

# 26 Electric Flux

## Fundamental Concepts

- Electric flux is the amount of electric field that penetrates an area.
- An area vector is a vector normal to the area surface with a magnitude equal to the area.
- For closed surfaces, flux going in is negative and flux going out is positive by convention.

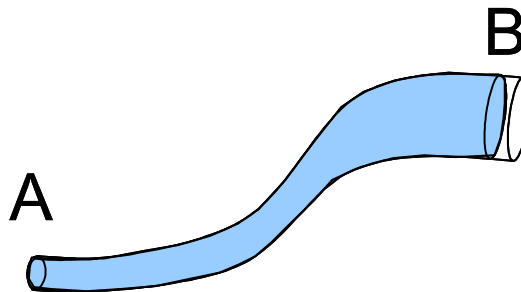
### The Idea of Flux

Van de Graaff Generator Demo

Question 223.26.1

If you took PH123 or have had a class that deals with fluids, I can use an analogy (if not, you will probably be OK, because you have probably used a garden hose). Let's recall some fluid dynamics for a moment. Remember what we called a *flow rate*? This was from the equation of continuity

$$v_1 A_1 = v_2 A_2$$



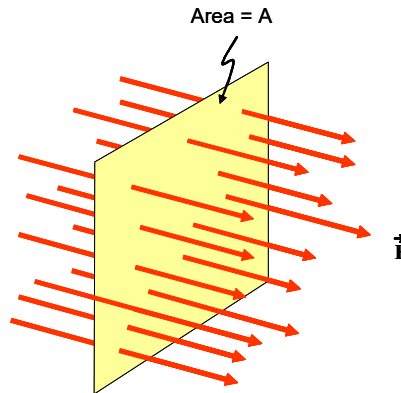
We wanted to know how much liquid was going by a particular part of the pipe in a given unit of time. We called  $vA$  a *flow rate*.

### The idea of electric flux

I want to introduce an analogous concept. But this time I want to use the electric field instead of water speed

$$\Phi = EA$$

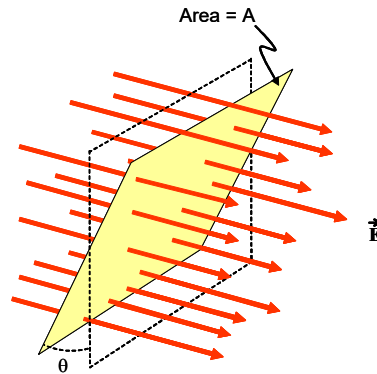
This is just like our flow rate in some ways. It is something multiplied by an area. In fact, it is how much of something goes through an area. We could guess that it is the amount of electric field that passes through the area,  $A$ . Now the electric fields we have dealt with so far don't flow. They just stay put (we will let them change later in the course). So it is only *like* a flow rate. But it is useful to think of this as “how much of something passes by an area,” and the “something” is the electric field in this case. Let's consider a picture



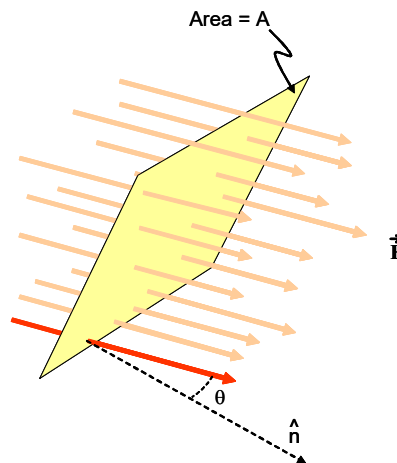
In this picture, we have a rectangular area,  $A$ , and the red arrows represent the field lines of the electric field. We can picture the quantity,  $\Phi$ , as the number of field lines that pass through  $A$ . Remember that the number of field lines we draw is greater if the field strength is higher, so this quantity,  $\Phi$ , tells us something about the strength of the field over the area.

Question 223.26.2

But, what if the area,  $A$ , is not perpendicular to the field?



We define an angle,  $\theta$  (our favorite greek letter, but we could of course use  $\beta$  or  $\alpha$ , or  $\zeta$  or whatever) that is the angle between the field direction and the area. A more mathematical way to do this is to define a vector that is perpendicular to (normal to) the surface  $\hat{n}$ . Then we can use this vector and one of the field lines to define  $\theta$ . It will be the angle between  $\hat{n}$  and the field lines.



