CHAPTER 25

Capacitance

25-1 CAPACITANCE

Learning Objectives

After reading this module, you should be able to . . .

25.01 Sketch a schematic diagram of a circuit with a parallel-plate capacitor, a battery, and an open or closed switch.

25.02 In a circuit with a battery, an open switch, and an uncharged capacitor, explain what happens to the conduction electrons when the switch is closed.

25.03 For a capacitor, apply the relationship between the magnitude of charge q on either plate ("the charge on the capacitor"), the potential difference V between the plates ("the potential across the capacitor"), and the capacitance C of the capacitor.

Key Ideas

- A capacitor consists of two isolated conductors (the plates) with charges $+q$ and $-q$. Its capacitance C is defined from

$$q = CV,$$

where V is the potential difference between the plates.

- When a circuit with a battery, an open switch, and an uncharged capacitor is completed by closing the switch, conduction electrons shift, leaving the capacitor plates with opposite charges.

What Is Physics?

One goal of physics is to provide the basic science for practical devices designed by engineers. The focus of this chapter is on one extremely common example—the capacitor, a device in which electrical energy can be stored. For example, the batteries in a camera store energy in the photoflash unit by charging a capacitor. The batteries can supply energy at only a modest rate, too slowly for the photoflash unit to emit a flash of light. However, once the capacitor is charged, it can supply energy at a much greater rate when the photoflash unit is triggered—enough energy to allow the unit to emit a burst of bright light.

The physics of capacitors can be generalized to other devices and to any situation involving electric fields. For example, Earth's atmospheric electric field is modeled by meteorologists as being produced by a huge spherical capacitor that partially discharges via lightning. The charge that skis collect as they slide along snow can be modeled as being stored in a capacitor that frequently discharges as sparks (which can be seen by nighttime skiers on dry snow).

The first step in our discussion of capacitors is to determine how much charge can be stored. This "how much" is called capacitance.

Paul Silvermann/Fundamental Photographs

Figure 25-1 An assortment of capacitors.

Capacitance

Figure 25-1 shows some of the many sizes and shapes of capacitors. Figure 25-2 shows the basic elements of *any* capacitor—two isolated conductors of any

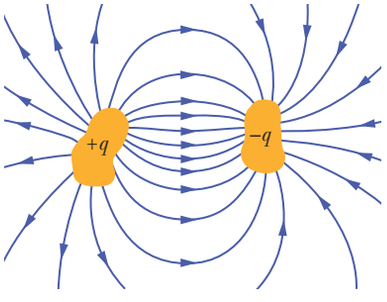

Figure 25-2 Two conductors, isolated electrically from each other and from their surroundings, form a *capacitor*. When the capacitor is charged, the charges on the conductors, or *plates* as they are called, have the same magnitude q but opposite signs.

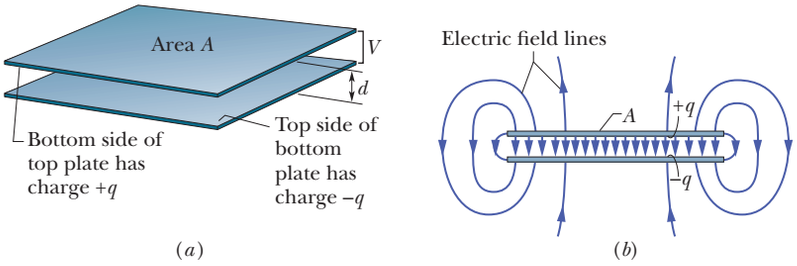

Figure 25-3 (*a*) A parallel-plate capacitor, made up of two plates of area *A* separated by a distance *d*. The charges on the facing plate surfaces have the same magnitude *q* but opposite signs. (*b*) As the field lines show, the electric field due to the charged plates is uniform in the central region between the plates. The field is not uniform at the edges of the plates, as indicated by the "fringing" of the field lines there.

shape. No matter what their geometry, flat or not, we call these conductors *plates.*

Figure 25-3*a* shows a less general but more conventional arrangement, called a *parallel-plate capacitor,* consisting of two parallel conducting plates of area *A* separated by a distance *d*. The symbol we use to represent a capacitor (⊣⊢) is based on the structure of a parallel-plate capacitor but is used for capacitors of all geometries. We assume for the time being that no material medium (such as glass or plastic) is present in the region between the plates. In Module 25-5, we shall remove this restriction.

