Educational Material

Script to Tectonics

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LITHOSPHERIC STRENGTH PROFILES

In order to study the mechanical response of the lithosphere to various types of forces, one has to take into account its **rheology**, which literally means knowing how it flows. As a scientific discipline, rheology describes the interactions between strain, stress and time. Strain and stress depend on the thermal structure, the fluid content, the thickness of compositional layers and various boundary conditions. The amount of time during which the load is applied is obviously an important factor.

- At time scale of seismic waves (up to hundreds seconds) the sub-crustal mantle behaves elastically down deep within the asthenosphere.
- Over a few to thousands of years (e.g. load of ice cap), the mantle flows like a viscous fluid.
- On long geological times (more than 1 million year), the upper crust and the upper mantle behave also as thin elastic and plastic plates that overlie an inviscid (i.e. with no viscosity) substratum.

The dimensionless **Deborah number** $D$, summarized as natural response time/experimental observation time, is a measure of the influence of time on flow properties.

Elasticity, plastic yielding and viscous creep are therefore ingredients of the mechanical behaviour of Earth materials. Each of these three modes will be considered in assessing flow processes in the lithosphere; these mechanical attributes are expressed in terms of **lithospheric strength**. This strength is estimated by integrating yield stress with depth. The current state of knowledge of rock rheology is sufficient to provide broad general outlines of mechanical behaviour, but also has important limitations. Two very thorny problems involve the scaling of rock properties with long time periods and for very large length scales.

ELEMENTS OF RHEOLOGY

**Definitions**

Rheology describes the response of materials to an imposed stress system. This response varies considerably according to the physical conditions of deformation. Deformation can be either recoverable or permanent. Recoverable deformation is described by a time-independent strain-stress relation – when the stress is removed, the strain returns to zero. This includes **elastic** deformation and **thermal expansion**. Permanent deformation includes **plastic** and **viscous flow or creep** as well as **brittle** deformation (cracking, faulting, etc.) and requires time-dependent relations. The flow behaviour of rocks to applied loads is empirically derived from laboratory experiments and can be compared to theoretical **constitutive equations**.

**Gross geological differentiation**

One can observe the nature of the deformation and describe mathematically the specific relationships between stress and strain, more precisely between the rate of application of stress and the rate of deformation, by experimentally subjecting rocks to forces and stresses under controlled conditions. Different rock types respond differently to the forces that act upon them. The response of each rock type depends on the conditions under which the force is applied. As a general observation:

- Under low confining pressures and temperatures like those at shallow depths in the crust, and on short time scales, the sample returns to its original dimensions when the load is removed (the material behaviour is **elastic**) or has deformed by fracturing (the material is **brittle**).
- Under high confining pressures and temperatures like those at greater depths in the crust, the sample deformed, slowly and steadily without fracturing. It behaved as a pliable or mouldable material, that is, it deformed in a **ductile** manner. The deformed sample does not return to its original dimensions when the load is removed. At least part of the strain is permanent. The sample behaved as a **plastic** material.
- Whatever the deformation regime, two layers separated by a “weaker” layer may deform independently; they are decoupled. Conversely, strain and stresses are transmitted across coupled, physically bonded layers. The degree of coupling between the upper and lower crusts as well as between crust and mantle affects the mode of deformation and the structural style at any scale.

In summary, experiments show over all that cold rocks in the upper part of the crust are brittle and hot rocks in the lower part of the crust are ductile. This approximation will permit to outline some of the deformation mechanisms that are thought to exist in the lithosphere. However, deep and hot rocks can also behave elastically when they are deformed very fast. This is why seismic waves can travel through the entire Earth. Therefore, it is indispensable to understand and apply the mathematical models described in this chapter to comprehend and quantify rock behaviour correctly.

### Constitutive equations

Rheological equations are called constitutive equations because they describe time-dependent stress/strain behaviours resulting from the internal constitution of the material, such as thermal energy, pore fluid pressure, grain size, composition, mass, density, etc., and external parameters such as pressure, temperature, chemistry of the environment etc. In other words, constitutive equations involve material (intrinsic) properties and external (extrinsic) conditions. For each constitutive equation, a mechanical analogue will be considered. However, a single equation describing material responses over the wide range of physical conditions would include too many parameters (visco+elasto+plastic rheology with temperature, grain size and pressure dependent viscosity considering strain softening of friction angle) to be practicable. It is more suitable to consider few ideal classes of response (rheologies such as elastic, viscous, plastic, etc.) which some materials display to various degrees of approximation under various physical conditions. For these reasons it is important to distinguish between materials and response.

