23 ELECTRIC POTENTIAL

? In one type of welding, electric charge flows between the welding tool and the metal pieces that are to be joined together. This produces a glowing arc whose high temperature fuses the pieces together. Why must the tool be held close to the pieces being welded?

LEARNING GOALS

By studying this chapter, you will learn:

- How to calculate the electric potential energy of a collection of charges.
- The meaning and significance of electric potential.
- How to calculate the electric potential that a collection of charges produces at a point in space.
- How to use equipotential surfaces to visualize how the electric potential varies in space.
- How to use electric potential to calculate the electric field.

This chapter is about energy associated with electrical interactions. Every time you turn on a light, listen to an MP3 player, or talk on a mobile phone, you are using electrical energy, an indispensable ingredient of our technological society. In Chapters 6 and 7 we introduced the concepts of *work* and *energy* in the context of mechanics; now we'll combine these concepts with what we've learned about electric charge, electric forces, and electric fields. Just as we found for many problems in mechanics, using energy ideas makes it easier to solve a variety of problems in electricity.

When a charged particle moves in an electric field, the field exerts a force that can do *work* on the particle. This work can always be expressed in terms of electric potential energy. Just as gravitational potential energy depends on the height of a mass above the earth's surface, electric potential energy depends on the position of the charged particle in the electric field. We'll describe electric potential energy using a new concept called *electric potential,* or simply *potential.* In circuits, a difference in potential from one point to another is often called *voltage.* The concepts of potential and voltage are crucial to understanding how electric circuits work and have equally important applications to electron beams used in cancer radiotherapy, high-energy particle accelerators, and many other devices.

23.1 Electric Potential Energy

The concepts of work, potential energy, and conservation of energy proved to be extremely useful in our study of mechanics. In this section we'll show that these concepts are just as useful for understanding and analyzing electrical interactions.

Let's begin by reviewing three essential points from Chapters 6 and 7. First, when a force $\vec{F}$ acts on a particle that moves from point a to point b, the work $W_{a \to b}$ done by the force is given by a *line integral:*

$$W_{a \to b} = \int_a^b \vec{F} \cdot d\vec{l} = \int_a^b F \cos\phi \, dl \quad \text{(work done by a force)} \tag{23.1}$$

where $d\vec{l}$ is an infinitesimal displacement along the particle's path and ϕ is the angle between $\vec{F}$ and $d\vec{l}$ at each point along the path.

Second, if the force $\vec{F}$ is *conservative,* as we defined the term in Section 7.3, the work done by $\vec{F}$ can always be expressed in terms of a **potential energy** U. When the particle moves from a point where the potential energy is U_a to a point where it is U_b, the change in potential energy is $\Delta U = U_b - U_a$ and the work $W_{a \to b}$ done by the force is

$$W_{a \to b} = U_a - U_b = -(U_b - U_a) = -\Delta U \quad \text{(work done by a conservative force)} \tag{23.2}$$

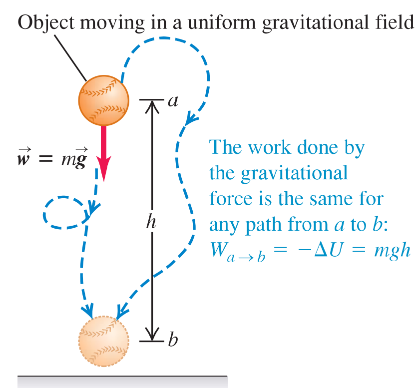
When $W_{a \to b}$ is positive, U_a is greater than U_b, ΔU is negative, and the potential energy *decreases.* That's what happens when a baseball falls from a high point (a) to a lower point (b) under the influence of the earth's gravity; the force of gravity does positive work, and the gravitational potential energy decreases (Fig. 23.1). When a tossed ball is moving upward, the gravitational force does negative work during the ascent, and the potential energy increases.

Third, the work–energy theorem says that the change in kinetic energy $\Delta K = K_b - K_a$ during a displacement equals the *total* work done on the particle. If only conservative forces do work, then Eq. (23.2) gives the total work, and $K_b - K_a = -(U_b - U_a)$. We usually write this as

$$K_a + U_a = K_b + U_b \tag{23.3}$$

That is, the total mechanical energy (kinetic plus potential) is *conserved* under these circumstances.

23.1 The work done on a baseball moving in a uniform gravitational field.



Electric Potential Energy in a Uniform Field

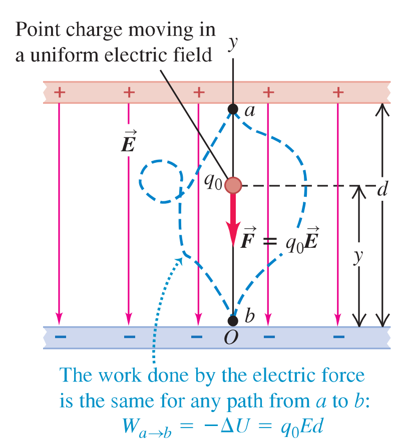
Let's look at an electrical example of these basic concepts. In Fig. 23.2 a pair of charged parallel metal plates sets up a uniform, downward electric field with magnitude E. The field exerts a downward force with magnitude $F = q_0E$ on a positive test charge q_0. As the charge moves downward a distance d from point a to point b, the force on the test charge is constant and independent of its location. So the work done by the electric field is the product of the force magnitude and the component of displacement in the (downward) direction of the force:

$$W_{a \to b} = Fd = q_0Ed \tag{23.4}$$

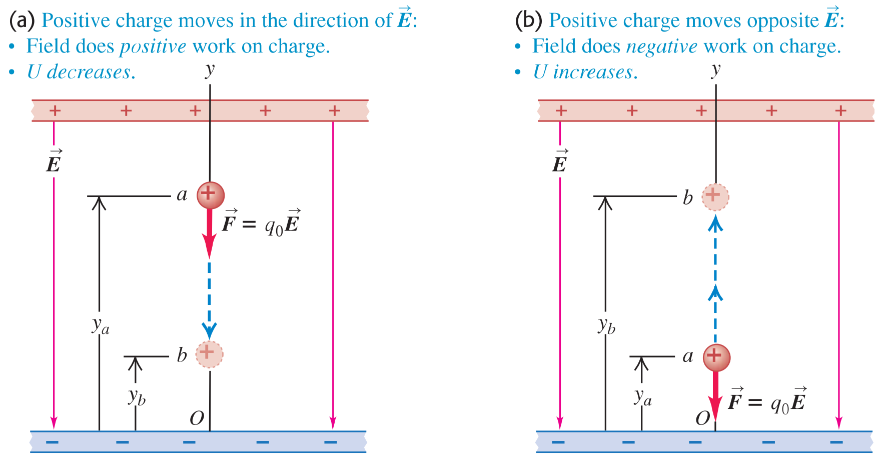
This work is positive, since the force is in the same direction as the net displacement of the test charge.

The y-component of the electric force, $F_y = -q_0E$, is constant, and there is no x- or z-component. This is exactly analogous to the gravitational force on a mass m near the earth's surface; for this force, there is a constant y-component $F_y = -mg$ and the x- and z-components are zero. Because of this analogy, we can conclude that the force exerted on q_0 by the uniform electric field in Fig. 23.2 is *conservative,* just as is the gravitational force. This means that the work $W_{a \to b}$ done by the field is independent of the path the particle takes from a to b. We can represent this work with a *potential-energy* function U, just as we did for gravitational potential energy

23.2 The work done on a point charge moving in a uniform electric field. Compare with Fig. 23.1.



23.3 A positive charge moving (a) in the direction of the electric field $\vec{E}$ and (b) in the direction opposite $\vec{E}$.



in Section 7.1. The potential energy for the gravitational force $F_y = -mg$ was $U = mgy$; hence the potential energy for the electric force $F_y = -q_0E$ is

$$U = q_0Ey \tag{23.5}$$

When the test charge moves from height y_a to height y_b, the work done on the charge by the field is given by

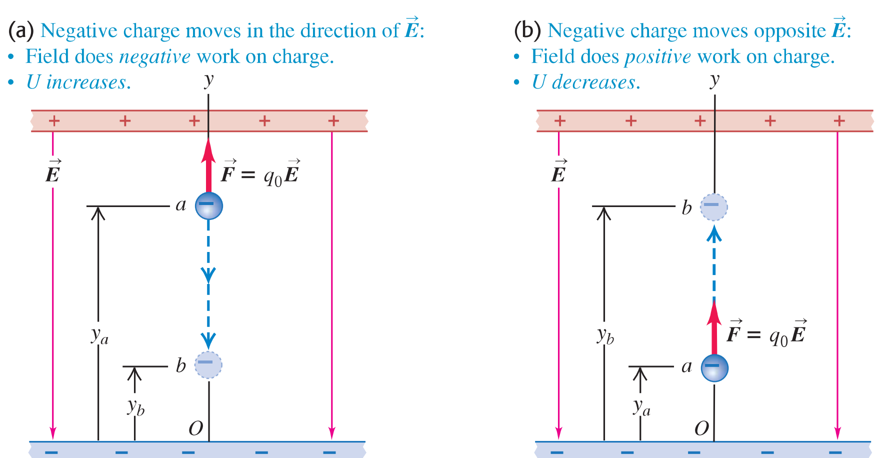
$$W_{a\to b} = -\Delta U = -(U_b - U_a) = -(q_0Ey_b - q_0Ey_a) = q_0E(y_a - y_b) \tag{23.6}$$

When y_a is greater than y_b (Fig. 23.3a), the positive test charge q_0 moves downward, in the same direction as $\vec{E}$; the displacement is in the same direction as the force $\vec{F} = q_0\vec{E}$, so the field does positive work and U decreases. [In particular, if $y_a - y_b = d$ as in Fig. 23.2, Eq. (23.6) gives $W_{a\to b} = q_0Ed$, in agreement with Eq. (23.4).] When y_a is less than y_b (Fig. 23.3b), the positive test charge q_0 moves upward, in the opposite direction to $\vec{E}$; the displacement is opposite the force, the field does negative work, and U increases.

If the test charge q_0 is *negative,* the potential energy increases when it moves with the field and decreases when it moves against the field (Fig. 23.4).

Whether the test charge is positive or negative, the following general rules apply: *U increases* if the test charge q_0 moves in the direction *opposite* the electric force $\vec{F} = q_0\vec{E}$ (Figs. 23.3b and 23.4a); *U decreases* if q_0 moves in the *same*

23.4 A negative charge moving (a) in the direction of the electric field $\vec{E}$ and (b) in the direction opposite $\vec{E}$. Compare with Fig. 23.3.



direction as $\vec{F} = q_0\vec{E}$ (Figs. 23.3a and 23.4b). This is the same behavior as for gravitational potential energy, which increases if a mass m moves upward (opposite the direction of the gravitational force) and decreases if m moves downward (in the same direction as the gravitational force).

CAUTION **Electric potential energy** The relationship between electric potential energy change and motion in an electric field is an important one that we'll use often, but that takes some effort to truly understand. Take the time to carefully study the preceding paragraph as well as Figs. 23.3 and 23.4. Doing so now will help you tremendously later!

Electric Potential Energy of Two Point Charges

The idea of electric potential energy isn't restricted to the special case of a uniform electric field. Indeed, we can apply this concept to a point charge in *any* electric field caused by a static charge distribution. Recall from Chapter 21 that we can represent any charge distribution as a collection of point charges. Therefore it's useful to calculate the work done on a test charge q_0 moving in the electric field caused by a single, stationary point charge q.

We'll consider first a displacement along the *radial* line in Fig. 23.5. The force on q_0 is given by Coulomb's law, and its radial component is

$$F_r = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{qq_0}{r^2} \tag{23.7}$$

If q and q_0 have the same sign ($+$ or $-$) the force is repulsive and F_r is positive; if the two charges have opposite signs, the force is attractive and F_r is negative. The force is *not* constant during the displacement, and we have to integrate to calculate the work $W_{a\rightarrow b}$ done on q_0 by this force as q_0 moves from a to b:

$$W_{a\rightarrow b} = \int_{r_a}^{r_b} F_r\,dr = \int_{r_a}^{r_b} \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{qq_0}{r^2}\,dr = \frac{qq_0}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\left(\frac{1}{r_a} - \frac{1}{r_b}\right) \tag{23.8}$$

The work done by the electric force for this particular path depends only on the endpoints.

Now let's consider a more general displacement (Fig. 23.6) in which a and b do *not* lie on the same radial line. From Eq. (23.1) the work done on q_0 during this displacement is given by

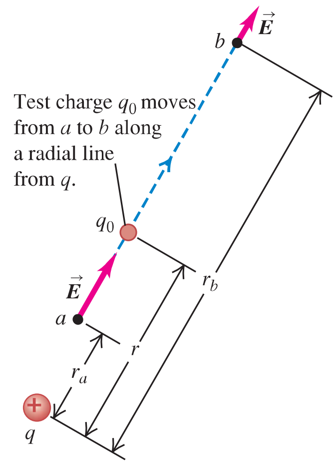
$$W_{a\rightarrow b} = \int_{r_a}^{r_b} F\cos\phi\,dl = \int_{r_a}^{r_b} \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{qq_0}{r^2}\cos\phi\,dl$$

But Fig. 23.6 shows that $\cos\phi\,dl = dr$. That is, the work done during a small displacement $d\vec{l}$ depends only on the change dr in the distance r between the charges, which is the *radial component* of the displacement. Thus Eq. (23.8) is valid even for this more general displacement; the work done on q_0 by the electric field $\vec{E}$ produced by q depends only on r_a and r_b, not on the details of the path. Also, if q_0 returns to its starting point a by a different path, the total work done in the round-trip displacement is zero (the integral in Eq. (23.8) is from r_a back to r_a). These are the needed characteristics for a conservative force, as we defined it in Section 7.3. Thus the force on q_0 is a *conservative* force.

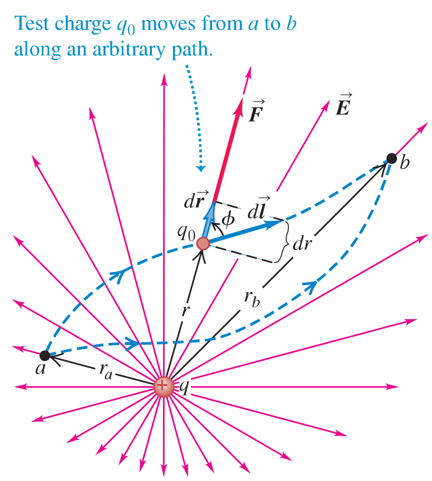
We see that Eqs. (23.2) and (23.8) are consistent if we define the potential energy to be $U_a = qq_0/4\pi\epsilon_0 r_a$ when q_0 is a distance r_a from q, and to be $U_b = qq_0/4\pi\epsilon_0 r_b$ when q_0 is a distance r_b from q. Thus the potential energy U when the test charge q_0 is at *any* distance r from charge q is

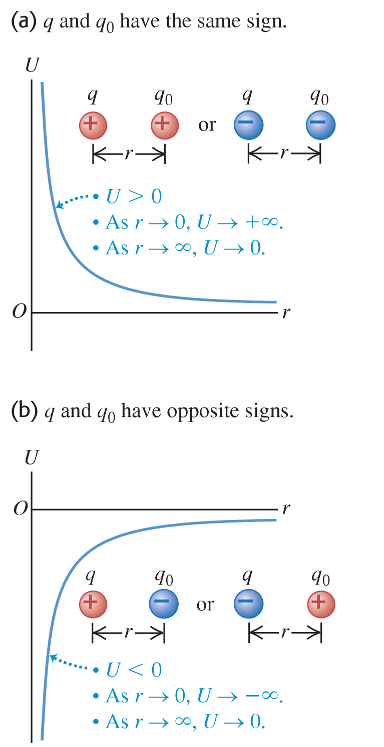
$$U = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{qq_0}{r} \quad \text{(electric potential energy of two point charges } q \text{ and } q_0\text{)} \tag{23.9}$$

23.5 Test charge q_0 moves along a straight line extending radially from charge q. As it moves from a to b, the distance varies from r_a to r_b.



23.6 The work done on charge q_0 by the electric field of charge q does not depend on the path taken, but only on the distances r_a and r_b.





23.7 Graphs of the potential energy U of two point charges q and q_0 versus their separation r.

Equation (23.9) is valid no matter what the signs of the charges q and q_0. The potential energy is positive if the charges q and q_0 have the same sign (Fig. 23.7a) and negative if they have opposite signs (Fig. 23.7b).

CAUTION **Electric potential energy vs. electric force** Don't confuse Eq. (23.9) for the potential energy of two point charges with the similar expression in Eq. (23.7) for the radial component of the electric force that one charge exerts on the other. Potential energy U is proportional to $1/r$, while the force component F_r is proportional to $1/r^2$.

Potential energy is always defined relative to some reference point where $U = 0$. In Eq. (23.9), U is zero when q and q_0 are infinitely far apart and $r = \infty$. Therefore U represents the work that would be done on the test charge q_0 by the field of q if q_0 moved from an initial distance r to infinity. If q and q_0 have the same sign, the interaction is repulsive, this work is positive, and U is positive at any finite separation (Fig. 23.7a). If the charges have opposite signs, the interaction is attractive, the work done is negative, and U is negative (Fig. 23.7b).

We emphasize that the potential energy U given by Eq. (23.9) is a *shared* property of the two charges. If the distance between q and q_0 is changed from r_a to r_b, the change in potential energy is the same whether q is held fixed and q_0 is moved or q_0 is held fixed and q is moved. For this reason, we never use the phrase "the electric potential energy *of* a point charge." (Likewise, if a mass m is at a height h above the earth's surface, the gravitational potential energy is a shared property of the mass m and the earth. We emphasized this in Sections 7.1 and 13.3.)

Equation (23.9) also holds if the charge q_0 is outside a spherically symmetric charge *distribution* with total charge q; the distance r is from q_0 to the center of the distribution. That's because Gauss's law tells us that the electric field outside such a distribution is the same as if all of its charge q were concentrated at its center (see Example 22.9 in Section 22.4).

Example 23.1 Conservation of energy with electric forces

A positron (the electron's antiparticle) has mass 9.11×10^{-31} kg and charge $q_0 = +e = +1.60 \times 10^{-19}$ C. Suppose a positron moves in the vicinity of an α (alpha) particle, which has charge $q = +2e = 3.20 \times 10^{-19}$ C and mass 6.64×10^{-27} kg. The α particle's mass is more than 7000 times that of the positron, so we assume that the α particle remains at rest. When the positron is 1.00×10^{-10} m from the α particle, it is moving directly away from the α particle at 3.00×10^6 m/s. (a) What is the positron's speed when the particles are 2.00×10^{-10} m apart? (b) What is the positron's speed when it is very far from the α particle? (c) Suppose the initial conditions are the same but the moving particle is an electron (with the same mass as the positron but charge $q_0 = -e$). Describe the subsequent motion.

SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: The electric force between a positron (or an electron) and an α particle is conservative, so mechanical energy (kinetic plus potential) is conserved. Equation (23.9) gives the potential energy U at any separation r: The potential-energy function for parts (a) and (b) looks like that of Fig. 23.7a, and the function for part (c) looks like that of Fig. 23.7b. We are given the positron speed $v_a = 3.00 \times 10^6$ m/s when the separation between the particles is $r_a = 1.00 \times 10^{-10}$ m. In parts (a) and (b) we use Eqs. (23.3) and (23.9) to find the speed for $r = r_b = 2.00 \times 10^{-10}$ m and $r = r_c \to \infty$, respectively. In part (c) we replace the positron with an electron and reconsider the problem.

EXECUTE: (a) Both particles have positive charge, so the positron speeds up as it moves away from the α particle. From the energy-conservation equation, Eq. (23.3), the final kinetic energy is

$$K_b = \tfrac{1}{2}mv_b^2 = K_a + U_a - U_b$$

In this expression,

$$K_a = \tfrac{1}{2}mv_a^2 = \tfrac{1}{2}(9.11 \times 10^{-31}\ \text{kg})(3.00 \times 10^6\ \text{m/s})^2$$
$$= 4.10 \times 10^{-18}\ \text{J}$$
$$U_a = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{qq_0}{r_a} = (9.0 \times 10^9\ \text{N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{C}^2) \times \frac{(3.20 \times 10^{-19}\ \text{C})(1.60 \times 10^{-19}\ \text{C})}{1.00 \times 10^{-10}\ \text{m}}$$
$$= 4.61 \times 10^{-18}\ \text{J}$$
$$U_b = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{qq_0}{r_b} = 2.30 \times 10^{-18}\ \text{J}$$

Hence the positron kinetic energy and speed at $r = r_b = 2.00 \times 10^{-10}$ m are

$$K_b = \tfrac{1}{2}mv_b^2 = 4.10 \times 10^{-18}\ \text{J} + 4.61 \times 10^{-18}\ \text{J} - 2.30 \times 10^{-18}\ \text{J}$$
$$= 6.41 \times 10^{-18}\ \text{J}$$
$$v_b = \sqrt{\frac{2K_b}{m}} = \sqrt{\frac{2(6.41 \times 10^{-18}\ \text{J})}{9.11 \times 10^{-31}\ \text{kg}}} = 3.8 \times 10^6\ \text{m/s}$$

(b) When the positron and α particle are very far apart so that $r = r_c \rightarrow \infty$, the final potential energy U_c approaches zero. Again from energy conservation, the final kinetic energy and speed of the positron in this case are

$$K_c = K_a + U_a - U_c = 4.10 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J} + 4.61 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J} - 0$$
$$= 8.71 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J}$$
$$v_c = \sqrt{\frac{2K_c}{m}} = \sqrt{\frac{2(8.71 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J})}{9.11 \times 10^{-31}\,\text{kg}}} = 4.4 \times 10^6\,\text{m/s}$$

(c) The electron and α particle have opposite charges, so the force is attractive and the electron slows down as it moves away. Changing the moving particle's sign from $+e$ to $-e$ means that the initial potential energy is now $U_a = -4.61 \times 10^{-18}$ J, which makes the total mechanical energy *negative*:

$$K_a + U_a = (4.10 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J}) - (4.61 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J})$$
$$= -0.51 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J}$$

The total mechanical energy would have to be positive for the electron to move infinitely far away from the α particle. Like a rock thrown upward at low speed from the earth's surface, it will reach a maximum separation $r = r_d$ from the α particle before reversing direction. At this point its speed and its kinetic energy K_d are zero, so at separation r_d we have

$$U_d = K_a + U_a - K_d = (-0.51 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J}) - 0$$
$$U_d = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{qq_0}{r_d} = -0.51 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J}$$
$$r_d = \frac{1}{U_d}\frac{qq_0}{4\pi\epsilon_0}$$
$$= \frac{(9.0 \times 10^9\,\text{N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{C}^2)}{-0.51 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J}}(3.20 \times 10^{-19}\,\text{C})(-1.60 \times 10^{-19}\,\text{C})$$
$$= 9.0 \times 10^{-10}\,\text{m}$$

For $r_b = 2.00 \times 10^{-10}$ m we have $U_b = -2.30 \times 10^{-18}$ J, so the electron kinetic energy and speed at this point are

$$K_b = \tfrac{1}{2}mv_b^2 = 4.10 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J} + (-4.61 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J})$$
$$- (-2.30 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J}) = 1.79 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J}$$
$$v_b = \sqrt{\frac{2K_b}{m}} = \sqrt{\frac{2(1.79 \times 10^{-18}\,\text{J})}{9.11 \times 10^{-31}\,\text{kg}}} = 2.0 \times 10^6\,\text{m/s}$$

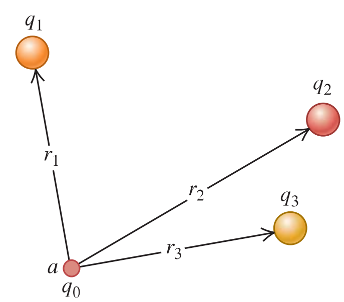
EVALUATE: Both particles behave as expected as they move away from the α particle: The positron speeds up, and the electron slows down and eventually turns around. How fast would an electron have to be moving at $r_a = 1.00 \times 10^{-10}$ m to travel infinitely far from the α particle? (*Hint:* See Example 13.4 in Section 13.3.)

Electric Potential Energy with Several Point Charges

Suppose the electric field $\vec{E}$ in which charge q_0 moves is caused by *several* point charges $q_1, q_2, q_3, \ldots$ at distances $r_1, r_2, r_3, \ldots$ from q_0, as in Fig. 23.8. For example, q_0 could be a positive ion moving in the presence of other ions (Fig. 23.9). The total electric field at each point is the *vector sum* of the fields due to the individual charges, and the total work done on q_0 during any displacement is the sum of the contributions from the individual charges. From Eq. (23.9) we conclude that the potential energy associated with the test charge q_0 at point a in Fig. 23.8 is the *algebraic* sum (*not* a vector sum):

$$U = \frac{q_0}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\left(\frac{q_1}{r_1} + \frac{q_2}{r_2} + \frac{q_3}{r_3} + \cdots\right) = \frac{q_0}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\sum_i \frac{q_i}{r_i} \quad \text{(point charge } q_0 \text{ and collection of charges } q_i\text{)} \tag{23.10}$$

23.8 The potential energy associated with a charge q_0 at point a depends on the other charges q_1, q_2, and q_3 and on their distances r_1, r_2, and r_3 from point a.

