

Electricity

The Nature of Electricity

Electricity is a little different from the other sources of energy that we talk about. Unlike coal, petroleum, or solar energy, electricity is a **secondary source of energy**. That means we must use other primary sources of energy, such as coal or wind, to make electricity. It also means we can't classify electricity as a **renewable** or **nonrenewable** form of energy. The energy source we use to make electricity may be renewable or nonrenewable, but the electricity is neither.

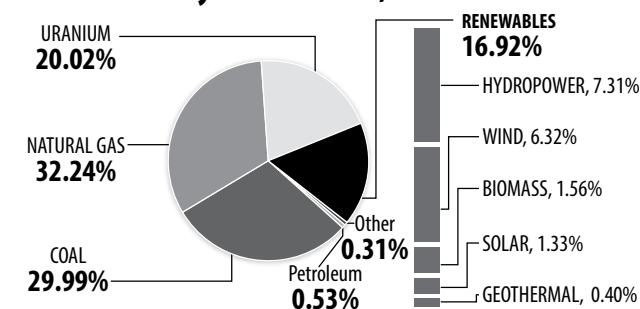
Making Electricity

Almost all electricity made in the United States is generated by large, central power plants. There are about 8,652 power plants in the U.S. Most power plants use coal, nuclear fission, natural gas, or other energy sources to superheat water into steam in a boiler. The very high pressure of the steam (it's 75 to 100 times normal atmospheric pressure) turns the blades of a turbine. (A **turbine** turns the linear motion of the steam into circular motion.) The blades are connected to a **generator**, which houses a large **magnet** surrounded by coiled copper wire. The blades spin the magnet rapidly, rotating the magnet inside the coil producing an **electric current**.

The steam, which is still very hot but now at normal pressure, is piped to a condenser, where it is cooled into water by passing it through pipes circulating over a large body of water or cooling tower. The water then returns to the boiler to be used again. Power plants can capture some of the heat from the cooling steam. In old plants, the heat was simply wasted.

Not all power plants use thermal energy to generate electricity. Hydropower plants and wind farms use motion energy to turn turbines, turning a generator, which produces electricity. Photovoltaic plants use radiant energy to generate electricity directly.

U.S. Electricity Production, 2017



Electricity at a Glance, 2017

Secondary Source of Energy, Energy Carrier

Major Energy Sources Used to Generate Electricity:

- natural gas, coal, uranium, hydropower

U.S. Energy Consumption:

- 38.08%

Net U.S. Electricity Generation:

- 4,021,175 billion kWh

Major Uses of Electricity:

- manufacturing, heating, cooling, lighting

Data: Energy Information Administration

Moving Electricity

We are using more and more electricity every year. One reason that electricity is used by so many consumers is that it's easy to move from one place to another. Electricity can be produced at a power plant and moved long distances before it is used. Let's follow the path of electricity from a power plant to a light bulb in your home.

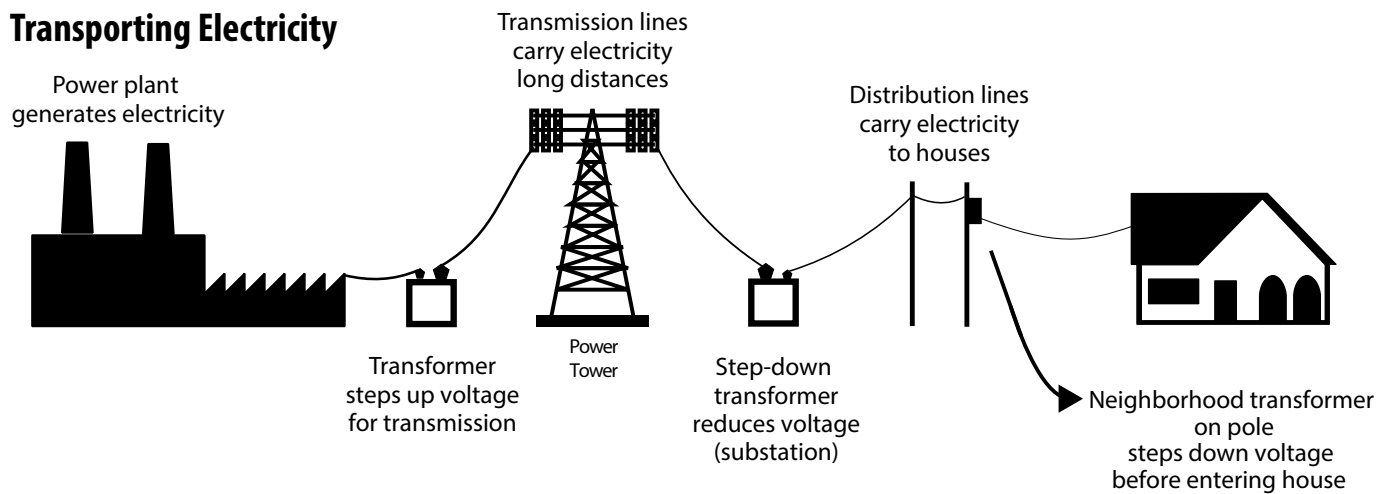
First, the electricity is generated at the power plant. Next, it goes by wire to a **transformer** that "steps up" the voltage. A transformer steps up the voltage of electricity from the 2,300 to 22,000 volts produced by a generator to as much as 765,000 volts (345,000 volts is typical). Power companies step up the voltage because less electricity is lost along the lines when the voltage is high.

The electricity is then sent on a nationwide network of **transmission lines** made of aluminum. Transmission lines are the huge tower lines you may see when you're on a highway connected by tall power towers. The lines are interconnected, so should one line fail, another will take over the load.

Step-down transformers located at substations along the lines reduce the voltage to 12,000 volts. Substations are small buildings in fenced-in areas that contain the switches, transformers, and other electrical equipment. Electricity is then carried over distribution lines that bring electricity to your home. Distribution lines may either be overhead or underground. The overhead distribution lines are the electric lines that you see along streets.

Before electricity enters your house, the voltage is reduced again at another transformer, usually a large gray can mounted on an electric pole. This neighborhood transformer reduces the electricity to 240 and 120 volts, the amount needed to run the appliances in your home.

Transporting Electricity



Electricity enters your house through a three-wire cable. The “live wires” are then brought from the circuit breaker or fuse box to power outlets and wall switches in your home. An electric meter measures how much electricity you use so the utility company can bill you. The time it takes for electricity to travel through these steps—from power plant to the light bulb in your home—is a tiny fraction of one second.

Power to the People

Everyone knows how important electricity is to our lives. All it takes is a power failure to remind us how much we depend on it. Life would be very different without electricity—no more instant light from flicking a switch, no more television, no more refrigerators, or stereos, or video games, or hundreds of other conveniences we take for granted. We depend on it, business depends on it, and industry depends on it. You could almost say the American economy runs on electricity.