Of course either way gives the same  $\theta$ .

Now our definition of  $\Phi$  can be made to work. We want the number of field lines passing through  $A$ , but of course, now there are fewer lines passing through the area because it is tilted. We can find  $\Phi$  using  $\theta$  as

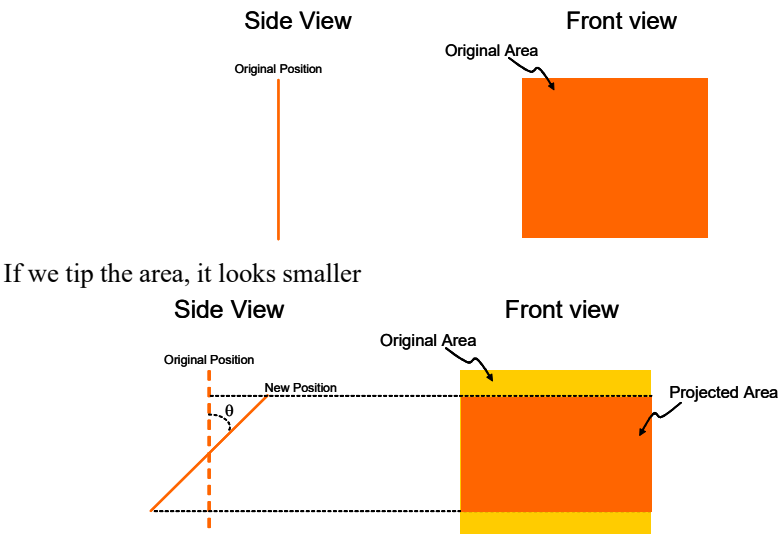
$$\Phi = EA \cos \theta \quad (26.1)$$

but let's consider what

$$A \cos \theta$$

Tip a flat object

means. We can start with our original area.



If we tip the area, it looks smaller

The smaller area is called the *projected area*.

We can see that by tipping our area, we get fewer field lines that penetrate that area.

Really the number of field lines is just proportional to  $E$ , so we won't ever really count field lines. But this is a good mental picture for what flux means. Really we will calculate

$$\Phi = EA \cos \theta$$

The  $\cos \theta$  with two magnitudes (field strength and area) multiplying it should remind you of something. It looks like the result of a vector dot product. If  $E$  and  $A$  were both vectors, then we could write the flux as

$$\Phi = \vec{E} \cdot \vec{A} \tag{26.2}$$

Demonstrate with a document with writing on one side

Well, we can define a vector that has  $A$  as its magnitude and is in the right direction to make

$$\vec{E} \cdot \vec{A} = EA \cos \theta$$

We define the *area vector*

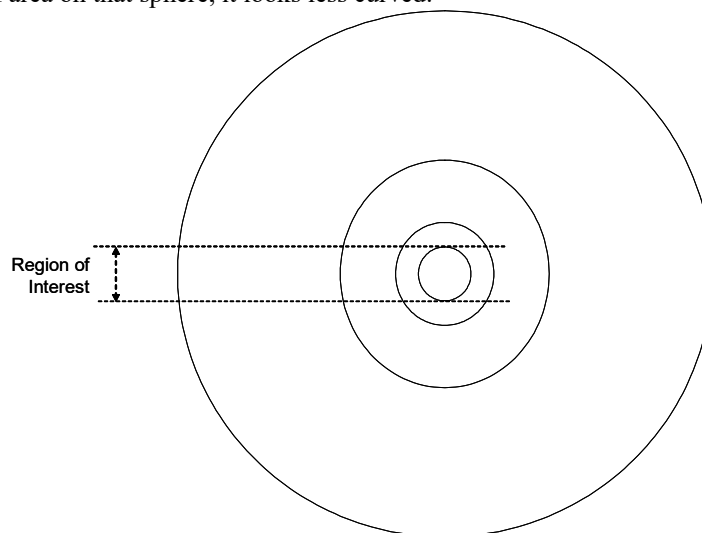
$$\vec{A} = \hat{n}A \tag{26.3}$$

Notice that for an open surface (one that does not form a closed surface with a empty space inside) we have to choose which side  $\hat{n}$  will point from. We can choose either side. But once we have made the choice, we have to stick with it for the entire problem we are solving.