### Material

#### Mechanical properties

**Homogeneity**

A strictly homogeneous material is one in which all pieces are identical. In other words, material composition and properties are independent of position. Materials are not homogeneous are heterogeneous (inhomogeneous).

**Isotropy**

Homogeneous materials may be mechanically isotropic or, on the contrary, anisotropic. An isotropic material is one in which the mechanical properties are equal in all directions: material properties are independent of the direction in which they are measured. Sandstones and granites can be considered as homogeneous and isotropic materials.

Layered and foliated rocks are statistically homogeneous, anisotropic materials if the scale of the layering or fabric is small relative to the scale of deformation.

**Parameters**

Material parameters are quantities that define some physical characteristics. Parameters such as elasticity, rigidity, compressibility, viscosity, fluidity are actually not constant. They are scalars in isotropic materials and tensors to account for the directional dependence of parameters in anisotropic materials. They also depend on extrinsic parameters such as temperature and pressure and are related to the rheological properties of the material. It is consequently very important to know the physical dimensions of these material parameters.
Types of material responses
Stress will permanently deform a body of material only if the strength of the body is exceeded. In simple terms, strength is the maximum differential stress that a material can support under given conditions. Theoretical continuum deformation can be described with three end-members, rheological behaviours: elasticity, viscous flow and plasticity. These three behaviours refer to three ideal rheological models, which are the characteristic relationships between stress, strain and time, exhibited by analogue objects being deformed. In order to understand deformation in rock, it is convenient to examine separately and in combination the three rheological end-members:
- Reversible elastic rheology, at small stresses and strains
- Irreversible, rate dependent creep (viscous rheology) which is usually thermally activated
- Rate independent, instantaneous yielding at high stresses (plastic rheology), which is often pressure sensitive but temperature independent.
In this introduction, only the one-dimensional macroscopic behaviour will be discussed.

Food for thoughts
Drop on the floor: (1) a jelly bean (or a gum eraser), (2) a rusk or a cracker, (3) a ball of dough (or soft clay or silly putty) and (4) some honey or heavy syrup. They all are submitted to the same gravity forces and they all follow the same trajectory. Describe their difference when they hit the ground, and relate their behaviour to those introduced up to now.

Elastic deformation
Elastic rheology has wide applications in geodynamics and constitutes a fundament to the plate tectonic theory according to which the lithospheric plates do not internally deform significantly over geological time. The compression or extension of a helical spring (Hookean body) demonstrates the linear elastic deformation and response.

Definition
Deformation is perfectly elastic when straining or unstraining takes place instantaneously, spontaneously once the load is applied or removed, and strain is strictly proportional to stress. An elastic medium deforming instantaneously and reversibly under local stresses has no memory of past deformations and stresses. Strain exists only if stress exists, whether deformation occurs in seconds or over million years; elastic deformation is time independent and recoverable. Importantly also, the principal axes of strain must coincide with the principal axes of stress in isotropic materials. An elastic material stores the energy used to deform it. This is important: the elastic energy that was stored during the elastic rock deformation is suddenly released during an earthquake.

Occurrence in rocks
When a seismic (acoustic) wave from an earthquake or an explosion travels through a body of rock, the rock particles are infinitesimally displaced from their equilibrium positions. They return to these positions once the disturbance has passed; there is no permanent distortion of the rock.
The same kind of temporary and totally recoverable deformation occurs if a rock or mineral specimen is loaded axially in the laboratory at relatively low stress (the latter really meaning differential stress) and at low hydrostatic pressures and temperatures. The instant the load is applied, the specimen begins to deform. The ideal relationship between the axial stress and the longitudinal strain is linear. Provided stress and strain remain small, the specimen does not break and instantly returns to its original unstrained size and shape once the deforming load is removed.

**Modulus of elasticity**

The linear relationship between stress and longitudinal strain in tension as well as in compression is written:

\[
\sigma = E \varepsilon = E(\ell - \ell_0)/\ell_0
\]

This equation is the Hooke’s law where:

- \(\sigma\) is the applied stress,
- \(\varepsilon\) is the dimensionless extensional strain, proportional to \(\sigma\),
- \(\ell\) the deformed-state length, \(\ell_0\) the original length, and
- \(E\) is a constant of proportionality (for example the strength of the spring) known as **elasticity modulus** or **Young's modulus**, which has the same dimension ([M][T][L]^{-1}) and unit (Pa) as stress because strain is dimensionless.

