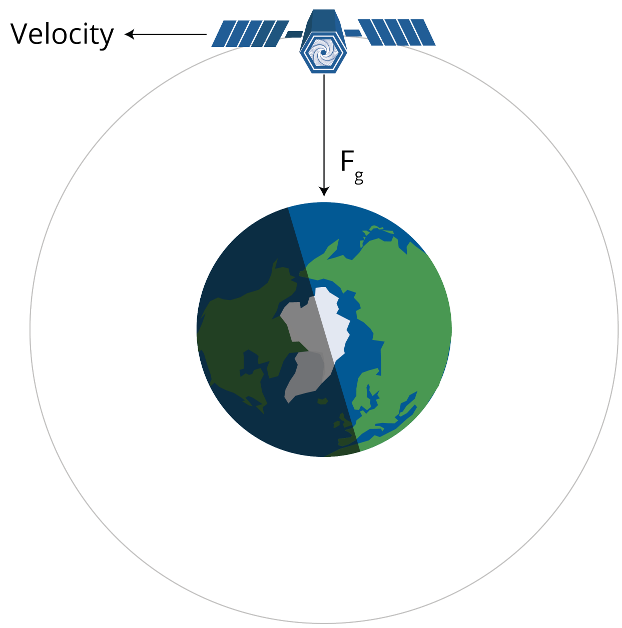
Chapter 1

Orbits

A satellite stays in orbit around the planet because the pull of the planet's gravity causes it to accelerate toward the center of the planet.



The satellite must be moving at a very particular speed to keep a constant distance from the planet – to travel in a circular orbit. If it is moving too slowly, it will get closer to the planet. If it is going too fast, it will get farther from the planet.

The radius of the earth is about 6.37 million meters. A satellite that is in a low orbit is typically about 2 million meters above the ground. At that distance, the acceleration due to gravity is more like $6.8m/s^2$, instead of the $9.8m/s^2$ that we experience on the surface of the planet.

How fast does the satellite need to be moving in a circle with a radius of 8.37 million meters to have an acceleration of $6.8m/s^2$? Real fast.

Recall that the acceleration vector is

$$a = \frac{v^2}{r}$$

Thus the velocity v needs to be:

$$v = \sqrt{ar} = \sqrt{6.8(8.37x10^6} = 7,544 \text{ m/s}$$

(That's 16,875 miles per hour.)

When a satellite falls out of orbit, it enters the atmosphere at that 7,544 m/s. The air rushing by generates so much friction that the satellite gets very, very hot and usually disintegrates.

1.1 Astronauts are not weightless

Some people see astronauts floating inside an orbiting spacecraft and think there is no gravity: that the astronauts are so far away that the gravity of the planet doesn't affect them. This is incorrect. The gravity might be slightly less (Maybe 6 newtons per kg instead of 9.8 newtons per kg), but the weightless they experience is because they and the spacecraft is in free fall. They are just moving so fast (in a direction perpendicular to gravity) that they don't collide with the planet.

Exercise 1 Mars Orbit

Working Space

The radius of Mars is 3.39 million meters. The atmosphere goes up another 11 km. Let's say you want to put a satellite in a circular orbit around Mars with a radius of 3.4 million meters.

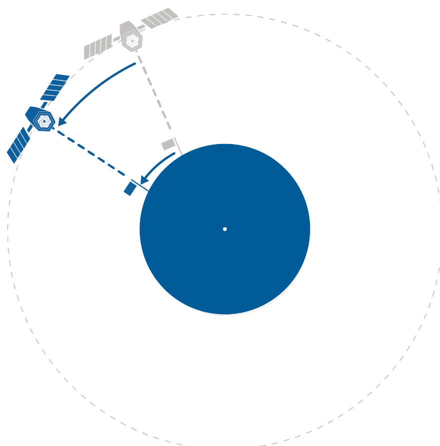
The acceleration due to gravity on the surface of Mars is $3.721 \mathrm{m/s^2}$. We can safely assume that it is approximately the same 11 km above the surface.

How fast does the satellite need to be traveling in its orbit? How long will each orbit take?

Answer on Page 7

1.2 Geosynchronous Orbits

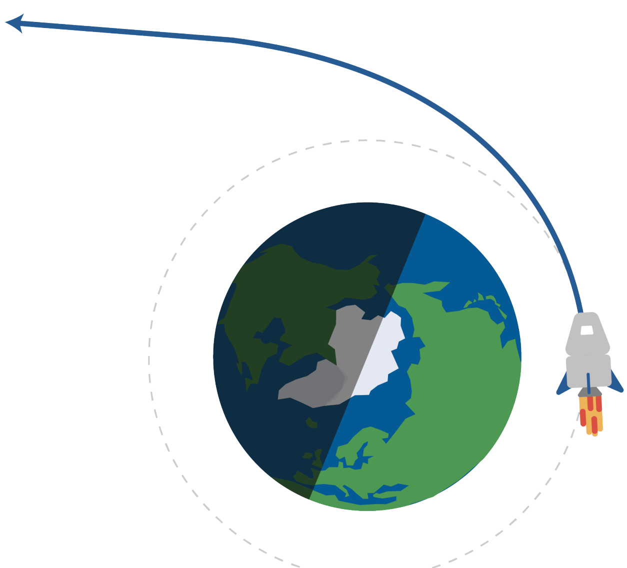
The planet earth rotates once a day. Satellites in low orbits circle the earth many times a day. Satellites in very high orbits circle less than once per day. There is a radius at which a satellite orbits exactly once per day. Satellites at this radius are known as "geosynchronous" or "geostationary" because they are always directly over a place on the planet.



The radius of a circular geosynchronous orbit is 42.164 million meters. (About 36 km above the surface of the earth.)

A geosynchronous satellite travels at a speed of 3,070 m/s.

Geosynchronous satellites are used for the Global Positioning Satellite system, weather monitoring system, and communications system.



FIXME: Add text for escape velocity

This is a draft chapter from the Kontinua Project. Please see our website (https://kontinua.org/) for more details.

Appendix A

Answers to Exercises

Answer to Exercise ?? (on page 3)

$$v = \sqrt{3.721(3.4 \times 10^6)} = 3,557 \text{ m/s}$$

The circular orbit is $2\pi(3.4 \times 10^6) = 21.4 \times 10^6$ meters in circumference.

The period of the orbit is $(21.4 \times 10^6)/3,557 \approx 6,000$ seconds.