16.3: Plane Electromagnetic Waves

The electric field lines in one plane are shown. The magnetic field is perpendicular to this plane. This radiation field has cylindrical symmetry around the axis of the dipole. Field lines near the dipole are not shown. The pattern is not at all uniform in all directions. The strongest signal is in directions perpendicular to the axis of the antenna, which would be horizontal if the antenna is mounted vertically. There is zero intensity along the axis of the antenna. The fields detected far from the antenna are from the changing electric and magnetic fields inducing each other and traveling as electromagnetic waves. Far from the
antenna, the wave fronts, or surfaces of equal phase for the electromagnetic wave, are almost spherical. Even farther from the antenna, the radiation propagates like electromagnetic plane waves.

The electromagnetic waves carry energy away from their source, similar to a sound wave carrying energy away from a standing wave on a guitar string. An antenna for receiving electromagnetic signals works in reverse. Incoming electromagnetic waves induce oscillating currents in the antenna, each at its own frequency. The radio receiver includes a tuner circuit, whose resonant frequency can be adjusted. The tuner responds strongly to the desired frequency but not others, allowing the user to tune to the desired broadcast. Electrical components amplify the signal formed by the moving electrons. The signal is then converted into an audio and/or video format.

Note

Use this simulation to broadcast radio waves. Wiggle the transmitter electron manually or have it oscillate automatically. Display the field as a curve or vectors. The strip chart shows the electron positions at the transmitter and at the receiver.

Contributors

- Samuel J. Ling (Truman State University), Jeff Sanny (Loyola Marymount University), and Bill Moebs with many contributing authors. This work is licensed by OpenStax University Physics under a Creative Commons Attribution License (by 4.0).