Note that \(d \varepsilon / dt = 0\). There are no time-dependent effects.

**Poisson number**

The **Poisson ratio**, \(\nu\), is used to express the relationship between volume change and stress and refers to the phenomenon that elastic materials extended or shortened in one direction are simultaneously shortened or extended along the perpendicular direction. This lateral strain effect is called the **Poisson effect**. The dimensionless Poisson’s number is the ratio of elastic lateral, transverse shortening of an extended rod to its longitudinal extension.

\[
\nu = \frac{\varepsilon_{\text{parallel-to-extensional-stress}}}{\varepsilon_{\text{perpendicular-to-extensional-stress}}}
\]
It follows from equations (1) and (2) that shortening produced by one principal stress in its direction gives rise to tensile strains, equally in the other coordinate directions in isotropic materials:

\[ \varepsilon_{xx} = \frac{\sigma_{xx}}{E}, \quad \varepsilon_{yy} = -\nu \left( \frac{\sigma_{xx}}{E} \right), \quad \varepsilon_{zz} = -\nu \left( \frac{\sigma_{xx}}{E} \right) \]

Since these equations are linear, elastic strain in each principal stress direction is the sum of the strains due to each principal stress:

\[ \varepsilon_{xx} = \left( \frac{1}{E} \right) \left[ \sigma_{xx} - \nu \left( \sigma_{yy} + \sigma_{zz} \right) \right] \]
\[ \varepsilon_{yy} = \left( \frac{1}{E} \right) \left[ \sigma_{yy} - \nu \left( \sigma_{xx} + \sigma_{zz} \right) \right] \]
\[ \varepsilon_{zz} = \left( \frac{1}{E} \right) \left[ \sigma_{zz} - \nu \left( \sigma_{xx} + \sigma_{yy} \right) \right] \]

These equations further show that normal strains are independent of the shear stress components in isotropic materials.

The **Poisson number** shows how much a core of rock bulges as it is shortened. For rocks, it is typically between 0.25 and 0.33, which indicates that lateral strain is about one-quarter of the imposed strain.

**Shear modulus**

Equations (1) and (2) were considering one-dimensional, tensile or compressional experiments. If the deformation is simple shear, the elastic resistance to sliding on a plane is also a constant proportionality: the **shear modulus** \( G \) (also called **rigidity modulus**), expressed in Pa) defined as the ratio of shear stress \( \tau \) to shear strain \( \gamma \):

\[ \tau = G \gamma \]

**Bulk modulus**

In pressure tests, the rock sample is subjected to controlled hydrostatic pressure. As there is volume strain, length strain and shear strain associated with appropriate stresses, a number of other constants replacing \( E \) are defined for isotropic elastic materials.

For a uniform hydrostatic pressure \( P \) producing a uniform dilatation, the **bulk modulus** or **incompressibility** \( K \) is the ratio of the hydrostatic pressure to that dilatation.
\[ P = K \frac{V - V_0}{V_0} = K \frac{dV}{V} \]

where \( V \) and \( V_0 \) are the final and initial volumes, respectively.

The inverse of the bulk modulus \( k = 1/K \) is the compressibility. The units are Pa.

For isotropic elastic materials only two parameters are independent. Therefore, four quantities \( E, \nu, G \) and \( K \) are related by the expressions:

\[ G = E \left[ \frac{2(1 + \nu)}{(1 - 2\nu)(1 + \nu)} \right] = \frac{3K(1 - 2\nu)}{2(1 + \nu)} \]

**Relationship between elastic strain and stress**

For purely elastic deformation, strain directions coincide with stress directions. Normal stresses (e.g. hydrostatic pressure) tend to change the volume of the material and are resisted by the body's bulk modulus, which depends on the Young's modulus and Poisson ratio. Shear stresses tend to deform the material without changing its volume, and are resisted by the body's shear modulus.

**Strain energy**

In an ideal elastic body, all the energy introduced during deformation remains available for returning the body to its original state. This stored, internal strain energy does not dissipate into heat, which makes elasticity the only thermodynamically reversible rheological behaviour.

**Ultimate strength**

A body deforming elastically may brutally break: the stress value at the point of rupture is the ultimate strength.

**Non-linear elasticity**

Some materials have modulus of elasticity that varies with stress and deformation but recover their initial shape along a different stress / strain path than the deformation path. Such materials are elastic with hysteresis.

