



Wallace Hall Academy Physics Department

Advanced Higher Physics

Uncertainties

Problems and Solutions

UNCERTAINTIES TUTORIAL 1.0

- 1 Three packages have to be added to the payload of the Space Shuttle. Their masses have been measured as follows:

$$m_1 = (112 \pm 1) \text{ kg} \quad m_2 = (252 \pm 2) \text{ kg} \quad \text{and} \quad m_3 = (151 \pm 1) \text{ kg}.$$

Calculate the total mass to be added and the uncertainty in the total.

- 2 When using a travelling microscope the following measurements were made.

$$\text{Reading 1} = (112.1 \pm 0.2) \text{ mm} \quad \text{Reading 2} = (114.5 \pm 0.2) \text{ mm}.$$

Calculate:

- the percentage uncertainty in the sum of these readings
- the percentage uncertainty in the difference of these readings
- Which of these, sum or difference, is usually needed for the travelling microscope?

- 3 A block of building material has been carefully machined to undergo tests. Its dimensions and mass are as follows:

$$\text{length} = 0.050 \pm 0.001 \text{ m}$$

$$\text{breadth} = 0.100 \pm 0.001 \text{ m}$$

$$\text{height} = 0.040 \pm 0.001 \text{ m}$$

$$\text{mass} = 0.560 \pm 0.002 \text{ kg}$$

- From this data, calculate the density of this material.
- Find the uncertainty in this value of density and express it as a percentage.

- 4 The radius of a sphere is measured to be $(1.2 \pm 0.1) \times 10^{-2} \text{ m}$.

The volume of a sphere is given as $\frac{4}{3} \pi r^3$, where r is the radius of the sphere.

Calculate the volume of the sphere, quoting the uncertainty in your answer.

- 5 A uniform disc is to be used as a flywheel in a new design of small engine. Its moment of inertia has to be known. The following method is used:

The diameter of the disc is measured with a metre stick at 8 different positions round the rim and its mass is measured on a balance which was accurate to 10 g.

Diameters 0.245 m 0.249 m 0.255 m 0.248 m

 0.243 m 0.247 m 0.251 m 0.246 m

Mass 4.04 kg

Use the formula for the moment of inertia $= \frac{1}{2} M R^2$, where R is the radius of the disc. Find the moment of inertia, quoting a value for the uncertainty associated with your answer.

- 6 Calculate the refractive index of a glass block, including the uncertainty, from the following information:

$$\text{Angle of incidence} = (46 \pm 1)^\circ \quad \text{Angle of refraction} = (28 \pm 1)^\circ.$$

Uncertainty Tutorial 1.0 – Solutions

1 Total mass = $112 + 252 + 151 = 515$ kg

Thus the uncertainty in the sum is given by: $\sqrt{1^2 + 2^2 + 1^2} = 2.4$ kg

Thus total mass = (515 ± 3) kg

Notice that simply adding the uncertainties in the masses is over pessimistic, giving 4 kg. The square root of the sum of the squares is better statistically in that uncertainties of this nature will sometimes cancel each other).

Note: the uncertainty is given as ± 3 , not ± 2.4 . Giving an excessive number of figures must be avoided. In general the uncertainty is given to one figure unless the leading digit is one, see question 4 below. Final uncertainty values are normally rounded up regardless of the following figures.

Remember to give the value to the same number of decimal places as the uncertainty, see question 3 below where the 2.75 becomes 2.8.

2 (a) & (b) uncertainty in the sum and difference = $\sqrt{(0.2)^2 + (0.2)^2}$
= 0.3 mm (one sig. fig.)

Thus % uncertainty in sum = $\frac{0.3}{226.6} \times 100 = 0.1\%$

Thus % uncertainty in difference = $\frac{0.3}{2.4} \times 100 = 13\%$

(c) Usually the difference in two readings is needed when using the travelling microscope. Great care has to be taken when measuring very small distances, even with an “accurate” instrument large uncertainties can be incurred.

