

◀ **FIGURE 1-11**

Covalent bonds in a silicon crystal.

SECTION 1-2 CHECKUP

1. What is the basic difference between conductors and insulators?
2. How do semiconductors differ from conductors and insulators?
3. How many valence electrons does a conductor such as copper have?
4. How many valence electrons does a semiconductor have?
5. Name three of the best conductive materials.
6. What is the most widely used semiconductive material?
7. Why does a semiconductor have fewer free electrons than a conductor?
8. How are covalent bonds formed?
9. What is meant by the term *intrinsic*?
10. What is a crystal?

1-3 CURRENT IN SEMICONDUCTORS

The way a material conducts electrical current is important in understanding how electronic devices operate. You can't really understand the operation of a device such as a diode or transistor without knowing something about current in semiconductors.

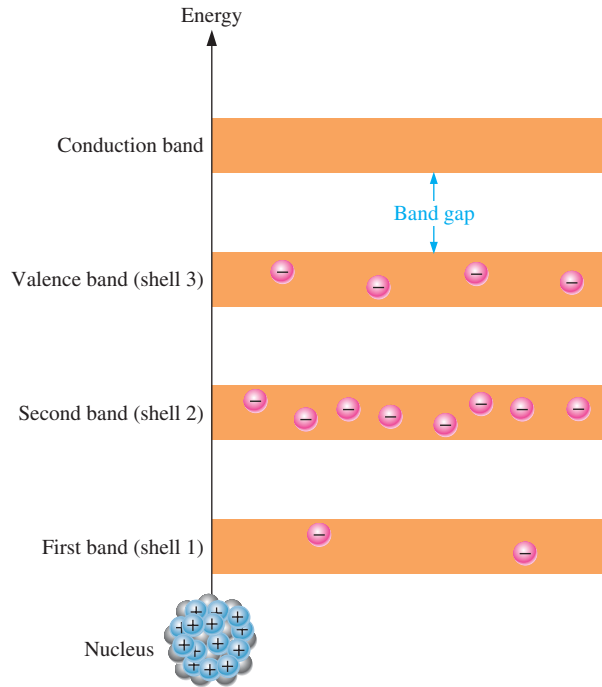
After completing this section, you should be able to

- **Describe how current is produced in a semiconductor**
- Discuss conduction electrons and holes
 - ♦ Explain an electron-hole pair
 - ♦ Discuss recombination
- Explain electron and hole current

As you have learned, the electrons of an atom can exist only within prescribed energy bands. Each shell around the nucleus corresponds to a certain energy band and is separated from adjacent shells by band gaps, in which no electrons can exist. Figure 1-12 shows the energy band diagram for an unexcited (no external energy such as heat) atom in a pure silicon crystal. This condition occurs *only* at a temperature of absolute 0 Kelvin.

► **FIGURE 1-12**

Energy band diagram for an unexcited atom in a pure (intrinsic) silicon crystal. There are no electrons in the conduction band.

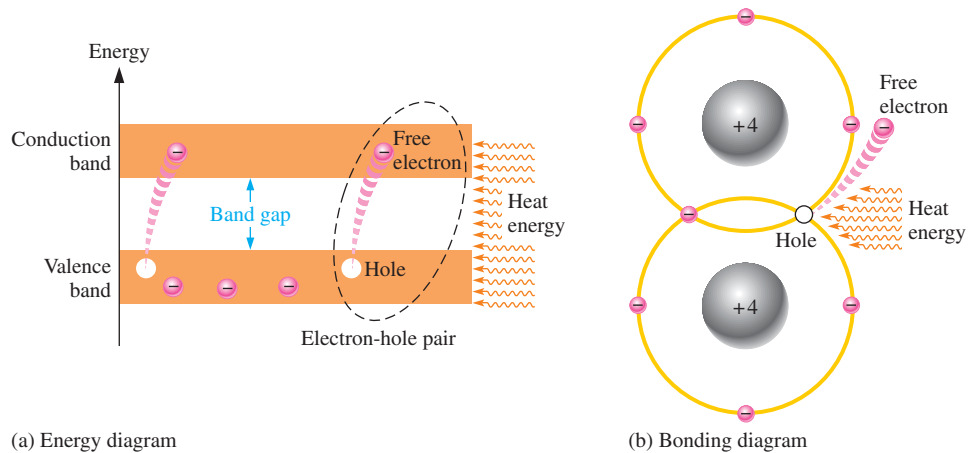


Conduction Electrons and Holes

An intrinsic (pure) silicon crystal at room temperature has sufficient heat (thermal) energy for some valence electrons to jump the gap from the valence band into the conduction band, becoming free electrons. Free electrons are also called **conduction electrons**. This is illustrated in the energy diagram of Figure 1-13(a) and in the bonding diagram of Figure 1-13(b).

