

Physics Lab Report Title

Your Name

November 2, 2025

1 Introduction

Light, as a transverse electromagnetic wave, exhibits polarization when the oscillations of its electric field vector are confined to a specific plane perpendicular to the direction of propagation. While most natural light sources emit unpolarized light with random oscillation directions, polarization can be induced through transmission via polarizing materials or reflection at dielectric interfaces. This laboratory experiment investigates these phenomena using a low-powered red diode laser and Polaroid sheets to explore the transmission properties of polarized light and the partial polarization achieved by reflection. The primary objectives are threefold. First, Malus' law is verified by measuring the intensity of light transmitted through two successive polarizers as a function of the angle θ between their transmission axes, confirming the relationship $I(\theta) = I_0 \cos^2 \theta$. Second, the system is extended to three polarizers, with the first and third oriented at 90° to each other, to derive and test the intensity expression $I_3 = \frac{I_1}{4} \sin^2(2\phi)$, where ϕ is the angle of the intermediate polarizer relative to the first. Finally, polarization by reflection is examined at an air-acrylic interface to determine Brewster's angle θ_p , at which the reflected light is fully polarized perpendicular to the plane of incidence, enabling calculation of the refractive index of acrylic via $\tan \theta_p = n_2/n_1$. These exercises elucidate fundamental principles of wave optics, including the vector resolution of electric fields, intensity dependence on field amplitude, and the Fresnel equations governing reflectance for parallel ($R_{||}$) and perpendicular (R_{\perp}) polarizations. The results provide empirical validation of classical polarization theory and practical insight into applications such as glare reduction in polarized sunglasses.

2 Methodology

The experiment was divided into three distinct exercises: verification of Malus' Law (two and three polarizers) and the determination of Brewster's angle. All measurements were conducted using a low-powered red diode laser as the light source and a light sensor coupled with a rotary motion sensor to measure intensity and angular position.

2.1 Apparatus

The core apparatus for the Malus' Law exercises comprised the diode laser, two or three Polaroid sheets (polarizers/analyzers) mounted on holders, and a light sensor/photodiode attached to a Rotary Motion Sensor (RMS) via a pulley and plastic belt. This system was assembled on a linear optics track (as shown in Figure 4 of the lab manual). For the Brewster's angle experiment, a separate setup was used, featuring the diode laser, an acrylic semi-circular lens (D-lens) mounted on a spectrophotometer disk, and a square analyzing polarizer on the spectrophotometer arm (as shown in Figure 6 and 7 of the lab manual). The angle of the reflected light was measured using a rotary motion sensor mounted on the spectrophotometer table.

2.2 Exercise 1: Malus' Law with Two Polarizers

1. **Initial Alignment:** The first polarizer (polarizer) and the second polarizer (analyzer, attached to the RMS) were placed on the track. The room lights were dimmed.
2. **Polarizer Axis Alignment:** The second polarizer was temporarily removed. The first polarizer was rotated until the light intensity recorded by the sensor was maximized, aligning its transmission axis with the intrinsic polarization axis of the laser light. The intensity was adjusted via the sensor gain to be between 3.5 – 4.0 V to avoid saturation.
3. **Analyzer Alignment:** The second polarizer (analyzer) and RMS assembly was returned to the track and rotated to achieve maximum light intensity, ensuring the analyzer's transmission axis was parallel to the first polarizer's axis. This angle was defined as the starting point, $\theta = 0^\circ$, by the software.
4. **Data Acquisition:** The RMS was used to rotate the analyzer through 180° while constantly monitoring the light intensity. The continuous

rotation ensured a smooth collection of data pairs (I, θ) over the full range, verifying Malus' Law, $I(\theta) = I_0 \cos^2 \theta$.

2.3 Exercise 2: Malus' Law with Three Polarizers

1. **Setup:** Three polarizers were placed on the optics track. Polarizer #1 was aligned for maximum transmission from the laser. Polarizer #3 was then rotated 90° relative to Polarizer #1 to achieve minimum light transmission ($I \approx 0$).
2. **Intermediate Polarizer Placement:** The RMS assembly was attached to Polarizer #2, which was placed between Polarizers #1 and #3. Polarizer #2 was rotated until the intensity I_3 was maximized, and this angular position was defined as the software's zero point ($\phi_{\text{measured}} = 0^\circ$), corresponding to the theoretical angle $\phi = 45^\circ$ relative to Polarizer #1.
3. **Data Acquisition:** Polarizer #2 (the middle polarizer) was rotated through 360° using the RMS while light intensity was recorded. This data was used to verify the relationship $I_3 = \frac{I_1}{4} \sin^2(2\phi)$.

