

Figure 6.9 ♦ Active and passive scanning for access points

in Section 8.8 that the new IEEE 802.11i protocol defining security aspects of the 802.11 protocol family takes precisely this approach.

6.3.2 The 802.11 MAC Protocol

Once a wireless station is associated with an AP, it can start sending and receiving data frames to and from the access point. But because multiple stations may want to transmit data frames at the same time over the same channel, a multiple access protocol is needed to coordinate the transmissions. Here, a **station** is either a wireless station or an AP. As discussed in Chapter 5 and Section 6.2.1, broadly speaking there are three classes of multiple access protocols: channel partitioning (including CDMA), random access, and taking turns. Inspired by the huge success of Ethernet and its random access protocol, the designers of 802.11 chose a random access protocol for 802.11 wireless LANs. This random access protocol is referred to as **CSMA with collision avoidance**, or more succinctly as **CSMA/CA**. As with Ethernet's CSMA/CD, the "CSMA" in CSMA/CA stands for "carrier sense multiple access," meaning that each station senses the channel before transmitting, and refrains from transmitting when the channel is sensed busy. Although both Ethernet and 802.11 use carrier-sensing random access, the two MAC protocols have important differences.

First, instead of using collision detection, 802.11 uses collision-avoidance techniques. Second, because of the relatively high bit error rates of wireless channels, 802.11 (unlike Ethernet) uses a link-layer acknowledgment/retransmission (ARQ) scheme. We'll describe 802.11's collision-avoidance and link-layer acknowledgment schemes below.

Recall from Sections 5.3.2 and 5.4.2 that with Ethernet's collision-detection algorithm, an Ethernet station listens to the channel as it transmits. If, while transmitting, it detects that another station is also transmitting, it aborts its transmission and tries to transmit again after waiting a small, random amount of time. Unlike the 802.3 Ethernet protocol, the 802.11 MAC protocol does *not* implement collision detection. There are two important reasons for this:

- The ability to detect collisions requires the ability to send (the station's own signal) and receive (to determine whether another station is also transmitting) at the same time. Because the strength of the received signal is typically very small compared to the strength of the transmitted signal at the 802.11 adapter, it is costly to build hardware that can detect a collision.
- More importantly, even if the adapter could transmit and listen at the same time (and presumably abort transmission when it senses a busy channel), the adapter would still not be able to detect all collisions, due to the hidden terminal problem and fading, as discussed in Section 6.2.

Because 802.11 wireless LANs do not use collision detection, once a station begins to transmit a frame, *it transmits the frame in its entirety*; that is, once a station gets started, there is no turning back. As one might expect, transmitting entire frames (particularly long frames) when collisions are prevalent can significantly degrade a multiple access protocol's performance. In order to reduce the likelihood of collisions, 802.11 employs several collision-avoidance techniques, which we'll shortly discuss.

Before considering collision avoidance, however, we'll first need to examine 802.11's **link-layer acknowledgment** scheme. Recall from Section 6.2 that when a station in a wireless LAN sends a frame, the frame may not reach the destination station intact for a variety of reasons. To deal with this non-negligible chance of failure, the 802.11 MAC protocol uses link-layer acknowledgments. As shown in Figure 6.10, when the destination station receives a frame that passes the CRC, it waits a short period of time known as the **Short Inter-frame Spacing (SIFS)** and then sends back an acknowledgment frame. If the transmitting station does not receive an acknowledgment within a given amount of time, it assumes that an error has occurred and retransmits the frame, using the CSMA/CA protocol to access the channel. If an acknowledgment is not received after some fixed number of retransmissions, the transmitting station gives up and discards the frame.

Having discussed how 802.11 uses link-layer acknowledgments, we're now in a position to describe the 802.11 CSMA/CA protocol. Suppose that a station (wireless station or an AP) has a frame to transmit.

1. If initially the station senses the channel idle, it transmits its frame after a short period of time known as the **Distributed Inter-frame Space (DIFS)**; see Figure 6.10.
2. Otherwise, the station chooses a random backoff value using binary exponential backoff (as we encountered in Section 5.3.2) and counts down this value when the channel is sensed idle. While the channel is sensed busy, the counter value remains frozen.
3. When the counter reaches zero (note that this can only occur while the channel is sensed idle), the station transmits the entire frame and then waits for an acknowledgment.

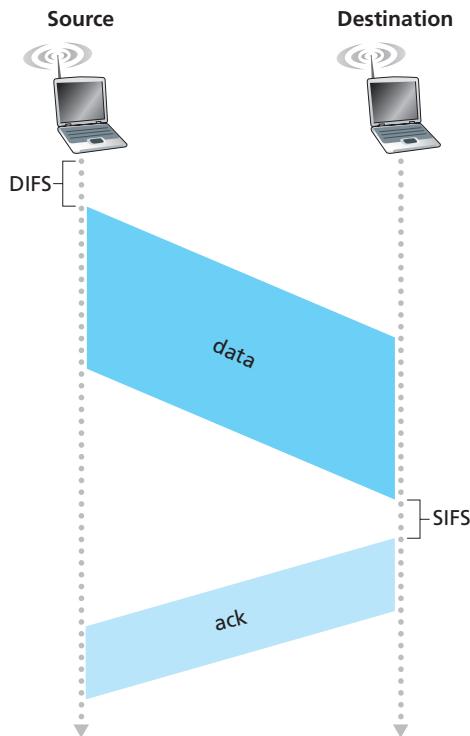


Figure 6.10 ♦ 802.11 uses link-layer acknowledgments

4. If an acknowledgment is received, the transmitting station knows that its frame has been correctly received at the destination station. If the station has another frame to send, it begins the CSMA/CA protocol at step 2. If the acknowledgment isn't received, the transmitting station reenters the backoff phase in step 2, with the random value chosen from a larger interval.

Recall that under Ethernet's CSMA/CD, multiple access protocol (Section 5.3.2), a station begins transmitting as soon as the channel is sensed idle. With CSMA/CA, however, the station refrains from transmitting while counting down, even when it senses the channel to be idle. Why do CSMA/CD and CDMA/CA take such different approaches here?

To answer this question, let's consider a scenario in which two stations each have a data frame to transmit, but neither station transmits immediately because each senses that a third station is already transmitting. With Ethernet's CSMA/CD, the two stations would each transmit as soon as they detect that the third station has finished transmitting. This would cause a collision, which isn't a serious issue in CSMA/CD, since both stations would abort their transmissions and thus avoid the useless transmissions of the remainders of their frames. In 802.11, however, the situation is quite different. Because 802.11 does not detect a collision and abort transmission, a frame suffering a collision will be transmitted in its entirety. The goal in 802.11 is thus to avoid collisions whenever possible. In 802.11, if the two stations sense the channel busy, they both immediately enter random backoff, hopefully choosing different backoff values. If these values are indeed different, once the channel becomes idle, one of the two stations will begin transmitting before the other, and (if the two stations are not hidden from each other) the "losing station" will hear the "winning station's" signal, freeze its counter, and refrain from transmitting until the winning station has completed its transmission. In this manner, a costly collision is avoided. Of course, collisions can still occur with 802.11 in this scenario: The two stations could be hidden from each other, or the two stations could choose random backoff values that are close enough that the transmission from the station starting first have yet to reach the second station. Recall that we encountered this problem earlier in our discussion of random access algorithms in the context of Figure 5.12.

Dealing with Hidden Terminals: RTS and CTS

The 802.11 MAC protocol also includes a nifty (but optional) reservation scheme that helps avoid collisions even in the presence of hidden terminals. Let's investigate this scheme in the context of Figure 6.11, which shows two wireless stations and one access point. Both of the wireless stations are within range of the AP (whose coverage is shown as a shaded circle) and both have associated with the AP. However, due to fading, the signal ranges of wireless stations are limited to the

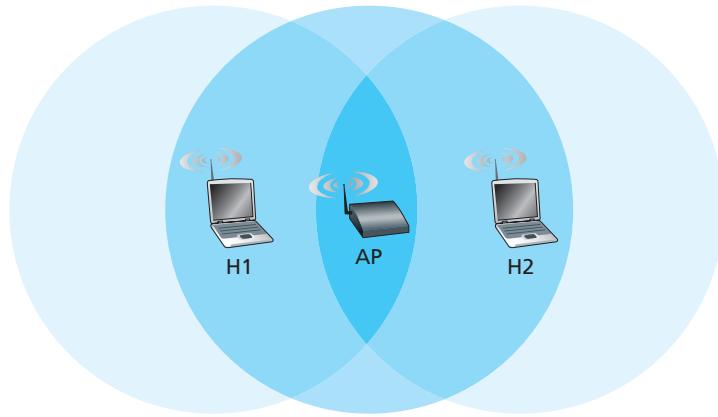


Figure 6.11 ♦ Hidden terminal example: H1 is hidden from H2, and vice versa

interiors of the shaded circles shown in Figure 6.11. Thus, each of the wireless stations is hidden from the other, although neither is hidden from the AP.