When a capacitor is *charged,* its plates have charges of equal magnitudes but opposite signs: $+q$ and $-q$. However, we refer to the *charge of a capacitor* as being q, the absolute value of these charges on the plates. (Note that q is not the net charge on the capacitor, which is zero.)

Because the plates are conductors, they are equipotential surfaces; all points on a plate are at the same electric potential. Moreover, there is a potential difference between the two plates. For historical reasons, we represent the absolute value of this potential difference with V rather than with the ΔV we used in previous notation.

The charge q and the potential difference V for a capacitor are proportional to each other; that is,

$$q = CV. \tag{25-1}$$

The proportionality constant C is called the **capacitance** of the capacitor. Its value depends only on the geometry of the plates and *not* on their charge or potential difference. The capacitance is a measure of how much charge must be put on the plates to produce a certain potential difference between them: The *greater the capacitance, the more charge is required.*

The SI unit of capacitance that follows from Eq. 25-1 is the coulomb per volt. This unit occurs so often that it is given a special name, the *farad* (F):

$$1 \text{ farad} = 1 \text{ F} = 1 \text{ coulomb per volt} = 1 \text{ C/V}. \tag{25-2}$$

As you will see, the farad is a very large unit. Submultiples of the farad, such as the microfarad ($1\ \mu\text{F} = 10^{-6}$ F) and the picofarad ($1\ \text{pF} = 10^{-12}$ F), are more convenient units in practice.

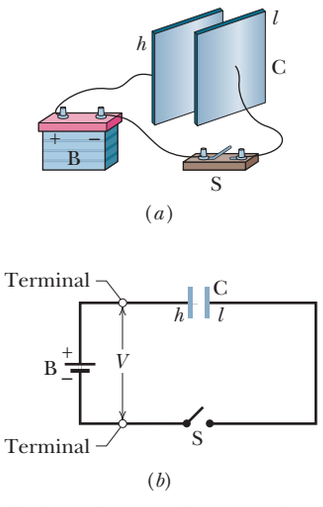

Figure 25-4 (*a*) Battery B, switch S, and plates *h* and *l* of capacitor C, connected in a circuit. (*b*) A schematic diagram with the *circuit elements* represented by their symbols.

Charging a Capacitor

One way to charge a capacitor is to place it in an electric circuit with a battery. An *electric circuit* is a path through which charge can flow. A *battery* is a device that maintains a certain potential difference between its *terminals* (points at which charge can enter or leave the battery) by means of internal electrochemical reactions in which electric forces can move internal charge.

In Fig. 25-4*a*, a battery B, a switch S, an uncharged capacitor C, and interconnecting wires form a circuit. The same circuit is shown in the *schematic diagram* of Fig. 25-4*b*, in which the symbols for a battery, a switch, and a capacitor represent those devices. The battery maintains potential difference V between its terminals. The terminal of higher potential is labeled + and is often called the *positive* terminal; the terminal of lower potential is labeled – and is often called the *negative* terminal.

The circuit shown in Figs. 25-4*a* and *b* is said to be *incomplete* because switch S is *open;* that is, the switch does not electrically connect the wires attached to it. When the switch is *closed,* electrically connecting those wires, the circuit is complete and charge can then flow through the switch and the wires. As we discussed in Chapter 21, the charge that can flow through a conductor, such as a wire, is that of electrons. When the circuit of Fig. 25-4 is completed, electrons are driven through the wires by an electric field that the battery sets up in the wires. The field drives electrons from capacitor plate h to the positive terminal of the battery; thus, plate h, losing electrons, becomes positively charged. The field drives just as many electrons from the negative terminal of the battery to capacitor plate l; thus, plate l, gaining electrons, becomes negatively charged *just as much* as plate h, losing electrons, becomes positively charged.

