

Rocks and Geology: General Information

Rocks and Geology with Rachel Micander, NBMG

Rocks are the foundation of the earth. Rock provides the firmament beneath our oceans and seas and it covers 28% of the earth's surface that we all call home.

When we travel any distance in any given direction, it is impossible not to see the tremendous variety in color, texture, and shape of the rocks around us.

Rocks are composed of one or more minerals. Limestone, for example, is composed primarily of the mineral calcite. Granite can be made up of the minerals quartz, orthoclase and plagioclase feldspars, hornblende, and biotite mica. Rocks are classified by their mineral composition as well as the environment in which they were formed. There are three major classifications of rocks: **igneous**, **sedimentary** and **metamorphic**.

A question: Which kind of rock came first? Think about it.....

The following sections describe the conditions and processes that create the landscape we admire and live on here on "terra firma."

IGNEOUS ROCKS

The millions of tons of molten rock that poured out of the volcano Paracutin in Mexico, and from the eruption of Mount St. Helens in Washington State illustrate one of the methods of igneous rock formation.

Igneous (from fire) rocks are formed when bodies of hot liquid rock called magma located beneath the earth's crust, find their way upward through the crust by way of fissures or faults. If the magma reaches the earth's surface, it forms extrusive igneous rocks or volcanic rocks. If the magma cools before it reaches the surface, it forms bodies of rock called intrusive igneous rocks or plutonic rocks.

Extrusive igneous rocks or volcanic rocks are formed from volcanic activity. Most varieties are fine-grained because they cooled very rapidly upon exposure to the surface of the earth. RHYOLITE (Sample 1) is an example of an extrusive igneous rock. It is a light colored rock formed during violent volcanic episodes such as the Mount St. Helens eruptions of May 1980 or the formation of Mammoth Mountain in California's Long Valley Caldera. Rhyolite is similar in composition to granite but has a fine-grained texture. It often contains visible shards of volcanic glass. It is expelled rapidly by the volcanic eruption, cooling and hardening almost immediately. Other rocks formed from this type of volcanic eruption include obsidian and pumice.

Obsidian, sometimes called volcanic glass, results from the rapid cooling of magma. It is a dark, glassy rock that can transmit light when thin chips are found. A mass of this rock makes up Obsidian Cliff in Yellowstone National Park and it also occurs at Obsidian Dome in Mono County, California, north of Mammoth Mountain.

BASALT (Sample 2) is a dark-colored, heavy rock formed from thick, syrupy lava flows. The eruptions that create basalts are less violent than those that create rhyolite but can be equally destructive. Eruptions

from the numerous Hawaiian volcanoes form extensive basalt lava flows. The Columbia Plateau in the northwestern United States is covered with 150,000 square miles of hardened basaltic lava. In places the basalt is one mile thick and is one of the earth's greatest volcanic constructions.

Intrusive igneous rocks form beneath the surface of the earth where slow-moving magma bodies cool before they reach the surface. Intrusive magma forces its way into or between masses of older rock and cools very slowly. As a result of this slow cooling process, intrusive igneous rocks are coarse-grained (the mineral crystals are readily visible to the naked eye or with the assistance of a hand-lens or magnifying glass). These rocks are later exposed at the surface through the processes of uplift and erosion. Granite and diorite are two of the many varieties of intrusive igneous rocks.

GRANITE (Sample 3) is easily recognized because of its speckled appearance. Close examination reveals that the speckling is caused by the different minerals granite is composed of. The light gray glassy mineral is quartz; the milky white or gray mineral is feldspar--in some samples the feldspar can be red or green (those special-colored granites are prized for building stone and for monuments and tombstone materials); the black shiny minerals could be platy mica or blocky hornblende. Granites are formed from magmas that are rich in silica and potassium; relatively poor in calcium, magnesium, and iron. Masses of granite can be found in the Rocky Mountains, the Adirondacks, the Black Hills of South Dakota, the White Mountains of New Hampshire, the Newberry Mountains in southern Nevada and many locations scattered throughout Nevada.