2.4 Exercise 3: Polarization by Reflection and Brewster's Angle

1. **Initial Setup and Alignment:** The Brewster's angle setup (diode laser, D-lens on spectrophotometer disk, light sensor on rotating arm) was assembled. The laser beam was aligned to hit the center of the light sensor when the sensor arm was at 180° . An auxiliary polarizer was set to 45° to ensure incident light had parallel ($I_{||}$) and perpendicular (I_{\perp}) components.
2. **Unpolarized Measurement (I_0):** The square analyzing polarizer was removed. The spectrophotometer arm and D-lens were rotated concurrently to measure the reflected light intensity (I_0) versus the reflected angle over a wide range.
3. **Parallel Component Measurement ($I_{||}$):** The square analyzing polarizer was placed on the spectrophotometer arm with its transmission axis aligned **parallel** to the plane of incidence (vertical axis polarizer). The acquisition was repeated using the same concurrent rotation procedure. The angle corresponding to minimum intensity was recorded as the Brewster angle, θ_p .

4. **Perpendicular Component Measurement (I_{\perp}):** The square analyzing polarizer was rotated 90° to align its transmission axis **perpendicular** to the plane of incidence (horizontal axis polarizer). The acquisition was repeated for a third time.
5. **Calculation:** The Brewster angle θ_p was determined from the minimum of the I_{\parallel} vs. angle plot and used to calculate the refractive index of the acrylic (n_2) via $\tan \theta_p = n_2/n_1$.

3 Data and Analysis

3.1 Malus' Law

Collected data exhibits low uncertainty and consistency with theory. Notably, at the start of each experiment, the rotary sensor must be pressed against the polarizer to prevent slipping; this procedure causes the rotary sensor to move around without changing the angle of the polarizer. Such error caused clusters of data points at maximum intensity and around $\theta = 0$.

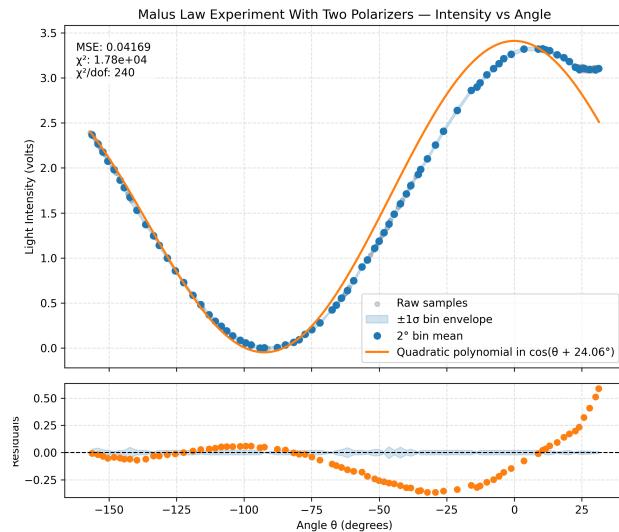


Figure 1: Intensity versus θ graph for two polarizers.

Data uncertainty is measured and reduced by combining a neighborhood of angles into bins of length 1° . The mean of the bin is plotted and areas one standard deviation from the mean is shaded. The cosine of the angles for two polarizers is fitted with a quadratic relationship with the intensity, While for three, a quartic relationship. The mean squared error and reduced χ^2 error

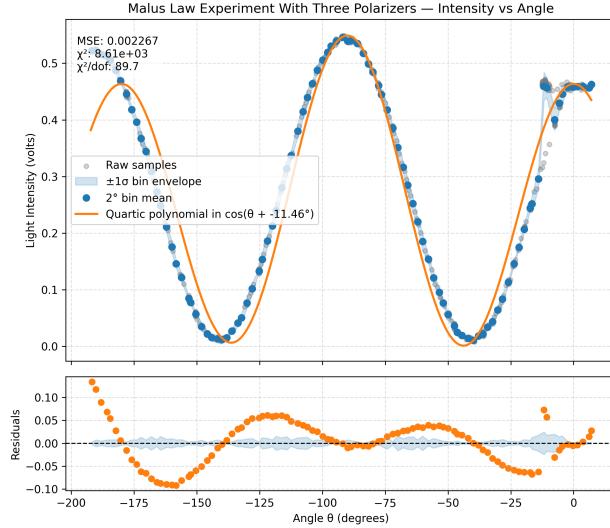


Figure 2: Intensity versus θ graph for three polarizers.

for two polarizer are 0.04169 and 240.3, and for three polarizers, 0.002267 and 89.67, respectively.