Initially, when the plates are uncharged, the potential difference between them is zero. As the plates become oppositely charged, that potential difference increases until it equals the potential difference V between the terminals of the battery. Then plate h and the positive terminal of the battery are at the same potential, and there is no longer an electric field in the wire between them. Similarly, plate l and the negative terminal reach the same potential, and there is then no electric field in the wire between them. Thus, with the field zero, there is no further drive of electrons. The capacitor is then said to be *fully charged,* with a potential difference V and charge q that are related by Eq. 25-1.

In this book we assume that during the charging of a capacitor and afterward, charge cannot pass from one plate to the other across the gap separating them. Also, we assume that a capacitor can retain (or *store*) charge indefinitely, until it is put into a circuit where it can be *discharged.*

Checkpoint 1

Does the capacitance C of a capacitor increase, decrease, or remain the same (a) when the charge q on it is doubled and (b) when the potential difference V across it is tripled?

25-2 CALCULATING THE CAPACITANCE

Learning Objectives

After reading this module, you should be able to . . .

25.04 Explain how Gauss' law is used to find the capacitance of a parallel-plate capacitor.
25.05 For a parallel-plate capacitor, a cylindrical capacitor, a spherical capacitor, and an isolated sphere, calculate the capacitance.

Key Ideas

- We generally determine the capacitance of a particular capacitor configuration by (1) assuming a charge q to have been placed on the plates, (2) finding the electric field $\vec{E}$ due to this charge, (3) evaluating the potential difference V between the plates, and (4) calculating C from $q = CV$. Some results are the following:
- A parallel-plate capacitor with flat parallel plates of area A and spacing d has capacitance

$$C = \frac{\varepsilon_0 A}{d}.$$

- A cylindrical capacitor (two long coaxial cylinders) of length L and radii a and b has capacitance

$$C = 2\pi\varepsilon_0 \frac{L}{\ln(\frac{b}{a})}.$$

- A spherical capacitor with concentric spherical plates of radii a and b has capacitance

$$C = 4\pi\varepsilon_0 \frac{ab}{b-a}.$$

- An isolated sphere of radius R has capacitance

$$C = 4\pi\varepsilon_0 R.$$

Calculating the Capacitance

Our goal here is to calculate the capacitance of a capacitor once we know its geometry. Because we shall consider a number of different geometries, it seems wise to develop a general plan to simplify the work. In brief our plan is as follows: (1) Assume a charge q on the plates; (2) calculate the electric field $\vec{E}$ between the plates in terms of this charge, using Gauss' law; (3) knowing $\vec{E}$, calculate the potential difference V between the plates from Eq. 24-18; (4) calculate C from Eq. 25-1.

Before we start, we can simplify the calculation of both the electric field and the potential difference by making certain assumptions. We discuss each in turn.

Calculating the Electric Field

To relate the electric field $\vec{E}$ between the plates of a capacitor to the charge q on either plate, we shall use Gauss' law:

$$\varepsilon_0 \oint \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{A} = q. \tag{25-3}$$

Here q is the charge enclosed by a Gaussian surface and $\oint \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{A}$ is the net electric flux through that surface. In all cases that we shall consider, the Gaussian surface will be such that whenever there is an electric flux through it, $\vec{E}$ will have a uniform magnitude E and the vectors $\vec{E}$ and $d\vec{A}$ will be parallel. Equation 25-3 then reduces to

$$q = \varepsilon_0 EA \quad \text{(special case of Eq. 25-3)}, \tag{25-4}$$

in which A is the area of that part of the Gaussian surface through which there is a flux. For convenience, we shall always draw the Gaussian surface in such a way that it completely encloses the charge on the positive plate; see Fig. 25-5 for an example.

Calculating the Potential Difference

In the notation of Chapter 24 (Eq. 24-18), the potential difference between the plates of a capacitor is related to the field $\vec{E}$ by

$$V_f - V_i = -\int_i^f \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{s}, \tag{25-5}$$

in which the integral is to be evaluated along any path that starts on one plate and ends on the other. We shall always choose a path that follows an electric field line, from the negative plate to the positive plate. For this path, the vectors $\vec{E}$ and $d\vec{s}$ will have opposite directions; so the dot product $\vec{E} \cdot d\vec{s}$ will be equal to $-E\,ds$. Thus, the right side of Eq. 25-5 will then be positive. Letting V represent the difference $V_f - V_i$, we can then recast Eq. 25-5 as

$$V = \int_-^+ E\,ds \quad \text{(special case of Eq. 25-5)}, \tag{25-6}$$

in which the – and + remind us that our path of integration starts on the negative plate and ends on the positive plate.