It is the responsibility of electric utility companies to make sure electricity is there when we need it. They must consider reliability, capacity, baseload, peak demand, and power pools.

Reliability is the capability of a utility company to provide electricity to its customers 100 percent of the time. A reliable electric service is without blackouts or brownouts. To ensure uninterrupted service, laws require most utility companies to have 15 to 20 percent more capacity than they need to meet peak demand. This means a utility company whose peak demand is 12,000 megawatts (MW) must have 14,000 MW of installed electrical capacity. This ensures that there will be enough electricity to meet demand even if equipment were to break down on a hot summer afternoon.

Capacity is the total quantity of electricity a utility company has on-line and ready to deliver when people need it. A large utility company may operate several power plants to generate electricity for its customers. A utility company that has seven 1,000 MW plants, eight 500 MW plants, and 30 100 MW plants has a total capacity of 14,000 MW.

Baseload power is the electricity generated by utility companies around-the-clock, using the most inexpensive energy sources—usually coal, nuclear, and hydropower. Baseload power stations usually run at full or near capacity.

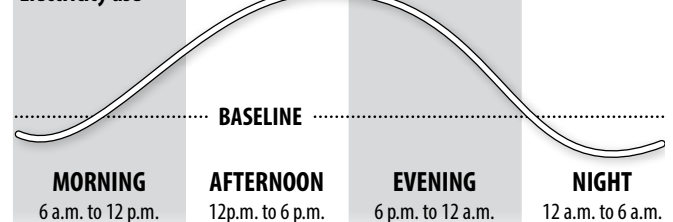
When many people want electricity at the same time, there is a **peak demand**. Power companies must be ready for peak demands so there is enough power for everyone. During the day’s peak, between 12:00 noon and 6:00 p.m., additional generators must be used to meet the demand. These peaking generators run on natural gas, diesel, or hydropower and can be put into operation in minutes because they require little start-up time. The more this equipment is used, the higher our utility bills. By managing the use of electricity during peak hours, we can help keep costs down.

The use of **power pools** is another way electric companies make their systems more reliable. Power pools link electric utilities together so they can share power as it is needed. A power failure in one system can be covered by a neighboring power company until the problem is corrected. There are eight regional power pool networks in North America. The key is to share power rather than lose it.

The reliability of U.S. electric service is excellent, usually better than 98 percent. In some countries, electric power may go out several times a day for several minutes or several hours at a time. Power outages in the United States are usually caused by such random occurrences as lightning, a tree limb falling on electric wires, or a fallen utility pole.

Peak Demand

Electricity use



Peak demand, also called peak load, is the maximum load during a specified period of time.

Demand-Side Management

Demand-side management is all the things a utility company does to affect how much people use electricity and when. It's one way electric companies manage peak load periods. Through energy efficiency and load management, electric utilities can save over 1,000 billion kilowatt-hours annually.

We can reduce the quantity of electricity we use by using better conservation measures and by using more efficient electrical appliances and equipment.

What's the difference between **conservation** and **efficiency**? Conserving electricity is turning off the hot water in the shower while you shampoo your hair. Using electricity more efficiently is installing a better showerhead to decrease water flow.

Demand-side management can also affect the timing of electrical demand. Some utility companies give rebates to customers who allow the utility company to turn off their hot water heaters or set their thermostats (via radio transmitters) during extreme peak demand periods, which occur perhaps 12 times a year.

America's Electric Grid

When you walk into a room and flip the switch on the wall, the lights come right on, just as you expected. But did you ever think how the electricity got to your house to give you the power for those lights and the many electrical appliances and products you use at home, ranging from your DVD player to your refrigerator?

Today there are more than 3,300 electric distribution utilities all over America that produce and distribute electricity to homes, businesses, and other energy users.

To get electricity to its users, there are more than 450,000 miles of high-voltage electric transmission lines across the U.S. and 2.5 million miles of feeder lines. They take the electricity produced at power plants to transformers that step up the voltage to reduce energy loss while it travels along the grid to where it is going to be used.

These transmission and distribution lines—whether they are located on poles above ground or buried underground—make up the most visible part of what is called the electric **grid**. The grid consists of the power generators, the power lines that transmit electricity to your home, the needed components that make it all work, your family, and the other homes and businesses in your community that use electricity.

TRANSMISSION LINES



Generating Electricity

Three basic types of **power plants** generate most of the electricity in the United States—fossil fuel, nuclear, and hydropower. There are also wind, geothermal, waste-to-energy, and solar power plants, but together they generate about 8.35 percent of the electricity produced in the United States.

Fossil Fuel Power Plants: Fossil fuel plants burn coal, natural gas, or petroleum. These plants use the chemical energy in fossil fuels to superheat water into steam, which drives a **steam generator**. Fossil fuel plants are sometimes called thermal power plants because they use heat to generate electricity. Coal and natural gas are the fossil fuels of choice for most electric companies, producing 29.99 percent and 32.24 percent of total U.S. electricity respectively. Petroleum produces 0.53 percent of the electricity in the U.S.

Nuclear Power Plants: Nuclear plants generate electricity much as fossil fuel plants do, except that the furnace is a **reactor** and the fuel is uranium. In a nuclear plant, a reactor splits uranium atoms into smaller elements, producing a great amount of heat in the process. The heat is used to superheat water into high-pressure steam, which drives a turbine generator. Like fossil fuel plants, nuclear power plants are thermal plants because they use heat to generate electricity. Nuclear energy produces 20.02 percent of the electricity in the U.S.

Hydropower Plants: Hydropower plants use the gravitational force of falling water to generate electricity. Hydropower is the cheapest way to produce electricity in this country, but there are few places where new dams can be built economically. There are many existing dams that could be retrofitted with turbines and generators. Hydropower is called a renewable energy source because it is renewed continuously during the natural water cycle. Hydropower produces five to ten percent of the electricity in the U.S., depending upon the amount of precipitation. In 2017, hydropower generated 7.31 percent of U.S. electricity.

The Continental U.S. Electric Grid



The process starts at the power plant that serves your community, and ends with wires running from the distribution lines into your home. Outside your home is a meter with a digital read-out or an analog series of dials that measure the flow of energy to determine how much electricity you are using. Of course, there are many more parts to this process, ranging from substations and wires for different phases of current, to safety devices and redundant lines along the grid to ensure that power is available at all times. You can see why the U.S. National Academy of Engineering has called America's electric grid "the greatest engineering achievement of the 20th century."

While this basic system of electricity transmission has worked well since the late 1880s, the increase in electric use in recent years has put a strain on the country's electric grid. The grid we use today was designed and put into place in the 1950s and 1960s, with much of the equipment planned to handle far smaller electrical use. More than 50 years later, a great deal of the equipment is reaching the end of its lifespan. At the same time, our electricity use has increased tremendously, putting a huge load on the system. Just look around your home at the TVs, DVRs, DVD players, computers, gaming consoles, lamps, air conditioners, and all the other appliances found in the typical home today, and you'll see a tremendous demand for electricity far above the basic lights and products used in homes back when today's system was set up.

