Radio Physics

Training materials for wireless trainers

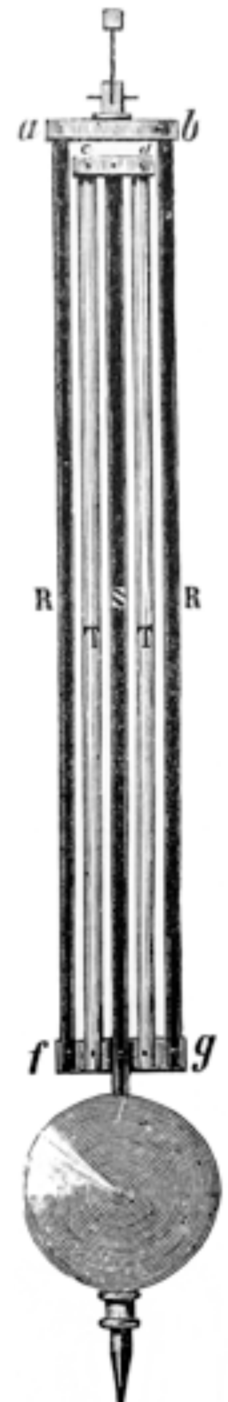
The Abdus Salam International Centre for Theoretical Physics

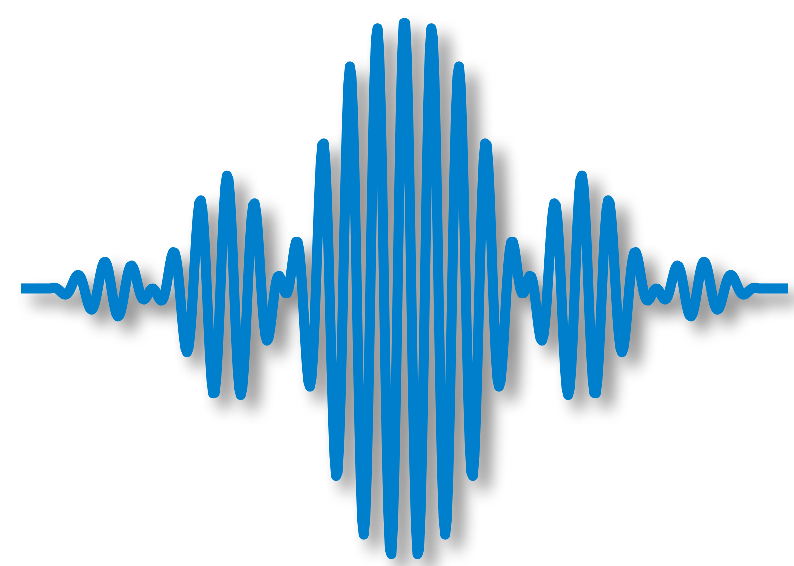
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Goals

- to introduce the fundamental concepts related to electromagnetic waves (frequency, amplitude, speed, wavelength, polarization, phase)
- to show where WiFi is placed, within the broader range of frequencies used in telecommunications
- to give an understanding of behavior of radio waves as they move through space (absorption, reflection, diffraction, refraction, interference)
- to introduce the concept of the Fresnel zone

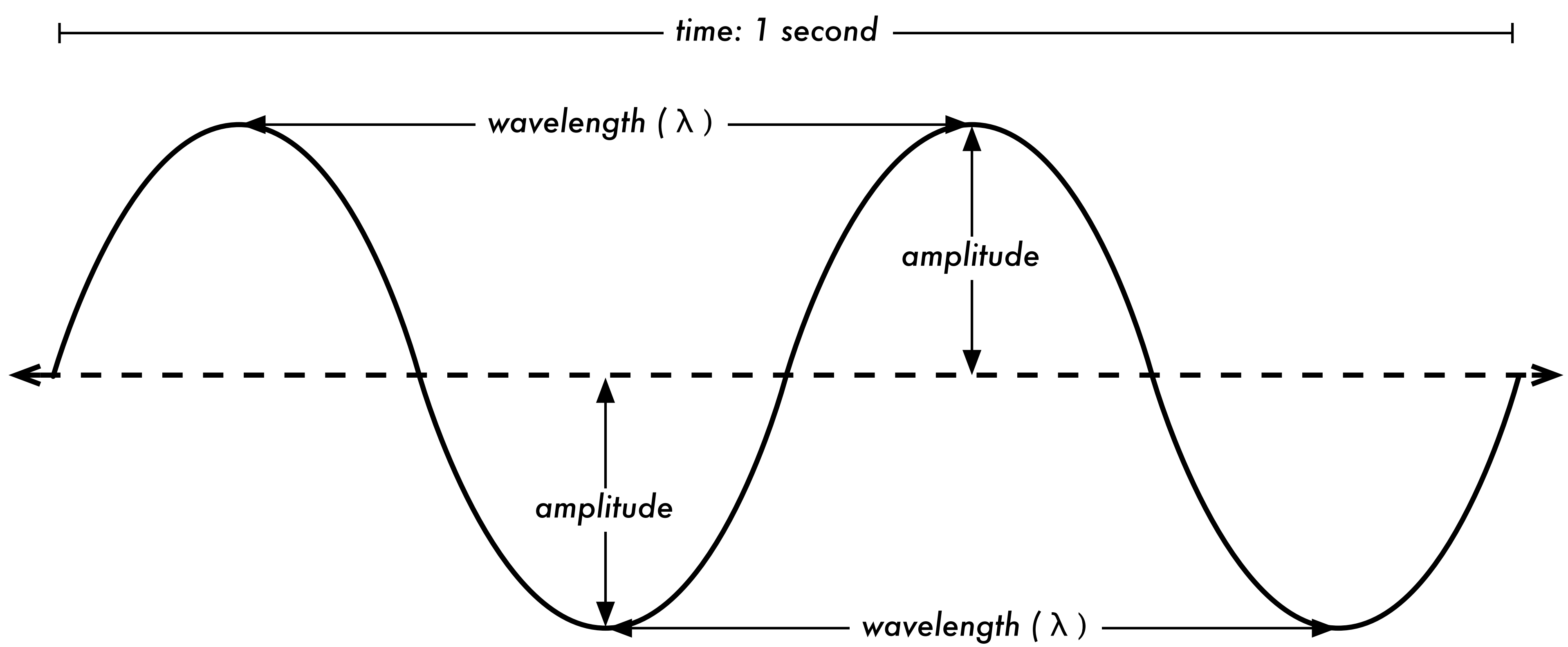
What is a Wave?





