10.3: Sound Waves

Figure 12.1.1

Crack! Crash! Thud! That's what you'd hear if you were in the forest when this old tree cracked and came crashing down to the ground. But what if there was nobody there to hear the tree fall? Would it still make these sounds? This is an old riddle. To answer the riddle correctly, you need to know the scientific definition of sound.

Defining Sound

In science, **sound** is defined as the transfer of energy from a vibrating object in waves that travel through matter. Most people commonly use the term sound to mean what they hear when sound waves enter their ears. The tree above generated sound waves when it fell to the ground, so it made sound according to the scientific definition. But the sound wasn't detected by a person's ears if there was nobody in the forest. So the answer to the riddle is both yes and no!

How Sound Waves Begin

All sound waves begin with vibrating matter. Look at the first guitar string on the left in the Figure below. Plucking the string makes it vibrate. The diagram below the figure shows the wave generated by the vibrating string. The moving string repeatedly pushes against the air particles next to it, which causes the air particles to vibrate. The vibrations spread through the air in all directions away from the guitar string as longitudinal waves. In longitudinal waves, particles of the medium vibrate back and forth parallel to the direction that the waves travel.

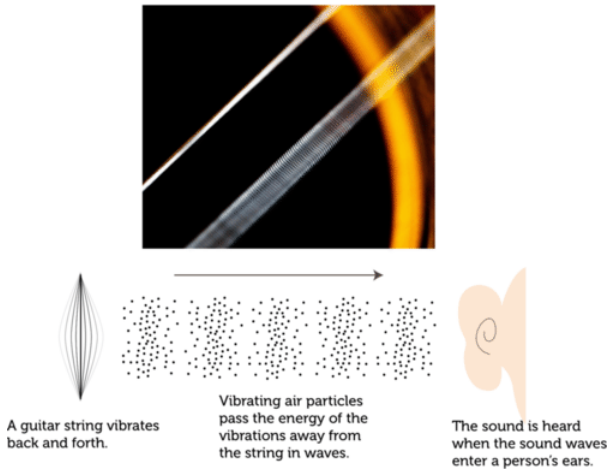

Figure 12.1.2

Q: If there were no air particles to carry the vibrations away from the guitar string, how would sound reach the ear?

A: It wouldn't unless the vibrations were carried by another medium. Sound waves are mechanical waves, so they can travel only though matter and not through empty space.

What about the sound waves created by other instruments? Why does the same musical note on different instruments, such as a guitar and violin, sound different? Begin your exploration of sound by exploring the different types of sound waves produced by string instruments in the Violin simulation below:

A pan flute is another example of a musical instrument that depends on the vibration of air particles. Use the Pan Flute simulation below to visualize how the movement of invisible air molecules inside the tubes produces musical notes:

A Ticking Clock

The fact that sound cannot travel through empty space was first demonstrated in the 1600s by a scientist named Robert Boyle. Boyle placed a ticking clock in a sealed glass jar. The clock could be heard ticking through the air and glass of the jar. Then Boyle pumped the air out of the jar. The clock was still ticking, but the ticking sound could no longer be heard. That's because the sound couldn't travel away from the clock without air particles to pass the sound energy along.

Sound Waves and Matter

Most of the sounds we hear reach our ears through the air, but sounds can also travel through liquids and solids. If you swim underwater—or even submerge your ears in bathwater—any sounds you hear have traveled to your ears through the water. Some solids, including glass and metals, are very good at transmitting sounds. Foam rubber and heavy fabrics, on the other hand, tend to muffle sounds. They absorb rather than pass on the sound energy.

Q: How can you tell that sounds travel through solids?

A: One way is that you can hear loud outdoor sounds such as sirens through closed windows and doors. You can also hear sounds through the inside walls of a house. For example, if you put your ear against a wall, you may be able to eavesdrop on a conversation in the next room—not that you would, of course.

Summary

- In science, sound is defined as the transfer of energy from a vibrating object in waves that travel through matter.
- All sound waves begin with vibrating matter. The vibrations generate longitudinal waves that travel through matter in all directions.
- Most sounds we hear travel through air, but sounds can also travel through liquids and solids.

Review

1. How is sound defined in science? How does this definition differ from the common meaning of the word?
2. Hitting a drum, as shown in the Figure below, generates sound waves. Create a diagram to show how the sound waves begin and how they reach a person's ears.

Figure 12.1.3

3. How do you think earplugs work?

Additional Resources

Study Guide:Waves Study Guide

Real World Application: Telephone Magic

Videos: