

In the preceding two chapters, we developed a mathematical framework for describing motion along a straight line. In this chapter, we continue our study of motion by investigating inertia, a property of objects that affects their motion. The experiments we carry out in studying inertia lead us to discover one of the most fundamental laws in physics—conservation of momentum.

4.1 Friction

Picture a block of wood sitting motionless on a smooth wooden surface. If you give the block a shove, it slides some distance but eventually comes to rest. Depending on the smoothness of the block and the smoothness of the wooden surface, this stopping may happen sooner or it may happen later. If the two surfaces in contact are very smooth and slippery, the block slides for a longer time interval than if the surfaces are rough or sticky. This you know from everyday experience: A hockey puck slides easily on ice but not on a rough road.

Figure 4.1 shows how the velocity of a wooden block decreases on three different surfaces. The slowing down is due to friction—the resistance to motion that one surface or object encounters when moving over another. Notice that, during the interval covered by the velocity-versus-time graph, the velocity decreases as the block slides over ice is hardly observable. The block slides easily over ice because there is very little friction between the two surfaces. The effect of friction is to bring two objects to rest with respect to each other—in this case the wooden block and the surface it is sliding on. The less friction there is, the longer it takes for the block to come to rest.

Figure 4.1 Velocity-versus-time graph for a wooden block sliding on three different surfaces. The rougher the surface, the more quickly the velocity decreases.

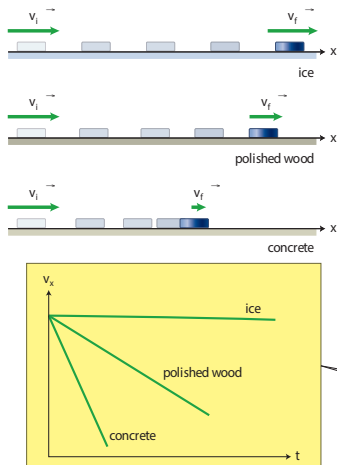


Figure 4.2 Low-friction track and carts used in the experiments described in this chapter.



You may wonder whether it is possible to make surfaces that have no friction at all, such that an object, once given a shove, continues to glide forever. There is no totally frictionless surface over which objects slide forever, but there are ways to minimize friction. You can, for instance, float an object on a cushion of air. This is most easily accomplished with a low-friction track—a track whose surface is dotted with little holes through which pressurized air blows. The air serves as a cushion on which a conveniently shaped object can float, with friction between the object and the track all but eliminated. Alternatively, one can use wheeled carts with low-friction bearings on an ordinary track. Figure 4.2 shows low-friction carts you may have encountered in your lab or class. Although there is still some friction both for low-friction tracks and for the track shown in Figure 4.2, this friction is so small that it can be ignored during an experiment. For example, if the track in Figure 4.2 is horizontal, carts move along its length without slowing down appreciably. In other words:

In the absence of friction, objects moving along a horizontal track keep moving without slowing down.

Another advantage of using such carts is that the track constrains the motion to being along a straight line. We can then use a high-speed camera to record the cart's position at various instants, and from that information determine its speed and acceleration.



4.1 (a) Are the accelerations of the motions shown in Figure 4.1 constant? (b) For which surface is the acceleration largest in magnitude?

4.2 Inertia

We can discover one of the most fundamental principles of physics by studying how the velocities of two low-friction carts change when the carts collide. Let's first see what happens with two identical carts. We call these standard carts because we'll use them as a standard against which to compare the motion of other carts. First we put one standard cart on the low-friction track and make sure it doesn't move. Next we place the second cart some distance from the first one and give the second cart a shove toward the first. The two carts collide, and the collision alters the velocities of both.

Cory: I remember, in high school, being amazed at how quickly carts could travel on these tracks - air would blow up through these tiny holes evenly distributed along the length of the track and the cart would essentially float on the air and consequently - the cart would move very quickly with the slightest push.

Alison: Although there is no way to create frictionless surfaces, I find it interesting that we consider experiments "in the absence of friction." In a way, this relates back to Chapter 1.5 where we talked about the importance of having too little or too much information in our representations. In some cases, the friction is so insignificant that we ignore it (simplifying our representation).

Beth: Does this only apply to solid surfaces? I feel as if a substance that floats on water either has negligible or very little friction.

Cory: Why is this? I don't get it.

Alison: I believe this applies to almost every surface, although I'm not sure if water would count more as resistance than friction. Anyways, the best example I could think of would be a surf board. If people who were paddling in the same direction as the waves experienced no resistance, they would continually speed up, and eventually reach very high speeds. However, in reality if they were two stop paddling they'd slow down and only the waves would slowly push them to shore.

Beth: Is it possible to have a surface, in real life, that inflicts NO friction at all?

Beth: Doesn't air resistance factor into this at all?

Alison: The key word is "appreciably". In the absence of friction, the cart does not slow down appreciably but still would a little due to air resistance.

Cory: a) yes b) concrete has the acceleration of greatest magnitude.

Beth: I would think that they are not constant because if we think of the formula $F=ma$, the force of friction is different in every case.

Alison: As a theoretical question about inertia, if an object in motion will stay in motion, but is being affected by friction, will it slow down perpetually but remain in motion, or will it eventually stop completely due to the friction? Just curious.

Beth: With friction everything slows down to a half at one point or another. It is only if an outside force acts on the object if that object will maintain motion after the effects of inertia.

Cory: Standard carts: identical carts in mass, shape, etc. I like this notion of standard carts, it provides a good baseline to compare other motion and to understand the concepts before building on it.

Cory: Great visual representation of friction! It is interesting how this compares the velocity of things on different surfaces.

Alison: The rougher the surface, the more friction between the surface and the wooden block, and thus acceleration will be greater.

Assuming these annotations are representative of these students' annotations for this assignment (and also that their annotations are distributed throughout the entire assignment and submitted on time), they would obtain the following evaluations for their body of annotations:

Meets expectations:

Alison's annotations reveal interpretation of the text and demonstrate his understanding of concepts through analogy and synthesis of multiple concepts. His responses are thoughtful explanations with substantiated claims and/or concrete examples. He also poses a profound question that goes beyond the material covered in the text. Finally, he applies understanding of graphical representation to explain the relationship between concepts.

Improvement needed:

While Beth asks possibly insightful questions, she does not elaborate on thought process. She demonstrates superficial reading, but no thoughtful reading or interpretation of the text. When responding to other students' questions, she demonstrates some thought but does not really address the question posed.

Deficient:

Cory's annotations have no real substance and do not demonstrate any thoughtful reading or interpretation of the text. His questions do not explicitly identify points of confusion. Moreover, his annotations are not backed up by any reasoning or assumptions.