The surge in demand for electricity has far exceeded the creation of new transmission facilities and equipment over the years. Compounding the problem is the fact that about two-thirds of the electricity produced in our power plants never reaches potential users because of losses in energy conversion and transmission. Because of the complexity and importance of the country's electric grid, many new governmental regulations increase the time needed to plan and install additional equipment to meet today's demands.

In the past few years, many parts of the country have experienced brief "brown outs" or longer periods of power outages, increasing public concern about the future of the system we use today. Think about this: right now, our electric grid is actually 98 percent reliable, meaning the power is usually there when we want it. But that very tiny percentage of time when the grid isn't working at its full capability can cost consumers billions to even hundreds of billions of dollars each year, depending on the type of outage. Outages can be due to weather, stoppages in automated equipment, computers that crash, and even the brief interruptions in the flow of energy and information in today's digital world that affect our work and our leisure activities.

For many years, America's electric grid has been a shining example of our technology and ability, and a major part of the country's prosperity, comfort, and security. To meet the country's growing electricity needs today and in the future, changes need to be made to the grid and the equipment it uses.

Economics of Electricity

How much does electricity cost? The answer depends on the cost to generate the power (50 percent), the cost of transmission (13 percent), and local distribution (28 percent). The average cost of electricity is about 12.9 cents per kWh (12.89¢) for residential customers, almost eleven cents (10.66¢) for commercial customers, and a little less than seven cents (6.88¢) for industrial customers. A major key to cost is the fuel used to generate the power. Electricity produced from natural gas, for example, costs more than electricity produced from uranium or hydropower. Location plays a part in electricity costs. Hawaii and Connecticut residents can pay as much as 29 cents and 20 cents per kWh, respectively, while residents of Washington State pay only 9.7 cents per kWh.

Another consideration is how much it costs to build a power plant. A plant may be very expensive to construct, but the cost of the fuel can make it competitive to other plants, or vice versa. Nuclear power plants, for example, are very expensive to build, but their fuel—uranium—is very cheap. Coal-fired plants, on the other hand, are much less expensive to build than nuclear plants, but their fuel—coal—is more expensive.

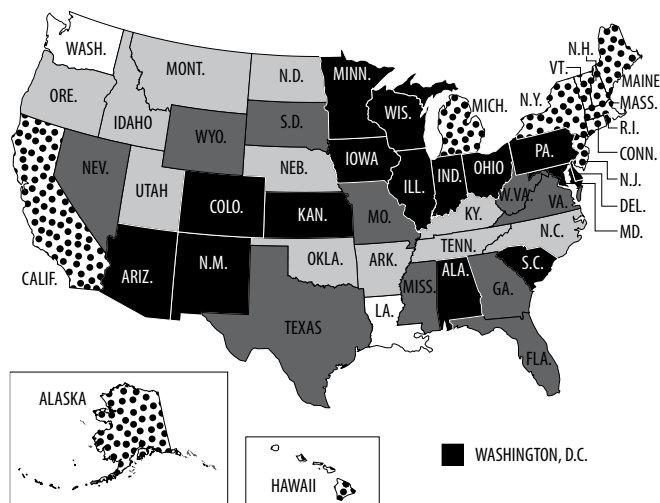
When calculating costs, a plant's efficiency must also be considered. In theory, a 100 percent energy efficient machine would change all the energy put into the machine into useful work, not wasting a single unit of energy. But converting a primary energy source into electricity involves a loss of usable energy, usually in the form of thermal energy. In general, it takes three units of fuel to produce one unit of electricity from a thermal power plant.

In 1900, most power plants were only four percent efficient. That means they wasted 96 percent of the fuel used to generate electricity. Today's thermal power plants are over eight times more efficient with efficiency ratings around 35 percent. Still, this means 65 percent of the initial thermal energy used to make electricity is lost. You can see this waste heat in the clouds of steam pouring out of giant cooling towers on newer power plants. A modern coal plant burns about 4,500 tons of coal each day, and about two-thirds of the energy in this is lost when the chemical energy in coal is converted into thermal energy, then into electrical energy. A hydropower plant, on the other hand, is about 90 percent efficient at converting the kinetic energy of moving water into electricity.

Average Residential Price for Electricity, 2017

PRICE PER KILOWATT-HOUR

< 10¢ / kWh 11 to 12¢ / kWh
 10 to 11¢ / kWh 12 to 15¢ / kWh > 15.00¢ / kWh



Data: Energy Information Administration

But that's not all. Between three and eight percent of the electricity generated at a power plant must be used to run equipment. And then, even after the electricity is sent over electrical lines, another seven percent of the electrical energy is lost in transmission. Of course, consumers pay for all the electricity generated, lost or not.

The cost of electricity is affected by what time of day it is used. During a hot summer afternoon from noon to 6 p.m., there is a peak of usage when air-conditioners are working harder to keep buildings cool. Electric companies charge their industrial and commercial customers more for electricity during these peak load periods because they must turn to more expensive ways to generate power.

Deregulation and Competition

Beginning in the 1930s, most electric utilities in the U.S. operated under state and federal regulations in a defined geographical area. Only one utility provided service to any one area. Consumers could not choose their electricity provider. In return, the utilities had to provide service to every consumer, regardless of profitability.

Under this model, utilities generated the power, transmitted it to the point of use, metered it, billed the customer, and provided information on efficiency and safety. The price was regulated by the state.

As a result, the price of a kilowatt-hour of electricity to residential customers varied widely among the states and utilities, from a high of 16 cents to a low of four cents. The price for large industrial users varied, too. The types of generating plants, the cost of fuel, taxes, and environmental regulations were some of the factors contributing to

the price variations.

In the 1970s, the energy business changed dramatically in the aftermath of the Arab **oil embargos**, the advent of nuclear power, and stricter environmental regulations. Independent power producers and **cogenerators** began making a major impact on the industry. Large consumers began demanding more choice in providers.

In 1992, Congress passed the Energy Policy Act to encourage the development of a competitive electric market with open access to transmission facilities. It also reduced the requirements for new non-utility generators and independent power producers.

The **Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC)** began changing rules to encourage competition at the wholesale level. Utilities and private producers could, for the first time, market electricity across state lines to other utilities.

Some state regulators are encouraging broker systems to provide a clearinghouse for low-cost electricity from under-utilized facilities. This power is sold to other utilities that need it, resulting in lower costs to both the buyer and seller. This wholesale marketing has already brought prices down in some areas.

Many states now have competition in the electric power industry. This competition can take many forms, including allowing large consumers to choose their provider and allowing smaller consumers to join together to buy power.