**Viscous deformation**

The intricately folded rocks that exist in some tectonic environments indicate that under certain conditions rocks can undergo large permanent strains without obvious faulting or loss of material continuity. Most of the structures of interest to geologists involve strains that are permanent and irreversible: There is no recovery (i.e. elimination of strain: the rock remains in a strained state) after removal of the deforming stress. The energy input to deform the rock is principally dissipated into heat. Hence, any rock deforming viscously emits heat.

**Definition**

The ideally viscous (Newtonian) behaviour is best exhibited by the flow of fluids. The compression or extension of a dashpot (Newtonian body), a porous piston that slides in a cylinder containing a fluid, demonstrates this type of deformation and response. When a force is applied to the piston, it moves. The rate at which it moves depends on the stress intensity. The resistance of the fluid to the piston moving through it represents viscous resistance to flow. When the force is removed the piston does not go back: Deformation ceases but is irreversible (non-recoverable) and permanent.

**Viscosity**

The ideally viscous (Newtonian) material is incompressible. In this material, the strain-rate is proportional to the applied stress:

\[ \sigma = \eta \dot{\varepsilon} \]

(3)

Where: \( \dot{\varepsilon} \) is the strain rate (i.e. \( d\varepsilon/dt \), the total strain derivative with respect to time) and, \( \eta \), the constant of proportionality, is the viscosity.
The unit of viscosity has the dimension of stress \([ML^{-1}T^{-2}]\) multiplied by time, therefore \([ML^{-1}T^{-1}]\). It is 1 Pa.s. The bulk viscosity of the mantle is of the order of 10^{21} Pa.s. Typical geological strain rates are 10^{-12} s^{-1} to 10^{-15} s^{-1}.

Equation (3) says that the higher the applied stress, the faster the material will deform. Conversely, a higher flow rate is associated with an increase in the magnitude of shear stress. The total strain is dependent both on the magnitude of the stress and the length of time for which it is applied. Large permanent strains whose amount is a function of time can be achieved. Like for elasticity, strain and stress appear or disappear simultaneously, with the corollary that any deformation along time produces local shear stress.

Note that an ideal viscous fluid has no shear strength and its viscosity is independent of stress. All of the deforming energy is dissipated into heat: the viscous behaviour is dissipative. For anisotropic materials (3) is replaced by a system of nine linear equations.

**Non-linear behaviour**

The linear viscosity is a close approximation to that of real rocks at high temperatures (1000-1500°C) and slow strain rates (10^{-12} to 10^{-14} sec^{-1}). Such physical conditions are found in the lower lithospheric mantle. The viscous behaviour of upper mantle and crustal rocks is complicated by two important facts:

(i) Viscosity is a strong exponential function of temperature (the Arrhenius relationship). Viscosity decreases with temperature.

(ii) The proportionality between stress and strain rate is typically not linear, but governed by a law stating that stress raised to some power is proportional to strain rate. The stress exponent of rocks is typically between 3 and 5, so that the application of a doubled stress results in an 8 to 32 fold increase in strain rate.

The simplest equation to describe the nonlinear behaviour is:

\[
\sigma^n = A\dot{\epsilon} \quad \text{or} \quad \sigma = B\dot{\epsilon}^n
\]  

(4)

where \(A\) and \(B\) are complex material functions. Equations (4), like equation (3), relate the stress to the strain rate. The flow power index \(n\) is a dimensionless material characteristic.
The result is that viscosity of rocks in the related stress-strain rate plot is a curve. Because of the non-linear behaviour of rocks, one uses the effective viscosity $\eta_{\text{eff}}$, which is defined as the ratio of the shear stress to the shear strain rate. The effective viscosity is a material coefficient, not a material property. It is a convenient description of the viscous behaviour under known conditions of pressure, temperature, stress and strain rate. Yet, importantly, the effective viscosity depends itself either on the stress or the strain rate. This is apparent when reformulating equations (4):

\[
\sigma = A\sigma^{1-n}\dot{\varepsilon} \quad \text{or} \quad \sigma = B\dot{\varepsilon}^{n-1}
\]

\[
\sigma = \eta_{\text{eff}}(\sigma)\dot{\varepsilon} \quad \text{or} \quad \sigma = \eta_{\text{eff}}(\dot{\varepsilon})\dot{\varepsilon}
\]

In the corresponding curve one readily sees that the rheology is strain rate hardening because the stress increases with increasing strain rate but it is also viscosity strain rate softening because the effective viscosity decreases (softens) with increasing strain rate.

