How Are Rainbows Formed?

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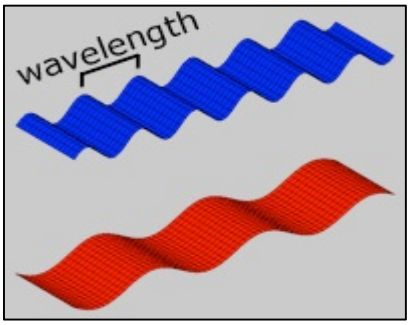
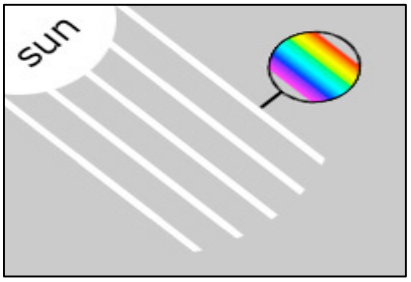
Sunlight is composed of light of varying wavelengths. Short wavelength light appears blue, violet and indigo, and long wavelength light appears red, orange and yellow. When sunlight enters a raindrop in the air, the light splits into a multitude of colors. This light then reflects off the back of the raindrop and re-emerges in the direction in which the light first entered. The light emerging from many raindrops creates a rainbow. Read on for a more detailed explanation.

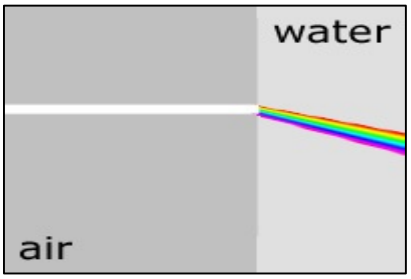
Fact 1. Light travels in waves. The light's wavelength determines its perceived color. Short wavelength light, for example, appears blue, and long wavelength light appears red.



Fact 2. Sunlight is composed of light of many wavelengths. In the range that we can see, this includes the colors of the rainbow.

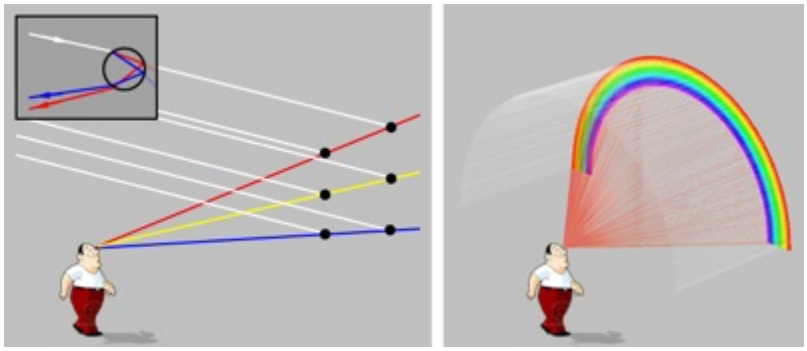


Fact 3. When light enters water, it bends (refracts). The amount of bending depends on the wavelength of light. As a result, the light splits into its component colors.



When a ray of sunlight enters a raindrop, it bends (refracts). The light then strikes the back of the raindrop, where some of the light passes through and some is reflected. As the light exits the raindrop, it is refracted again. The angle at which the light emerges depends on the wavelength of light. This path is illustrated in the small box below, where only the bending of two wavelengths (blue and red) are shown.

Consider now the diagram on the left. The sun is behind you (white rays) and there is rain in front of you (black dots). As the sunlight enters each raindrop, the light is refracted and reflected as described above. Because the sun is so far away, the rays of sunlight are nearly parallel to one another. As a result, the angle between the red line and each ray of sunlight striking a raindrop on that line will be the same. So, the light that reaches your eye along this ray will be of the same wavelength (color). The same is true for the yellow, blue, and intermediate lines corresponding to each color of the rainbow.



Consider now the diagram on the right which explains why the colors of a rainbow form an arc. The angle between the incoming rays of sunlight (white) and all of the red lines, forming a circular cone, have the same angle. As a result, the light that reaches your eye along these lines have the same wavelength (color). The same is true for each band of the rainbow.

The reason that rainbows are somewhat rare is that you will only see them when there is rain in front of you and somewhat in the distance, and the sun is behind you and fairly low on the horizon.