Electromagnetic Waves

- Characteristic wavelength, frequency, and amplitude
- No need for a carrier medium
- Examples: light, X-rays and radio waves



Quick review of unit prefixes

Powers of ten			
Nano-	10^{-9}	1/1000000000	n
Micro-	10^{-6}	1/1000000	µ
Milli-	10^{-3}	1/1000	m
Centi-	10^{-2}	1/100	c
Kilo-	10^{3}	1 000	k
Mega-	10^{6}	1 000 000	M
Giga-	10^{9}	1 000 000 000	G

Wavelength and Frequency

$$c = f * \lambda$$

c = speed (meters / second)

f = frequency (cycles per second, or Hz)

λ = wavelength (meters)

If a wave on water travels at one meter per second, and it oscillates five times per second, then each wave will be twenty centimeters long:

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1 meter/second = 5 cycles/second * λ
λ = 1 / 5 meters
λ = 0.2 meters = 20 cm
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Wavelength and Frequency

Since the speed of light is approximately 3×10^8 m/s, we can calculate the wavelength for a given frequency.

Let us take the example of the frequency of 802.11b/g wireless networking, which is:

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f = 2.4 GHz
  = 2,400,000,000 cycles / second

wavelength (λ) = c / f
               = 3 * 10^8 m/s / 2.4 * 10^9 s^-1
               = 1.25 * 10^-1 m
               = 12.5 cm
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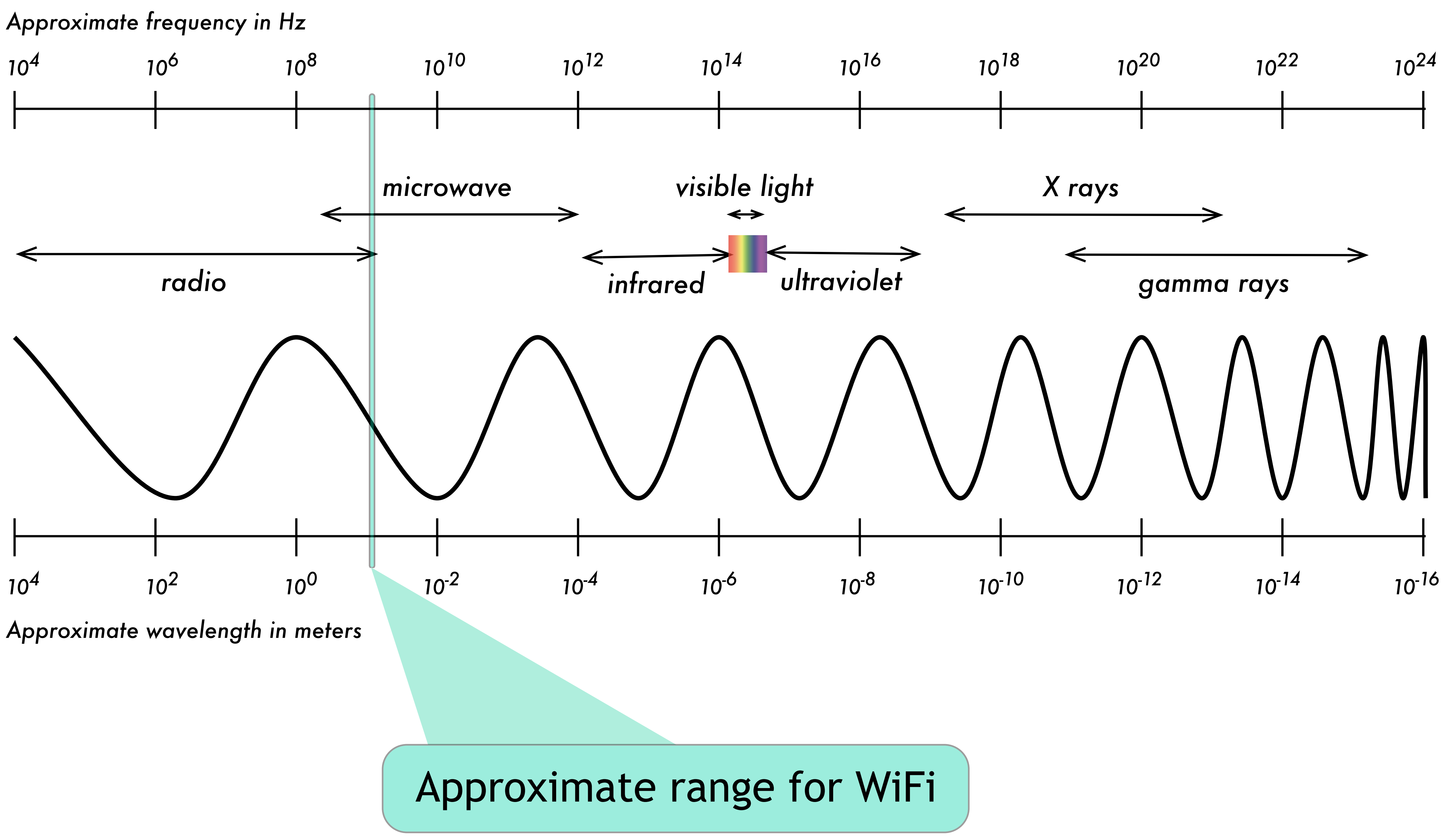
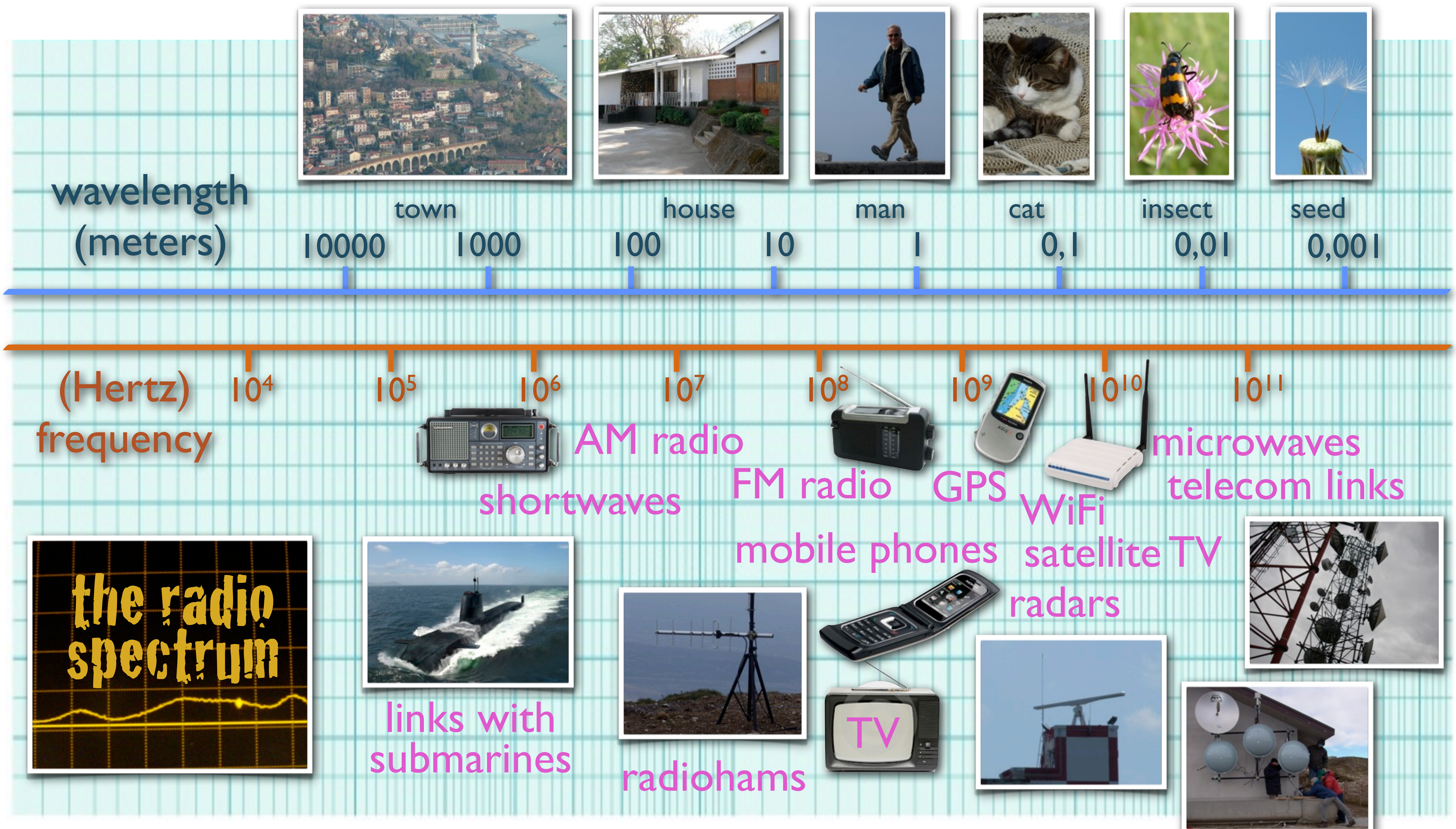
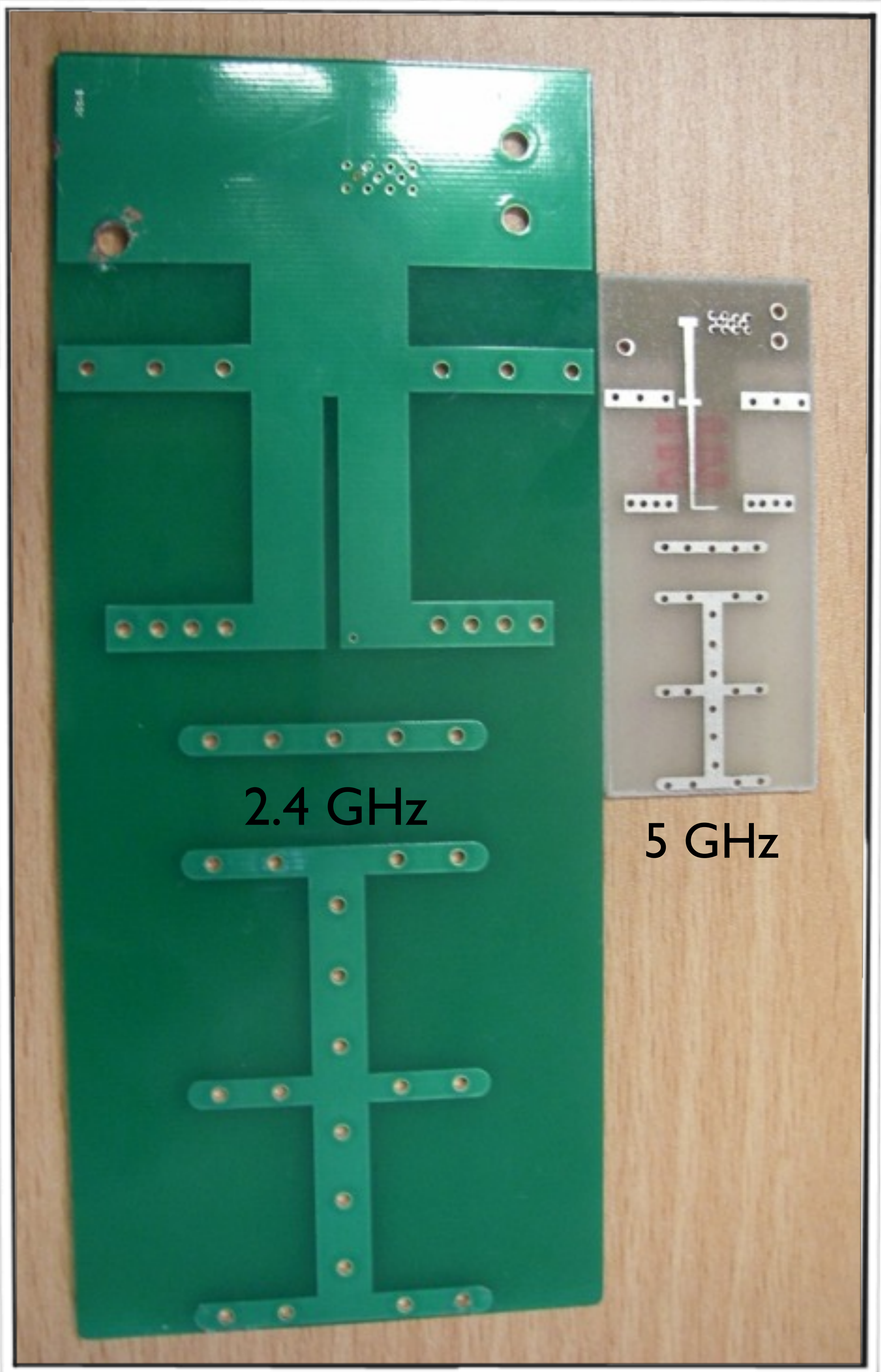
Therefore, the wavelength of 802.11b/g WiFi is about ***12.5 cm***.