**Plastic deformation**

Plasticity deals with the behaviour of a solid.

**Definition**

The ideally plastic material is a solid that does not deform until a threshold strength = stress (the yield stress) $\sigma_c$ is reached; the solid is incapable of maintaining a stress greater than this critical value $\sigma_c$. There is no permanent deformation if the applied stress is small (i.e. smaller than the yield stress); at the yield stress, permanent and irreversible deformation proceeds continuously and indefinitely under constant stress (as for viscous deformation); it is therefore theoretically possible to get unlimited plastic deformation. The amount of strain, i.e. of plastic flow is a function of time, increasing as long as the yield stress is maintained. Plastic flow on a macroscopic scale strictly is spatially continuous (uniform). Geologists extended the concept to discontinuous, non-linear frictional sliding (e.g. faulting where the force is not proportional to displacement). In both cases, deformation is a shear strain at constant volume and can only be caused by shear stress. For rocks and soils, so-called non-associated plastic flow laws involve volume change during plastic flow.

**Yield criterion**

Ideal plastic behaviour is rate independent. It assumes that there is no deformation below the yield stress and that during deformation the stress cannot rise above the yield stress, except during
acceleration of the deformation. Yet, strain rate is independent of stress. The constitutive equation where stress for flow is a constant is the **Von Mises yield criterion**:

\[ \sigma \leq K \]

which requires that the magnitude of stress cannot exceed the yield stress \( K = \sigma_c \). This particular stress is the characteristic **strength** of the material. The strength is not a constant but a dependent variable; it is a function of the three principal stresses applied and of the temperature, pressure, of the nature of the material, the chemical composition of the adjacent rocks and, finally, of the history of the deformation (i.e. the intermediate steps followed to attend the yield value). Time does not appear in the constitutive equation. Neither strain nor strain rate is related to stress.

**Model**

The conceptual model to simulate this type of deformation and response is a weight resting on a flat and rough surface (Saint-Venant body). The weight is not displaced as long as the applied force is less than the frictional resistance. At a threshold force the weight begins moving, and a constant force that just overcomes the frictional resistance keeps it moving. When the force is removed or decreases below the threshold magnitude, the weight stays in its new position.

The analogy is not really a case of plastic deformation. It describes the relationships between stress, strain (displacement) and time, but the weight remains undeformed. A plastic body is deformed while displaying similar relationships between stress, strain and time. The flow rule is a function of stress:

\[ \dot{\varepsilon} = \begin{cases} 
0 & \text{if } \sigma \leq K \text{ and } \dot{\sigma} = 0 \\
\Lambda f(\sigma) & \text{if } \sigma = K \text{ and } \dot{\sigma} = 0 
\end{cases} \]

In which \( \Lambda \) is a positive and indeterminate proportionality factor. This indeterminacy, along with the existence of \( K \), distinguish perfectly plastic from viscous materials.

Note that the stress does not determine the strain rate, they are not proportional, but the stress and strain rates behave in an analogous manner. The ideally plastic material displays another characteristic kind of deformation: strain only takes place in localised regions where the critical value of stress is reached.

**Viscoelastic deformation**

Real rocks, whether shallow or deep in the Earth, combine the properties of ideal viscous, plastic and elastic bodies. Their strain has elastic properties on the time scale of seismic waves, and plastic or viscous components or any combination of these behaviours on the long, plate-tectonics time scale.
Rocks are *elasto-visco-plastic*. A material that combines viscous and elastic characteristics is *viscoelastic*. Viscoelastic behaviours are useful in modelling the response of the earth’s lithosphere, which exhibits elastic deformation over a short time-scale but gradually flows on long terms. Mechanical models of such materials are represented by a spring and a dashpot arranged in series or in parallel.

**Firmo-viscous (i.e. strong-viscous) behaviour (Kelvin body)**

A spring and a dashpot in parallel (known as the Kelvin body) simulate the strong-viscous (firmo-viscous) deformation.

When the force is applied both the spring and the dashpot move simultaneously. The deformation (i.e. the displacement) is the same for both. However, the dashpot and spring stresses are in parallel and thus the total stress is the sum of the stress in the spring and the stress in the dashpot. From adding equations (1) and (3), the Kelvin model has the constitutive equation:

\[
\sigma = E \varepsilon + \eta \dot{\varepsilon}
\]

Note that: If \( E \to 0 \) (the spring has zero stiffness), the flow is viscous. If \( \eta \to 0 \) (i.e. for low viscosities) the material is elastic.