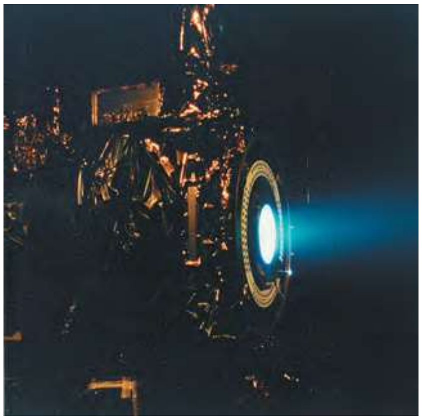


When q_0 is at a different point b, the potential energy is given by the same expression, but $r_1, r_2, \ldots$ are the distances from $q_1, q_2, \ldots$ to point b. The work done on charge q_0 when it moves from a to b along any path is equal to the difference $U_a - U_b$ between the potential energies when q_0 is at a and at b.

We can represent *any* charge distribution as a collection of point charges, so Eq. (23.10) shows that we can always find a potential-energy function for *any* static electric field. It follows that **for every electric field due to a static charge distribution, the force exerted by that field is conservative.**

Equations (23.9) and (23.10) define U to be zero when all the distances $r_1, r_2, \ldots$ are infinite—that is, when the test charge q_0 is very far away from all the charges that produce the field. As with any potential-energy function, the point where $U = 0$ is arbitrary; we can always add a constant to make U equal zero at any point we choose. In electrostatics problems it's usually simplest to choose this point to be at infinity. When we analyze electric circuits in Chapters 25 and 26, other choices will be more convenient.

23.9 This ion engine for spacecraft uses electric forces to eject a stream of positive xenon ions (Xe^+) at speeds in excess of 30 km/s. The thrust produced is very low (about 0.09 newton) but can be maintained continuously for days, in contrast to chemical rockets, which produce a large thrust for a short time (see Fig. 8.33). Such ion engines have been used for maneuvering interplanetary spacecraft.



Equation (23.10) gives the potential energy associated with the presence of the test charge q_0 in the $\vec{E}$ field produced by $q_1, q_2, q_3, \ldots$. But there is also potential energy involved in assembling these charges. If we start with charges $q_1, q_2, q_3, \ldots$ all separated from each other by infinite distances and then bring them together so that the distance between q_i and q_j is r_{ij}, the *total* potential energy U is the sum of the potential energies of interaction for each pair of charges. We can write this as

$$U = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0} \sum_{i<j} \frac{q_i q_j}{r_{ij}} \qquad (23.11)$$

This sum extends over all *pairs* of charges; we don't let $i = j$ (because that would be an interaction of a charge with itself), and we include only terms with $i < j$ to make sure that we count each pair only once. Thus, to account for the interaction between q_3 and q_4, we include a term with $i = 3$ and $j = 4$ but not a term with $i = 4$ and $j = 3$.

Interpreting Electric Potential Energy

As a final comment, here are two viewpoints on electric potential energy. We have defined it in terms of the work done *by the electric field* on a charged particle moving in the field, just as in Chapter 7 we defined potential energy in terms of the work done by gravity or by a spring. When a particle moves from point a to point b, the work done on it by the electric field is $W_{a\to b} = U_a - U_b$. Thus the potential-energy difference $U_a - U_b$ equals *the work that is done by the electric force when the particle moves from a to b*. When U_a is greater than U_b, the field does positive work on the particle as it "falls" from a point of higher potential energy (a) to a point of lower potential energy (b).

An alternative but equivalent viewpoint is to consider how much work we would have to do to "raise" a particle from a point b where the potential energy is U_b to a point a where it has a greater value U_a (pushing two positive charges closer together, for example). To move the particle slowly (so as not to give it any kinetic energy), we need to exert an additional external force $\vec{F}_{ext}$ that is equal and opposite to the electric-field force and does positive work. The potential-energy difference $U_a - U_b$ is then defined as *the work that must be done by an external force to move the particle slowly from b to a against the electric force.* Because $\vec{F}_{ext}$ is the negative of the electric-field force and the displacement is in the opposite direction, this definition of the potential difference $U_a - U_b$ is equivalent to that given above. This alternative viewpoint also works if U_a is less than U_b, corresponding to "lowering" the particle; an example is moving two positive charges away from each other. In this case, $U_a - U_b$ is again equal to the work done by the external force, but now this work is negative.

We will use both of these viewpoints in the next section to interpret what is meant by electric *potential,* or potential energy per unit charge.

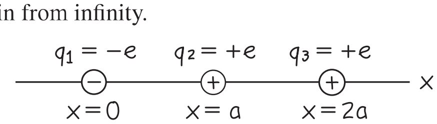
Example 23.2 A system of point charges

Two point charges are located on the x-axis, $q_1 = -e$ at $x = 0$ and $q_2 = +e$ at $x = a$. (a) Find the work that must be done by an external force to bring a third point charge $q_3 = +e$ from infinity to $x = 2a$. (b) Find the total potential energy of the system of three charges.

SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: Figure 23.10 shows the final arrangement of the three charges. In part (a) we need to find the work W that must be done on q_3 by an external force $\vec{F}_{ext}$ to bring q_3 in from infinity to $x = 2a$. We do this by using Eq. (23.10) to find the potential energy associated with q_3 in the presence of q_1 and q_2. In part (b) we use Eq. (23.11), the expression for the potential energy of a collection of point charges, to find the total potential energy of the system.

23.10 Our sketch of the situation after the third charge has been brought in from infinity.



EXECUTE: (a) The work W equals the difference between (i) the potential energy U associated with q_3 when it is at $x = 2a$ and (ii) the potential energy when it is infinitely far away. The second of these is zero, so the work required is equal to U. The distances between the charges are $r_{13} = 2a$ and $r_{23} = a$, so from Eq. (23.10),

$$W = U = \frac{q_3}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\left(\frac{q_1}{r_{13}} + \frac{q_2}{r_{23}}\right) = \frac{+e}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\left(\frac{-e}{2a} + \frac{+e}{a}\right) = \frac{+e^2}{8\pi\epsilon_0 a}$$

This is positive, just as we should expect. If we bring q_3 in from infinity along the $+x$-axis, it is attracted by q_1 but is repelled more strongly by q_2. Hence we must do positive work to push q_3 to the position at $x = 2a$.

(b) From Eq. (23.11), the total potential energy of the three-charge system is

$$U = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\sum_{i<j}\frac{q_i q_j}{r_{ij}} = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\left(\frac{q_1 q_2}{r_{12}} + \frac{q_1 q_3}{r_{13}} + \frac{q_2 q_3}{r_{23}}\right)$$

$$= \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\left[\frac{(-e)(e)}{a} + \frac{(-e)(e)}{2a} + \frac{(e)(e)}{a}\right] = \frac{-e^2}{8\pi\epsilon_0 a}$$

EVALUATE: Our negative result in part (b) means that the system has lower potential energy than it would if the three charges were infinitely far apart. An external force would have to do *negative* work to bring the three charges from infinity to assemble this entire arrangement and would have to do *positive* work to move the three charges back to infinity.

Test Your Understanding of Section 23.1 Consider the system of three point charges in Example 21.4 (Section 21.3) and shown in Fig. 21.14. (a) What is the sign of the total potential energy of this system? (i) positive; (ii) negative; (iii) zero. (b) What is the sign of the total amount of work you would have to do to move these charges infinitely far from each other? (i) positive; (ii) negative; (iii) zero.

23.2 Electric Potential

MasteringPHYSICS

PhET: Charges and Fields
ActivPhysics 11.13: Electrical Potential Energy and Potential

In Section 23.1 we looked at the potential energy U associated with a test charge q_0 in an electric field. Now we want to describe this potential energy on a "per unit charge" basis, just as electric field describes the force per unit charge on a charged particle in the field. This leads us to the concept of *electric potential,* often called simply *potential.* This concept is very useful in calculations involving energies of charged particles. It also facilitates many electric-field calculations because electric potential is closely related to the electric field $\vec{E}$. When we need to determine an electric field, it is often easier to determine the potential first and then find the field from it.

Potential is *potential energy per unit charge.* We define the potential V at any point in an electric field as the potential energy U *per unit charge* associated with a test charge q_0 at that point:

$$V = \frac{U}{q_0} \quad \text{or} \quad U = q_0 V \tag{23.12}$$

Potential energy and charge are both scalars, so potential is a scalar. From Eq. (23.12) its units are the units of energy divided by those of charge. The SI unit of potential, called one **volt** (1 V) in honor of the Italian electrical experimenter Alessandro Volta (1745–1827), equals 1 joule per coulomb:

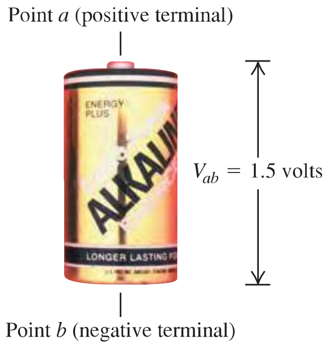
$$1\text{ V} = 1\text{ volt} = 1\text{ J/C} = 1\text{ joule/coulomb}$$

Let's put Eq. (23.2), which equates the work done by the electric force during a displacement from a to b to the quantity $-\Delta U = -(U_b - U_a)$, on a "work per unit charge" basis. We divide this equation by q_0, obtaining

$$\frac{W_{a\to b}}{q_0} = -\frac{\Delta U}{q_0} = -\left(\frac{U_b}{q_0} - \frac{U_a}{q_0}\right) = -(V_b - V_a) = V_a - V_b \tag{23.13}$$

where $V_a = U_a/q_0$ is the potential energy per unit charge at point a and similarly for V_b. We call V_a and V_b the *potential at point a* and *potential at point b*, respectively. Thus the work done per unit charge by the electric force when a charged body moves from a to b is equal to the potential at a minus the potential at b.

23.11 The voltage of this battery equals the difference in potential $V_{ab} = V_a - V_b$ between its positive terminal (point a) and its negative terminal (point b).



The difference $V_a - V_b$ is called the *potential of a with respect to b*; we sometimes abbreviate this difference as $V_{ab} = V_a - V_b$ (note the order of the subscripts). This is often called the potential difference between a and b, but that's ambiguous unless we specify which is the reference point. In electric circuits, which we will analyze in later chapters, the potential difference between two points is often called **voltage** (Fig. 23.11). Equation (23.13) then states: $\boldsymbol{V_{ab}}$**, the potential of *a* with respect to *b*, equals the work done by the electric force when a UNIT charge moves from *a* to *b*.**

Another way to interpret the potential difference V_{ab} in Eq. (23.13) is to use the alternative viewpoint mentioned at the end of Section 23.1. In that viewpoint, $U_a - U_b$ is the amount of work that must be done by an *external* force to move a particle of charge q_0 slowly from b to a against the electric force. The work that must be done *per unit charge* by the external force is then $(U_a - U_b)/q_0 = V_a - V_b = V_{ab}$. In other words: $\boldsymbol{V_{ab}}$**, the potential of *a* with respect to *b*, equals the work that must be done to move a UNIT charge slowly from *b* to *a* against the electric force.**

An instrument that measures the difference of potential between two points is called a *voltmeter.* (In Chapter 26 we'll discuss how these devices work.) Voltmeters that can measure a potential difference of 1 μV are common, and sensitivities down to 10^{-12} V can be attained.

Calculating Electric Potential

To find the potential V due to a single point charge q, we divide Eq. (23.9) by q_0:

$$V = \frac{U}{q_0} = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{q}{r} \quad \text{(potential due to a point charge)} \tag{23.14}$$

where r is the distance from the point charge q to the point at which the potential is evaluated. If q is positive, the potential that it produces is positive at all points; if q is negative, it produces a potential that is negative everywhere. In either case, V is equal to zero at $r = \infty$, an infinite distance from the point charge. Note that potential, like electric field, is independent of the test charge q_0 that we use to define it.

Similarly, we divide Eq. (23.10) by q_0 to find the potential due to a collection of point charges:

$$V = \frac{U}{q_0} = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\sum_i \frac{q_i}{r_i} \quad \text{(potential due to a collection of point charge)} \tag{23.15}$$

Application **Electrocardiography**
The electrodes used in an electrocardiogram—EKG or ECG for short—measure the potential differences (typically no greater than 1 mV = 10^{-3} V) between different parts of the patient's skin. These are indicative of the potential differences between regions of the heart, and so provide a sensitive way to detect any abnormalities in the electrical activity that drives cardiac function.