► **FIGURE 1-13**

Creation of electron-hole pairs in a silicon crystal. Electrons in the conduction band are free electrons.

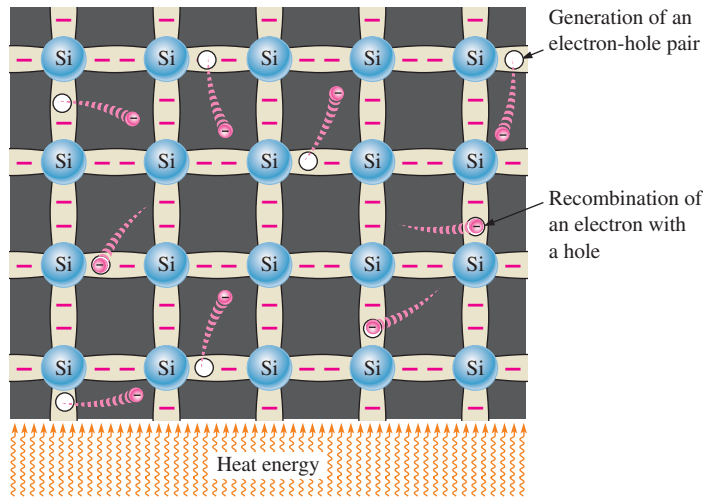


(a) Energy diagram

(b) Bonding diagram

When an electron jumps to the conduction band, a vacancy is left in the valence band within the crystal. This vacancy is called a **hole**. For every electron raised to the conduction band by external energy, there is one hole left in the valence band, creating what is called an **electron-hole pair**. **Recombination** occurs when a conduction-band electron loses energy and falls back into a hole in the valence band.

To summarize, a piece of intrinsic silicon at room temperature has, at any instant, a number of conduction-band (free) electrons that are unattached to any atom and are essentially drifting randomly throughout the material. There is also an equal number of holes in the valence band created when these electrons jump into the conduction band. This is illustrated in Figure 1-14.

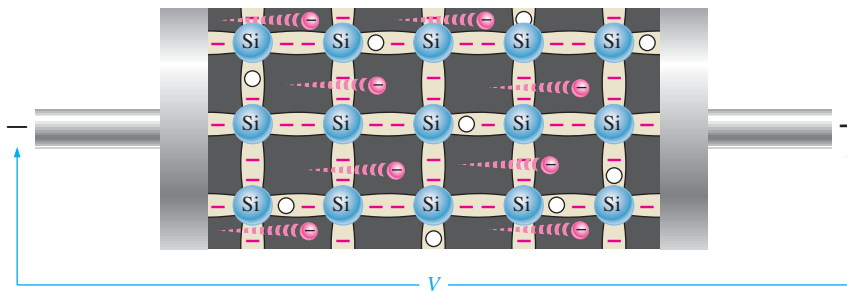


◀ FIGURE 1-14

Electron-hole pairs in a silicon crystal. Free electrons are being generated continuously while some recombine with holes.

Electron and Hole Current

When a voltage is applied across a piece of intrinsic silicon, as shown in Figure 1-15, the thermally generated free electrons in the conduction band, which are free to move randomly in the crystal structure, are now easily attracted toward the positive end. This movement of free electrons is one type of **current** in a semiconductive material and is called *electron current*.



◀ FIGURE 1-15

Electron current in intrinsic silicon is produced by the movement of thermally generated free electrons.