DIORITE (Sample 4) is also a speckled intrusive igneous rock but is noticeably darker in color than granite. The rock is coarse to medium grained with interlocking grains of dark gray plagioclase feldspar, greenish-black hornblende, and less than 10% quartz. Diorite is formed from magmas that are rich in iron, calcium, and magnesium; poor in silica and potassium. Large masses of diorite are found in intrusive igneous (plutonic) mountain ranges such as the Sierra Nevada, the ranges of southern California, and many other locations world-wide.

The differences between extrusive igneous rocks and intrusive igneous rocks result primarily from their mode of formation. Granite, pumice, and rhyolite come from magmas of very similar composition; diorite and basalt come from magmas of very similar composition.

Igneous rocks were the first to appear during the earth-formation process.

SEDIMENTARY ROCKS

Sedimentary rocks are interesting because of their methods of formation. These rocks can be built up under water by the deposition of materials such as sand, clay, mud, pebbles, and gravel. These materials, called **sediments**, are brought to the waters of lakes and oceans by the streams or rivers that flow into them. Wind and moving glaciers are also sediment transportation agents. Repeated freezing and thawing of water in fractures and pore spaces in rocks will cause them to break down over time. All of these processes are collectively known as **weathering** and **erosion**. Other sedimentary rocks are made from the remains of plants and animals such as algae, shells, or ferns. Still others are derived from minerals such as salt or gypsum that were once dissolved in ocean or lake waters. As these sediments accumulate in layers or **beds**, the weight of the newest, youngest beds on top causes pressure on the older beds beneath forcing these older beds to stick together and to harden into rock. During this process, some natural cementing materials such as lime, calcite, and quartz, found in ocean and lake waters, may help cement together coarser materials such as sand and gravel.

The kind of sedimentary rock produced depends on the kinds of materials deposited: very fine grained muds or clays form **SHALE** (Sample 5), cemented sands become **SANDSTONE** (Sample 6), and cemented pebbles or gravel form **CONGLOMERATE** (Sample 7). Clay and lime together form a rock called marl. Seashells provide the material for **LIMESTONE** (Sample 8). Decaying plant and animal remains from swamps and shallow lakes form the parent material for coal. Diatomite is a sedimentary rock composed of the silica-rich remains of algae, which are microscopic, single-celled plants that grow in lakes containing silica-laden water. Diatoms absorb silica from the water they live in and biologically secrete it to form their siliceous shells in a great variety of forms. There are approximately 50,000,000 diatoms in a cubic inch of diatomite.

Sedimentary rocks are very common and many are easy to identify. Shale has a muddy smell when wet, just like the material it was formed from. Sandstone is obviously made of grains of sand (usually quartz). Sometimes the grains are loosely cemented and if two pieces of sandstone are rubbed together, sand grains will be dislodged. Sandstones are often well-sorted which means that the sand grains are mostly all the same size or diameter. Conglomerate, on the other hand, is usually described as poorly-sorted because the materials that make up the rock are of a variety of sizes ranging from clay-size to boulders. Limestone often has visible remains of animals, shells or plants called **fossils**. Sedimentary rocks are derived from previously existing rocks which are decomposed by one of the methods described earlier. Sedimentary rocks may be formed from igneous and metamorphic rocks (described later) or from older sedimentary rocks.

Most sedimentary rocks have a banded, "layer cake" appearance which is due to the difference in materials which were deposited, layer by layer, one on top of another. Each layer tells a unique story about a particular location during various periods in geologic history as the layers are preserved in a chronologic sequence which can be studied, interpreted, and age dated by geologists. One of the most spectacular examples of sedimentary "layer cake" rock formation is found in the walls of the Grand Canyon.

METAMORPHIC ROCKS

In general, it may be said that when any bedrock is subjected to greatly increased pressures, very high temperatures, or both, it may be changed in its physical and chemical properties to become a metamorphic rock. Metamorphic means "a change in form". The pressure increase may be the result of movement of the earth's crust which crumples and folds the bedrock. Increased pressure may also result from deep burial of sediments as younger sedimentary beds are deposited over the top of them. Increases in temperatures may result from friction created by movement or from nearby sources of hot magma. Fluids are often present during the heading process which may alter or re-melt and completely recrystallize previously existing rocks. Metamorphism can effect igneous and sedimentary rocks, and even other metamorphic rocks that were formed earlier in time. **SCHIST** (Sample 9) is a metamorphic rock derived from sedimentary or older metamorphic rocks that have been altered by heat and pressure from nearby intrusive igneous bodies. Schist is identified by its platy appearance due to the parallel orientation of sheets or grains of minerals called **mica**.

Some other examples of metamorphic rocks and rocks from which they were derived are as follows:

<u>Metamorphic Rock</u>	<u>Derived From</u>
SLATE	Shale
QUARTZITE (Sample 10)	Sandstone and other quartz-rich rocks
GNEISS (Sample 11)	Granite and other rocks
MARBLE (Sample 12)	Limestone
ANTHRACITE COAL	Bituminous Coal

Notice that the sample of gneiss has a speckled appearance like granite but that the mineral grains are oriented in parallel bands and the bands are alternately light and dark. The banding is a direct result of pressure and heating (but not to the melting point) which actually changes the structure of the rock. Where there has been movement, mineral grains will turn and flow in the direction of movement.

Notice how much more durable the quartzite is compared to the sandstone. Marble has been converted from limestone and the result is a crystalline rock that is much prized as a building stone and as a carving stone for statuary. Quartzite and marble can often look alike. The hardness test will help identify one from the other: Quartzite is made up of quartz (hardness 7) and marble is composed of calcite (hardness 3). An excellent example of marble is found at the Crestmore quarry just outside Riverside, California. Notable occurrences of metamorphic rocks are found along the length of the San Andreas Fault.

ROCKS AND GEOLOGY EXERCISE

PURPOSE: This exercise will help students to learn about the diversity of rocks, the various environments they were formed, and to identify where various rock types are found in nature.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

ROCKS AND GEOLOGY GENERAL INFORMATION HANDOUT

GEOLOGIC CONDITIONS DRAWING

STICK-ON DOTS (any size from 1/4" to 3/4")

12 SAMPLE ROCK KIT WITH IDENTIFICATION KEY INSERT

INTRODUCTION: Rocks come in every shape, color, texture, and form imaginable. This diversity is the result of several factors: 1) The minerals they are composed of; 2) the environment they were formed in; and 3) the forces of nature that have acted upon them, to name only a few. With this exercise, the students will learn about a variety of geologic environments and will be able to match each of these environments with one of the rock samples included in the "Rock Kit".

INSTRUCTIONS: Have the students read the "Rocks and Geology General Information section. The rocks that are talked about are divided into three categories: IGNEOUS, SEDIMENTARY, AND METAMORPHIC. They should also have the geologic conditions drawing handy so that they can refer to it when reading about a particular environment.

Next, have the students open up the Rock Kit. The rock samples are arranged by category: Samples 1– 4 are igneous, samples 5 – 8 are sedimentary, and samples 9 – 12 are metamorphic. The name of each sample and its number are shown on the label insert for the kit. (Try to avoid mixing up the samples as some of them look alike. RECOMMENDATION: Paint a small spot on each sample using white model paint and ink the sample number on the paint spot.)

Give each student 12 stick-on dots. They can label each dot with a number from 1 to 12, or they can write in the name of each rock type (or abbreviate the names) from the rock kit on the dot.

Have the students stick a dot for each rock type where they think it would occur on the geologic conditions sheet. The Rocks and Geology General Information handout provides a number of clues that will be helpful.