Trifold paper

## Flux and Curved Areas

Suppose the area we have is not flat? Then what? Well let's recall that if we take a sphere the surface will be curved. But if we take a bigger sphere, and look at the same amount of area on that sphere, it looks less curved.



This becomes more apparent if we remove the rest of the circle or sphere to take away the visual cues our eyes and minds use to say something is curved



Suppose we take a curved surface but we just look at a very small part of that surface. This would be very like magnifying our circle. We would see an increasingly flat surface piece compared to our increased scale of our image.

This gives us the idea that for an element of area,  $\Delta A$  we could find an element of flux  $\Delta\Phi$  for this small part of the whole curved surface. Essentially  $\Delta A$  is flat (or we would just take a smaller  $\Delta A$ ).

$$\Delta\Phi = \vec{E} \cdot \Delta\vec{A} \quad (26.4)$$

This is just a small piece of the total flux through the curved surface, the total flux

through our whole curved surface is

$$\Phi_E \approx \sum \Delta\Phi \quad (26.5)$$

Of course, to make this exact, we will take the limit as  $\Delta A \rightarrow 0$  resulting in an integral.

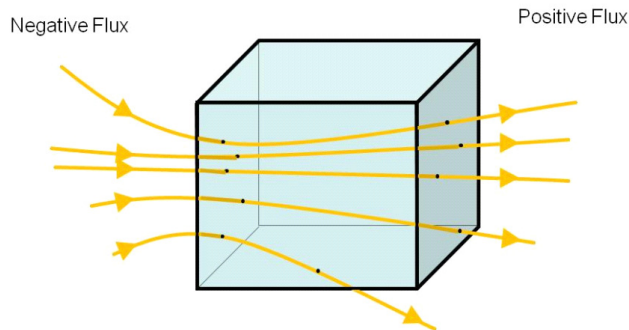
We find the flux through a curved surface to be

$$\Phi_E = \lim_{\Delta A \rightarrow 0} \sum_i \vec{E} \cdot \Delta\vec{A}_i = \int_{\text{surface}} \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{A} \quad (26.6)$$

Notice that this is a *surface integral*. It may be that you have not done surface integrals for some time, but we will practice in the upcoming lectures.

## Closed surfaces

Suppose we build a box with our areas.



Then we would have some lines going in and some going out. By convention we will call the flux formed by the ones going in negative and the flux formed by the ones going out positive. From these questions we see that if there is no charge inside of the box, the net flux must be zero. We could take any size or shape of closed surface and this would be true! But if we do have charge inside of the box we expect there to be a net flux. If it is a negative net charge, it will be a negative flux and if it is a positive net charge it will be a positive net flux. Next lecture we will formalize this as a new law of physics, but for now we need to remember from M215 or M113 how to write an integration over a closed surface. We use a special integral sign with a circle

$$\Phi_E = \oint \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{A} \quad (26.7)$$

You will also see this written as

$$\Phi_E = \oint E_n dA \quad (26.8)$$

where  $E_n$  is the component of the field normal to the surface at the point area increment

Question 223.26.3  
Required

Question 223.26.4  
Required

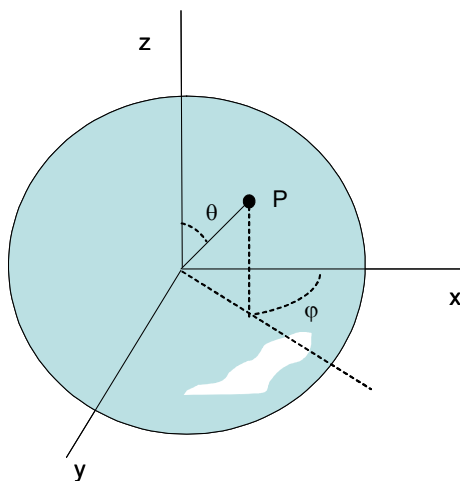
Question 223.26.5

$dA$ .