Although the reduced chi squared error is much greater than one, indicating a poor model, the mean squared errors are small, showing a good fit. This discrepancy can be attributed to the way standard deviation is calculated; because each bin contains few data points, it has small standard deviation. Since χ^2 error is very sensitive to data points with small standard deviations, even a small deviation from the fitted curve would contribute a lot to the χ^2 value.

The frequency of the Intensity vs. Angle graph for 3 polarizers is twice as that for 2 polarizers, which can be explained mathematically using trigonometric identities that $\cos^2 x$ is proportional to $\cos 2x$, so a quartic sinusoidal data would have twice the frequency of a quadratic one. Moreover, the average intensity of the three polarizers (oscillating around $0.3V$) is much lower than that of two polarizers because the perpendicular arrangement of the polarizers at the ends will always filter some light regardless of the central polarizer's orientation.

The highest intensity of the three polarizers occurred at measured angles 0° , 90° , and 180° , but since we started measurement when the intensity is maximum, that is, when the actual angle is 45° [?], $\theta_{actual} = \theta_{measured} + 45^\circ$, resulting in intensity peaks at angles 45° , 135° , and 225° . By the same conversion, the intensity is at a minimum when the actual angle is 0° or 90° , when the middle polarizer aligns with one of the polarizers at the ends,

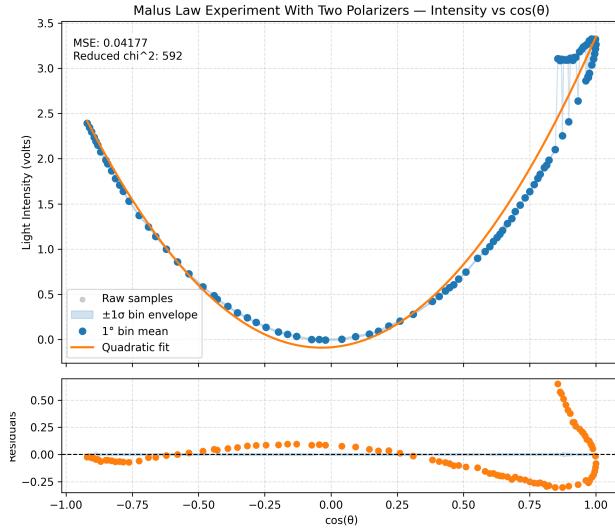


Figure 3: Intensity versus $\cos(\theta)$ graph for two polarizers. The uncertainty of the intensity and angle are invisible because the light sensor is accurate to a hundredth of a volt. The graph is roughly quadratic.

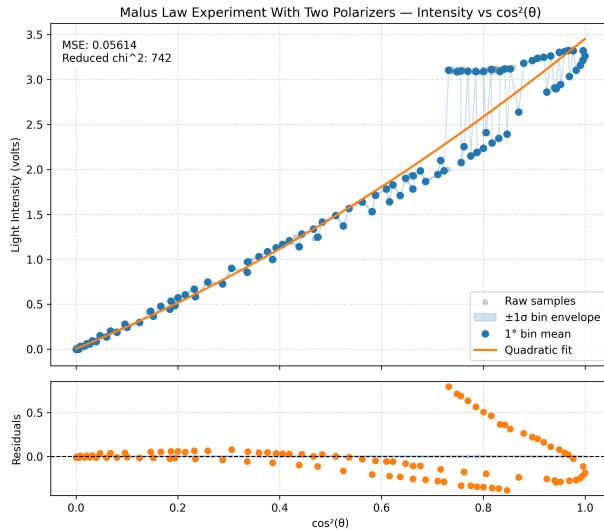


Figure 4: The light intensity is linear with $\cos^2 \theta$, with a mean squared error of 0.039. The two parallel but shifted patterns demonstrates that the rotary sensor has drift error possibly due to slip.

blocking the incident light completely.