Measuring Electricity

Power is the rate (time) of doing work. A **watt** is a measure of the electric power an electrical device uses. Most electrical devices require a certain number of watts to work correctly. Light bulbs, for example, are rated by watts (13, 32, 60, 75, 100 watts), as are appliances, such as a 1500-watt hairdryer.

A **kilowatt** is 1,000 watts. A **kilowatt-hour** is the amount of electricity used in one hour at a rate of 1,000 watts. Visualize adding water to a pool. In this analogy, a kilowatt is the rate at which water is added to the pool; a kilowatt-hour is the amount of water added to the pool in a period of time.

Just as we buy gasoline in gallons or wood in cords, we buy electricity in kilowatt-hours. Utility companies charge us for the kilowatt-hours we use during a month. If an average family of four uses 867 kilowatt-hours in one month, and the utility company charges 12.9 cents per kilowatt-hour, the family will receive a bill for \$111.84 ($867 \times \$0.129 = \111.84).

Electric utilities use **megawatts** and **gigawatts** to measure large amounts of electricity. Power plant capacity is usually measured in megawatts. One megawatt is equal to one million watts or one thousand kilowatts.

Gigawatts are often used to measure the electricity produced in an entire state or in the United States. One gigawatt is equal to one billion watts, one million kilowatts, or one thousand megawatts.

Efficiency of a Thermal Power Plant

PER KILOWATT-HOUR

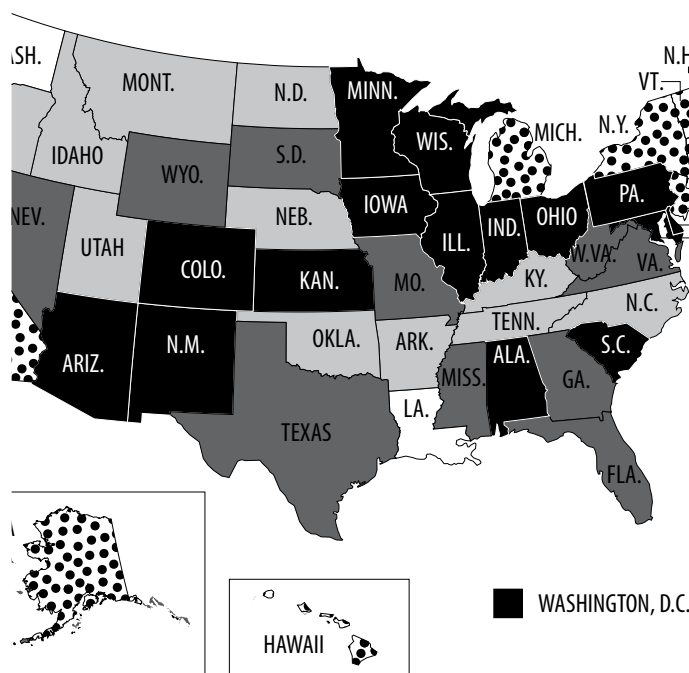
10¢ / kWh

11 to 12¢ / kWh

to 11¢ / kWh

12 to 15¢ / kWh

> 15.00¢ / kWh



Energy Information Administration

In some states, individual consumers have the option of choosing their electric utility, much like people can choose their telephone carrier or internet service provider. Their local utility would distribute the power to the consumer and maintain the infrastructure.

This competition created new markets and new companies when a utility would separate its operation, transmission, and retail operations into different companies.

Future Demand

Home computers, microwave ovens, and video games have invaded our homes and they are demanding electricity! Electronic devices are part of the reason why Americans use more electricity every year.

The U. S. Department of Energy predicts the nation will need to increase its current generating capacity of over 1 million megawatts by one-fifth in the next 20 years. Demand for electricity is projected to increase in the future despite technological energy efficiency improvements in electric devices and appliances.

Some parts of the nation, especially California, have begun experiencing power shortages. Utilities can resort to rolling blackouts—planned power outages to one neighborhood or area at a time—because of the limited power. Utilities often warn that there will be increasing outages nationwide during the summer months even if consumers implement energy conservation techniques. However, well planned and managed energy efficiency and conservation programs can help avoid these electricity shortages.

Conserving electricity and using it more efficiently will help, but everyone agrees we need more power plants now. That's where the challenge begins. Should we use coal, natural gas, or nuclear power to generate electricity? Can we produce more electricity from renewable energy sources such as wind or solar? And where should we build new power plants? No one wants a power plant in his backyard, but everyone wants the benefits of electricity.

Right now, most new power generation comes from natural gas, wind, and solar. Natural gas is a relatively clean fuel and is abundant in the United States. Natural gas combined-cycle turbines use the waste heat they generate to turn a second turbine. Using this waste heat increases efficiency to 50 or 60 percent, instead of the 35 percent efficiency of conventional power plants.

Smart Grids

Another way to meet future demand is to update the electric grid and create a smart grid. The existing electric grid has worked well for many years, but developing a new, more efficient grid will help meet growing electricity demand. Updating the current grid and transmission lines would not only improve current operations, but would also open new markets for electricity generated by renewable energy sources.

Independent Power Producers

The business of generating electricity once was handled solely by electric utility companies, but today many others are generating—and selling—electricity. Independent power producers, sometimes called private power producers or non-utility generators, generate electricity using many different energy sources.

Independent power producers (IPPs) came on strong after the oil crisis of the 1970s. At that time, Congress wanted to encourage greater efficiency in energy use and the development of new forms of energy. In 1978, Congress passed the Public Utility Regulatory Policies Act or PURPA. This law changed the relationship between electric utilities and smaller IPPs. Under the law, a public utility company cannot ignore a nearby IPP. A utility must purchase power from an IPP if the utility has a need for the electricity, and if the IPP can make electricity for less than what it would cost the utility to make it.

The relationship between IPPs and utilities varies from state to state. Some utilities welcome the IPPs because they help them meet the growing demand for electricity in their areas without having to build new, expensive power plants. Other utilities worry that power from IPPs will make their systems less reliable and increase their costs. They fear that this may cause industries to think twice before locating to their areas.

For different reasons, some environmentalists also worry that IPPs may not be subject to the same pollution control laws as public utilities. In reality, the opposite is true. Because they are generally the newest plants, IPPs are subject to the most stringent environmental controls. In any case, most experts predict that IPPs will produce more and more electricity. Today, IPPs generate 39.87 percent of the nation's electricity.

A special independent power producer is a **cogenerator** (combined heat and power, CHP)—a plant that produces electricity and uses the waste heat to manufacture products. Industrial plants, paper mills, and fast-food chains can all be cogenerators. These types of plants are not new. Thomas Edison's plant was a cogenerator. Plants generate their own electricity to save money and ensure they have a reliable source of energy that they can control. Now, some cogenerators are selling the electricity they do not use to utilities. The electric utilities supply that energy to their customers. So, even though your family's electric bill comes from a utility company, your electricity may have been made by a local factory. Today, about 3.5 percent of the electricity produced in the U.S. is cogenerated.

