

Photo Description



This image shows a terminal block (a green connector block labeled 1-8) and a relay (a blue component labeled C P/MV) wired together with colored wires in red, blue, yellow, and green. The wires carry electrical current between components, allowing electricity to flow through different pathways. A yellow control box on the right labeled with "C1" and "C2" helps manage the electrical flow in this circuit system.

Scientific Phenomena

Anchoring Phenomenon: Why do electrical devices need wires and special connectors to work?

Electricity needs a complete, closed path (called a circuit) to flow from a power source, through electrical devices, and back to complete the loop. In this image, the colored wires create pathways for electric current to travel between the terminal block, relay, and control box. Without these connections, electricity cannot flow, and the system won't function. The relay acts as a switch—when electricity flows through it, it can automatically turn other electrical circuits "on" or "off," similar to how a light switch works in your home.

Core Science Concepts

- * Complete Circuit: Electricity must flow in a continuous loop from the power source through all components and back to the power source. If the path is broken anywhere, electricity stops flowing and devices stop working.
- * Conductors and Conductivity: The colored wires are made of copper metal, which is an excellent conductor—a material that allows electricity to flow easily through it. The plastic coating around the wires is an insulator that prevents electricity from leaking out.
- * Electrical Components and Their Functions: Different parts of a circuit have different jobs. The terminal block acts as a connection point, the relay is an automatic switch, and the control box manages when electricity flows.
- * Series vs. Parallel Connections: Wires can be connected in different ways. Understanding how components connect helps students predict how electricity will flow and whether all parts will receive power.

Pedagogical Tip:

Use the "light bulb moment" strategy: Before discussing circuits formally, have students predict what will happen if you remove one wire from a flashlight circuit. This activates prior knowledge and creates cognitive dissonance that makes the concept of "complete circuits" more memorable. Students learn better when they grapple with the phenomenon first.

UDL Suggestions:

Representation: Provide a color-coded circuit diagram alongside this photo so students can see both the real circuit and its symbolic representation. Some students need multiple modalities to understand abstract concepts like electricity. Consider also offering a tactile version—students can trace their fingers along the wire pathways while you explain current flow.

Engagement: Let students choose which colored wire they'll "follow" as electricity flows through the circuit, creating a physical demonstration where student volunteers hold hands to represent the circuit path.

Zoom In / Zoom Out

Zoom In: The Atomic Level

When electricity flows through a copper wire, what's actually happening? Inside the metal, billions of tiny electrons (negatively charged particles smaller than atoms) are moving from one atom to the next, like a relay race happening at speeds close to the speed of light! The electrons don't actually travel very fast, but the signal they carry moves almost instantly. The plastic coating around the wire stops electrons from escaping because its atoms hold onto their electrons tightly—that's why it's an insulator. In the relay, when electricity flows through a coil of wire, it creates an invisible magnetic field that pushes a metal switch to "click" on or off. This happens because moving electrons create magnetism!

Zoom Out: Electrical Grids and Communities

This small circuit in a building is connected to a much larger system: the electrical grid that powers your entire community. Power plants generate electricity and send it through transmission lines (like massive versions of these colored wires) across cities and towns. The terminal blocks, relays, and control systems in this photo are the same types of components that electricians and engineers use in building electrical systems, traffic lights, hospitals, and schools. Understanding how this small circuit works helps you understand how electricity reaches your home, charges your devices, and powers the computers you use to learn. Every hospital, fire station, and home depends on these same principles of complete circuits and safe electrical connections.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think would happen if we removed one of the colored wires from this circuit? Why? (Bloom's: Predict | DOK: 2)
2. How is this electrical circuit similar to a water system with pipes and pumps? What parts are the same? (Bloom's: Analyze | DOK: 3)
3. Why do you think different colored wires are used in this circuit instead of just one color? (Bloom's: Evaluate | DOK: 3)
4. If the relay is like a switch, what do you think it's switching on or off, and how would you test your idea? (Bloom's: Create | DOK: 4)

Potential Student Misconceptions

Misconception 1: "Electricity gets used up as it flows through a circuit."

Clarification: Electricity doesn't disappear—it flows in a complete loop, like water in a fountain. The same amount of electricity that enters a circuit at the power source must exit and return to complete the path. What does change is the energy the electricity carries. When electricity flows through a light bulb, it transfers its energy to make heat and light, but the electricity itself keeps flowing back to the power source. Think of it like a relay race: the runners (electrons) keep running around the track, but they get tired from running (energy is released).

Misconception 2: "Thicker wires have more electricity in them than thin wires."

Clarification: The thickness of a wire doesn't determine how much electricity flows through it—the voltage (electrical pressure) and the power source determine that. However, thicker wires are better at carrying large amounts of electricity without getting too hot and causing safety problems. It's similar to water pipes: a thin pipe can carry water just fine, but a thick pipe can carry more water without the pressure building up dangerously.

Misconception 3: "Electricity travels through wires looking for a place to go, like it's alive."

Clarification: Electricity doesn't "search" or "want" to go anywhere. It only flows when there's a complete, closed path and a power source pushing it. The power source creates electrical pressure that forces electrons to move through the circuit. If the path is broken (open circuit), no electricity flows at all—it doesn't try to jump across gaps or find another route. This is why a light switch works: breaking the circuit stops the flow completely.

Extension Activities

Activity 1: Build a Simple Circuit with a Buzzer

Students design and build their own simple circuits using batteries, buzzers, wire, and switches. They test whether adding more batteries in series makes the buzzer louder (voltage increase) and predict what happens if they connect components in different ways. This hands-on experience deepens understanding of complete circuits and how components affect circuit behavior.

Activity 2: Circuit Design Challenge

Provide students with a real-world problem: "Design a circuit that turns on a light when a door opens." Students sketch their circuit design, label the components, and explain the path electricity would take. They can test their designs using circuit simulation software (like TinkerCAD Circuits—free online) before attempting to build them.

Activity 3: "Conductor or Insulator?" Scavenger Hunt

Students explore the classroom and school to find five materials they think are conductors and five they think are insulators. They organize findings in a chart, make predictions about why materials are categorized that way, and test a few with battery and bulb circuits (only with teacher supervision and appropriate safety measures).

Cross-Curricular Ideas

Math Connection: Circuits and Measurement

Students can measure and record the lengths of each colored wire in the circuit using rulers or measuring tape. They create a bar graph or data table comparing wire lengths and calculate the total length of all wires combined. They can also estimate how many times longer the circuit wires are compared to a pencil, connecting measurement skills to real-world applications. This reinforces skills like estimation, measurement, and data representation.

ELA Connection: Instructional Writing and Safety

Have students write a "How to Safely Connect Wires in a Circuit" instruction manual for younger students. This requires clear, sequential writing (procedural text), vocabulary usage, and explaining concepts simply. Students can illustrate their instructions with labeled diagrams and create a "Safety Rules Poster" for the classroom. This combines technical writing with the responsibility of communicating science clearly.

Social Studies Connection: Careers and Community Infrastructure

Discuss how electricians, engineers, and technicians maintain the electrical systems that power your school and community. Take a "virtual tour" of your school's electrical room (with permission) or watch a video of an electrician at work. Students can interview family members or community workers who use circuits in their jobs (HVAC technicians, building maintenance workers, etc.) and create a presentation about how electricity powers community services like hospitals, fire stations, and traffic systems.

Art Connection: Circuit Design and Color Coding

Students design their own circuits on paper, choosing their own color scheme for wires and labeling each component. They can create a "circuit blueprint" that looks professional and includes a color-coding legend explaining what each color represents. This connects to real engineering practices where colors indicate different functions (like red for positive, black for negative, green for ground). Students can also create a 3D model of a circuit using craft materials, making the abstract concept of current flow more tangible.

STEM Career Connection

Electrician

Electricians install, repair, and maintain electrical systems in homes, schools, hospitals, and buildings—exactly like the systems shown in this photo. They read circuit diagrams, connect wires safely, test circuits to make sure they work, and keep people safe by following electrical codes. Electricians use tools like multimeters to test circuits and must understand how electricity flows. This job requires problem-solving and attention to detail.

Average Annual Salary: \$56,900 USD

Electrical Engineer

Electrical engineers design the circuits and electrical systems that power everything from smartphones to power plants. They use computers to plan circuits, test them with simulations, and create blueprints for technicians and electricians to build. Engineers must understand how electricity behaves in different situations and invent new ways to use electrical technology safely and efficiently. Some electrical engineers specialize in renewable energy like solar panels and wind turbines.

Average Annual Salary: \$104,000 USD

Electronics Technician

Electronics technicians build, test, and repair circuits and electronic devices like computers, circuit boards, medical equipment, and automation systems (like the relay system in this photo). They use testing equipment to check if circuits work properly, locate problems, and fix broken components. Technicians need to understand how circuits function and be skilled at careful, precise work. Many technicians work in manufacturing, hospitals, or tech companies.

Average Annual Salary: \$63,500 USD

NGSS Connections

Performance Expectation: 5-PS2-1: Support an argument that the gravitational force exerted by Earth on objects is directed down.

Note: While this image shows circuits (energy/forces), the primary 5th grade PE for electricity is:

Related PE - Energy Transfer: 4-PS3-4: Apply scientific ideas to design, test, and refine a device that converts energy from one form to another. (This anticipatory standard connects well to understanding how electrical circuits convert and transfer energy.)

Disciplinary Core Ideas:

- 4-PS3.B (Energy Transfer)
- 5-PS2.B (Types of Interactions)

Crosscutting Concepts:

- Systems and System Models (The circuit is a system where parts interact)
- Energy and Matter (Electricity moves through the system via wires)

Science Vocabulary

- * Circuit: A complete, closed path that electricity follows as it flows from a power source through devices and back to the power source.
- * Conductor: A material (like copper wire) that allows electricity to flow easily through it.
- * Insulator: A material (like plastic or rubber) that does not allow electricity to flow through it and is used to protect people from electric shocks.
- * Relay: An electronic switch that uses a small amount of electricity to turn a larger electrical circuit on or off automatically.
- * Terminal Block: A connector device that securely holds wires in place and allows electricity to flow between them safely.
- * Current: The flow of electricity through a circuit, like water flowing through a pipe.

External Resources

Children's Books:

- Electricity All Around by National Geographic Kids (introduces electrical concepts with vivid photos)
- The Magic School Bus and the Electric Field Trip by Joanna Cole (engaging narrative about electricity)
- Who Uses This? Community Workers (shows real-world applications of electrical circuits in jobs)

Teacher Tip: Start with students' observations of the photo before jumping to explanations. Ask, "What do you notice?" and "What questions do you have?" This positions students as scientific thinkers rather than passive receivers of information and builds stronger conceptual understanding of circuit behavior.