

8.4 Earth's Layered Structure

Earth's interior lies not very far beneath our feet, but we can't reach it. The deepest well has drilled only 12 kilometers into Earth's crust. With such limited access, how do we know what Earth's interior is like? Most knowledge of the interior comes from the study of earthquake waves that travel through Earth.

Layers Defined by Composition

If Earth were made of the same materials throughout, seismic waves would spread through it in straight lines at constant speed. However, this is not the case. Seismic waves reaching seismographs located farther from an earthquake travel at faster average speeds than those recorded at locations closer to the event. This general increase in speed with depth is due to increased pressure, which changes the elastic properties of deeply buried rock. As a result, the paths of seismic waves through Earth are refracted, or bent, as they travel. Figure 14 shows this bending. **Earth's interior consists of three major zones defined by its chemical composition—the crust, mantle, and core.**

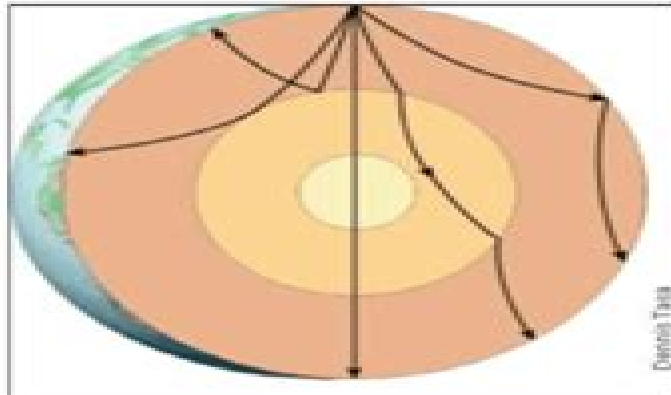


Figure 14 The arrows show only a few of the many possible paths that seismic waves take through Earth. **Inferring** What causes the wave paths to change?

Crust

The crust, the thin, rocky outer layer of Earth, is divided into oceanic and continental crust. The oceanic crust is roughly 7 kilometers thick and composed of the igneous rocks basalt and gabbro. The continental crust is 8–75 kilometers thick, but averages a thickness of 40 kilometers. It consists of many rock types. The average

composition of the continental crust is granitic rock called granodiorite. Continental rocks have an average density of about 2.7 g/cm^3 and some are over 4 billion years old. The rocks of the oceanic crust are younger (180 million years or less) and have an average density of about 3.0 g/cm^3 .

Mantle

Over 82 percent of Earth's volume is contained in the mantle—a solid, rocky shell that extends to a depth of 2890 kilometers. The boundary between the crust and mantle represents a change in chemical composition. The dominant rock type in the uppermost mantle is peridotite, which has a density of 3.4 g/cm^3 .

Section 8 4 Earth Layered Structure Answers

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