The smart grid system will include two-way interaction between the utility company and consumers. During peak demand when power generation is reaching its limit, the utility company can contact consumers to alert them of the need to reduce energy until the demand decreases. The smart grid would alert the power producer to an outage or power interruption long before the homeowner has to call the producer to let them know the power is out.

Developing the smart grid would offer a variety of technologies that will help consumers lower their power usage during peak periods, allow power producers to expand their use of photovoltaics, wind, and other renewable energy technologies, provide system back-up to eliminate power outages during peak times, and save money while reducing carbon dioxide emissions.

Research and Development

Electricity research didn't end with Edison and Westinghouse. Scientists are still studying ways to make electricity work better. The dream is to come up with ways to use electricity more efficiently and generate an endless supply of electricity. One promising technology is superconductivity.

Superconductivity was discovered in the laboratory about 100 years ago, long before there was any adequate theory to explain it. Superconductivity is the loss of virtually all resistance to the passage of electricity through some materials. Scientists found that as some conducting materials are cooled, the frictional forces that cause resistance to electric flow suddenly drop to almost nothing at a particular temperature. In other words, electricity remains flowing without noticeable energy loss even after the voltage is removed.

Until just a few years ago, scientists thought that superconductivity was only possible at temperatures below -419°F. That temperature could only be maintained by using costly liquid helium. But new ceramic-like materials are superconducting at temperatures as high as -211°F. These new materials can maintain their superconducting state using liquid nitrogen. The economics of superconductivity is becoming practical. As helium reserves continue to diminish, costs of helium continue to rise. Its many high-tech uses will need to find substitutes. For superconductivity, liquid nitrogen may be a better bet than helium. 100 cubic feet of liquid nitrogen could cost researchers or companies 30 cents to \$2.00 per 100 cubic feet, whereas helium could cost 8 cents to \$1.50 per cubic foot.

Some obstacles remain in the way of incorporating this new technology into commercial products, however. First, researchers have conducted most experiments using only very small samples of the new ceramic materials, which tend to be very brittle and difficult to shape. Second, researchers are still not sure the ceramic materials can carry large electric currents without losing their superconductivity. Still, the development of the new superconductors has the potential to dramatically change, perhaps even revolutionize, the electronics, electric power, and transportation industries.

Energy Storage

Scientists have recently been working hard to develop a wide range of energy storage methods and technologies that can change electricity into something else that can be stored temporarily. Electric power producers use these energy storage technologies to quickly supply energy when it is needed, and to consume energy when there is a surplus – helping to balance supply and demand instantaneously. Energy storage is continually at work, improving the way electricity is generated, delivered, and consumed in America, making our electricity grid more reliable and efficient. Ultimately, energy storage helps power producers save money, which results in consumers saving money, too. Energy storage systems work with both nonrenewable and renewable sources of energy. Some examples of energy storage in use in small or large-scale include: pumped storage, batteries, capacitors, flywheels, thermal storage, and compressed air. While some of these technologies have been used for many years, others are emerging. Scientists continue to experiment and develop new storage methods that can help consumers on a smaller scale, and utilities on the largest of scales.

Monitoring Electricity Use

Homes and apartment buildings are equipped with meters so that utilities can determine how much electricity and natural gas each residence consumes. Most homes, apartment buildings, and commercial buildings in the U.S. have digital electric meters. However, some places may still have analog meters. These meters contain an aluminum disk. As electricity enters the house it passes through a pair of loops that creates a magnetic field. This creates an eddy current in the disk and causes the disk to rotate. The speed the disk rotates is proportional to the amount of power being consumed. As the disk spins, hands on dials move to record how much electricity has been consumed. Regardless of the type of meter, once a month the utility reads the meter and charges the customer for their electricity usage.

With once a month meter readings it is difficult for the consumer to monitor their electricity usage. Consumers can adjust their electricity usage after they receive their bills, but it's too late to change their behaviors to affect their current bill. When electricity is generated it has to be used. If it is not used, that electricity is lost. Monitoring electricity usage once a month doesn't help the utilities either. In order to better gauge how much electricity is needed at a given time, engineers have designed new meters that more accurately measure energy usage. This technology will allow utilities to generate enough electricity to meet their customers' needs. In the future it will also allow utilities to more effectively employ renewable energy resources. These meters are called **smart meters**.

Smart meters measure electricity usage much like the analog or digital meters. What makes these meters "smart" is the addition of two-way wireless communication between the meter and the utility. Rather than sending a meter reader to read meters once a month, the smart meter sends data to the utility every hour. Consumers can log on to secure websites to monitor their energy usage on an hourly basis as well. Seeing near real-time data allows consumers to make changes to their energy usage, which will have a direct impact on their energy bill. Many utilities implementing smart meters offer services that will e-mail or text consumers when their electricity usage is nearing a price bracket, allowing consumers to adjust their electricity usage accordingly.

Smart meters allow customers to more closely monitor their energy usage and make changes to conserve energy. In 2017, more than 51 percent of all U.S. electric customers had smart meters.

Starting with Ben

Many people think Benjamin Franklin discovered electricity with his famous kite-flying experiments in 1752. Franklin is famous for tying a key to a kite string during a thunderstorm, proving that static electricity and lightning were indeed, the same thing. However, that isn't the whole story of electricity. Electricity was not "discovered" all at once.

Electricity is an action—not really a thing—so different forms of electricity had been known in nature for a long time. Lightning and static electricity were two forms.

In the early years, electricity became associated with light. After all, electricity lights up the sky during a thunderstorm. Likewise, static electricity creates tiny, fiery sparks. People wanted a cheap and safe way to light their homes, and scientists thought electricity could do it.

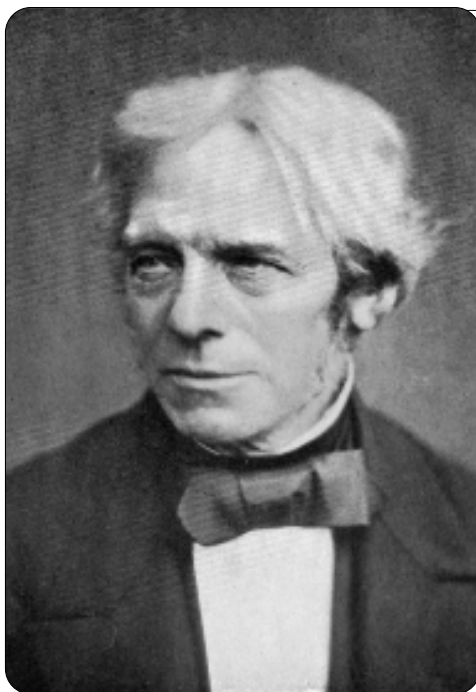
A Different Kind of Power: The Battery

The road to developing a practical use of electricity was a long one. Until 1800, there was no dependable source of electricity for experiments. It was in this year that an Italian scientist named Alessandro Volta soaked some paper in salt water, placed zinc and copper on alternate sides of the paper, and watched the chemical reaction produce an electric current. Volta had created the first electric cell.

By connecting many of these cells together, Volta was able to "string a current" and create a **battery**. (It is in honor of Volta that we rate batteries in **volts**.) Finally, a safe and dependable source of electricity was available, making it easy for scientists to study electricity. The electric age was just around the corner!

A Current Began

English scientist Michael Faraday was the first to realize that an electric current could be produced by passing a magnet through copper wiring. Both the electric generator and the electric motor are based on this principle. A generator converts motion energy into electricity. A motor converts electrical energy into motion.



Michael Faraday

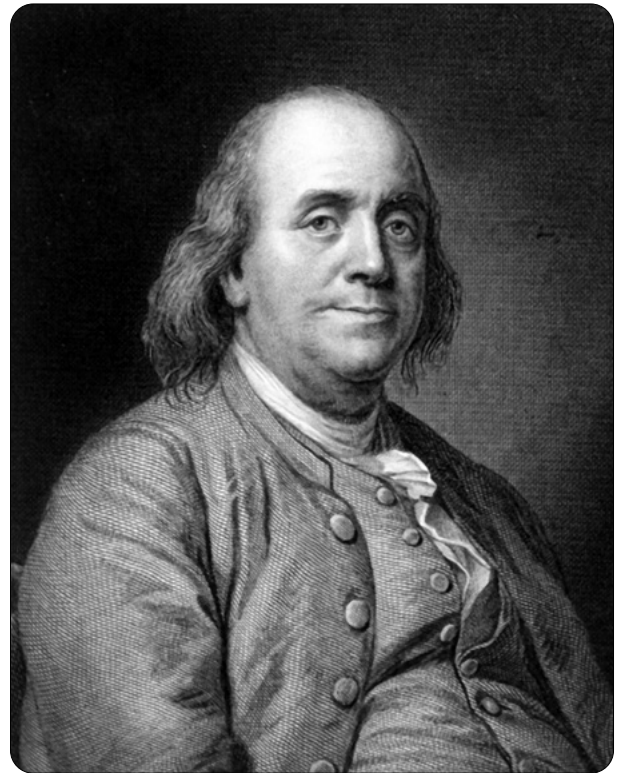


Image courtesy of NOAA Photo Library
Benjamin Franklin

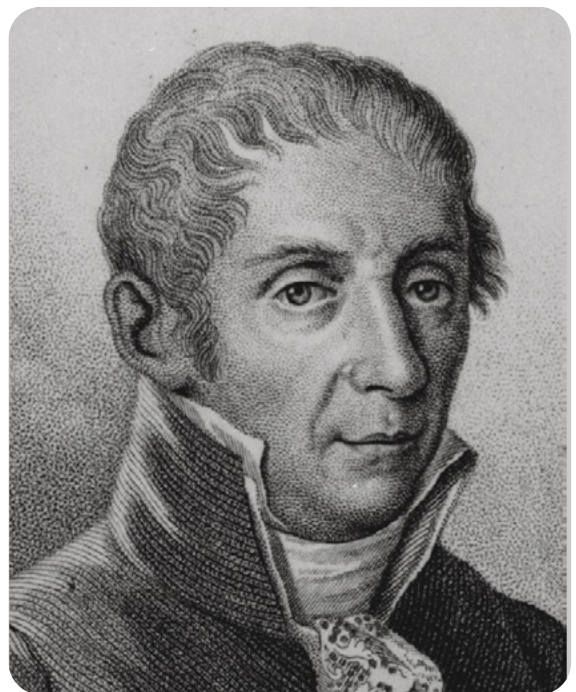


Image courtesy of Teylers Museum
Alessandro Volta

Mr. Edison and His Light

In 1879, Thomas Edison focused on inventing a practical light bulb, one that would last a long time before burning out. The challenge was finding a strong material to be used as the **filament**, the small wire inside the bulb that conducts the electricity.

Finally, Edison used ordinary cotton thread that had been soaked in carbon. The filament did not burn—instead, it became **incandescent**; that is, it glowed. These new lights were battery-powered, though, and expensive.

The next obstacle was developing an electrical system that could provide people with a practical, inexpensive source of energy. Edison went about looking for ways to make electricity both practical and inexpensive. He engineered the first electric power plant that was able to carry electricity to people's homes.

Edison's Pearl Street Power Station started up its generator on September 4, 1882, in New York City. About 85 customers in lower Manhattan received enough power to light 5,000 lamps. His customers paid a lot for their electricity. In today's dollars, the electricity cost \$5 per kilowatt-hour! Today's electricity costs about 12.9 cents per kilowatt-hour.

The Question: AC or DC?

The turning point of the electric age came a few years later with the development of **AC (alternating current)** power systems. Croatian-born scientist, Nikola Tesla came to the United States to work with Thomas Edison. After a falling out, Tesla discovered the rotating magnetic field and created the alternating current electrical system that is used very widely today. Tesla teamed up with engineer and business man George Westinghouse to patent the AC system and provide the nation with power that could travel long distances – a direct competition with Thomas Edison's DC system. Tesla later went on to form the Tesla Electric Company, invent the Tesla Coil, which is still used in science labs and in radio technology today, and design the system used to generate electricity at Niagara Falls.

Now using AC, power plants could transport electricity much farther than before. While Edison's **DC (direct current)** plant could only transport electricity within one square mile of his Pearl Street Power Station, the Niagara Falls plant was able to transport electricity over 200 miles!

Electricity didn't have an easy beginning. While many people were thrilled with all the new inventions, some people were afraid of electricity and wary of bringing it into their homes. They were afraid to let their children near this strange new power source. Many social critics of the day saw electricity as an end to a simpler, less hectic way of life. Poets commented that electric lights were less romantic than gaslights. Perhaps they were right, but the new electric age could not be dimmed.

In 1920, about two percent of U.S. energy was used to make electricity. In 2017, with the increasing use of technologies powered by electricity, it was 38 percent.