3 (a) Volume = $L \times B \times H = 0.050 \times 0.100 \times 0.040 = 2.00 \times 10^{-4}$ m³

$$\text{density} = \frac{\text{mass}}{\text{volume}} = \frac{0.560}{2.0 \times 10^{-4}} = 2.8 \times 10^3 \text{ kg m}^{-3}$$

(b) % uncertainty in mass = $\frac{0.002}{0.560} \times 100 = 0.4\%$

% uncertainty in length = 2%, % uncertainty in breadth = 1%,
% uncertainty in height = 3%

Thus % uncertainty in volume = $\sqrt{2^2 + 1^2 + 3^2} = 3.7\%$ or 4%

The dominant uncertainty is in the volume. Thus the % uncertainty in density will be 4%.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{density} &= 2.8 \times 10^3 \pm 4\% \text{ kg m}^{-3} \\ &= (2.8 \pm 0.1) \times 10^3 \text{ kg m}^{-3} \end{aligned}$$

4 % uncertainty in radius, $r = \frac{0.1}{1.2} \times 100 = 8\%$

The volume depends on the cube of r :

the % uncertainty in the volume = $3 \times 8\% = 24\%$

$$\text{volume} = \frac{4}{3} \pi (1.2 \times 10^{-2})^3 \text{ m}^3 = 7.24 \times 10^{-6} \text{ m}^3$$

$$\text{volume} = (7.2 \pm 1.7) \times 10^{-6} \text{ m}^3$$

$$5 \quad \% \text{ uncertainty in mass} = \frac{0.01}{4.04} \times 100 = 0.25 \%$$

$$\text{mean diameter} = 0.248 \text{ m}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{random uncertainty in mean} &= \frac{0.255 - 0.243}{8} = 0.0015 \\ &= 0.002 \text{ m} \end{aligned}$$

$$\% \text{ uncertainty in mean diameter} = \frac{0.002}{0.248} \times 100 = 0.8 \%$$

The % uncertainty will be the same for the radius.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Thus moment of inertia of the disc} &= \frac{1}{2} M R^2 = 0.5 \times 4.04 \times (0.124)^2 \\ &= 0.0311 \text{ kg m}^2 \end{aligned}$$

The dominant uncertainty here is in the radius, which is squared:

$$\text{total \% uncertainty} = 2 \times 0.8 \% = 1.6 \%$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Thus moment of inertia} &= 0.0311 \pm 1.6 \% \\ &= (0.0311 \pm 0.0005) \text{ kg m}^2 \end{aligned}$$

$$6 \quad \text{refractive index, } n = \frac{\sin \theta_1}{\sin \theta_2} = \frac{\sin 46}{\sin 28} = \frac{0.7193}{0.4695} = 1.53$$

The easiest way to work out the uncertainty in a sine value is to work out the maximum and minimum values. Find the difference between these values and halve it.

$$\text{Thus for } \theta_1 : \sin 47^\circ = 0.7314 \quad \sin 45^\circ = 0.7071$$

$$\text{Range} = 0.0243 \quad \text{uncertainty} = \frac{0.0243}{2} = 0.0122$$

$$\text{Thus \% uncertainty in } \sin \theta_1 = \frac{0.0122}{0.7193} \times 100 = 1.7 \%$$

$$\text{For } \theta_2 : \sin 29^\circ = 0.4848 \quad \sin 27^\circ = 0.4540$$

$$\text{Range} = 0.0308 \quad \text{uncertainty} = \frac{0.0308}{2} = 0.0154$$

$$\text{Thus \% uncertainty in } \sin \theta_2 = \frac{0.0154}{0.4695} \times 100 = 3.3 \%$$

To find the overall uncertainty in refractive index these two uncertainties have to be combined.

$$\begin{aligned} \% \text{ uncertainty in refractive index, } n &= \sqrt{1.7^2 + 3.3^2} = \sqrt{13.8} \\ &= 3.7 \% \text{ or } 4 \% \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Final value :} \quad n &= 1.53 \pm 4 \% \\ &= 1.53 \pm 0.06 \end{aligned}$$