We are now ready to apply Eqs. 25-4 and 25-6 to some particular cases.

We use Gauss' law to relate q and E. Then we integrate the E to get the potential difference.

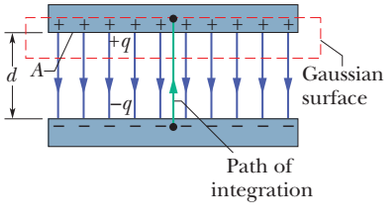

Figure 25-5 A charged parallel-plate capacitor. A Gaussian surface encloses the charge on the positive plate. The integration of Eq. 25-6 is taken along a path extending directly from the negative plate to the positive plate.

A Parallel-Plate Capacitor

We assume, as Fig. 25-5 suggests, that the plates of our parallel-plate capacitor are so large and so close together that we can neglect the fringing of the electric

field at the edges of the plates, taking $\vec{E}$ to be constant throughout the region between the plates.

We draw a Gaussian surface that encloses just the charge q on the positive plate, as in Fig. 25-5. From Eq. 25-4 we can then write

$$q = \varepsilon_0 EA, \tag{25-7}$$

where A is the area of the plate.

Equation 25-6 yields

$$V = \int_-^+ E\,ds = E\int_0^d ds = Ed. \tag{25-8}$$

In Eq. 25-8, E can be placed outside the integral because it is a constant; the second integral then is simply the plate separation d.

If we now substitute q from Eq. 25-7 and V from Eq. 25-8 into the relation $q = CV$ (Eq. 25-1), we find

$$C = \frac{\varepsilon_0 A}{d} \quad \text{(parallel-plate capacitor).} \tag{25-9}$$

Thus, the capacitance does indeed depend only on geometrical factors — namely, the plate area A and the plate separation d. Note that C increases as we increase area A or decrease separation d.

As an aside, we point out that Eq. 25-9 suggests one of our reasons for writing the electrostatic constant in Coulomb's law in the form $1/4\pi\varepsilon_0$. If we had not done so, Eq. 25-9 — which is used more often in engineering practice than Coulomb's law — would have been less simple in form. We note further that Eq. 25-9 permits us to express the permittivity constant ε_0 in a unit more appropriate for use in problems involving capacitors; namely,

$$\varepsilon_0 = 8.85 \times 10^{-12}\ \text{F/m} = 8.85\ \text{pF/m}. \tag{25-10}$$

We have previously expressed this constant as

$$\varepsilon_0 = 8.85 \times 10^{-12}\ \text{C}^2/\text{N}\cdot\text{m}^2. \tag{25-11}$$

A Cylindrical Capacitor

Figure 25-6 shows, in cross section, a cylindrical capacitor of length L formed by two coaxial cylinders of radii a and b. We assume that $L \gg b$ so that we can neglect the fringing of the electric field that occurs at the ends of the cylinders. Each plate contains a charge of magnitude q.

As a Gaussian surface, we choose a cylinder of length L and radius r, closed by end caps and placed as is shown in Fig. 25-6. It is coaxial with the cylinders and encloses the central cylinder and thus also the charge q on that cylinder. Equation 25-4 then relates that charge and the field magnitude E as

$$q = \varepsilon_0 EA = \varepsilon_0 E(2\pi rL),$$

in which $2\pi rL$ is the area of the curved part of the Gaussian surface. There is no flux through the end caps. Solving for E yields

$$E = \frac{q}{2\pi\varepsilon_0 Lr}. \tag{25-12}$$

Substitution of this result into Eq. 25-6 yields

$$V = \int_-^+ E\,ds = -\frac{q}{2\pi\varepsilon_0 L}\int_b^a \frac{dr}{r} = \frac{q}{2\pi\varepsilon_0 L}\ln\left(\frac{b}{a}\right), \tag{25-13}$$

where we have used the fact that here $ds = -dr$ (we integrated radially inward).

