

Waves Screen

Make waves with a dripping faucet, speaker, or laser. Adjust the frequency and amplitude, and observe the changes in the wave.

GENERATE continuous wave or pulse

VIEW wave from the top or side

ADJUST frequency and amplitude

EXPLORE water, sound, or light waves

MEASURE wavelength or speed

Wave Interference

Interference Screen

Explore how a pair of wave sources create an interference pattern. Find points of constructive and destructive interference by eye, and by using the detectors.

OBSERVE the distance and time scale

CREATE an interference pattern with two sources

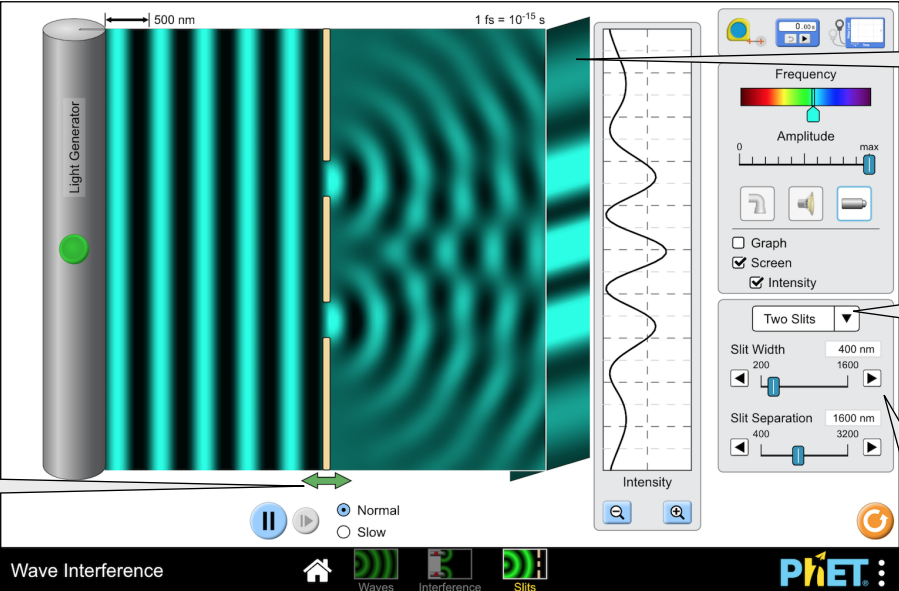
COMPARE amplitude and phase

SEE particle or wave view of sound

Wave Interference

Slits Screen

Put up a barrier to see how the waves move through one or two slits, and discover the resulting interference pattern. Determine how to change the pattern by adjusting the slit width and separation.



The screenshot shows the PhET Slits simulation interface. On the left, a 'Light Generator' emits waves with a wavelength of 500 nm and a frequency of $1 \text{ fs} = 10^{-15} \text{ s}$. A barrier with two slits is positioned in the center. The resulting interference pattern is shown on the right. The control panel on the right includes a frequency slider, an amplitude slider, and checkboxes for 'Graph', 'Screen', and 'Intensity'. Below these are controls for 'Two Slits', 'Slit Width' (ranging from 200 to 1600 nm), and 'Slit Separation' (ranging from 400 to 3200 nm). A 'Wave Interference' panel at the bottom left has a play/pause button and 'Normal'/'Slow' options. The PhET logo is at the bottom right.