In this expression, r_i is the distance from the ith charge, q_i, to the point at which V is evaluated. Just as the electric field due to a collection of point charges is the *vector* sum of the fields produced by each charge, the electric potential due to a collection of point charges is the *scalar* sum of the potentials due to each charge. When we have a continuous distribution of charge along a line, over a surface, or through a volume, we divide the charge into elements dq, and the sum in Eq. (23.15) becomes an integral:

$$V = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\int \frac{dq}{r} \quad \text{(potential due to a continuous distribution of charge)} \tag{23.16}$$

where r is the distance from the charge element dq to the field point where we are finding V. We'll work out several examples of such cases. The potential defined by Eqs. (23.15) and (23.16) is zero at points that are infinitely far away from *all* the charges. Later we'll encounter cases in which the charge distribution itself extends to infinity. We'll find that in such cases we cannot set $V = 0$ at infinity, and we'll need to exercise care in using and interpreting Eqs. (23.15) and (23.16).

CAUTION **What is electric potential?** Before getting too involved in the details of how to calculate electric potential, you should stop and remind yourself what potential is. The electric *potential* at a certain point is the potential energy that would be associated with a *unit* charge placed at that point. That's why potential is measured in joules per coulomb, or volts. Keep in mind, too, that there doesn't have to be a charge at a given point for a potential V to exist at that point. (In the same way, an electric field can exist at a given point even if there's no charge there to respond to it.)

Finding Electric Potential from Electric Field

When we are given a collection of point charges, Eq. (23.15) is usually the easiest way to calculate the potential V. But in some problems in which the electric field is known or can be found easily, it is easier to determine V from $\vec{E}$. The force $\vec{F}$ on a test charge q_0 can be written as $\vec{F} = q_0\vec{E}$, so from Eq. (23.1) the work done by the electric force as the test charge moves from a to b is given by

$$W_{a\to b} = \int_a^b \vec{F}\cdot d\vec{l} = \int_a^b q_0\vec{E}\cdot d\vec{l}$$

If we divide this by q_0 and compare the result with Eq. (23.13), we find

$$V_a - V_b = \int_a^b \vec{E}\cdot d\vec{l} = \int_a^b E\cos\phi\, dl \quad \text{(potential difference as an integral of } \vec{E}\text{)} \tag{23.17}$$

The value of $V_a - V_b$ is independent of the path taken from a to b, just as the value of $W_{a\to b}$ is independent of the path. To interpret Eq. (23.17), remember that $\vec{E}$ is the electric force per unit charge on a test charge. If the line integral $\int_a^b \vec{E}\cdot d\vec{l}$ is positive, the electric field does positive work on a positive test charge as it moves from a to b. In this case the electric potential energy decreases as the test charge moves, so the potential energy per unit charge decreases as well; hence V_b is less than V_a and $V_a - V_b$ is positive.

As an illustration, consider a positive point charge (Fig. 23.12a). The electric field is directed away from the charge, and $V = q/4\pi\epsilon_0 r$ is positive at any finite distance from the charge. If you move away from the charge, in the direction of $\vec{E}$, you move toward lower values of V; if you move toward the charge, in the direction opposite $\vec{E}$, you move toward greater values of V. For the negative point charge in Fig. 23.12b, $\vec{E}$ is directed toward the charge and $V = q/4\pi\epsilon_0 r$ is negative at any finite distance from the charge. In this case, if you move toward the charge, you are moving in the direction of $\vec{E}$ and in the direction of decreasing (more negative) V. Moving away from the charge, in the direction opposite $\vec{E}$, moves you toward increasing (less negative) values of V. The general rule, valid for *any* electric field, is: Moving *with* the direction of $\vec{E}$ means moving in the direction of *decreasing* V, and moving *against* the direction of $\vec{E}$ means moving in the direction of *increasing* V.

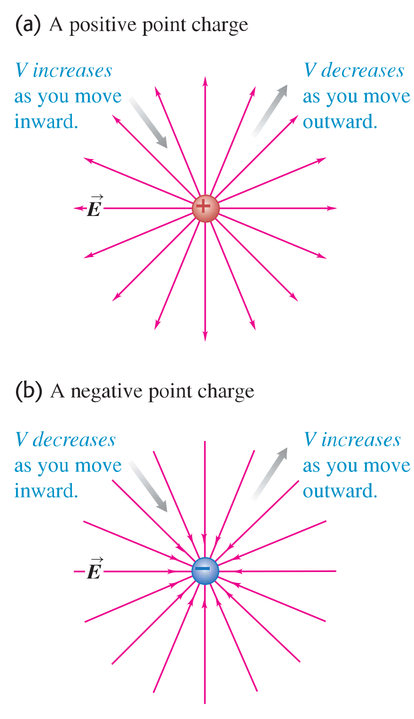
Also, a positive test charge q_0 experiences an electric force in the direction of $\vec{E}$, toward lower values of V; a negative test charge experiences a force opposite $\vec{E}$, toward higher values of V. Thus a positive charge tends to "fall" from a high-potential region to a lower-potential region. The opposite is true for a negative charge.

Notice that Eq. (23.17) can be rewritten as

$$V_a - V_b = -\int_b^a \vec{E}\cdot d\vec{l} \tag{23.18}$$

This has a negative sign compared to the integral in Eq. (23.17), and the limits are reversed; hence Eqs. (23.17) and (23.18) are equivalent. But Eq. (23.18) has a slightly different interpretation. To move a unit charge slowly against the electric

23.12 If you move in the direction of $\vec{E}$, electric potential V decreases; if you move in the direction opposite $\vec{E}$, V increases.



force, we must apply an *external* force per unit charge equal to $-\vec{E}$, equal and opposite to the electric force per unit charge $\vec{E}$. Equation (23.18) says that $V_a - V_b = V_{ab}$, the potential of a with respect to b, equals the work done per unit charge by this external force to move a unit charge from b to a. This is the same alternative interpretation we discussed under Eq. (23.13).

Equations (23.17) and (23.18) show that the unit of potential difference $(1\ \text{V})$ is equal to the unit of electric field $(1\ \text{N/C})$ multiplied by the unit of distance $(1\ \text{m})$. Hence the unit of electric field can be expressed as 1 *volt per meter* $(1\ \text{V/m})$, as well as 1 N/C:

$$1\ \text{V/m} = 1\ \text{volt/meter} = 1\ \text{N/C} = 1\ \text{newton/coulomb}$$

In practice, the volt per meter is the usual unit of electric-field magnitude.

Electron Volts

The magnitude e of the electron charge can be used to define a unit of energy that is useful in many calculations with atomic and nuclear systems. When a particle with charge q moves from a point where the potential is V_b to a point where it is V_a, the change in the potential energy U is

$$U_a - U_b = q(V_a - V_b) = qV_{ab}$$

If the charge q equals the magnitude e of the electron charge, 1.602×10^{-19} C, and the potential difference is $V_{ab} = 1$ V, the change in energy is

$$U_a - U_b = (1.602 \times 10^{-19}\ \text{C})(1\ \text{V}) = 1.602 \times 10^{-19}\ \text{J}$$

This quantity of energy is defined to be 1 **electron volt** $(1\ \text{eV})$:

$$1\ \text{eV} = 1.602 \times 10^{-19}\ \text{J}$$

The multiples meV, keV, MeV, GeV, and TeV are often used.

CAUTION **Electron volts vs. volts** Remember that the electron volt is a unit of energy, *not* a unit of potential or potential difference!

When a particle with charge e moves through a potential difference of 1 volt, the change in potential *energy* is 1 eV. If the charge is some multiple of e—say Ne—the change in potential energy in electron volts is N times the potential difference in volts. For example, when an alpha particle, which has charge $2e$, moves between two points with a potential difference of 1000 V, the change in potential energy is $2(1000\ \text{eV}) = 2000$ eV. To confirm this, we write

$$\begin{aligned} U_a - U_b = qV_{ab} &= (2e)(1000\ \text{V}) = (2)(1.602 \times 10^{-19}\ \text{C})(1000\ \text{V}) \\ &= 3.204 \times 10^{-16}\ \text{J} = 2000\ \text{eV} \end{aligned}$$

Although we have defined the electron volt in terms of *potential* energy, we can use it for *any* form of energy, such as the kinetic energy of a moving particle. When we speak of a "one-million-electron-volt proton," we mean a proton with a kinetic energy of one million electron volts $(1\ \text{MeV})$, equal to $(10^6)(1.602 \times 10^{-19}\ \text{J}) = 1.602 \times 10^{-13}$ J. The Large Hadron Collider near Geneva, Switzerland, is designed to accelerate protons to a kinetic energy of 7 TeV $(7 \times 10^{12}\ \text{eV})$.

Example 23.3 Electric force and electric potential

A proton (charge $+e = 1.602 \times 10^{-19}$ C) moves a distance $d = 0.50$ m in a straight line between points a and b in a linear accelerator. The electric field is uniform along this line, with magnitude $E = 1.5 \times 10^7\ \text{V/m} = 1.5 \times 10^7\ \text{N/C}$ in the direction from a to b. Determine (a) the force on the proton; (b) the work done on it by the field; (c) the potential difference $V_a - V_b$.

SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: This problem uses the relationship between electric field and electric force. It also uses the relationship among force, work, and potential-energy difference. We are given the electric field, so it is straightforward to find the electric force on the proton. Calculating the work is also straightforward because $\vec{E}$ is uniform, so the force on the proton is constant. Once the work is known, we find $V_a - V_b$ using Eq. (23.13).

EXECUTE: (a) The force on the proton is in the same direction as the electric field, and its magnitude is

$$\begin{aligned} F &= qE = (1.602 \times 10^{-19}\ \text{C})(1.5 \times 10^{7}\ \text{N/C}) \\ &= 2.4 \times 10^{-12}\ \text{N} \end{aligned}$$

(b) The force is constant and in the same direction as the displacement, so the work done on the proton is

$$\begin{aligned} W_{a \to b} &= Fd = (2.4 \times 10^{-12}\ \text{N})(0.50\ \text{m}) = 1.2 \times 10^{-12}\ \text{J} \\ &= (1.2 \times 10^{-12}\ \text{J})\frac{1\ \text{eV}}{1.602 \times 10^{-19}\ \text{J}} \\ &= 7.5 \times 10^{6}\ \text{eV} = 7.5\ \text{MeV} \end{aligned}$$

(c) From Eq. (23.13) the potential difference is the work per unit charge, which is

$$\begin{aligned} V_a - V_b &= \frac{W_{a \to b}}{q} = \frac{1.2 \times 10^{-12}\ \text{J}}{1.602 \times 10^{-19}\ \text{C}} \\ &= 7.5 \times 10^{6}\ \text{J/C} = 7.5 \times 10^{6}\ \text{V} \\ &= 7.5\ \text{MV} \end{aligned}$$

We can get this same result even more easily by remembering that 1 electron volt equals 1 volt multiplied by the charge e. The work done is 7.5×10^6 eV and the charge is e, so the potential difference is $(7.5 \times 10^6\ \text{eV})/e = 7.5 \times 10^6$ V.

EVALUATE: We can check our result in part (c) by using Eq. (23.17) or Eq. (23.18). The angle ϕ between the constant field $\vec{E}$ and the displacement is zero, so Eq. (23.17) becomes

$$V_a - V_b = \int_a^b E\cos\phi\, dl = \int_a^b E\, dl = E\int_a^b dl$$

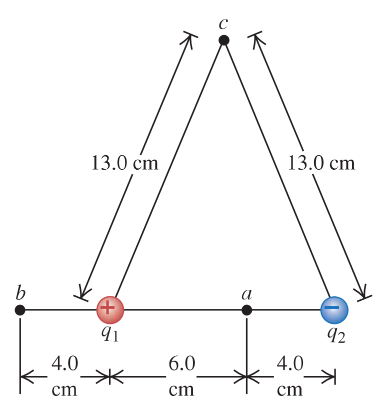
The integral of dl from a to b is just the distance d, so we again find

$$V_a - V_b = Ed = (1.5 \times 10^{7}\ \text{V/m})(0.50\ \text{m}) = 7.5 \times 10^{6}\ \text{V}$$

Example 23.4 Potential due to two point charges

An electric dipole consists of point charges $q_1 = +12$ nC and $q_2 = -12$ nC placed 10.0 cm apart (Fig. 23.13). Compute the electric potentials at points a, b, and c.

23.13 What are the potentials at points a, b, and c due to this electric dipole?



SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: This is the same arrangement as in Example 21.8, in which we calculated the electric *field* at each point by doing a *vector* sum. Here our target variable is the electric *potential V* at three points, which we find by doing the *algebraic* sum in Eq. (23.15).