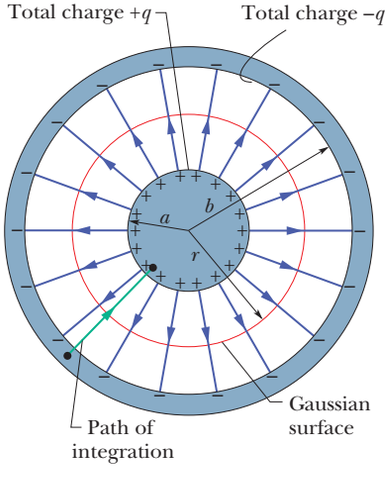

Figure 25-6 A cross section of a long cylindrical capacitor, showing a cylindrical Gaussian surface of radius r (that encloses the positive plate) and the radial path of integration along which Eq. 25-6 is to be applied. This figure also serves to illustrate a spherical capacitor in a cross section through its center.

From the relation $C = q/V$, we then have

$$C = 2\pi\varepsilon_0 \frac{L}{\ln(b/a)} \quad \text{(cylindrical capacitor).} \tag{25-14}$$

We see that the capacitance of a cylindrical capacitor, like that of a parallel-plate capacitor, depends only on geometrical factors, in this case the length L and the two radii b and a.

A Spherical Capacitor

Figure 25-6 can also serve as a central cross section of a capacitor that consists of two concentric spherical shells, of radii a and b. As a Gaussian surface we draw a sphere of radius r concentric with the two shells; then Eq. 25-4 yields

$$q = \varepsilon_0 EA = \varepsilon_0 E(4\pi r^2),$$

in which $4\pi r^2$ is the area of the spherical Gaussian surface. We solve this equation for E, obtaining

$$E = \frac{1}{4\pi\varepsilon_0}\frac{q}{r^2}, \tag{25-15}$$

which we recognize as the expression for the electric field due to a uniform spherical charge distribution (Eq. 23-15).

If we substitute this expression into Eq. 25-6, we find

$$V = \int_-^+ E\,ds = -\frac{q}{4\pi\varepsilon_0}\int_b^a \frac{dr}{r^2} = \frac{q}{4\pi\varepsilon_0}\left(\frac{1}{a} - \frac{1}{b}\right) = \frac{q}{4\pi\varepsilon_0}\frac{b-a}{ab}, \tag{25-16}$$

where again we have substituted $-dr$ for ds. If we now substitute Eq. 25-16 into Eq. 25-1 and solve for C, we find

$$C = 4\pi\varepsilon_0 \frac{ab}{b-a} \quad \text{(spherical capacitor).} \tag{25-17}$$

An Isolated Sphere

We can assign a capacitance to a *single* isolated spherical conductor of radius R by assuming that the "missing plate" is a conducting sphere of infinite radius. After all, the field lines that leave the surface of a positively charged isolated conductor must end somewhere; the walls of the room in which the conductor is housed can serve effectively as our sphere of infinite radius.

To find the capacitance of the conductor, we first rewrite Eq. 25-17 as

$$C = 4\pi\varepsilon_0 \frac{a}{1 - a/b}.$$

If we then let $b \to \infty$ and substitute R for a, we find

$$C = 4\pi\varepsilon_0 R \quad \text{(isolated sphere).} \tag{25-18}$$

Note that this formula and the others we have derived for capacitance (Eqs. 25-9, 25-14, and 25-17) involve the constant ε_0 multiplied by a quantity that has the dimensions of a length.

Checkpoint 2

For capacitors charged by the same battery, does the charge stored by the capacitor increase, decrease, or remain the same in each of the following situations? (a) The plate separation of a parallel-plate capacitor is increased. (b) The radius of the inner cylinder of a cylindrical capacitor is increased. (c) The radius of the outer spherical shell of a spherical capacitor is increased.