Electromagnetic Spectrum



Perspective





WiFi frequencies and wavelengths

Standard	Frequency	Wavelength
802.11 b/g/n	2.4 GHz	12.5 cm
802.11 a/n	5.x GHz	5 to 6 cm

Behavior of radio waves

There are a few simple rules of thumb that can prove extremely useful when making first plans for a wireless network:

- The ***longer*** the wavelength, the further it goes
- The ***longer*** the wavelength, the better it travels through and around things
- The ***shorter*** the wavelength, the more data it can transport

All of these rules, simplified as they may be, are rather easy to understand by example.

Traveling radio waves

Radio waves do not move in a strictly straight line. On their way from "point A" to "point B", waves may be subject to:

- Absorption
- Reflection
- Diffraction
- Refraction

Absorption

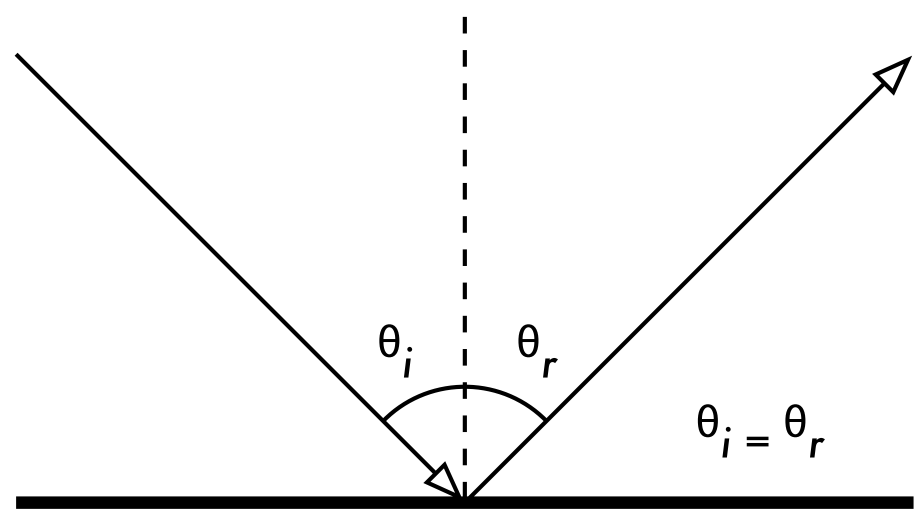
When electromagnetic waves go through some material, they generally get weakened or dampened.

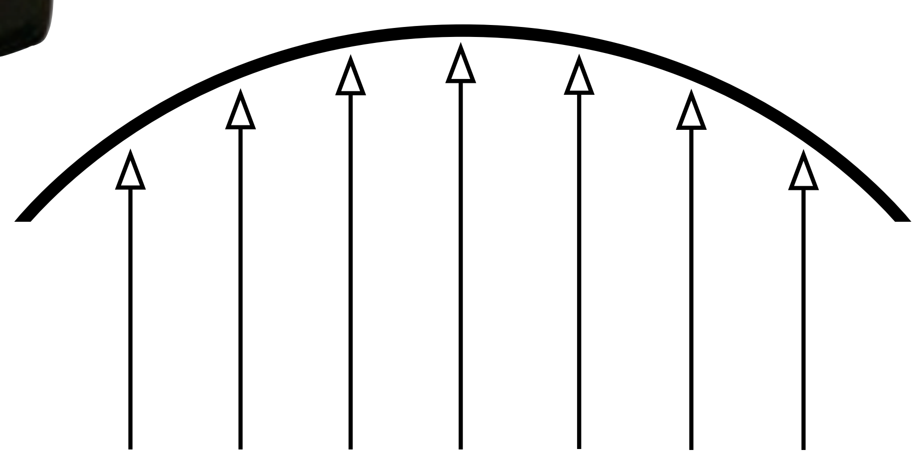
Materials that absorb energy include:

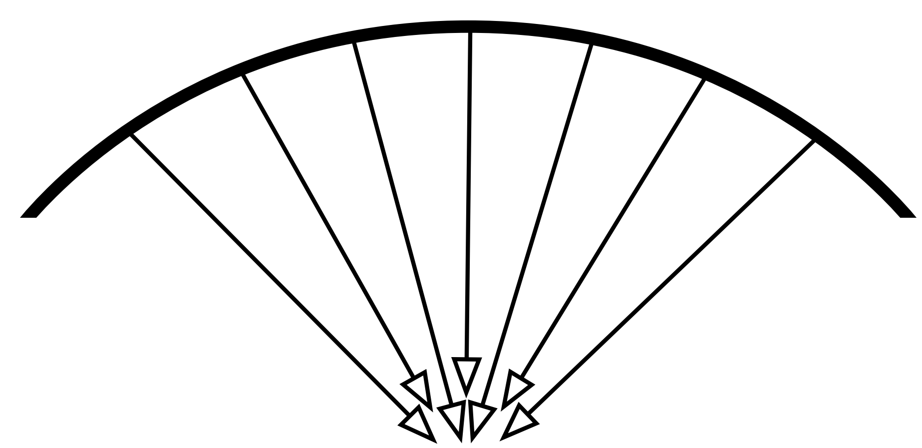
- ***Metal***. Electrons can move freely in metals, and are readily able to swing and thus absorb the energy of a passing wave.
- ***Water*** molecules jostle around in the presence of radio waves, thus absorbing some energy.
- ***Trees*** and ***wood*** absorb radio energy proportionally to the amount of water contained in them.
- ***Humans*** are mostly water: we absorb radio energy quite well!

Reflection

The rules for reflection are quite simple: the angle at which a wave hits a surface is the same angle at which it gets deflected. **Metal** and **water** are excellent reflectors of radio waves.