EXECUTE: At point a we have $r_1 = 0.060$ m and $r_2 = 0.040$ m, so Eq. (23.15) becomes

$$\begin{aligned} V_a &= \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\sum_i \frac{q_i}{r_i} = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{q_1}{r_1} + \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{q_2}{r_2} \\ &= (9.0 \times 10^{9}\ \text{N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{C}^2)\frac{12 \times 10^{-9}\ \text{C}}{0.060\ \text{m}} \\ &\quad + (9.0 \times 10^{9}\ \text{N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{C}^2)\frac{(-12 \times 10^{-9}\ \text{C})}{0.040\ \text{m}} \\ &= 1800\ \text{N}\cdot\text{m/C} + (-2700\ \text{N}\cdot\text{m/C}) \\ &= 1800\ \text{V} + (-2700\ \text{V}) = -900\ \text{V} \end{aligned}$$

In a similar way you can show that the potential at point b (where $r_1 = 0.040$ m and $r_2 = 0.140$ m) is $V_b = 1930$ V and that the potential at point c (where $r_1 = r_2 = 0.130$ m) is $V_c = 0$.

EVALUATE: Let's confirm that these results make sense. Point a is closer to the -12-nC charge than to the $+12$-nC charge, so the potential at a is negative. The potential is positive at point b, which is closer to the $+12$-nC charge than the -12-nC charge. Finally, point c is equidistant from the $+12$-nC charge and the -12-nC charge, so the potential there is zero. (The potential is also equal to zero at a point infinitely far from both charges.)

Comparing this example with Example 21.8 shows that it's much easier to calculate electric potential (a scalar) than electric field (a vector). We'll take advantage of this simplification whenever possible.

Example 23.5 Potential and potential energy

Compute the potential energy associated with a +4.0-nC point charge if it is placed at points a, b, and c in Fig. 23.13.

SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: The potential energy U associated with a point charge q at a location where the electric potential is V is $U = qV$. We use the values of V from Example 23.4.

EXECUTE: At the three points we find

$$U_a = qV_a = (4.0 \times 10^{-9}\ \text{C})(-900\ \text{J/C}) = -3.6 \times 10^{-6}\ \text{J}$$
$$U_b = qV_b = (4.0 \times 10^{-9}\ \text{C})(1930\ \text{J/C}) = 7.7 \times 10^{-6}\ \text{J}$$
$$U_c = qV_c = 0$$

All of these values correspond to U and V being zero at infinity.

EVALUATE: Note that *zero* net work is done on the 4.0-nC charge if it moves from point c to infinity *by any path.* In particular, let the path be along the perpendicular bisector of the line joining the other two charges q_1 and q_2 in Fig. 23.13. As shown in Example 21.8 (Section 21.5), at points on the bisector, the direction of $\vec{E}$ is perpendicular to the bisector. Hence the force on the 4.0-nC charge is perpendicular to the path, and no work is done in any displacement along it.

Example 23.6 Finding potential by integration

By integrating the electric field as in Eq. (23.17), find the potential at a distance r from a point charge q.

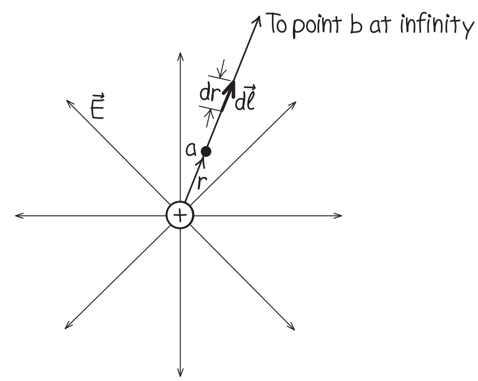
SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: We let point a in Eq. (23.17) be at distance r and let point b be at infinity (Fig. 23.14). As usual, we choose the potential to be zero at an infinite distance from the charge q.

EXECUTE: To carry out the integral, we can choose any path we like between points a and b. The most convenient path is a radial line as shown in Fig. 23.14, so that $d\vec{l}$ is in the radial direction and has magnitude dr. Writing $d\vec{l} = \hat{r}dr$, we have from Eq. (23.17)

$$V - 0 = V = \int_r^\infty \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{l}$$
$$= \int_r^\infty \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0} \frac{q}{r^2} \hat{r} \cdot \hat{r} dr = \int_r^\infty \frac{q}{4\pi\epsilon_0 r^2} dr$$
$$= -\frac{q}{4\pi\epsilon_0 r}\bigg|_r^\infty = 0 - \left(-\frac{q}{4\pi\epsilon_0 r}\right)$$
$$V = \frac{q}{4\pi\epsilon_0 r}$$

23.14 Calculating the potential by integrating $\vec{E}$ for a single point charge.



EVALUATE: Our result agrees with Eq. (23.14) and is correct for positive or negative q.

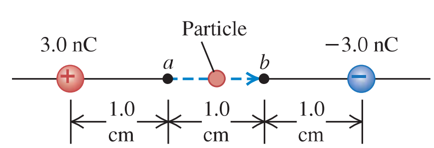
Example 23.7 Moving through a potential difference

In Fig. 23.15 a dust particle with mass $m = 5.0 \times 10^{-9}$ kg $= 5.0\ \mu$g and charge $q_0 = 2.0$ nC starts from rest and moves in a straight line from point a to point b. What is its speed v at point b?

SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: Only the conservative electric force acts on the particle, so mechanical energy is conserved: $K_a + U_a = K_b + U_b$. We get the potential energies U from the corresponding potentials V using Eq. (23.12): $U_a = q_0V_a$ and $U_b = q_0V_b$.

23.15 The particle moves from point a to point b; its acceleration is not constant.



EXECUTE: We have $K_a = 0$ and $K_b = \frac{1}{2}mv^2$. We substitute these and our expressions for U_a and U_b into the energy-conservation equation, then solve for v. We find

$$0 + q_0V_a = \tfrac{1}{2}mv^2 + q_0V_b$$

$$v = \sqrt{\frac{2q_0(V_a - V_b)}{m}}$$

We calculate the potentials using Eq. (23.15), $V = q/4\pi\epsilon_0 r$:

$$\begin{aligned} V_a &= (9.0 \times 10^9\ \text{N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{C}^2)\left(\frac{3.0 \times 10^{-9}\ \text{C}}{0.010\ \text{m}} + \frac{(-3.0 \times 10^{-9}\ \text{C})}{0.020\ \text{m}}\right) \\ &= 1350\ \text{V} \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} V_b &= (9.0 \times 10^9\ \text{N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{C}^2)\left(\frac{3.0 \times 10^{-9}\ \text{C}}{0.020\ \text{m}} + \frac{(-3.0 \times 10^{-9}\ \text{C})}{0.010\ \text{m}}\right) \\ &= -1350\ \text{V} \end{aligned}$$

$$V_a - V_b = (1350\ \text{V}) - (-1350\ \text{V}) = 2700\ \text{V}$$

Finally,

$$v = \sqrt{\frac{2(2.0 \times 10^{-9}\ \text{C})(2700\ \text{V})}{5.0 \times 10^{-9}\ \text{kg}}} = 46\ \text{m/s}$$

EVALUATE: Our result makes sense: The positive test charge speeds up as it moves away from the positive charge and toward the negative charge. To check unit consistency in the final line of the calculation, note that $1\ \text{V} = 1\ \text{J/C}$, so the numerator under the radical has units of J or $\text{kg}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{s}^2$.

Test Your Understanding of Section 23.2 If the electric *potential* at a certain point is zero, does the electric *field* at that point have to be zero? (*Hint:* Consider point c in Example 23.4 and Example 21.8.)

23.3 Calculating Electric Potential

When calculating the potential due to a charge distribution, we usually follow one of two routes. If we know the charge distribution, we can use Eq. (23.15) or (23.16). Or if we know how the electric field depends on position, we can use Eq. (23.17), defining the potential to be zero at some convenient place. Some problems require a combination of these approaches.

As you read through these examples, compare them with the related examples of calculating electric *field* in Section 21.5. You'll see how much easier it is to calculate scalar electric potentials than vector electric fields. The moral is clear: Whenever possible, solve problems using an energy approach (using electric potential and electric potential energy) rather than a dynamics approach (using electric fields and electric forces).

Problem-Solving Strategy 23.1 Calculating Electric Potential

MP

IDENTIFY *the relevant concepts:* Remember that electric potential is *potential energy per unit charge.*

SET UP *the problem* using the following steps:

1. Make a drawing showing the locations and values of the charges (which may be point charges or a continuous distribution of charge) and your choice of coordinate axes.
2. Indicate on your drawing the position of the point at which you want to calculate the electric potential V. Sometimes this position will be an arbitrary one (say, a point a distance r from the center of a charged sphere).

EXECUTE *the solution* as follows:

1. To find the potential due to a collection of point charges, use Eq. (23.15). If you are given a continuous charge distribution, devise a way to divide it into infinitesimal elements and use Eq. (23.16). Carry out the integration, using appropriate limits to include the entire charge distribution.
2. If you are given the electric field, or if you can find it using any of the methods presented in Chapter 21 or 22, it may be easier to find the potential difference between points a and b using Eq. (23.17) or (23.18). When appropriate, make use of your freedom to define V to be zero at some convenient place, and choose this place to be point b. (For point charges, this will usually be at infinity. For other distributions of charge—especially those that themselves extend to infinity—it may be necessary to define V_b to be zero at some finite distance from the charge distribution.) Then the potential at any other point, say a, can by found from Eq. (23.17) or (23.18) with $V_b = 0$.
3. Although potential V is a *scalar* quantity, you may have to use components of the vectors $\vec{E}$ and $d\vec{l}$ when you use Eq. (23.17) or (23.18) to calculate V.

EVALUATE *your answer:* Check whether your answer agrees with your intuition. If your result gives V as a function of position, graph the function to see whether it makes sense. If you know the electric field, you can make a rough check of your result for V by verifying that V decreases if you move in the direction of $\vec{E}$.

Example 23.8 A charged conducting sphere

A solid conducting sphere of radius R has a total charge q. Find the electric potential everywhere, both outside and inside the sphere.

SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: In Example 22.5 (Section 22.4) we used Gauss's law to find the electric *field* at all points for this charge distribution. We can use that result to determine the corresponding potential.

EXECUTE: From Example 22.5, the field *outside* the sphere is the same as if the sphere were removed and replaced by a point charge q. We take $V = 0$ at infinity, as we did for a point charge. Then the potential at a point outside the sphere at a distance r from its center is the same as that due to a point charge q at the center:

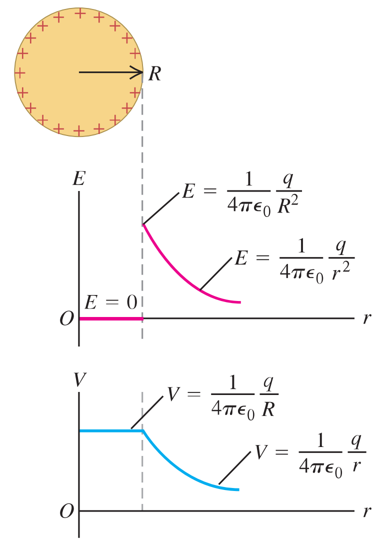
$$V = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{q}{r}$$

The potential at the surface of the sphere is $V_{surface} = q/4\pi\epsilon_0 R$.

Inside the sphere, $\vec{E}$ is zero everywhere. Hence no work is done on a test charge that moves from any point to any other point inside the sphere. This means that the potential is the same at every point inside the sphere and is equal to its value $q/4\pi\epsilon_0 R$ at the surface.

EVALUATE: Figure 23.16 shows the field and potential for a positive charge q. In this case the electric field points radially away from the sphere. As you move away from the sphere, in the direction of $\vec{E}$, V decreases (as it should).

23.16 Electric-field magnitude E and potential V at points inside and outside a positively charged spherical conductor.



Ionization and Corona Discharge

The results of Example 23.8 have numerous practical consequences. One consequence relates to the maximum potential to which a conductor in air can be raised. This potential is limited because air molecules become *ionized,* and air becomes a conductor, at an electric-field magnitude of about 3×10^6 V/m. Assume for the moment that q is positive. When we compare the expressions in Example 23.8 for the potential $V_{surface}$ and field magnitude $E_{surface}$ at the surface of a charged conducting sphere, we note that $V_{surface} = E_{surface}R$. Thus, if E_m represents the electric-field magnitude at which air becomes conductive (known as the *dielectric strength* of air), then the maximum potential V_m to which a spherical conductor can be raised is

$$V_m = RE_m$$

For a conducting sphere 1 cm in radius in air, $V_m = (10^{-2}\ \text{m})(3 \times 10^6\ \text{V/m}) = 30{,}000$ V. No amount of "charging" could raise the potential of a conducting sphere of this size in air higher than about 30,000 V; attempting to raise the potential further by adding extra charge would cause the surrounding air to become ionized and conductive, and the extra added charge would leak into the air.

