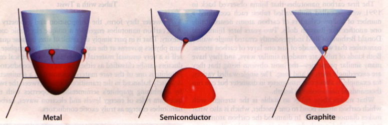
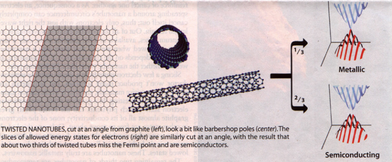
The Electrical Behavior of Nanotubes

A Split Personality



ELECTRICAL PROPERTIES of a material depend on the separation between the collection of energy states that are filled by electrons (*red*) and the additional "conduction" states that are empty and available for electrons to hop into (*light blue*). Metals conduct electricity easily because there are so many electrons with easy access to adjacent conduction states. In semiconductors, electrons need an energy boost from light or an electrical field to jump the gap to the first available conduction state. The form of carbon known as graphite is a semimetal that just barely conducts, because without these external boosts, only a few electrons can access the narrow path to a conduction state.

STRAIGHT NANOTUBES look like a straight swath cut from a sheet of graphite (*left*) and rolled into a tube (*center*). The geometry of nanotubes limits electrons to a select few slices of graphite's energy states (*right*). Depending on the diameter of the tube, one of these slices can include the narrow path that joins electrons with conduction states. This special point, called the Fermi point, makes two thirds of the nanotubes metallic. Otherwise, if the slices miss the Fermi point, the nanotubes semiconduct.



TWISTED NANOTUBES, cut at an angle from graphite (*left*), look a bit like barbershop poles (*center*). The slices of allowed energy states for electrons (*right*) are similarly cut at an angle, with the result that about two thirds of twisted tubes miss the Fermi point and are semiconductors.

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