) or contract toward it if we (a) switch to yellow light or (b) decrease the slit width?

Sample Problem

Single-slit diffraction pattern with white light

A slit of width a is illuminated by white light.

(a) For what value of a will the first minimum for red light of wavelength $\lambda = 650$ nm appear at $\theta = 15°$?

KEY IDEA

Diffraction occurs separately for each wavelength in the range of wavelengths passing through the slit, with the locations of the minima for each wavelength given by Eq. 36-3 ($a \sin \theta = m\lambda$).

Calculation: When we set $m = 1$ (for the first minimum) and substitute the given values of θ and λ, Eq. 36-3 yields

$$a = \frac{m\lambda}{\sin \theta} = \frac{(1)(650 \text{ nm})}{\sin 15°}$$
$$= 2511 \text{ nm} \approx 2.5\ \mu\text{m}. \qquad \text{(Answer)}$$

For the incident light to flare out that much (±15° to the first minima) the slit has to be very fine indeed—in this case, a mere four times the wavelength. For comparison, note that a fine human hair may be about 100 μm in diameter.

(b) What is the wavelength λ' of the light whose first side diffraction maximum is at 15°, thus coinciding with the first minimum for the red light?

KEY IDEA

The first side maximum for any wavelength is about halfway between the first and second minima for that wavelength.

Calculations: Those first and second minima can be located with Eq. 36-3 by setting $m = 1$ and $m = 2$, respectively. Thus, the first side maximum can be located *approximately* by setting $m = 1.5$. Then Eq. 36-3 becomes

$$a \sin \theta = 1.5\lambda'.$$

Solving for λ' and substituting known data yield

$$\lambda' = \frac{a \sin \theta}{1.5} = \frac{(2511 \text{ nm})(\sin 15°)}{1.5}$$
$$= 430 \text{ nm}. \qquad \text{(Answer)}$$

Light of this wavelength is violet (far blue, near the short-wavelength limit of the human range of visible light). From the two equations we used, can you see that the first side maximum for light of wavelength 430 nm will always coincide with the first minimum for light of wavelength 650 nm, no matter what the slit width is? However, the angle θ at which this overlap occurs does depend on slit width. If the slit is relatively narrow, the angle will be relatively large, and conversely.

36-4 Intensity in Single-Slit Diffraction, Qualitatively

In Section 36-3 we saw how to find the positions of the minima and the maxima in a single-slit diffraction pattern. Now we turn to a more general problem: find an expression for the intensity I of the pattern as a function of θ, the angular position of a point on a viewing screen.

To do this, we divide the slit of Fig. 36-4 into N zones of equal widths Δx small enough that we can assume each zone acts as a source of Huygens wavelets. We wish to superimpose the wavelets arriving at an arbitrary point P on the viewing screen, at angle θ to the central axis, so that we can determine the amplitude E_θ of the electric component of the resultant wave at P. The intensity of the light at P is then proportional to the square of that amplitude.

To find E_θ, we need the phase relationships among the arriving wavelets. The phase difference between wavelets from adjacent zones is given by

$$\begin{pmatrix}\text{phase}\\ \text{difference}\end{pmatrix} = \left(\frac{2\pi}{\lambda}\right)\begin{pmatrix}\text{path length}\\ \text{difference}\end{pmatrix}.$$

For point P at angle θ, the path length difference between wavelets from adjacent zones is $\Delta x \sin \theta$; so the phase difference $\Delta\phi$ between wavelets from adjacent zones is

$$\Delta\phi = \left(\frac{2\pi}{\lambda}\right)(\Delta x \sin \theta). \qquad (36\text{-}4)$$