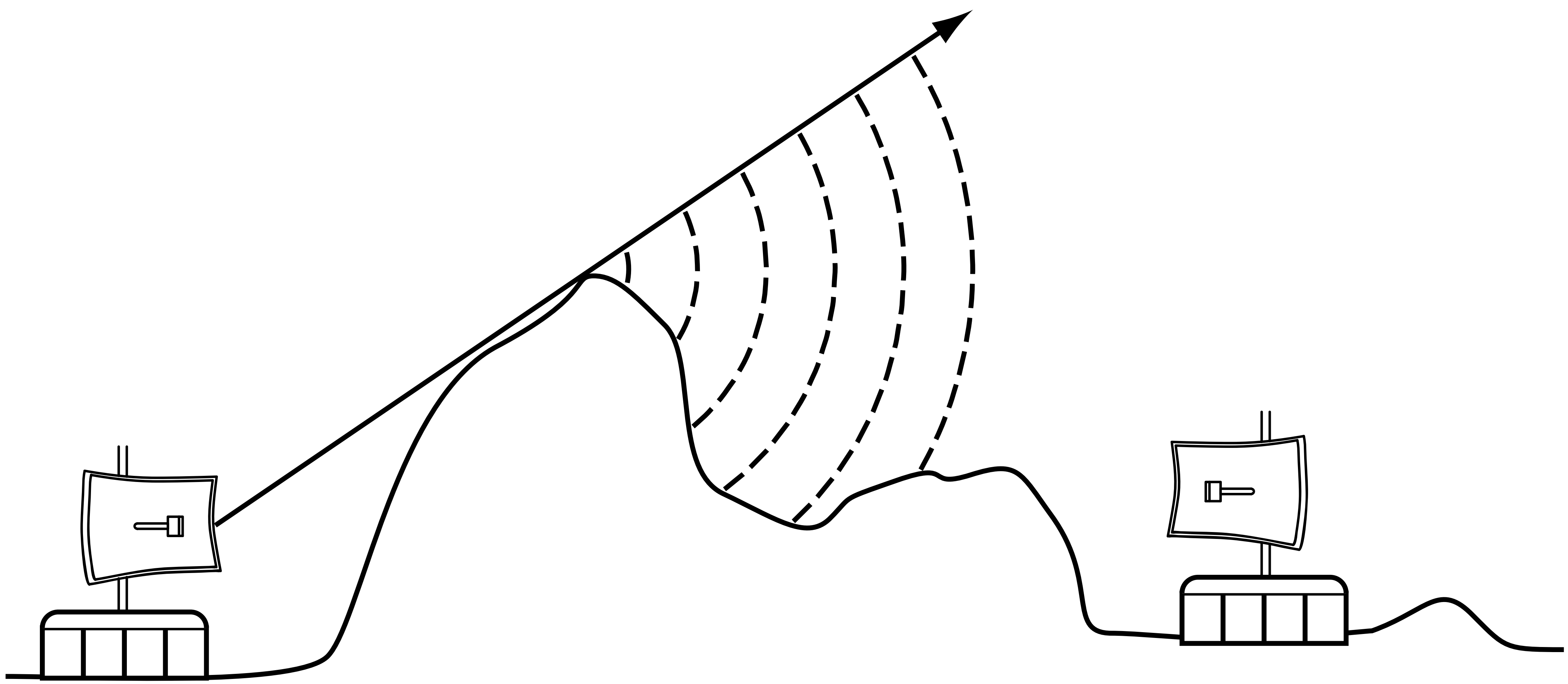






Diffraction

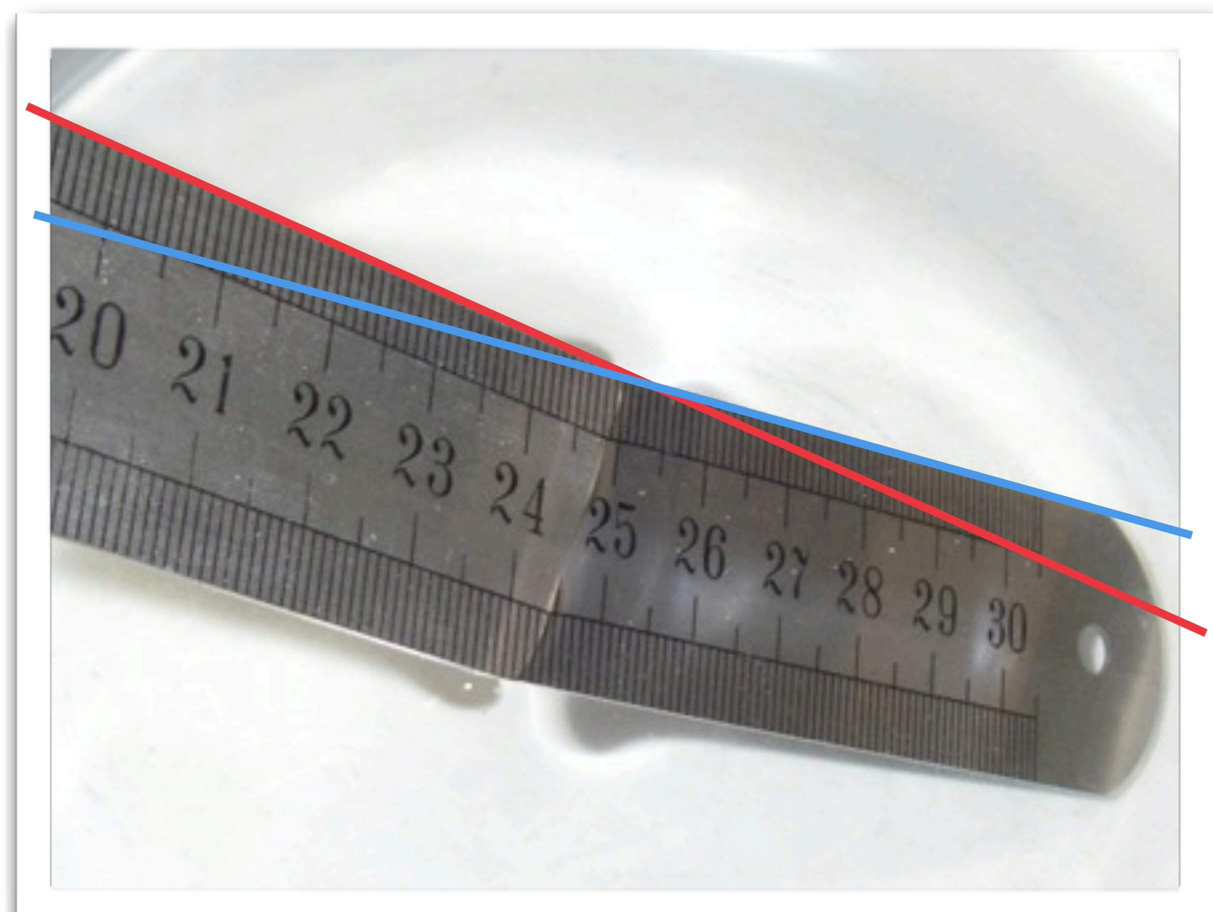
Because of the effect of diffraction, waves will “bend” around corners or through an opening in a barrier.



Refraction

Refraction is the apparent "bending" of waves when they meet a material with different characteristics.

When a wave moves from one medium to another, it changes speed and direction upon entering the new medium.



Other important wave properties

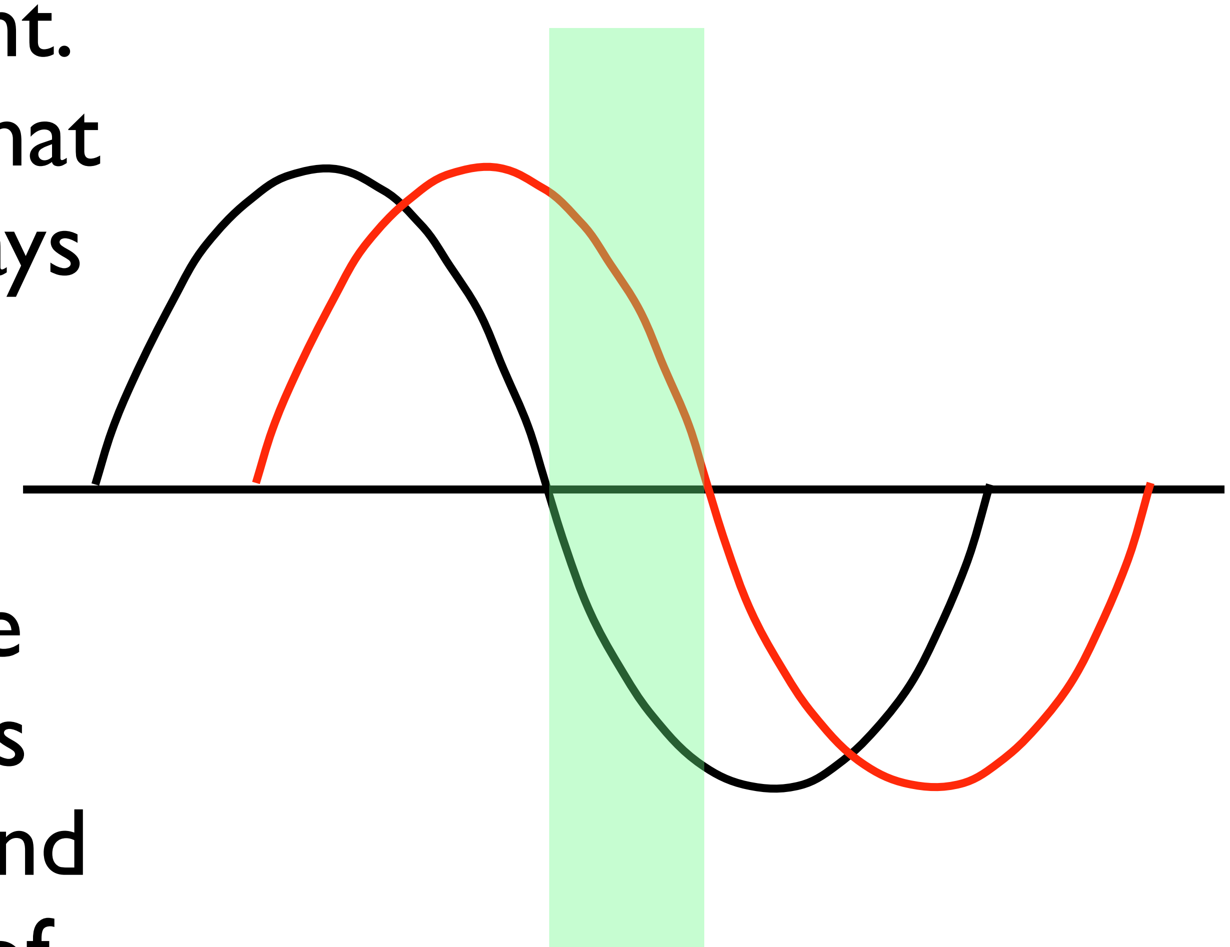
These properties are also important to consider when using electromagnetic waves for communications.

- Phase
- Polarization
- Fresnel Zone

Phase

The **phase** of a wave is the fraction of a cycle that the wave is offset from a reference point. It is a relative measurement that can be express in different ways (radians, cycles, degrees, percentage).

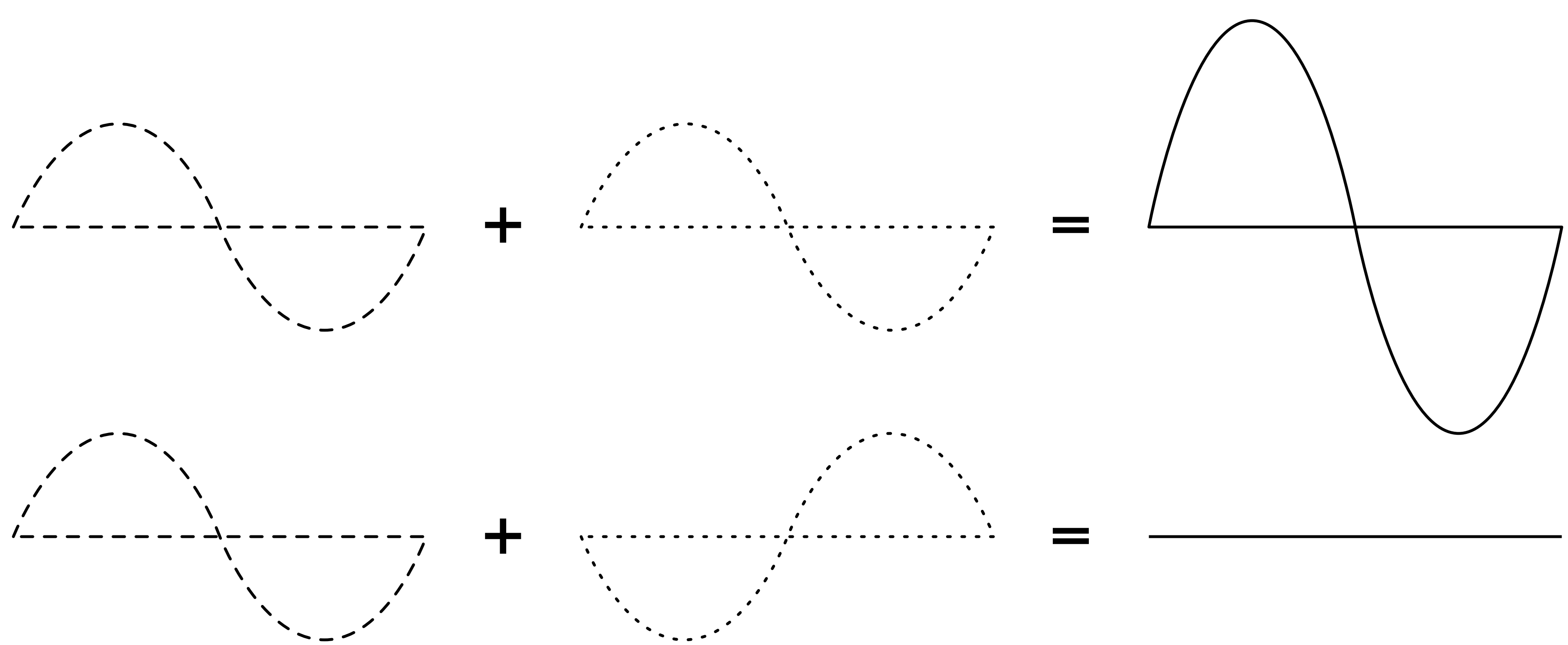
Two waves that have the same frequency and different phases have a **phase difference**, and the waves are said to be out of phase with each other.



Interference

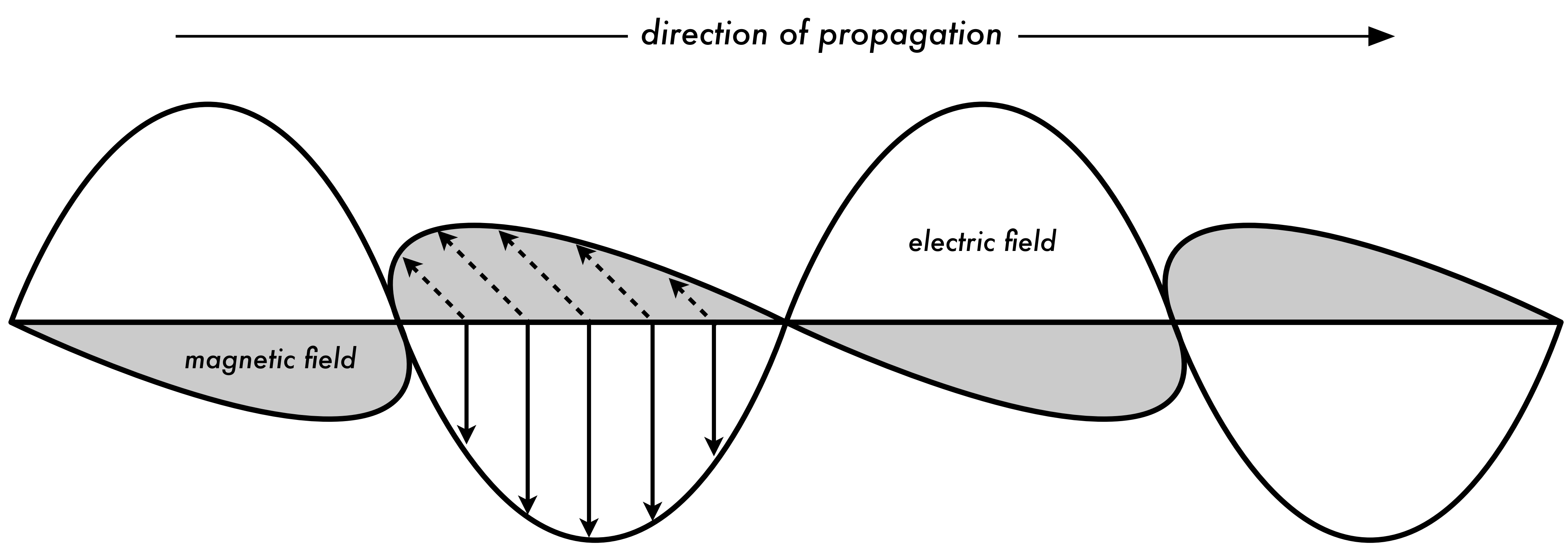
When two waves of the same frequency, amplitude and **phase** meet, the result is ***constructive interference***: the amplitude doubles.