To attain even higher potentials, high-voltage machines such as Van de Graaff generators use spherical terminals with very large radii (see Fig. 22.26 and the photograph that opens Chapter 22). For example, a terminal of radius $R = 2$ m has a maximum potential $V_m = (2\ \text{m})(3 \times 10^6\ \text{V/m}) = 6 \times 10^6\ \text{V} = 6$ MV.

Our result in Example 23.8 also explains what happens with a charged conductor with a very *small* radius of curvature, such as a sharp point or thin wire. Because the maximum potential is proportional to the radius, even relatively small potentials applied to sharp points in air produce sufficiently high fields just outside the point to ionize the surrounding air, making it become a conductor. The resulting current and its associated glow (visible in a dark room) are called *corona*. Laser printers and photocopying machines use corona from fine wires to spray charge on the imaging drum (see Fig. 21.2).

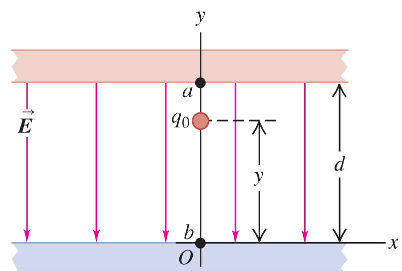
A large-radius conductor is used in situations where it's important to *prevent* corona. An example is the metal ball at the end of a car radio antenna, which prevents the static that would be caused by corona. Another example is the blunt end of a metal lightning rod (Fig. 23.17). If there is an excess charge in the atmosphere, as happens during thunderstorms, a substantial charge of the opposite sign can build up on this blunt end. As a result, when the atmospheric charge is discharged through a lightning bolt, it tends to be attracted to the charged lightning rod rather than to other nearby structures that could be damaged. (A conducting wire connecting the lightning rod to the ground then allows the acquired charge to dissipate harmlessly.) A lightning rod with a sharp end would allow less charge buildup and hence would be less effective.

23.17 The metal mast at the top of the Empire State Building acts as a lightning rod. It is struck by lightning as many as 500 times each year.

Example 23.9 Oppositely charged parallel plates

Find the potential at any height y between the two oppositely charged parallel plates discussed in Section 23.1 (Fig. 23.18).

23.18 The charged parallel plates from Fig. 23.2.



SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: We discussed this situation in Section 23.1. From Eq. (23.5), we know the electric *potential energy* U for a test charge q_0 is $U = q_0Ey$. (We set $y = 0$ and $U = 0$ at the bottom plate.) We use Eq. (23.12), $U = q_0V$, to find the electric *potential* V as a function of y.

EXECUTE: The potential $V(y)$ at coordinate y is the potential energy per unit charge:

$$V(y) = \frac{U(y)}{q_0} = \frac{q_0Ey}{q_0} = Ey$$

The potential decreases as we move in the direction of $\vec{E}$ from the upper to the lower plate. At point a, where $y = d$ and $V(y) = V_a$,

$$V_a - V_b = Ed \quad \text{and} \quad E = \frac{V_a - V_b}{d} = \frac{V_{ab}}{d}$$

where V_{ab} is the potential of the positive plate with respect to the negative plate. That is, the electric field equals the potential difference between the plates divided by the distance between them. For a given potential difference V_{ab}, the smaller the distance d between the two plates, the greater the magnitude E of the electric field. (This relationship between E and V_{ab} holds *only* for the planar geometry we have described. It does *not* work for situations such as concentric cylinders or spheres in which the electric field is not uniform.)

EVALUATE: Our result shows that $V = 0$ at the bottom plate (at $y = 0$). This is consistent with our choice that $U = q_0V = 0$ for a test charge placed at the bottom plate.

CAUTION **"Zero potential" is arbitrary** You might think that if a conducting body has zero potential, it must necessarily also have zero net charge. But that just isn't so! As an example, the plate at $y = 0$ in Fig. 23.18 has zero potential ($V = 0$) but has a nonzero charge per unit area $-\sigma$. There's nothing particularly special about the place where potential is zero; we can *define* this place to be wherever we want it to be.

Example 23.10 An infinite line charge or charged conducting cylinder

Find the potential at a distance r from a very long line of charge with linear charge density (charge per unit length) λ.

SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: In both Example 21.10 (Section 21.5) and Example 22.6 (Section 22.4) we found that the electric field at a radial distance r from a long straight-line charge (Fig. 23.19a) has only a radial component given by $E_r = \lambda/2\pi\epsilon_0 r$. We use this expression to find the potential by integrating $\vec{E}$ as in Eq. (23.17).

EXECUTE: Since the field has only a radial component, we have $\vec{E} \cdot d\vec{l} = E_r\,dr$. Hence from Eq. (23.17) the potential of any point a

Continued

with respect to any other point b, at radial distances r_a and r_b from the line of charge, is

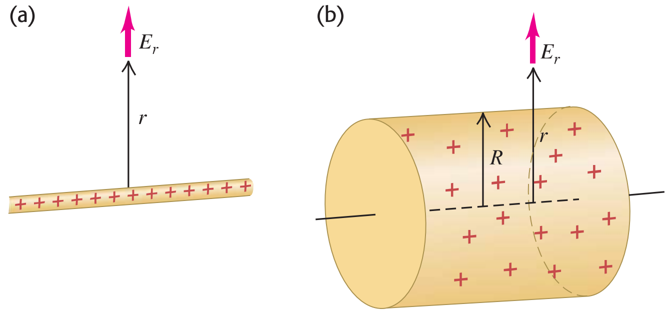
$$V_a - V_b = \int_a^b \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{l} = \int_a^b E_r \, dr = \frac{\lambda}{2\pi\epsilon_0} \int_{r_a}^{r_b} \frac{dr}{r} = \frac{\lambda}{2\pi\epsilon_0} \ln \frac{r_b}{r_a}$$

If we take point b at infinity and set $V_b = 0$, we find that V_a is *infinite* for any finite distance r_a from the line charge: $V_a = (\lambda/2\pi\epsilon_0)\ln(\infty/r_a) = \infty$. This is *not* a useful way to define V for this problem! The difficulty is that the charge distribution itself extends to infinity.

Instead, as recommended in Problem-Solving Strategy 23.1, we set $V_b = 0$ at point b at an arbitrary but *finite* radial distance r_0. Then the potential $V = V_a$ at point a at a radial distance r is given by $V - 0 = (\lambda/2\pi\epsilon_0)\ln(r_0/r)$, or

$$V = \frac{\lambda}{2\pi\epsilon_0} \ln \frac{r_0}{r}$$

23.19 Electric field outside (a) a long, positively charged wire and (b) a long, positively charged cylinder.



EVALUATE: According to our result, if λ is positive, then V decreases as r increases. This is as it should be: V decreases as we move in the direction of $\vec{E}$.

From Example 22.6, the expression for E_r with which we started also applies outside a long, charged conducting cylinder with charge per unit length λ (Fig. 23.19b). Hence our result also gives the potential for such a cylinder, but only for values of r (the distance from the cylinder axis) equal to or greater than the radius R of the cylinder. If we choose r_0 to be the cylinder radius R, so that $V = 0$ when $r = R$, then at any point for which $r > R$,

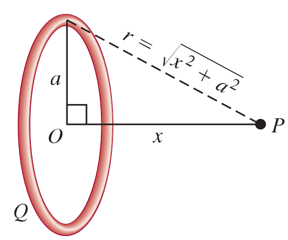
$$V = \frac{\lambda}{2\pi\epsilon_0} \ln \frac{R}{r}$$

Inside the cylinder, $\vec{E} = \mathbf{0}$, and V has the same value (zero) as on the cylinder's surface.

Example 23.11 A ring of charge

Electric charge Q is distributed uniformly around a thin ring of radius a (Fig. 23.20). Find the potential at a point P on the ring axis at a distance x from the center of the ring.

23.20 All the charge in a ring of charge Q is the same distance r from a point P on the ring axis.



SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: We divide the ring into infinitesimal segments and use Eq. (23.16) to find V. All parts of the ring (and therefore all elements of the charge distribution) are at the same distance from P.

EXECUTE: Figure 23.20 shows that the distance from each charge element dq to P is $r = \sqrt{x^2 + a^2}$. Hence we can take the factor $1/r$ outside the integral in Eq. (23.16), and

$$V = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0} \int \frac{dq}{r} = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0} \frac{1}{\sqrt{x^2 + a^2}} \int dq = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0} \frac{Q}{\sqrt{x^2 + a^2}}$$

EVALUATE: When x is much larger than a, our expression for V becomes approximately $V = Q/4\pi\epsilon_0 x$, which is the potential at a distance x from a point charge Q. Very far away from a charged ring, its electric potential looks like that of a point charge. We drew a similar conclusion about the electric *field* of a ring in Example 21.9 (Section 21.5).

We know the electric field at all points along the x-axis from Example 21.9 (Section 21.5), so we can also find V along this axis by integrating $\vec{E} \cdot d\vec{l}$ as in Eq. (23.17).

Example 23.12 Potential of a line of charge

Positive electric charge Q is distributed uniformly along a line of length $2a$ lying along the y-axis between $y = -a$ and $y = +a$ (Fig. 23.21). Find the electric potential at a point P on the x-axis at a distance x from the origin.

SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: This is the same situation as in Example 21.10 (Section 21.5), where we found an expression for the electric field $\vec{E}$ at an arbitrary point on the x-axis. We can find V at point P by integrating over the charge distribution using Eq. (23.16). Unlike the situation in Example 23.11, each charge element dQ is a *different* distance from point P, so the integration will take a little more effort.

EXECUTE: As in Example 21.10, the element of charge dQ corresponding to an element of length dy on the rod is $dQ = (Q/2a)dy$. The distance from dQ to P is $\sqrt{x^2 + y^2}$, so the contribution dV that the charge element makes to the potential at P is

$$dV = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{Q}{2a}\frac{dy}{\sqrt{x^2 + y^2}}$$

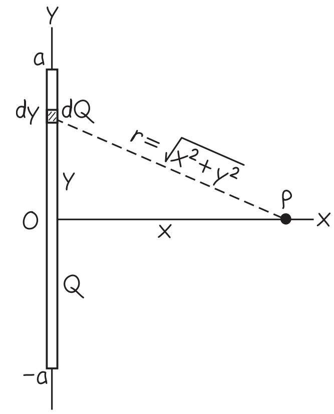
To find the potential at P due to the entire rod, we integrate dV over the length of the rod from $y = -a$ to $y = a$:

$$V = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{Q}{2a}\int_{-a}^{a}\frac{dy}{\sqrt{x^2 + y^2}}$$

You can look up the integral in a table. The final result is

$$V = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{Q}{2a}\ln\left(\frac{\sqrt{a^2 + x^2} + a}{\sqrt{a^2 + x^2} - a}\right)$$

23.21 Our sketch for this problem.



EVALUATE: We can check our result by letting x approach infinity. In this limit the point P is infinitely far from all of the charge, so we expect V to approach zero; you can verify that it does.

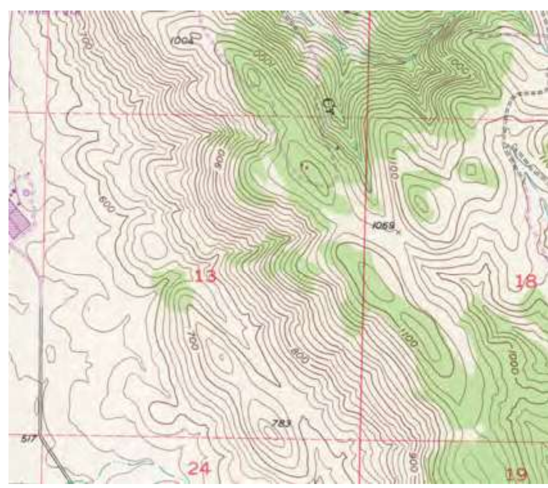
We know the electric field at all points along the x-axis from Example 21.10. We invite you to use this information to find V along this axis by integrating $\vec{E}$ as in Eq. (23.17).

Test Your Understanding of Section 23.3 If the electric *field* at a certain point is zero, does the electric *potential* at that point have to be zero? (*Hint:* Consider the center of the ring in Example 23.11 and Example 21.9.)

