

Photo Description



This image shows a set of railroad tracks stretching into the distance, surrounded by trees with green and yellow leaves. The tracks are made of metal rails resting on wooden railroad ties (also called sleepers) that sit on a bed of small rocks called ballast. The straight rails demonstrate how engineers use geometry to create pathways for heavy trains to travel safely.

Scientific Phenomena

Anchoring Phenomenon: Why do railroad tracks look like they get closer together as they disappear into the distance?

Scientific Explanation: This is an example of perspective and parallel lines. The two metal rails run parallel to each other (they never actually meet), but our eyes perceive them as converging toward a vanishing point far away. This optical illusion occurs because objects that are far away appear smaller to our eyes than objects close to us. Additionally, this image illustrates physical properties of materials—the metal rails are chosen because metal is strong, rigid, and can support tremendous weight without bending or breaking. The wooden ties distribute the weight of trains across the ballast (rocks below), demonstrating how engineers use the physical properties of different materials to solve real-world problems.

Core Science Concepts

- * Physical Properties of Materials: Different materials (metal, wood, rock) are chosen for railroad construction because of their specific properties. Metal is strong and durable; wood provides flexibility; rocks distribute weight effectively.
- * Force and Support: The railroad structure demonstrates how weight is distributed. The heavy train's weight is transferred from the rails to the ties to the ballast, preventing the train from sinking into the ground.
- * Geometry and Design: Railroad tracks are constructed in parallel lines, and engineers carefully plan the spacing between ties to ensure stability and safety.
- * Weathering and Change Over Time: The image shows rust and moss growing on the rails, illustrating how materials change when exposed to weather, water, and air over long periods.

Pedagogical Tip:

Encourage students to observe the close-up details in this image: rust on the rails, moss or lichen growth, variations in wood color on the ties, and the texture of the ballast rocks. Have students sketch these details before discussing why they occur. This builds observational skills and creates a bridge to understanding material properties and weathering.

UDL Suggestions:

Multiple Means of Representation: Provide a labeled diagram of railroad track components (rails, ties, ballast) alongside the photograph. Some students may benefit from tactile models or 3D representations. Multiple Means of Action & Expression: Allow students to demonstrate understanding through drawing, building with manipulatives, or creating digital labels rather than only written responses. Multiple Means of Engagement: Connect to students' personal experiences—many children have seen trains or railroad crossings—and invite them to share observations before formal instruction.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think engineers chose metal and wood to build railroad tracks instead of plastic or concrete? (Bloom's: Analyze | DOK: 2)
2. What do you observe has happened to the metal rails over time, and what might have caused those changes? (Bloom's: Analyze | DOK: 2)
3. How do the small rocks under the railroad ties help support the weight of a heavy train? (Bloom's: Explain | DOK: 3)
4. If you were designing a new railroad track system, what materials would you choose and why would those materials work better than the ones shown in this photo? (Bloom's: Evaluate | DOK: 3)

Extension Activities

1. Material Testing Investigation: Provide students with samples of different materials (metal washers, wood pieces, plastic, rubber, fabric). Ask them to test each material's strength by hanging weights from it using a simple testing apparatus. Record which material can support the most weight before breaking or bending. Connect findings back to why metal is used for railroad rails.
2. Design Your Own Track: Challenge students to design a safe pathway for a toy train using craft materials (paper towel tubes, straws, cardboard, tape, small rocks). Students must create a structure that keeps the toy train on track and supports it without tipping. Have them test their designs and modify based on what they observe.
3. Observe Weathering Over Time: Create a "mini railroad" demonstration with metal objects (steel wool, nails, washers) exposed to water and air in clear containers. Have students make predictions and observations over 1-2 weeks as rust develops. Document changes with drawings or photos to show how materials change over time.

NGSS Connections

Grade 4 Performance Expectation:

- 4-PS3-1: Use evidence to construct an explanation relating the speed of an object to the energy of that object.
- 4-ETS1-1: Define a simple design problem reflecting a need or want that includes specified criteria for success and constraints on materials, time, or cost.

Disciplinary Core Ideas:

- 4-PS1.A - All objects are made of one or more materials that can be identified, described, and classified by their observable properties
- 4-PS2.B - The patterns of an object's motion in various situations can be observed and measured
- 4-ETS1.A - Possible solutions to a problem are limited by available materials and resources

Crosscutting Concepts:

- Patterns - Students observe the repeating pattern of railroad ties
- Structure and Function - The structure of railroad tracks is designed to serve a specific function: safely transporting heavy loads

Science Vocabulary

- * Parallel: Two lines or surfaces that run next to each other and never meet, even if they continue forever in the same direction.

- * Ballast: Small rocks or stones placed under railroad ties to support the tracks and distribute the weight of trains.
- * Physical Properties: Characteristics of a material that you can observe or measure, such as color, hardness, texture, or strength.
- * Weathering: The slow breaking down or wearing away of rocks and materials caused by wind, water, ice, and sunlight over time.
- * Rigid: Stiff and unable to bend; not flexible.
- * Distribute: To spread something out evenly across an area or object.

External Resources

Children's Books:

- The Little Engine That Could by Watty Piper (classic story about trains and perseverance; supports discussion of how trains move)
- Trains by Gail Gibbons (informative non-fiction picture book with detailed illustrations of train parts and tracks)
- Click, Clack, Go! by Doreen Cronin (engaging story about different modes of transportation including trains)

YouTube Videos:

- "How Are Railroad Tracks Made?" by National Geographic Kids (approximately 5 minutes; shows the engineering and construction process of railroad tracks) — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=example> (Search National Geographic Kids for current valid link)
- "Materials and Their Properties" by Crash Course Kids (approximately 4 minutes; explores how different materials are chosen for different purposes) — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=example> (Search Crash Course Kids channel for current valid link)

Teacher Tip: Before showing this photograph, consider taking a safe field trip to a local railroad crossing or park where students can observe real railroad tracks. This concrete experience will deepen their understanding when they return to analyze the image. Always prioritize safety—never allow students to play on active railroad tracks.