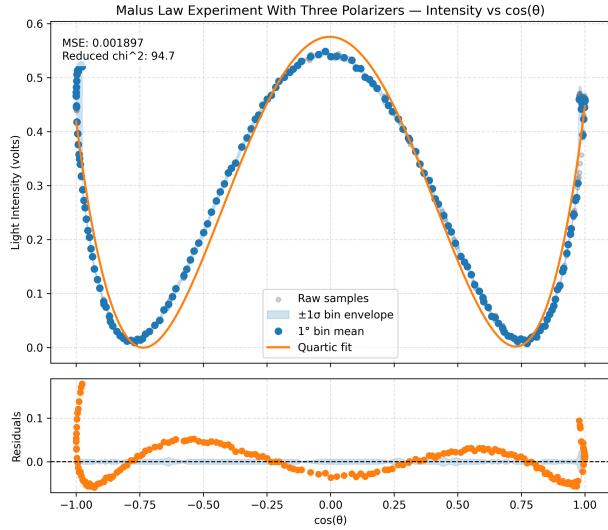


Figure 5: Intensity versus $\cos \theta$ graph for the three polarizers. The quartic curve has peaks at $\theta = 0^\circ$, 90° , and 180° . Notably, the angle θ is offset by 45° from the real polarizer direction.

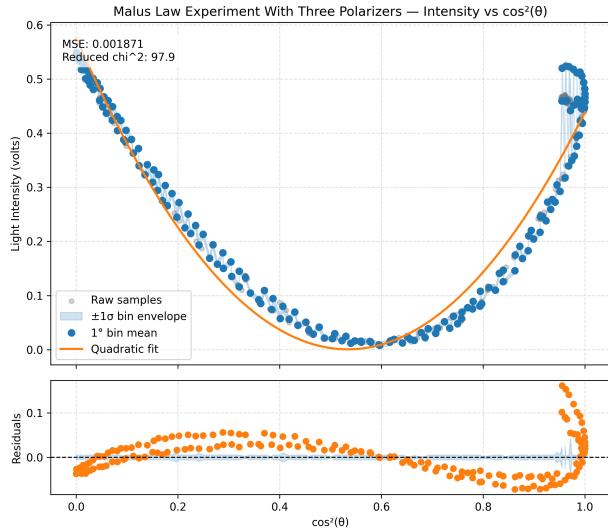


Figure 6: The intensity has a quadratic relationship with $\cos^2 \theta$, namely $I_3 = \frac{I_1}{2}(1 - \cos^2 \theta)(\cos^2 \theta)$, which can be derived from Eq.5 in the lab manual using trigonometric identities.

3.2 Brewster's Angle

The raw data obtained is very noisy due to the operation errors involved in rotating the apparatus disks concurrently. The light sensor is easily moved

out of the way of the reflected light, causing sudden dips in intensity.

The sensor angle is offset by 70° from the actual angle, $\theta_{actual} = \theta_{measured} - 70^\circ$ because the measurement software always begins recording at $\theta = 180^\circ$ but actual data collection begin at an angle from the incidence normal to not block the incident laser.

Notably, the error of both experiments grew larger with intensity. This could be attributed to error visibility, that when the actual intensity is near zero, an empty reading would not appear significant, but at high intensity, a dip in data differs greatly from the actual intensity.

Due to equipment limitations, the range of intensity recorded by the light sensor is constrained. To capture the small changes when intensity is low, the sensor must be amplified, which, however, overshoots intensity measurements at high intensity, causing clusters of data points at $4.3V$, the maximum reading of the light sensor, around small reflection angles.

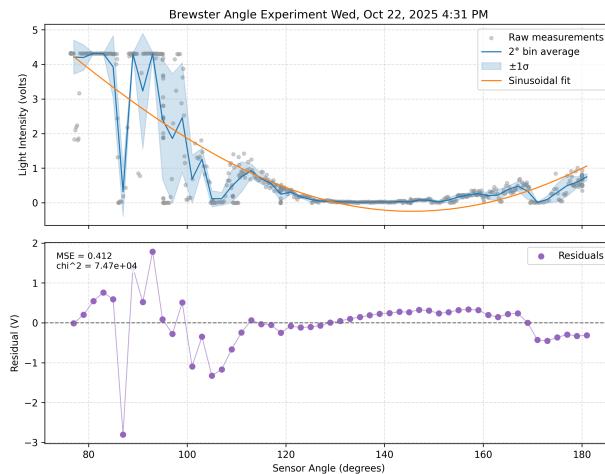


Figure 7: Intensity versus angle plot for Brewster's angle. The minimum intensity occurred at around 135° .