23.4 Equipotential Surfaces

Field lines (see Section 21.6) help us visualize electric fields. In a similar way, the potential at various points in an electric field can be represented graphically by *equipotential surfaces.* These use the same fundamental idea as topographic maps like those used by hikers and mountain climbers (Fig. 23.22). On a topographic map, contour lines are drawn through points that are all at the same elevation. Any number of these could be drawn, but typically only a few contour lines are shown at equal spacings of elevation. If a mass m is moved over the terrain along such a contour line, the gravitational potential energy mgy does not change because the elevation y is constant. Thus contour lines on a topographic map are really curves of constant gravitational potential energy. Contour lines are close together where the terrain is steep and there are large changes in elevation over a small horizontal distance; the contour lines are farther apart where the terrain is gently sloping. A ball allowed to roll downhill will experience the greatest downhill gravitational force where contour lines are closest together.

23.22 Contour lines on a topographic map are curves of constant elevation and hence of constant gravitational potential energy.

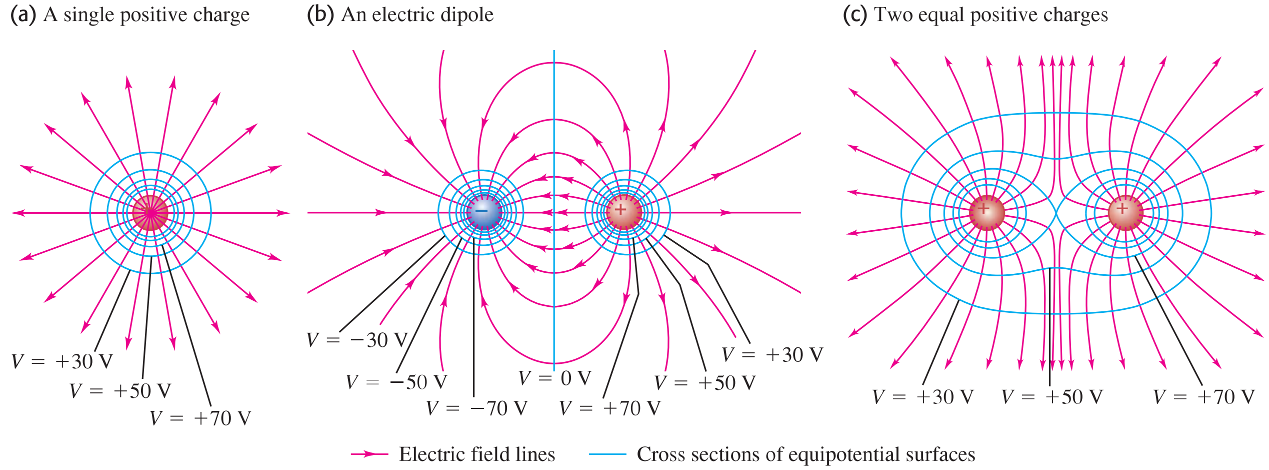


By analogy to contour lines on a topographic map, an **equipotential surface** is a three-dimensional surface on which the *electric potential* V is the same at every point. If a test charge q_0 is moved from point to point on such a surface, the *electric* potential energy q_0V remains constant. In a region where an electric field is present, we can construct an equipotential surface through any point. In diagrams we usually show only a few representative equipotentials, often with equal potential differences between adjacent surfaces. No point can be at two different potentials, so equipotential surfaces for different potentials can never touch or intersect.

Equipotential Surfaces and Field Lines

Because potential energy does not change as a test charge moves over an equipotential surface, the electric field can do no work on such a charge. It follows that $\vec{E}$ must be perpendicular to the surface at every point so that the electric force $q_0\vec{E}$ is always perpendicular to the displacement of a charge moving on the surface.

23.23 Cross sections of equipotential surfaces (blue lines) and electric field lines (red lines) for assemblies of point charges. There are equal potential differences between adjacent surfaces. Compare these diagrams to those in Fig. 21.28, which showed only the electric field lines.



Field lines and equipotential surfaces are always mutually perpendicular. In general, field lines are curves, and equipotentials are curved surfaces. For the special case of a *uniform* field, in which the field lines are straight, parallel, and equally spaced, the equipotentials are parallel *planes* perpendicular to the field lines.

Figure 23.23 shows three arrangements of charges. The field lines in the plane of the charges are represented by red lines, and the intersections of the equipotential surfaces with this plane (that is, cross sections of these surfaces) are shown as blue lines. The actual equipotential surfaces are three-dimensional. At each crossing of an equipotential and a field line, the two are perpendicular.

In Fig. 23.23 we have drawn equipotentials so that there are equal potential differences between adjacent surfaces. In regions where the magnitude of $\vec{E}$ is large, the equipotential surfaces are close together because the field does a relatively large amount of work on a test charge in a relatively small displacement. This is the case near the point charge in Fig. 23.23a or between the two point charges in Fig. 23.23b; note that in these regions the field lines are also closer together. This is directly analogous to the downhill force of gravity being greatest in regions on a topographic map where contour lines are close together. Conversely, in regions where the field is weaker, the equipotential surfaces are farther apart; this happens at larger radii in Fig. 23.23a, to the left of the negative charge or the right of the positive charge in Fig. 23.23b, and at greater distances from both charges in Fig. 23.23c. (It may appear that two equipotential surfaces intersect at the center of Fig. 23.23c, in violation of the rule that this can never happen. In fact this is a single figure-8–shaped equipotential surface.)

CAUTION ***E* need not be constant over an equipotential surface** On a given equipotential surface, the potential V has the same value at every point. In general, however, the electric-field magnitude E is *not* the same at all points on an equipotential surface. For instance, on the equipotential surface labeled "$V = -30$ V" in Fig. 23.23b, the magnitude E is less to the left of the negative charge than it is between the two charges. On the figure-8–shaped equipotential surface in Fig. 23.23c, $E = 0$ at the middle point halfway between the two charges; at any other point on this surface, E is nonzero.

Equipotentials and Conductors

Here's an important statement about equipotential surfaces: **When all charges are at rest, the surface of a conductor is always an equipotential surface.**

Since the electric field $\vec{E}$ is always perpendicular to an equipotential surface, we can prove this statement by proving that **when all charges are at rest, the electric field just outside a conductor must be perpendicular to the surface at every point** (Fig. 23.24). We know that $\vec{E} = \mathbf{0}$ everywhere inside the conductor; otherwise, charges would move. In particular, at any point just inside the surface the component of $\vec{E}$ tangent to the surface is zero. It follows that the tangential component of $\vec{E}$ is also zero just *outside* the surface. If it were not, a charge could move around a rectangular path partly inside and partly outside (Fig. 23.25) and return to its starting point with a net amount of work having been done on it. This would violate the conservative nature of electrostatic fields, so the tangential component of $\vec{E}$ just outside the surface must be zero at every point on the surface. Thus $\vec{E}$ is perpendicular to the surface at each point, proving our statement.

It also follows that **when all charges are at rest, the entire solid volume of a conductor is at the same potential.** Equation (23.17) states that the potential difference between two points a and b within the conductor's solid volume, $V_a - V_b$, is equal to the line integral $\int_a^b \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{l}$ of the electric field from a to b. Since $\vec{E} = \mathbf{0}$ everywhere inside the conductor, the integral is guaranteed to be zero for any two such points a and b. Hence the potential is the same for any two points within the solid volume of the conductor. We describe this by saying that the solid volume of the conductor is an *equipotential volume*.

Finally, we can now prove a theorem that we quoted without proof in Section 22.5. The theorem is as follows: In an electrostatic situation, if a conductor contains a cavity and if no charge is present inside the cavity, then there can be no net charge *anywhere* on the surface of the cavity. This means that if you're inside a charged conducting box, you can safely touch any point on the inside walls of the box without being shocked. To prove this theorem, we first prove that *every point in the cavity is at the same potential.* In Fig. 23.26 the conducting surface A of the cavity is an equipotential surface, as we have just proved. Suppose point P in the cavity is at a different potential; then we can construct a different equipotential surface B including point P.

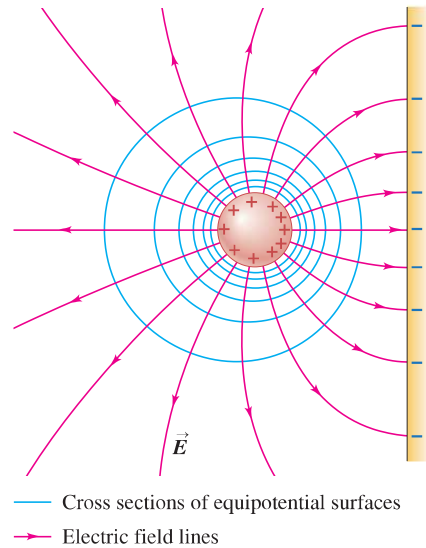
Now consider a Gaussian surface, shown in Fig. 23.26, between the two equipotential surfaces. Because of the relationship between $\vec{E}$ and the equipotentials, we know that the field at every point between the equipotentials is from A toward B, or else at every point it is from B toward A, depending on which equipotential surface is at higher potential. In either case the flux through this Gaussian surface is certainly not zero. But then Gauss's law says that the charge enclosed by the Gaussian surface cannot be zero. This contradicts our initial assumption that there is *no* charge in the cavity. So the potential at P *cannot* be different from that at the cavity wall.

The entire region of the cavity must therefore be at the same potential. But for this to be true, *the electric field inside the cavity must be zero everywhere.* Finally, Gauss's law shows that the electric field at any point on the surface of a conductor is proportional to the surface charge density σ at that point. We conclude that *the surface charge density on the wall of the cavity is zero at every point.* This chain of reasoning may seem tortuous, but it is worth careful study.

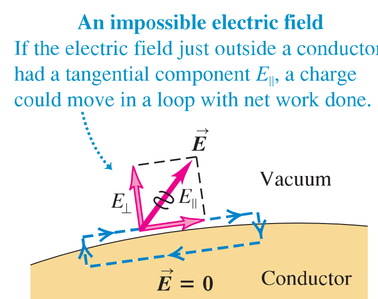
CAUTION **Equipotential surfaces vs. Gaussian surfaces** Don't confuse equipotential surfaces with the Gaussian surfaces we encountered in Chapter 22. Gaussian surfaces have relevance only when we are using Gauss's law, and we can choose *any* Gaussian surface that's convenient. We are *not* free to choose the shape of equipotential surfaces; the shape is determined by the charge distribution.

Test Your Understanding of Section 23.4 Would the shapes of the equipotential surfaces in Fig. 23.23 change if the sign of each charge were reversed?

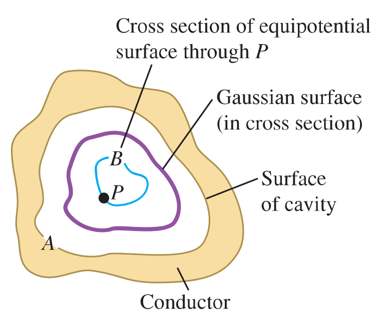
23.24 When charges are at rest, a conducting surface is always an equipotential surface. Field lines are perpendicular to a conducting surface.



23.25 At all points on the surface of a conductor, the electric field must be perpendicular to the surface. If $\vec{E}$ had a tangential component, a net amount of work would be done on a test charge by moving it around a loop as shown here—which is impossible because the electric force is conservative.



23.26 A cavity in a conductor. If the cavity contains no charge, every point in the cavity is at the same potential, the electric field is zero everywhere in the cavity, and there is no charge anywhere on the surface of the cavity.



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23.5 Potential Gradient

Electric field and potential are closely related. Equation (23.17), restated here, expresses one aspect of that relationship:

$$V_a - V_b = \int_a^b \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{l}$$

If we know $\vec{E}$ at various points, we can use this equation to calculate potential differences. In this section we show how to turn this around; if we know the potential V at various points, we can use it to determine $\vec{E}$. Regarding V as a function of the coordinates (x, y, z) of a point in space, we will show that the components of $\vec{E}$ are related to the *partial derivatives* of V with respect to x, y, and z.

In Eq. (23.17), $V_a - V_b$ is the potential of a with respect to b—that is, the change of potential encountered on a trip from b to a. We can write this as

$$V_a - V_b = \int_b^a dV = -\int_a^b dV$$

where dV is the infinitesimal change of potential accompanying an infinitesimal element $d\vec{l}$ of the path from b to a. Comparing to Eq. (23.17), we have

$$-\int_a^b dV = \int_a^b \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{l}$$

These two integrals must be equal for *any* pair of limits a and b, and for this to be true the *integrands* must be equal. Thus, for *any* infinitesimal displacement $d\vec{l}$,

$$-dV = \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{l}$$

To interpret this expression, we write $\vec{E}$ and $d\vec{l}$ in terms of their components: $\vec{E} = \hat{\imath}\, E_x + \hat{\jmath}\, E_y + \hat{k}\, E_z$ and $d\vec{l} = \hat{\imath}\, dx + \hat{\jmath}\, dy + \hat{k}\, dz$. Then we have

$$-dV = E_x dx + E_y dy + E_z dz$$

Suppose the displacement is parallel to the x-axis, so $dy = dz = 0$. Then $-dV = E_x dx$ or $E_x = -(dV/dx)_{y,\, z\ \text{constant}}$, where the subscript reminds us that only x varies in the derivative; recall that V is in general a function of x, y, and z. But this is just what is meant by the partial derivative $\partial V/\partial x$. The y- and z-components of $\vec{E}$ are related to the corresponding derivatives of V in the same way, so we have

$$E_x = -\frac{\partial V}{\partial x} \qquad E_y = -\frac{\partial V}{\partial y} \qquad E_z = -\frac{\partial V}{\partial z} \qquad \text{(components of } \vec{E} \text{ in terms of } V) \tag{23.19}$$

This is consistent with the units of electric field being V/m. In terms of unit vectors we can write $\vec{E}$ as

$$\vec{E} = -\left(\hat{\imath}\frac{\partial V}{\partial x} + \hat{\jmath}\frac{\partial V}{\partial y} + \hat{k}\frac{\partial V}{\partial z}\right) \qquad (\vec{E} \text{ in terms of } V) \tag{23.20}$$

In vector notation the following operation is called the **gradient** of the function f:

$$\vec{\nabla} f = \left(\hat{\imath}\frac{\partial}{\partial x} + \hat{\jmath}\frac{\partial}{\partial y} + \hat{k}\frac{\partial}{\partial z}\right) f \tag{23.21}$$

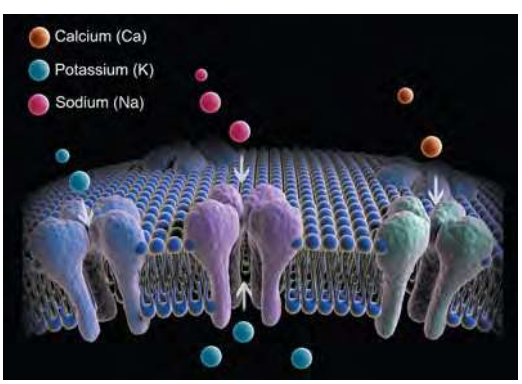
The operator denoted by the symbol $\vec{\nabla}$ is called "grad" or "del." Thus in vector notation,

$$\vec{E} = -\vec{\nabla} V \tag{23.22}$$

This is read "$\vec{E}$ is the negative of the gradient of V" or "$\vec{E}$ equals negative grad V." The quantity $\vec{\nabla} V$ is called the *potential gradient.*

Application Potential Gradient Across a Cell Membrane

The interior of a human cell is at a lower electric potential V than the exterior. (The potential difference when the cell is inactive is about –70 mV in neurons and about –95 mV in skeletal muscle cells.) Hence there is a potential gradient $\vec{\nabla} V$ that points from the *interior* to the *exterior* of the cell membrane, and an electric field $\vec{E} = -\vec{\nabla} V$ that points from the *exterior* to the *interior*. This field affects how ions flow into or out of the cell through special channels in the membrane.



At each point, the potential gradient points in the direction in which V *increases* most rapidly with a change in position. Hence at each point the direction of $\vec{E}$ is the direction in which V *decreases* most rapidly and is always perpendicular to the equipotential surface through the point. This agrees with our observation in Section 23.2 that moving in the direction of the electric field means moving in the direction of decreasing potential.

Equation (23.22) doesn't depend on the particular choice of the zero point for V. If we were to change the zero point, the effect would be to change V at every point by the same amount; the derivatives of V would be the same.

If $\vec{E}$ is radial with respect to a point or an axis and r is the distance from the point or the axis, the relationship corresponding to Eqs. (23.19) is

$$E_r = -\frac{\partial V}{\partial r} \qquad \text{(radial electric field)} \tag{23.23}$$

Often we can compute the electric field caused by a charge distribution in either of two ways: directly, by adding the $\vec{E}$ fields of point charges, or by first calculating the potential and then taking its gradient to find the field. The second method is often easier because potential is a *scalar* quantity, requiring at worst the integration of a scalar function. Electric field is a *vector* quantity, requiring computation of components for each element of charge and a separate integration for each component. Thus, quite apart from its fundamental significance, potential offers a very useful computational technique in field calculations. Below, we present two examples in which a knowledge of V is used to find the electric field.

We stress once more that if we know $\vec{E}$ as a function of position, we can calculate V using Eq. (23.17) or (23.18), and if we know V as a function of position, we can calculate $\vec{E}$ using Eq. (23.19), (23.20), or (23.23). Deriving V from $\vec{E}$ requires integration, and deriving $\vec{E}$ from V requires differentiation.

Example 23.13 Potential and field of a point charge

From Eq. (23.14) the potential at a radial distance r from a point charge q is $V = q/4\pi\epsilon_0 r$. Find the vector electric field from this expression for V.

SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: This problem uses the general relationship between the electric potential as a function of position and the electric-field vector. By symmetry, the electric field here has only a radial component E_r. We use Eq. (23.23) to find this component.

EXECUTE: From Eq. (23.23),

$$E_r = -\frac{\partial V}{\partial r} = -\frac{\partial}{\partial r}\left(\frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{q}{r}\right) = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{q}{r^2}$$

so the vector electric field is

$$\vec{E} = \hat{r}E_r = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{q}{r^2}\hat{r}$$

EVALUATE: Our result agrees with Eq. (21.7), as it must.

An alternative approach is to ignore the radial symmetry, write the radial distance as $r = \sqrt{x^2 + y^2 + z^2}$, and take the derivatives of V with respect to x, y, and z as in Eq. (23.20). We find

$$\frac{\partial V}{\partial x} = \frac{\partial}{\partial x}\left(\frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{q}{\sqrt{x^2 + y^2 + z^2}}\right) = -\frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{qx}{(x^2 + y^2 + z^2)^{3/2}}$$
$$= -\frac{qx}{4\pi\epsilon_0 r^3}$$

and similarly

$$\frac{\partial V}{\partial y} = -\frac{qy}{4\pi\epsilon_0 r^3} \qquad \frac{\partial V}{\partial z} = -\frac{qz}{4\pi\epsilon_0 r^3}$$

Then from Eq. (23.20),

$$\vec{E} = -\left[\hat{\imath}\left(-\frac{qx}{4\pi\epsilon_0 r^3}\right) + \hat{\jmath}\left(-\frac{qy}{4\pi\epsilon_0 r^3}\right) + \hat{k}\left(-\frac{qz}{4\pi\epsilon_0 r^3}\right)\right]$$
$$= \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{q}{r^2}\left(\frac{x\hat{\imath} + y\hat{\jmath} + z\hat{k}}{r}\right) = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{q}{r^2}\hat{r}$$

This approach gives us the same answer, but with more effort. Clearly it's best to exploit the symmetry of the charge distribution whenever possible.

Example 23.14 Potential and field of a ring of charge

In Example 23.11 (Section 23.3) we found that for a ring of charge with radius a and total charge Q, the potential at a point P on the ring's symmetry axis a distance x from the center is

$$V = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{Q}{\sqrt{x^2 + a^2}}$$

Find the electric field at P.

SOLUTION

IDENTIFY and SET UP: Figure 23.20 shows the situation. We are given V as a function of x along the x-axis, and we wish to find the electric field at a point on this axis. From the symmetry of the charge distribution, the electric field along the symmetry (x-) axis of the ring can have only an x-component. We find it using the first of Eqs. (23.19).

EXECUTE: The x-component of the electric field is

$$E_x = -\frac{\partial V}{\partial x} = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{Qx}{(x^2 + a^2)^{3/2}}$$

EVALUATE: This agrees with our result in Example 21.9.

CAUTION **Don't use expressions where they don't apply** In this example, V is not a function of y or z on the ring axis, so that $\partial V/\partial y = \partial V/\partial z = 0$ and $E_y = E_z = 0$. But that does not mean that it's true *everywhere*; our expressions for V and E_x are valid *only on the ring axis*. If we had an expression for V valid at *all* points in space, we could use it to find the components of $\vec{E}$ at any point using Eqs. (23.19).

Test Your Understanding of Section 23.5 In a certain region of space the potential is given by $V = A + Bx + Cy^3 + Dxy$, where A, B, C, and D are positive constants. Which of these statements about the electric field $\vec{E}$ in this region of space is correct? (There may be more than one correct answer.) (i) Increasing the value of A will increase the value of $\vec{E}$ at all points; (ii) increasing the value of A will decrease the value of $\vec{E}$ at all points; (iii) $\vec{E}$ has no z-component; (iv) the electric field is zero at the origin $(x = 0, y = 0, z = 0)$.

CHAPTER 23 SUMMARY

Electric potential energy: The electric force caused by any collection of charges at rest is a conservative force. The work W done by the electric force on a charged particle moving in an electric field can be represented by the change in a potential-energy function U.

The electric potential energy for two point charges q and q_0 depends on their separation r. The electric potential energy for a charge q_0 in the presence of a collection of charges q_1, q_2, q_3 depends on the distance from q_0 to each of these other charges. (See Examples 23.1 and 23.2.)

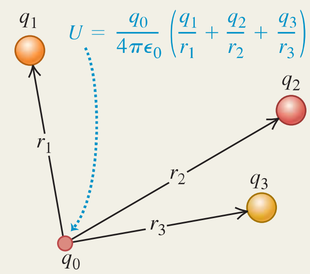
$$W_{a \to b} = U_a - U_b \tag{23.2}$$

$$U = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{qq_0}{r} \tag{23.9}$$

(two point charges)

$$U = \frac{q_0}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\left(\frac{q_1}{r_1} + \frac{q_2}{r_2} + \frac{q_3}{r_3} + \cdots\right) = \frac{q_0}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\sum_i \frac{q_i}{r_i} \tag{23.10}$$

(q_0 in presence of other point charges)



Electric potential: Potential, denoted by V, is potential energy per unit charge. The potential difference between two points equals the amount of work that would be required to move a unit positive test charge between those points. The potential V due to a quantity of charge can be calculated by summing (if the charge is a collection of point charges) or by integrating (if the charge is a distribution). (See Examples 23.3, 23.4, 23.5, 23.7, 23.11, and 23.12.)

The potential difference between two points a and b, also called the potential of a with respect to b, is given by the line integral of $\vec{E}$. The potential at a given point can be found by first finding $\vec{E}$ and then carrying out this integral. (See Examples 23.6, 23.8, 23.9, and 23.10.)

$$V = \frac{U}{q_0} = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\frac{q}{r} \tag{23.14}$$

(due to a point charge)

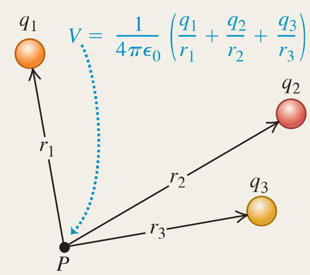
$$V = \frac{U}{q_0} = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\sum_i \frac{q_i}{r_i} \tag{23.15}$$

(due to a collection of point charges)

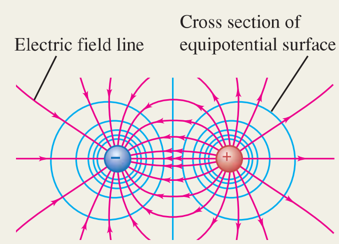
$$V = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_0}\int \frac{dq}{r} \tag{23.16}$$

(due to a charge distribution)

$$V_a - V_b = \int_a^b \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{l} = \int_a^b E\cos\phi\, dl \tag{23.17}$$



Equipotential surfaces: An equipotential surface is a surface on which the potential has the same value at every point. At a point where a field line crosses an equipotential surface, the two are perpendicular. When all charges are at rest, the surface of a conductor is always an equipotential surface and all points in the interior of a conductor are at the same potential. When a cavity within a conductor contains no charge, the entire cavity is an equipotential region and there is no surface charge anywhere on the surface of the cavity.



Finding electric field from electric potential: If the potential V is known as a function of the coordinates x, y, and z, the components of electric field $\vec{E}$ at any point are given by partial derivatives of V. (See Examples 23.13 and 23.14.)

$$E_x = -\frac{\partial V}{\partial x} \quad E_y = -\frac{\partial V}{\partial y} \quad E_z = -\frac{\partial V}{\partial z} \tag{23.19}$$

$$\vec{E} = -\left(\hat{\imath}\frac{\partial V}{\partial x} + \hat{\jmath}\frac{\partial V}{\partial y} + \hat{k}\frac{\partial V}{\partial z}\right) \tag{23.20}$$

(vector form)