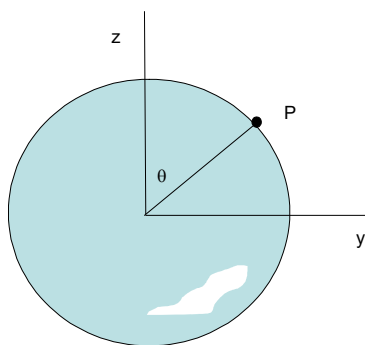
### Flux example: a sphere

For each type of surface we choose, we need an area element to perform the integration. This is a lot like finding  $dq$  in our electric field integral. Let's take an example, a sphere.

We can start by finding the coordinates of a point,  $P$ , on the surface of the sphere.

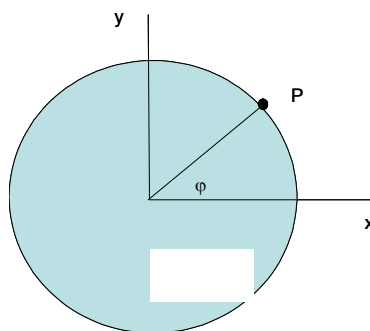


We define the coordinates in terms of two angles,  $\theta$  and  $\phi$ . Let's look at them one at a time. First  $\theta$



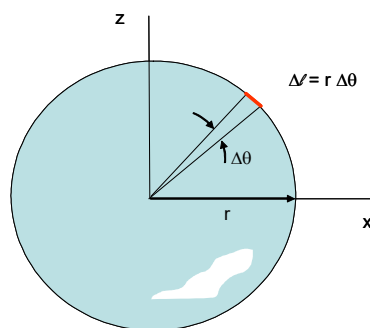
Side View

and now  $\phi$



Top View

Let's build an area by defining a sort of box shape on the surface by allowing a change in  $\theta$  and  $\phi$  ( $\Delta\theta$  and  $\Delta\phi$ ). First  $\Delta\theta$ ,



Side View

The angle  $\theta$  just defines a circle that passes through the “north pole” and “south pole” of our sphere. By changing  $\theta$  we get a small bit of arc length. We remember that the length of an arc is

$$s_\theta = r\theta \quad (26.9)$$

where  $\theta$  is in radians. So we expect that

$$\Delta s_\theta = r\Delta\theta \quad (26.10)$$

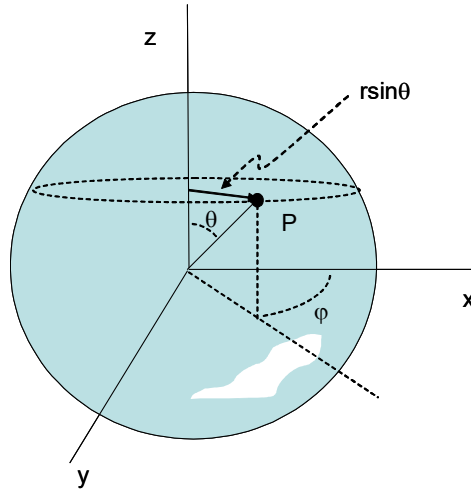
We can check this by integrating

$$\int_0^{2\pi} r d\theta = r \int_0^{2\pi} d\theta = 2\pi r \quad (26.11)$$



Just as we expect, the integral of arc length around the whole circle is the circumference of the circle. Then  $\Delta s_\theta$  is one side of our small box-like area, the box height.

Now let's look at  $\phi$

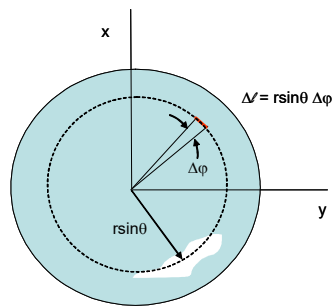


$\phi$  also forms a circle on the sphere, but its size depends on  $\theta$ . Near the north pole, the radius of the  $\phi$ -circle is very small. At  $\theta = 90^\circ$ , the  $\phi$ -circle is in the  $xy$  plane and has radius  $r$ . We can write the radius of the  $\phi$ -circle as a projection over  $90^\circ - \theta$  which gives us a radius of  $r \sin \theta$ . Then we use the arc length formula again to find