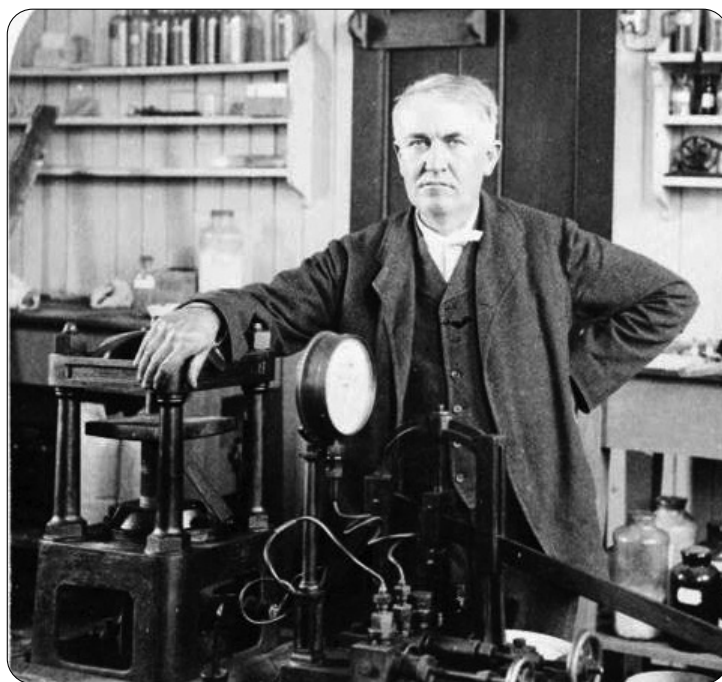


Image courtesy of U.S. Library of Congress

Thomas Edison in his lab in 1901.

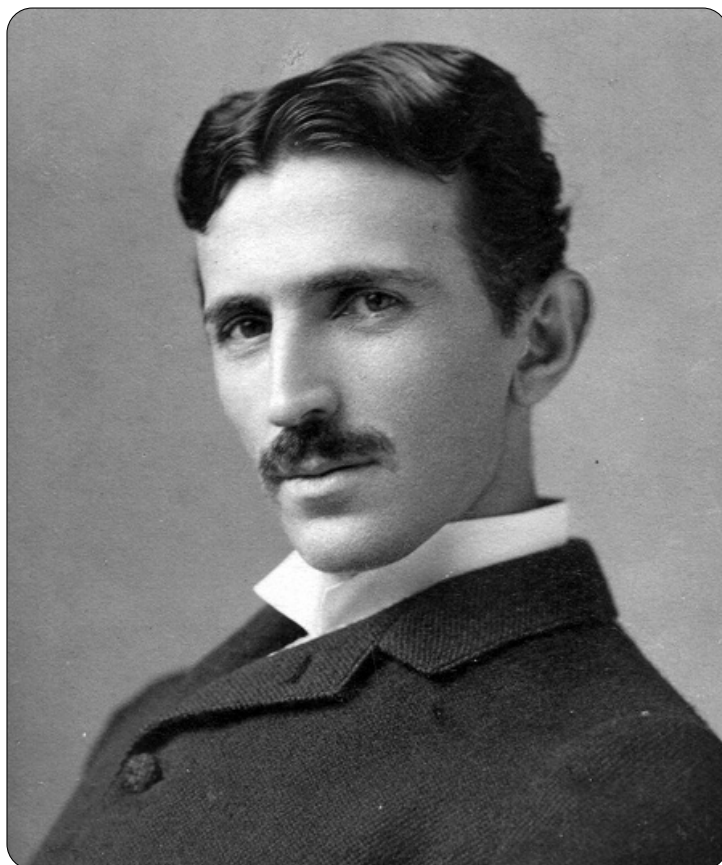


Photo by Napoleon Sarony

Nikola Tesla

Measuring Electricity

Electricity makes our lives easier, but it can seem like a mysterious force. Measuring electricity is confusing because we cannot see it. We are familiar with terms such as watt, volt, and amp, but we do not have a clear understanding of these terms. We buy a 100-watt light bulb, a tool that requires 120 volts, or an appliance that uses 8.8 amps, but we don't think about what those units mean.

Using the flow of water as an analogy can make electricity easier to understand. The flow of electrons in a **circuit** is similar to water flowing through a hose. If you could look into a hose at a given point, you would see a certain amount of water passing that point each second. The amount of water depends on how much pressure is being applied—how hard the water is being pushed. It also depends on the diameter of the hose. The harder the pressure and the larger the diameter of the hose, the more water passes each second. The flow of electrons through a wire depends on the electrical pressure pushing the electrons and on the cross-sectional area of the wire.

Voltage

The pressure that pushes electrons in a circuit is called voltage. Using the water analogy, if a tank of water were suspended one meter above the ground with a 1-centimeter pipe coming out of the bottom, the water pressure would be similar to the force of a shower. If the same water tank were suspended 10 meters above the ground, the force of the water would be much greater, possibly enough to hurt you.

Voltage (V) is a measure of the pressure applied to electrons to make them move. It is a measure of the strength of the current in a circuit and is measured in **volts (V)**. Just as the 10-meter tank applies greater pressure than the 1-meter tank, a 10-volt power supply (such as a battery) would apply greater pressure than a 1-volt power supply.

AA batteries are 1.5 volts; they apply a small amount of voltage for lighting small flashlight bulbs. A car usually has a 12-volt battery—it applies more voltage to push current through circuits to operate the radio or defroster. The standard voltage of wall outlets is 120 volts—a dangerous voltage. An electric clothes dryer is usually wired at 240 volts—a very dangerous voltage.

Current

The flow of electrons can be compared to the flow of water. The water current is the number of molecules of water flowing past a fixed point; electric current is the number of electrons flowing past a fixed point.

Electric current (I) is defined as electrons flowing between two points having a difference in voltage. Current is measured in **amperes** or **amps (A)**. One ampere is 6.25×10^{18} electrons per second passing through a circuit.

With water, as the diameter of the pipe increases, so does the amount of water that can flow through it. With electricity, conducting wires take the place of the pipe. As the cross-sectional area of the wire increases, so does the amount of electric current (number of electrons) that can flow through it.

Resistance

Resistance (R) is a property that slows the flow of electrons. Using the water analogy, resistance is anything that slows water flow, such as a smaller pipe or fins on the inside of a pipe.

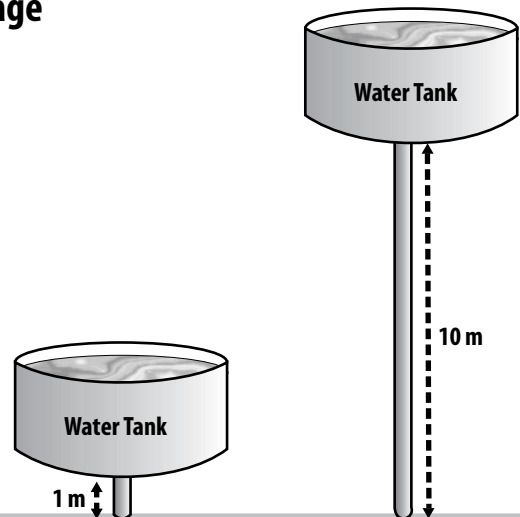
In electrical terms, the resistance of a conducting wire depends on the properties of the metal used to make the wire and the wire's diameter. Copper, aluminum, and silver—metals used in conducting wires—have different resistance.

