

Photo Description



This image shows a terminal block (a green connector) with eight numbered positions and colored wires attached to it, alongside a blue capacitor and a yellow component labeled with "C" and "F" markings. The wires—red, black, yellow, blue, and green—represent different electrical pathways that can carry electric current through a circuit system, similar to how roads carry traffic.

Scientific Phenomena

Anchoring Phenomenon: How do colored wires help electricity travel through a circuit?

Electricity flows through closed loops called circuits. In this image, the different colored wires are conductors—materials that allow electricity to move easily from one place to another. The terminal block acts as a connection point where multiple wires meet, allowing electricity to flow in different pathways. Each colored wire is insulated (covered in plastic) to keep electricity from escaping and to help us organize which path the electricity takes. Without complete loops and proper connections, electricity cannot flow and power devices like lights or motors.

Core Science Concepts

- * Electrical Conductors and Insulators: Metals in wires conduct (allow) electricity to flow, while plastic coating insulates (prevents) electricity from leaking out.
- * Complete Circuits: Electricity must travel in a closed loop with a power source, wire, and load (device) to work. If the loop breaks, electricity stops flowing.
- * Energy Transfer: Electricity is a form of energy that travels through wires to power devices. The colored wires help direct this energy to different destinations.
- * Connection and Organization: Terminal blocks organize multiple wires and create reliable connection points where electricity can safely transfer between different parts of a circuit.

Pedagogical Tip:

When teaching circuits to fourth graders, use the analogy of a racetrack or water pipe: electricity is like a car or water that needs a complete path to travel. If the track has a gap or the pipe is broken, nothing moves. This concrete comparison helps students understand why circuits must be closed loops before electricity can flow.

UDL Suggestions:

Provide multiple means of representation by combining visual (the colored wires in the photo), tactile (students building circuits with wire), and kinesthetic (students acting as "electricity" moving around a human circuit loop) learning experiences. Also, allow students to choose how they show understanding: drawing a circuit diagram, building a real circuit, or explaining circuits to a partner.

Zoom In / Zoom Out

Zoom In: Atomic Level — Electrons on the Move

When electricity flows through those colored wires, something invisible is happening at the tiniest level. Inside the metal wire are billions and billions of atoms. Each atom has even tinier particles called electrons that are loosely attached to them.

When electricity flows, these electrons move from atom to atom in a chain reaction, like a line of dominoes tipping over one after another. The electrons don't move super fast—they actually move quite slowly—but there are so many of them moving at the same time that the light turns on almost instantly! The plastic coating around the wire stops these electrons from escaping and zapping you or other things nearby.

Zoom Out: Community Level — Powering Our Homes and Schools

This small terminal block and colored wires are just tiny pieces of a much, much bigger electrical system. Zoom out and you'll see that your school is connected to an electrical grid—a massive network of power lines, transformers, and substations that stretches across your city and beyond. Electricity is generated at power plants (sometimes using coal, wind, or the sun), travels through thick cables on tall towers, gets stepped down to safer voltages at substations, and finally arrives at your school through underground or overhead lines. The terminal block in this photo does the same job as those enormous connection points in the power grid—it connects different pathways so electricity can reach all the classrooms, cafeterias, and offices in your building. Without systems like this, hospitals couldn't save lives, traffic lights wouldn't work, and you couldn't charge your tablet for learning!

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the wires in this circuit are different colors? (Bloom's: Understand | DOK: 1)
2. What would happen if one of these wires was cut or unplugged from the terminal block? (Bloom's: Analyze | DOK: 2)
3. How is this circuit similar to a path you walk to get from your classroom to the playground? (Bloom's: Analyze | DOK: 2)
4. If we wanted to add a light bulb to this circuit, where would we connect it, and why does it need to be part of a complete loop? (Bloom's: Evaluate | DOK: 3)

Potential Student Misconceptions

Misconception 1: "Electricity uses up and disappears when a light turns on."

Clarification: Electricity doesn't disappear—it changes form! When electricity flows through a light bulb, most of the energy transforms into light and heat (that's why bulbs get warm). The electricity itself keeps flowing around the circuit in a loop, ready to be used again. It's like water flowing around a waterwheel—the water doesn't vanish when it turns the wheel; it just keeps circulating.

Misconception 2: "Different colored wires carry different types of electricity."

Clarification: The colored plastic coating is just for organization and safety, not because the electricity itself is different colors. All the wires carry the same kind of electrical energy. We use different colors like a filing system—red might mean "power," black might mean "ground," and green might mean "safety." The colors help electricians know which wire goes where, similar to how different colored folders in a filing cabinet help you organize papers.

Misconception 3: "You need to see electricity to know it's flowing."