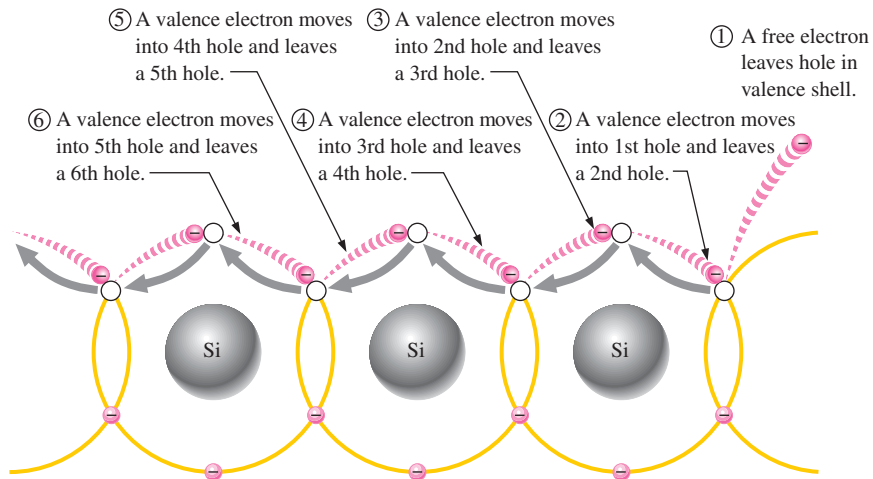
Another type of current occurs in the valence band, where the holes created by the free electrons exist. Electrons remaining in the valence band are still attached to their atoms and are not free to move randomly in the crystal structure as are the free electrons. However, a valence electron can move into a nearby hole with little change in its energy level, thus leaving another hole where it came from. Effectively the hole has moved from one place to another in the crystal structure, as illustrated in Figure 1-16. Although current in the valence band is produced by valence electrons, it is called *hole current* to distinguish it from electron current in the conduction band.

As you have seen, conduction in semiconductors is considered to be either the movement of free electrons in the conduction band or the movement of holes in the valence band, which is actually the movement of valence electrons to nearby atoms, creating hole current in the opposite direction.

It is interesting to contrast the two types of charge movement in a semiconductor with the charge movement in a metallic conductor, such as copper. Copper atoms form a different type of crystal in which the atoms are not covalently bonded to each other but consist of a “sea” of positive ion cores, which are atoms stripped of their valence electrons. The valence electrons are attracted to the positive ions, keeping the positive ions together and forming the metallic bond. The valence electrons do not belong to a given atom, but to the crystal as a whole. Since the valence electrons in copper are free to move, the application of a voltage results in current. There is only one type of current—the movement of free electrons—because there are no “holes” in the metallic crystal structure.

► FIGURE 1-16

Hole current in intrinsic silicon.



When a valence electron moves left to right to fill a hole while leaving another hole behind, the hole has effectively moved from right to left. Gray arrows indicate effective movement of a hole.

SECTION 1-3 CHECKUP

1. Are free electrons in the valence band or in the conduction band?
2. Which electrons are responsible for electron current in silicon?
3. What is a hole?
4. At what energy level does hole current occur?

1-4 N-TYPE AND P-TYPE SEMICONDUCTORS

Semiconductive materials do not conduct current well and are of limited value in their intrinsic state. This is because of the limited number of free electrons in the conduction band and holes in the valence band. Intrinsic silicon (or germanium) must be modified by increasing the number of free electrons or holes to increase its conductivity and make it useful in electronic devices. This is done by adding impurities to the intrinsic material. Two types of extrinsic (impure) semiconductive materials, *n*-type and *p*-type, are the key building blocks for most types of electronic devices.

After completing this section, you should be able to

- **Describe the properties of *n*-type and *p*-type semiconductors**
 - ♦ Define *doping*
- Explain how *n*-type semiconductors are formed
 - ♦ Describe a majority carrier and minority carrier in *n*-type material
- Explain how *p*-type semiconductors are formed
 - ♦ Describe a majority carrier and minority carrier in *p*-type material

Since semiconductors are generally poor conductors, their conductivity can be drastically increased by the controlled addition of impurities to the intrinsic (pure) semiconductive material. This process, called **doping**, increases the number of current carriers (electrons or holes). The two categories of impurities are *n*-type and *p*-type.

N-Type Semiconductor

To increase the number of conduction-band electrons in intrinsic silicon, **pentavalent** impurity atoms are added. These are atoms with five valence electrons such as arsenic (As), phosphorus (P), bismuth (Bi), and antimony (Sb).