

Scientific and Engineering Practices

1. Asking Questions and Defining Problems

Science begins with a question about a phenomenon, such as “Why is the sky blue?” or “What causes cancer?” and seeks to develop theories that can provide explanatory answers to such questions. A basic practice of the scientist is formulating empirically answerable questions about phenomena, establishing what is already known, and determining what questions have yet to be satisfactorily answered.

Engineering begins with a problem, need, or desire that suggests an engineering problem that needs to be solved. A societal problem such as reducing the nation’s dependence on fossil fuels may engender a variety of engineering problems, such as designing more efficient transportation systems, or alternative power generation devices such as improved solar cells. Engineers ask questions to define the engineering problem, determine criteria for a successful solution, and identify constraints.

2. Developing and Using Models

Science often involves the construction and use of a wide variety of models and simulations to help develop explanations about natural phenomena. Models make it possible to go beyond observables and imagine a world not yet seen. Models enable predictions of the form “if . . . then . . . therefore” to be made in order to test hypothetical explanations.

Engineering makes use of models and simulations to analyze existing systems so as to see where flaws might occur or to test possible solutions to a new problem. Engineers also call on models of various sorts to test proposed systems and to recognize the strengths and limitations of their designs.

3. Planning and Carrying Out Investigations

Scientific investigation may be conducted in the field or the laboratory. A major practice of scientists is planning and carrying out a systematic investigation, which requires the identification of what is to be recorded and, if applicable, what are to be treated as the dependent and independent variables (control of variables). Observations and data collected from such work are used to test existing theories and explanations or to revise and develop new ones.

Engineers use investigation both to gain data essential for specifying design criteria or parameters and to test their designs. Like scientists, engineers must identify relevant variables, decide how they will be measured, and collect data for analysis. Their investigations help them to identify how effective, efficient, and durable their designs may be under a range of conditions.

4. Analyzing and Interpreting Data

Scientific investigations produce data that must be analyzed in order to derive meaning. Because data usually do not speak for themselves, scientists use a range of tools—including tabulation, graphical interpretation, visualization, and statistical analysis—to identify the significant features and patterns in the data. Sources of error are identified and the degree of certainty calculated. Modern technology makes the collection of large data sets much easier, thus providing many secondary sources for analysis.

Engineers analyze data collected in the tests of their designs and investigations; this allows them to compare different solutions and determine how well each one meets specific design criteria—that is, which design best solves the problem within the given constraints. Like scientists, engineers require a range of tools to identify the major patterns and interpret the results.

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5. Using Mathematics and Conceptual Thinking

In **science**, mathematics and computation are fundamental tools for representing physical variables and their relationships. They are used for a range of tasks, such as constructing simulations, statistically analyzing data, and recognizing, expressing, and applying quantitative relationships. Mathematical and computational approaches enable predictions of the behavior of physical systems, along with the testing of such predictions. Moreover, statistical techniques are invaluable for assessing the significance of patterns or correlations.

In **engineering**, mathematical and computational representations of established relationships and principles are an integral part of design. For example, structural engineers create mathematically based analyses of designs to calculate whether they can stand up to the expected stresses of use and if they can be completed within acceptable budgets. Moreover, simulations of designs provide an effective test bed for the development of designs and their improvement.

6. Constructing Explanations and Designing Solutions

The goal of **science** is the construction of theories that can provide explanatory accounts of features of the world. A theory becomes accepted when it has been shown to be superior to other explanations in the breadth of phenomena it accounts for and in its explanatory coherence and parsimony. Scientific explanations are explicit applications of theory to a specific situation or phenomenon, perhaps with the intermediary of a theory-based model for the system under study. The goal for students is to construct logically coherent explanations of phenomena that incorporate their current understanding of science, or a model that represents it, and are consistent with the available evidence.

Engineering design, a systematic process for solving engineering problems, is based on scientific knowledge and models of the material world. Each proposed solution results from a process of balancing competing criteria of desired functions, technological feasibility, cost, safety, esthetics, and compliance with legal requirements. There is usually no single best solution but rather a range of solutions. Which one is the optimal choice depends on the criteria used for making evaluations.

7. Engaging in Argument from Evidence

In **science**, reasoning and argument are essential for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of a line of reasoning and for finding the best explanation for a natural phenomenon. Scientists must defend their explanations, formulate evidence based on a solid foundation of data, examine their own understanding in light of the evidence and comments offered by others, and collaborate with peers in searching for the best explanation for the phenomenon being investigated.

In **engineering**, reasoning and argument are essential for finding the best possible solution to a problem. Engineers collaborate with their peers throughout the design process, with a critical stage being the selection of the most promising solution among a field of competing ideas. Engineers use systematic methods to compare alternatives, formulate evidence based on test data, make arguments from evidence to defend their conclusions, evaluate critically the ideas of others, and revise their designs in order to achieve the best solution to the problem at hand.

8. Obtaining, Evaluating, and Communicating Information

Science cannot advance if scientists are unable to communicate their findings clearly and persuasively or to learn about the findings of others. A major practice of science is thus the communication of ideas and the results of inquiry—orally, in writing, with the use of tables, diagrams, graphs, and equations, and by engaging in extended discussions with scientific peers. Science requires the ability to derive meaning from scientific texts (such as papers, the Internet, symposia, and lectures), to evaluate the scientific validity of the information thus acquired, and to integrate that information.

Engineers cannot produce new or improved technologies if the advantages of their designs are not communicated clearly and persuasively. Engineers need to be able to express their ideas, orally and in writing, with the use of tables, graphs, drawings, or models and by engaging in extended discussions with peers. Moreover, as with scientists, they need to be able to derive meaning from colleagues' texts, evaluate the information, and apply it usefully. In engineering and science alike, new technologies are now routinely available that extend the possibilities for collaboration and communication.