$$s_\phi = (r \sin \theta) \phi \quad (26.12)$$

a change in arch length will be

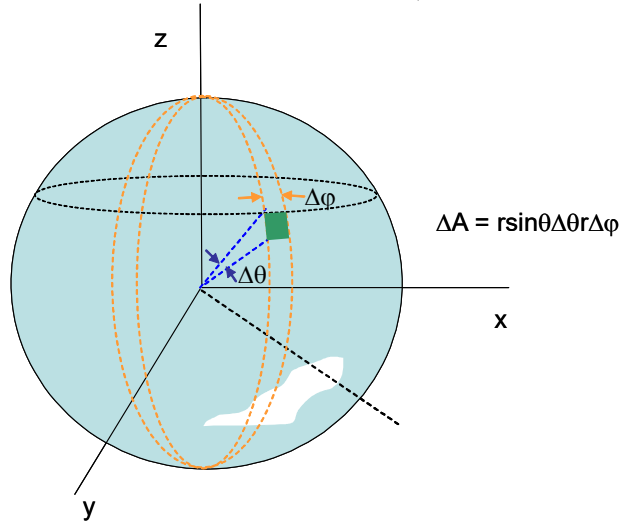
$$\Delta s_\phi = (r \sin \theta) \Delta \phi \quad (26.13)$$



Top View

This is the other side of our box, the box width.

Now let's combine them. We multiply  $\Delta s_\theta \times \Delta s_\phi$  to obtain a roughly rectangular area.



$$\Delta A \approx \Delta s_\theta \times \Delta s_\phi = r \Delta\theta r \sin \theta \Delta\phi \quad (26.14)$$

which is the area of our small box. We have found an element of area on the surface of the sphere! Let's check our element of area by integration. After changing  $\Delta$  to  $d$  and rearranging

$$dA = r^2 \sin \theta d\theta d\phi \quad (26.15)$$

then

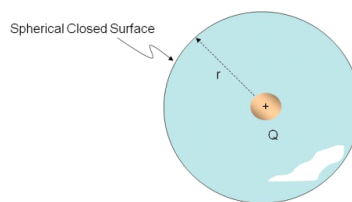
$$A = \int \int r^2 \sin \theta d\theta d\phi \quad (26.16)$$

we have to be careful not to over count area. Let's view this as first integrating around the circle of radius  $r \sin \theta$  over the variable  $\phi$ , then an integration of all these circles as  $\theta$  changes from 0 to  $\pi$

$$\begin{aligned} A &= \int_0^\pi \int_0^{2\pi} r^2 \sin \theta d\phi d\theta \\ &= r^2 \int_0^\pi \sin \theta d\theta \int_0^{2\pi} d\phi \\ &= 2\pi r^2 \int_0^\pi \sin \theta d\theta \\ &= 4\pi r^2 \end{aligned} \quad (26.17)$$

as we expect.

We are now ready to do a simple problem.



Let's calculate the flux through a spherical surface if there is a point charge at the center of the sphere. The field of the point charge is

$$\vec{E} = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_o} \frac{Q_E}{r^2} \hat{r}$$

then the flux through the surface is

$$\begin{aligned}\Phi_E &= \oint \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{A} \\ &= \oint \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_o} \frac{Q_E}{r^2} \hat{r} \cdot d\vec{A}\end{aligned}$$

but  $\hat{r}$  is always in the same direction as  $d\vec{A}$  for this case, so

$$\hat{r} \cdot d\vec{A} = (1)dA \cos(0) = dA$$

which gives us just

$$\begin{aligned}\Phi_E &= \frac{Q_E}{4\pi\epsilon_o} \oint \frac{1}{r^2} dA \\ &= \frac{Q_E}{4\pi\epsilon_o} \oint \frac{1}{r^2} r^2 \sin\theta d\theta d\phi \\ &= \frac{Q_E}{4\pi\epsilon_o} \int_0^\pi \left( \int_0^{2\pi} d\phi \right) \sin\theta d\theta \\ &= \frac{Q_E}{4\pi\epsilon_o} 4\pi \\ &= \frac{Q_E}{\epsilon_o}\end{aligned}$$

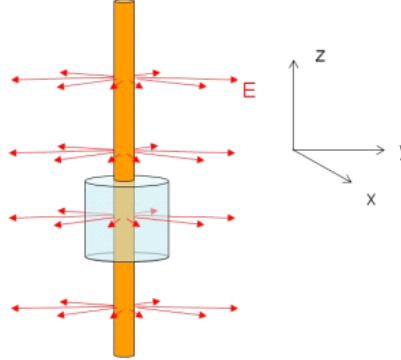
Some comments are in order. Our surfaces that we are using to calculate flux might be a real object. You might calculate the electric flux leaving a microwave oven, or a computer case to make sure you are in keeping emissions within FCC rules. But more likely the surface is purely imaginary—*just something we make up*.