Clarification: Electricity is invisible, but we can see and feel its effects. We can see a light bulb glow, feel heat from a toaster, or hear a speaker play music—all because electricity is doing work behind the scenes. Just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there, just like you can't see wind, but you can see leaves moving because of it.

Extension Activities

1. Build Your Own Circuit: Provide students with AA batteries, wire, light bulbs, and switches. Challenge them to build a working circuit and draw a diagram of their circuit. Have them predict what happens when they open and close the switch, then test their prediction.
2. Circuit Scavenger Hunt: Take students on a classroom walk to identify circuits in the school (light switches, interactive whiteboards, computers, charging stations). Have students sketch or photograph each circuit and discuss what it powers.
3. Series vs. Parallel Circuits: Using the terminal block as a model, help students compare circuits where components are connected in a line (series) versus branching off (parallel). Test which setup keeps lights brighter when multiple bulbs are added. Have students record observations and hypothesize why.

Cross-Curricular Ideas

Math Connection: Counting and Patterns

Students can count the eight numbered terminals on the terminal block and identify the number sequence. Challenge them to skip-count by 2s using the even-numbered terminals (2, 4, 6, 8) and identify odd numbers. They can also measure the length of each colored wire using rulers and create a bar graph comparing which wire is longest and shortest. This connects circuit organization with data collection and representation.

ELA Connection: Procedural Writing and Vocabulary

Have students write step-by-step instructions for building a simple circuit using the vocabulary words (conductor, insulator, circuit, terminal block). They can create an illustrated "How to Build a Circuit" guide for younger students, practicing sequencing, descriptive language, and clear communication. Students might also read age-appropriate books about electricity and write book reviews or create "Electricity Fact Cards" with new vocabulary.

Social Studies Connection: Community Helpers and History

Invite a local electrician to visit the classroom (virtually or in person) to discuss how they use circuits to wire homes and buildings. Connect this to the history of electricity by showing students pictures of Thomas Edison and Benjamin Franklin and discussing how electricity changed our communities over time. Students can research "Who brought electricity to our town?" using library resources and present findings to the class.

Art Connection: Design and Color Coding

Challenge students to design their own "circuit diagram" using colored markers or paint to represent the terminal block and wired connections from the photo. They can invent their own color-coding system and create a legend explaining what each color means. Students might also create a three-dimensional model of a circuit using craft materials (pipe cleaners for wires, foam board for the base, and stickers for labels), strengthening their understanding through hands-on artistic creation.

STEM Career Connection

Electrician

Electricians install, repair, and maintain electrical systems in homes, schools, and businesses—exactly like the circuits and terminal blocks in this photo! They read blueprints, connect wires safely, test circuits to make sure they work, and troubleshoot problems when something stops working. Electricians use math to calculate electrical loads and physics knowledge about how electricity flows. It's a job that helps keep communities safe and powered. Average Annual Salary: \$55,000–\$60,000 USD

Electrical Engineer

Electrical engineers design and develop the systems and devices that use electricity. They might design the circuits inside your phone, create safer power grids for cities, or invent new renewable energy systems using solar panels or wind turbines. Engineers use advanced math, science, and computer skills to solve complex problems and create new technologies.

Average Annual Salary: \$105,000–\$110,000 USD

Power Plant Operator

Power plant operators manage the huge machines and systems that generate electricity for entire cities and regions. They monitor control panels (which look similar to this circuit but much bigger!), check that all systems are running safely, and keep the electrical grid stable so homes and businesses never lose power. This job requires attention to detail, problem-solving skills, and knowledge of how electricity generation works. Average Annual Salary: \$80,000–\$85,000 USD

NGSS Connections

Performance Expectation:

4-PS3-2: Make observations to provide evidence that energy is transferred by sound, light, heat, and electric currents.

Disciplinary Core Idea:

4-PS3.B Energy can be transferred in various ways.

Crosscutting Concepts:

Energy and Matter — Electricity is a form of energy that flows through pathways.

Systems and System Models — A circuit is a system with interconnected parts that must work together.

Science Vocabulary

- * Circuit: A complete loop that electricity travels through from a power source and back again.
- * Conductor: A material (like copper wire) that allows electricity to flow easily through it.
- * Insulator: A material (like plastic or rubber) that stops electricity from flowing through it.
- * Terminal Block: A connector that safely joins multiple wires together so electricity can transfer between them.
- * Electrical Path: The route that electricity takes as it moves through a circuit from the power source to a device and back.
- * Energy Transfer: When electricity moves from one place to another to power something, like a light or motor.

External Resources

Children's Books:



Electricity* by Rebecca Stefoff (DK Findout series)

The Electricity Book* by Lisa Trumbauer (a colorful introduction to circuits)

Spark the Electric Jigsaw Girl* by Betsy Cornwell (narrative-based introduction to circuits and energy)