Resistance is measured in units called **ohms (Ω)**. There are devices called resistors, with set resistances, that can be placed in circuits to reduce or control the current flow. Any device placed in a circuit to do work is called a **load**. The light bulb in a flashlight is a load. A television plugged into a wall outlet is also a load. Every load has resistance.

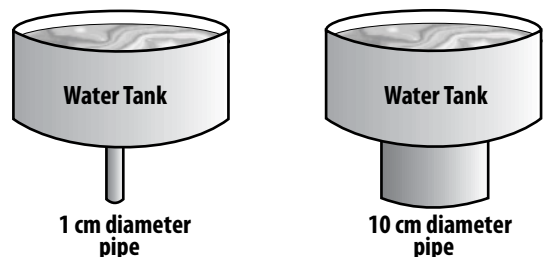
Ohm's Law

George Ohm, a German physicist, discovered that in many materials, especially metals, the current that flows through a material is proportional to the voltage. He found that if he doubled the voltage, the current also doubled. If he reduced the voltage by half, the current dropped by half. The resistance of the material remained the same.

Voltage



Current



This relationship is called **Ohm's Law** and can be described using a simple formula. If you know any two of the measurements, you can calculate the third using the following formula:

$$\text{voltage} = \text{current} \times \text{resistance}$$

$$V = I \times R \quad \text{or} \quad V = A \times \Omega$$

Electric Power

Power (P) is a measure of the rate of doing work, or the rate at which energy is converted. Electric power is the rate at which electricity is produced or consumed. Using the water analogy, electric power is the combination of the water pressure (voltage) and the rate of flow (current) that results in the ability to do work.

A large pipe carries more water (current) than a small pipe. Water at a height of 10 meters has much greater force (voltage) than at a height of one meter. The power of water flowing through a 1-centimeter pipe from a height of one meter is much less than water through a 10-centimeter pipe from 10 meters.

Electric power is defined as the amount of electric current flowing due to an applied voltage. It is the amount of electricity required to start or operate a load for one second. Electric power is measured in **watts (W)**. The formula is:

$$\text{power} = \text{voltage} \times \text{current}$$

$$P = V \times I \quad \text{or} \quad W = V \times A$$

Electrical Energy

Electrical energy introduces the concept of time to electric power. In the water analogy, it would be the amount of water falling through the pipe over a period of time, such as an hour. When we talk about using power over time, we are talking about using energy. Using our water example, we could look at how much work could be done by the water in the time that it takes for the tank to empty.

The electrical energy that an appliance or device consumes can be determined only if you know how long (time) it consumes electric power at a specific rate (power). To find the amount of energy consumed, you multiply the rate of energy consumption (measured in watts) by the amount of time (measured in hours) that it is being consumed. Electrical energy is measured in watt-hours (Wh).

$$\text{energy} = \text{power} \times \text{time}$$

$$E = P \times t \quad \text{or} \quad E = W \times h = Wh$$

Another way to think about power and energy is with an analogy to traveling. If a person travels in a car at a rate of 40 miles per hour (mph), to find the total distance traveled, you would multiply the rate of travel by the amount of time you traveled at that rate.

If a car travels for 1 hour at 40 miles per hour, it would travel 40 miles.

$$\text{distance} = 40 \text{ mph} \times 1 \text{ hour} = 40 \text{ miles}$$

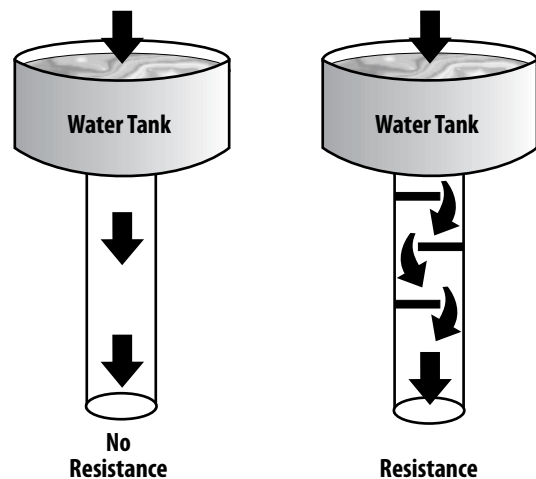
If a car travels for 3 hours at 40 miles per hour, it would travel 120 miles.

$$\text{distance} = 40 \text{ mph} \times 3 \text{ hours} = 120 \text{ miles}$$

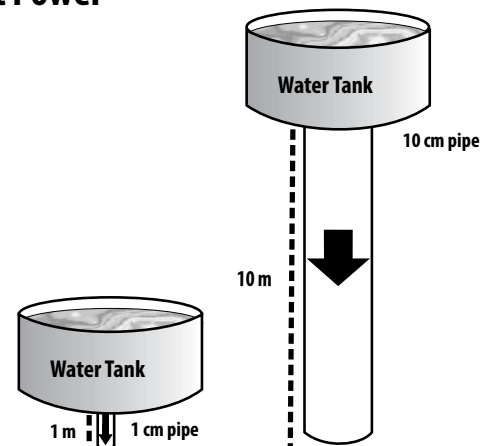
The distance traveled represents the work done by the car. When we look at power, we are talking about the rate that electrical energy is being produced or consumed. Energy is analogous to the distance traveled or the work done by the car.

A person wouldn't say he took a 40-mile per hour trip because that is the rate. The person would say he took a 40-mile trip or a 120-mile trip. We would describe the trip in terms of distance traveled, not rate traveled. The distance represents the amount of work done.

Resistance



Electric Power



The same applies with electric power. You would not say you used 100 watts of light energy to read your book, because a watt represents the rate you use energy, not the total energy used. The amount of energy used would be calculated by multiplying the rate by the amount of time you read.

If you read for five hours with a 100-W light bulb, for example, you would use the formula as follows:

$$\text{energy} = \text{power} \times \text{time} (E = P \times t)$$

$$\text{energy} = 100 \text{ W} \times 5 \text{ hour} = 500 \text{ Wh}$$

One watt-hour is a very small amount of electrical energy. Usually, we measure electric power in larger units called **kilowatt-hours (kWh)** or 1,000 watt-hours (kilo = thousand). A kilowatt-hour is the unit that utilities use when billing most customers. The average cost of a kilowatt-hour of electricity for residential customers is about \$0.129.

To calculate the cost of reading with a 100-W light bulb for five hours, you would change the watt-hours into kilowatt-hours, then multiply the kilowatt-hours used by the cost per kilowatt-hour, as shown below:

$$500 \text{ Wh} \times \frac{1 \text{ kW}}{1,000 \text{ W}} = 0.5 \text{ kWh}$$

$$0.5 \text{ kWh} \times \$0.129/\text{kWh} = \$0.065$$

Therefore, it would cost a little more than six cents to read for five hours with a 100-W light bulb.