Symmetry is going to be very important in doing problems with flux. So we will often make up very symmetrical surfaces to help us with our problems. In today's problem, the fact that  $\hat{r}$  and  $d\vec{A}$  were in the same direction made the integral *much* easier.

Until next lecture, it may not seem beneficial to invent some strange symmetrical surface and then to calculate the flux through that surface. But it is, and it will have the effect of turning a long, difficult integral into a simple one, when we can pull it off.

### Flux example: a long straight wire

Let's take another example. A long straight wire.



We remember that the field from a long straight wire is approximately

$$E = \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_o} \frac{2|\lambda|}{r}$$

The symmetry of the field suggests an imaginary surface for measuring the flux. A cylinder matches the geometry well. Let's find the flux through an imaginary cylinder that is  $L$  tall and has a radius  $r$  and is concentric with the line of charge. Note that we are totally making up the cylindrical surface. There is not really any surface there at all.

The flux will be

$$\Phi_E = \oint \tilde{\mathbf{E}} \cdot d\tilde{\mathbf{A}}$$

We can view this as three separate integrals

$$\Phi_E = \oint_{top} \tilde{\mathbf{E}} \cdot d\tilde{\mathbf{A}} + \oint_{side} \tilde{\mathbf{E}} \cdot d\tilde{\mathbf{A}} + \oint_{bottom} \tilde{\mathbf{E}} \cdot d\tilde{\mathbf{A}}$$

since our cylinder has end caps (the top and bottom) and a curved side.

Let's consider the end caps first. For both the top and the bottom ends,  $\tilde{\mathbf{E}} \cdot d\tilde{\mathbf{A}} = 0$  everywhere. No field goes through the ends. So there is no flux through the ends of the cylinder.

There is flux through the side of the cylinder. Note that the field is perpendicular to the side surface everywhere. So  $\tilde{\mathbf{E}} \cdot d\tilde{\mathbf{A}} = EdA$ . We can write our flux as

$$\begin{aligned} \Phi_E &= \oint_{side} EdA \\ &= \oint \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_o} \frac{2|\lambda|}{r} dA \end{aligned}$$

Integrated over the side surface. But we will need an element of surface area  $dA$  for a

Question 223.26.6

cylinder side. Cylindrical coordinates seem logical so let's try

$$dA = r d\theta dz$$

then

$$\begin{aligned}\Phi_E &= \oint \oint \frac{1}{4\pi\epsilon_o} \frac{2|\lambda|}{r} r d\theta dz \\ &= \frac{2|\lambda|}{4\pi\epsilon_o} \int_0^L \int_0^{2\pi} d\theta dz \\ &= \frac{|\lambda|}{2\pi\epsilon_o} (2\pi L) \\ &= \frac{|\lambda|}{\epsilon_o} L\end{aligned}$$

So far we have, indeed, made integrals that look hard but are really easy to do. But note that this would be *much* harder if the wire were not at the center of the cylinder, or if in the previous example the charge had been off to one side of the sphere.

We would still like to remove such difficulties if we can. And often we can by choosing our imaginary surface so that the symmetry is there. But sometimes that is harder. or worse yet, we don't know exactly where the charges are in a complicated configuration of charge. We will take this on next lecture when we study a technique for finding the electric field invented by Gauss.

## Basic Equations

The electric flux is defined as

$$\Phi_E = \vec{\mathbf{E}} \cdot \vec{\mathbf{A}} = EA \cos \theta$$

where the area vector is given by

$$\vec{\mathbf{A}} = \hat{\mathbf{n}}A$$

and for a curved area, we integrate

$$\Phi_E = \oint \tilde{\mathbf{E}} \cdot d\tilde{\mathbf{A}}$$