Sample Problem 25.01 Charging the plates in a parallel-plate capacitor

In Fig. 25-7*a*, switch S is closed to connect the uncharged capacitor of capacitance $C = 0.25\ \mu F$ to the battery of potential difference $V = 12$ V. The lower capacitor plate has thickness $L = 0.50$ cm and face area $A = 2.0 \times 10^{-4}\ m^2$, and it consists of copper, in which the density of conduction electrons is $n = 8.49 \times 10^{28}$ electrons/m^3. From what depth d within the plate (Fig. 25-7*b*) must electrons move to the plate face as the capacitor becomes charged?

KEY IDEA

The charge collected on the plate is related to the capacitance and the potential difference across the capacitor by Eq. 25-1 ($q = CV$).

Calculations: Because the lower plate is connected to the negative terminal of the battery, conduction electrons move up to the face of the plate. From Eq. 25-1, the total charge magnitude that collects there is

$$q = CV = (0.25 \times 10^{-6}\ F)(12\ V)$$
$$= 3.0 \times 10^{-6}\ C.$$

Dividing this result by e gives us the number N of conduction electrons that come up to the face:

$$N = \frac{q}{e} = \frac{3.0 \times 10^{-6}\ C}{1.602 \times 10^{-19}\ C}$$
$$= 1.873 \times 10^{13}\ \text{electrons}.$$

These electrons come from a volume that is the product of the face area A and the depth d we seek. Thus, from the density of conduction electrons (number per volume), we can write

$$n = \frac{N}{Ad},$$

or

$$d = \frac{N}{An} = \frac{1.873 \times 10^{13}\ \text{electrons}}{(2.0 \times 10^{-4}\ m^2)(8.49 \times 10^{28}\ \text{electrons}/m^3)}$$
$$= 1.1 \times 10^{-12}\ m = 1.1\ pm. \quad \text{(Answer)}$$

We commonly say that electrons move from the battery to the negative face but, actually, the battery sets up an electric field in the wires and plate such that electrons very close to the plate face move up to the negative face.

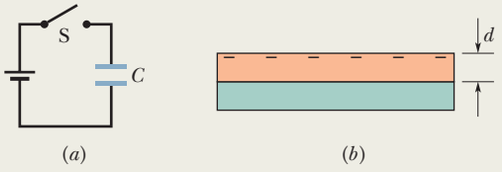

Figure 25-7 (*a*) A battery and capacitor circuit. (*b*) The lower capacitor plate.

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25-3 CAPACITORS IN PARALLEL AND IN SERIES

Learning Objectives

After reading this module, you should be able to . . .

25.06 Sketch schematic diagrams for a battery and (a) three capacitors in parallel and (b) three capacitors in series.
25.07 Identify that capacitors in parallel have the same potential difference, which is the same value that their equivalent capacitor has.
25.08 Calculate the equivalent of parallel capacitors.
25.09 Identify that the total charge stored on parallel capacitors is the sum of the charges stored on the individual capacitors.
25.10 Identify that capacitors in series have the same charge, which is the same value that their equivalent capacitor has.
25.11 Calculate the equivalent of series capacitors.
25.12 Identify that the potential applied to capacitors in series is equal to the sum of the potentials across the individual capacitors.
25.13 For a circuit with a battery and some capacitors in parallel and some in series, simplify the circuit in steps by finding equivalent capacitors, until the charge and potential on the final equivalent capacitor can be determined, and then reverse the steps to find the charge and potential on the individual capacitors.
25.14 For a circuit with a battery, an open switch, and one or more uncharged capacitors, determine the amount of charge that moves through a point in the circuit when the switch is closed.
25.15 When a charged capacitor is connected in parallel to one or more uncharged capacitors, determine the charge and potential difference on each capacitor when equilibrium is reached.

Key Idea

● The equivalent capacitances C_{eq} of combinations of individual capacitors connected in parallel and in series can be found from

$$C_{eq} = \sum_{j=1}^{n} C_j \quad (n \text{ capacitors in parallel})$$

and

$$\frac{1}{C_{eq}} = \sum_{j=1}^{n} \frac{1}{C_j} \quad (n \text{ capacitors in series}).$$

Equivalent capacitances can be used to calculate the capacitances of more complicated series–parallel combinations.