ADJUST barrier position

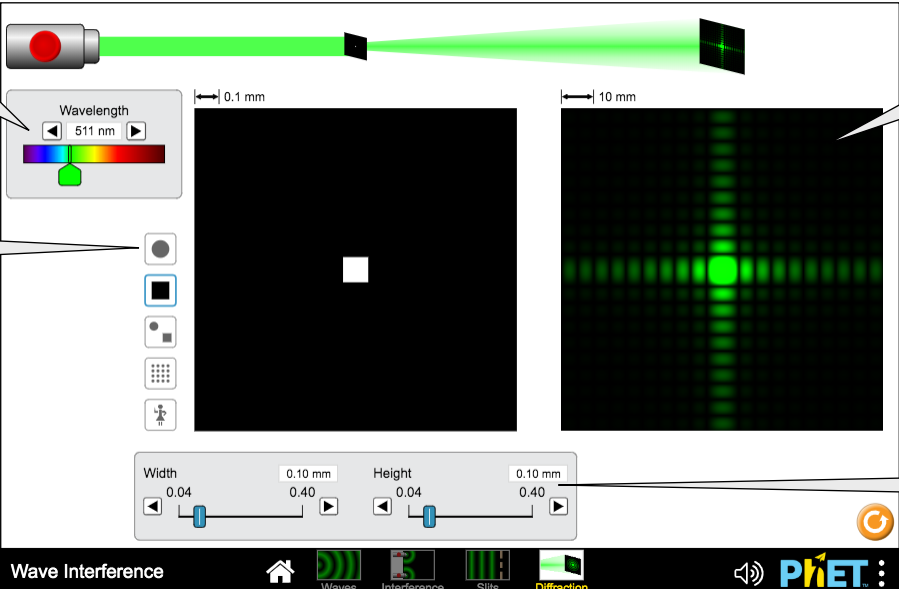
OBSERVE the interference pattern

EXPERIMENT with single or double slit

ADJUST slit width, separation

Diffraction Screen

Experiment with diffraction through elliptical, rectangular, or irregular apertures. Adjust the aperture dimensions and/or wavelength to discover the effect on the diffraction pattern.



The screenshot shows the PhET Diffraction simulation interface. A green light beam is shown passing through an aperture. The diffraction pattern is shown on the right. The control panel on the left includes a 'Wavelength' slider (set to 511 nm) and a 'Wavelength' color bar. Below these are icons for different aperture geometries: circle, square, rectangle, and irregular. The control panel at the bottom includes sliders for 'Width' (0.04 to 0.40 mm) and 'Height' (0.04 to 0.40 mm). The PhET logo is at the bottom right.

ADJUST wavelength

EXPLORE different aperture geometries

OBSERVE diffraction pattern

CONTROL aperture size

Customization Options

To enable an overlay that displays the theoretical location of interference maxima (yellow lines) and minima (red lines) on the Interference and Slits screens, append `?theory` to the end of the URL:

https://phet.colorado.edu/sims/html/wave-interference/latest/wave-interference_en.html?theory

Model Simplifications

- The color maps to the amplitude of the wave. To improve the appearance of the nodes, while maintaining balance between the apparent widths of the maxima and minima, this color-mapping is piecewise defined. Amplitudes greater than zero linearly map to color values of 40%-100%, while amplitudes less than zero linearly map to color values of 0%-40%.
- Before the laser is turned on, the wave viewing window is black, suggesting that the light propagates into vacuum. However, when the laser is running, black represents a trough.
- Due to the different time scales across the water, sound, and light scenes, the next frame button will advance time by a different amount in each scene.
- The boundaries of the wave viewing window are absorbing, but there are still some artifacts due to internal reflections. This can result in some noise in the Screen and Intensity curve, which is smoothed by displaying time-averaged data.
- The particle view of sound can only support one frequency at a time. Changing the frequency will lead to temporary misalignment between the particles and the wavefronts at the previous frequency.
- The plane wave source on the Slits screen is generic. Due to the nature of the model, changing the amplitude will instantaneously change the amplitude for the entire plane wave to the left of the barrier.
- Certain changes will instantaneously clear (or partially clear) the wave viewing area — changing the source separation (Interference), moving the barrier (Slits), changing the frequency (light on all screens, all sources on Slits).
- The diffraction pattern is computed as the fast Fourier transform (FFT) of the aperture pattern.
- The FFT is independent of wavelength. To simulate the effect of changing wavelength, we adjust the size of the aperture in the model, but leave the aperture in the view unchanged.
- The diffraction pattern from a monochromatic source is monochromatic. However, due to the nuances of color perception (nonlinear, color-dependent, saturation-dependent) some diffraction patterns may appear to be multi-colored.

Suggestions for Use

Sample Challenge Prompts

- How does changing the frequency and amplitude affect the characteristics of the waves? How are the water droplet and speaker affected?
- Design an experiment to measure the speed of the wave. How does your measurement compare to the accepted value of the speed of sound or light? How can you explain the discrepancies between your calculated value and the accepted value?
- Create an interference pattern with two sources, and determine the ways to change the pattern.
- Identify points of constructive and destructive interference by eye, and by using the wave detector.
- Compare single-slit diffraction and double-slit interference. How are the patterns on the screen similar? Determine the ways to change this pattern.
- For two slits, use the equation $d \sin \theta = m \lambda$ to predict to where on the screen the maxima will appear. Use the tape measure to verify your predictions.
- Explain how the aperture geometry relates to the diffraction pattern.
- Predict how changing the wavelength or aperture size affects the diffraction pattern.

See all published activities for Wave Interference [here](#).

For more tips on using PhET sims with your students, see [Tips for Using PhET](#).