The horizontally polarized square filter dimmed the laser significantly at a measured angle of 135° , which is normalized to $135^\circ - 70^\circ = 65^\circ$ actual angle. The angle between the incident and the normal follows to be $180^\circ - 65^\circ = 115^\circ$, then divided by two to get the Brewsters angle equaling to 57.5° [?].

$$n_2 = n_1 \cdot \tan \theta_p = 1 \cdot \tan 57.5^\circ = 1.569$$

Choosing an arbitrary incident angle, 30° , so $\sin(30^\circ) = \frac{1}{2}$ and $\cos(30^\circ) = 0.866$, $\sin \theta_2 = \frac{n_1}{n_2} \cdot \sin(\theta_1) = \frac{1}{1.732 \cdot 2} = 0.2886$, meaning that $\theta_2 = 16.779^\circ$ and

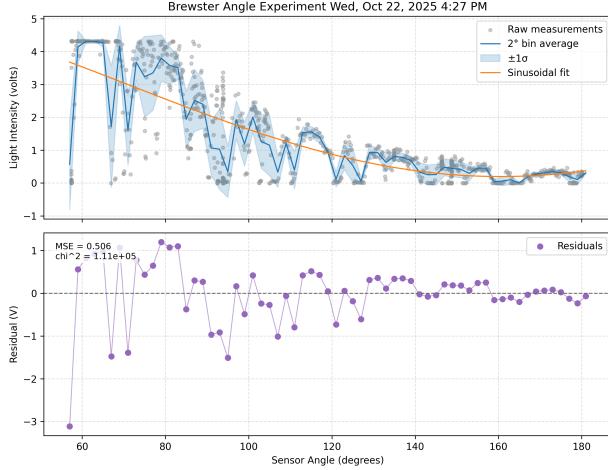


Figure 8: The vertically places square polarizer displayed no significant intensity drop at any angle.

$\cos \theta_2 = 0.9574$. Using the formulae given,

$$r_{\perp} = \frac{\cos \theta_1 - n_2 \cos \theta_2}{\cos \theta_1 + n_2 \cos \theta_2} \quad (1)$$

$$r_{\parallel} = \frac{\cos \theta_2 - n_2 \cos \theta_1}{\cos \theta_2 + n_2 \cos \theta_1} \quad (2)$$

$$r_{\perp} \approx -0.314 \text{ and } r_{\perp}^2 = 0.09859 \quad r_{\parallel} \approx -0.221 \text{ and } r_{\parallel}^2 = 0.04884$$

The refractive index of water is around 1.3, which is lower than the acrylic index of 1.7, meaning that $\tan \theta_{\text{water}} < \tan \theta_{\text{acrylic}}$, since tangent is an increasing function, the Brewster's angle of water is less than the Brewster's angle of acrylic.

The vertical polarizer would not have a dipping angle as the horizontal polarizer would; its intensity would vary smoothly with the incident angle, decreasing as the incident angle decreases. This is because the reflected ray always have a component perpendicular to the plane of reflection, which aligns with the vertical polarizer.

Glare comes from the sunlight's reflection off of flat surfaces. These flat surfaces partially or entirely polarizes light in the direction perpendicular to the plane of incidence. A polarized sunglasses can then block or dim the polarized light to reduce glare. Most sunglasses are designed to be polarized vertically. This design choice is because any surfaces flat in front of us have a vertical incidence plane, meaning that the reflected glare would be polarized horizontally, which can be most effectively blocked by a vertically polarized lens. One way to check this is to use a polarizer whose polarizing direction

is known; then put the sunglasses after it. Rotate the sunglasses until the amount of light the pass through is maximum. When this happens, the rotated sunglasses are polarized in the same direction as the polarizer in front.

4 Conclusion

Summarize findings, significance, and possible improvements for future work.

References

Use any citation style required (APA, MLA, etc.).