When two waves of the same frequency and amplitude and **opposite phase** meet, the result is ***destructive interference***: the wave is annihilated.

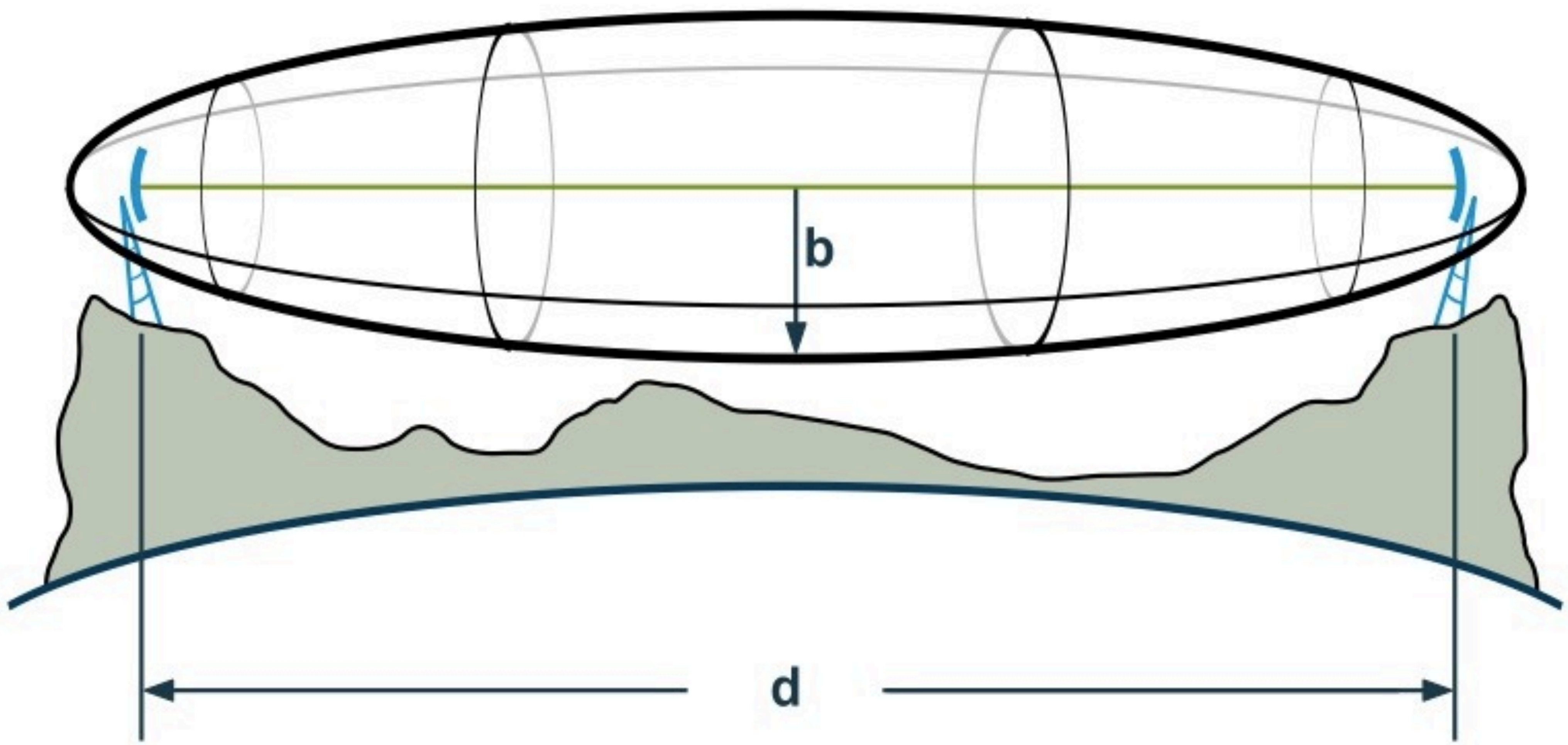


Polarization

- Electromagnetic waves have electrical and magnetic components.
- The electrical and magnetic components oscillate perpendicular to each other and to the direction of the propagation.



Line of Sight and Fresnel Zones



a free line-of-sight **IS NOT EQUAL TO** a free Fresnel Zone

Conclusions

- Radio waves have a characteristic wavelength, frequency and amplitude, which affect the way they travel through space.

- WiFi uses a tiny part of the electromagnetic spectrum

- Lower frequencies travel further, but at the expense of throughput.

- Radio waves occupy a volume in space, the Fresnel zone, which should be unobstructed for optimum reception.

Thank you for your attention

For more details about the topics presented in this lecture, please see the book ***Wireless Networking in the Developing World***, available as free download in many languages at:

http://wndw.net