Let's now consider why hidden terminals can be problematic. Suppose Station H1 is transmitting a frame and halfway through H1's transmission, Station H2 wants to send a frame to the AP. H2, not hearing the transmission from H1, will first wait a DIFS interval and then transmit the frame, resulting in a collision. The channel will therefore be wasted during the entire period of H1's transmission as well as during H2's transmission.

In order to avoid this problem, the IEEE 802.11 protocol allows a station to use a short **Request to Send (RTS)** control frame and a short **Clear to Send (CTS)** control frame to *reserve* access to the channel. When a sender wants to send a DATA frame, it can first send an RTS frame to the AP, indicating the total time required to transmit the DATA frame and the acknowledgment (ACK) frame. When the AP receives the RTS frame, it responds by broadcasting a CTS frame. This CTS frame serves two purposes: It gives the sender explicit permission to send and also instructs the other stations not to send for the reserved duration.

Thus, in Figure 6.12, before transmitting a DATA frame, H1 first broadcasts an RTS frame, which is heard by all stations in its circle, including the AP. The AP then responds with a CTS frame, which is heard by all stations within its range, including H1 and H2. Station H2, having heard the CTS, refrains from transmitting for the time specified in the CTS frame. The RTS, CTS, DATA, and ACK frames are shown in Figure 6.12.

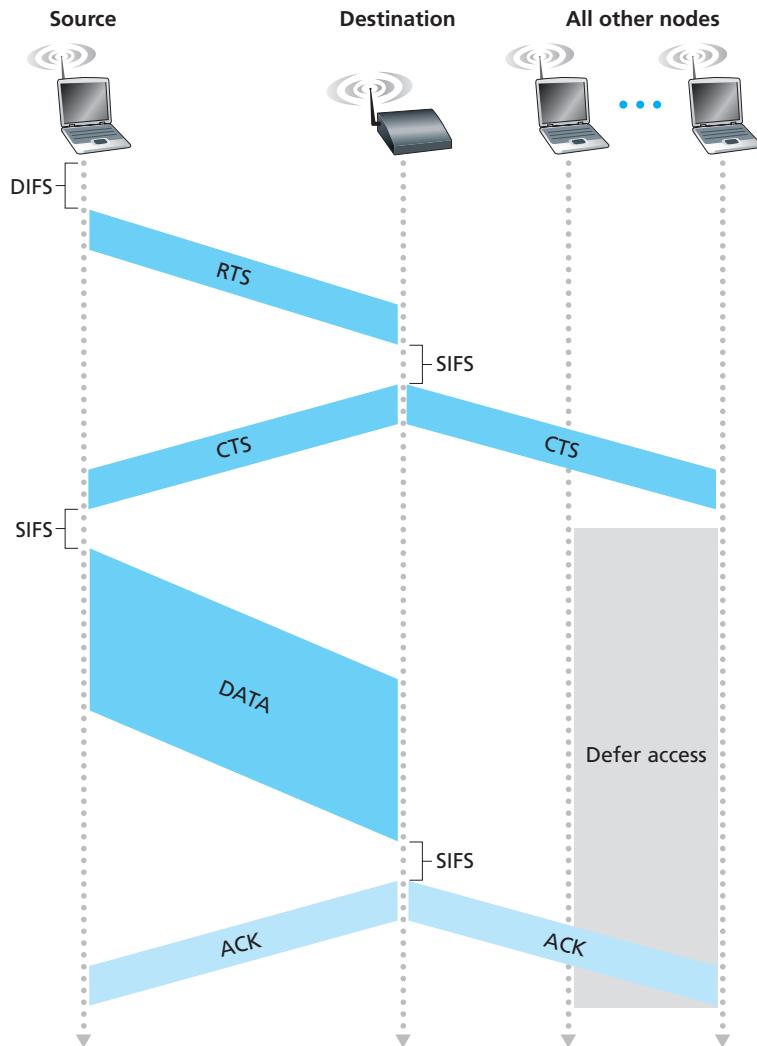


Figure 6.12 ♦ Collision avoidance using the RTS and CTS frames

The use of the RTS and CTS frames can improve performance in two important ways:

- The hidden station problem is mitigated, since a long DATA frame is transmitted only after the channel has been reserved.