Because of the parallel arrangement of the dashpot and the spring, the Kelvin body is characterised by complete recovery of its geometry when an applied force is removed. However, the dashpot retards elastic shortening of the spring. Stress gradually decreases until all of the strain is recovered. When the force is removed, the strain does not immediately disappear. This is known as *elastic after-effect*. Note again that a suddenly applied stress will induce no instantaneous strain because of the dashpot in parallel to the spring.

Some unconsolidated geological materials approximate this behaviour. However, this model is inappropriate to describe large tectonic strains because stresses become excessively large if strain of the elastic spring becomes very large.

**Visco-elastic behaviour (Maxwell body)**

A visco-elastic material basically obeys the viscous law (i.e. strain is a function of time), but behaves elastically at the instant of stress application and for stress of short duration.

**Rheology**

A spring and a dashpot arranged in series (Maxwell body) represent this type of behaviour. This arrangement indicates that the spring and the dashpot take up the same stress (the forces and the stress they represent are equal in the spring and in the dashpot) but the total strain (as well as the strain rate) is the sum of the spring deformation and the dashpot deformation.
This model is befitting large tectonic strains since there is no limitation from the elastic spring. When a Maxwell body is subjected to a stress, the linear strain rate $\dot{\varepsilon}$ is composed of two parts: (1) the spring is instantaneously and elastically extended at a strain rate directly proportional to the stress rate $\dot{\sigma}$; (2) the dashpot responds only to the instantaneous level of stress, and moves at a constant rate controlled by the viscosity for as long as the force is applied. Using equations (1) and (3), the corresponding constitutive equation is:

$$\dot{\varepsilon} = \frac{\dot{\sigma}}{E} + \frac{\sigma}{\eta}$$

Note that:
- If $E \to \infty$ (the spring is rigid), the material behaves like a viscous material for long-term loads.
- If $\eta \to \infty$ (i.e., for high viscosities) the material behaves like an elastic material for loads of short duration.

Note also that, in contrast to the Kelvin body, a suddenly applied stress will induce an instantaneous elastic strain because the spring is free to respond.

**Relaxation time**

For simulating a permanent deformation, the spring is extended and then held at a given extension (i.e., the material is under constant imposed strain). The spring deforms instantaneously and elastically as soon as a constant force $F$ is applied. The spring instantaneously stores energy gradually converted into permanent viscous deformation as the dashpot moves at a constant rate through the fluid until the spring has returned to its unstressed length. Provided no force is still applied, the spring only may recover its original length, but the dashpot maintains some irreversible flow. The viscosity of the liquid retards elastic recovery, which is rapid at first but decays as the tension in the spring decays. When the application of force $F$ stops, stress neither vanishes nor persists; instead it dissipates exponentially. The reduction in stress that occurs with time under a fixed, constant strain or displacement is called **stress relaxation**.
The time taken for the stress to decay to $e^{-1}$ of its initial value is known as the **Maxwell relaxation time** $t_M$. $e$ is the base of natural logarithms. The relaxation time $t_M$ can be obtained by dividing viscosity by the shear modulus:

$$t_M = \frac{\eta}{G}$$

**Exercise**

Calculate the relaxation time for olivine-dominated rocks (Earth mantle):

$G = 10^{12}$ dyn.cm$^{-2}$ and $\eta = 10^{22}$ poise.

The dimensionless **Deborah number** $D$ incorporates both the elasticity and viscosity to characterize the **fluidity** of a visco-elastic material. Its definition is the ratio of a characteristic material time (how long does it take to naturally relax/deform) to a characteristic process/observation time (time of the material response in experimental or numerical tests):

$$D_e = \frac{\mu \dot{\varepsilon}}{G}$$

with $\mu$ the viscosity, $\dot{\varepsilon}$ the strain rate and $G$ the elastic modulus. Small Deborah numbers define viscous materials that easily flow; high Deborah numbers define non-Newtonian to elastic materials.

The Deborah number depends on the observation time. What does it mean? Water behaves as a fluid under natural and “usual” conditions (i.e. above freezing temperatures). As experiment, jump from high into a pool or a river or the sea: you can be injured like if you crashed against a solid. This is “observation time”: fluids behave closer to solids under some circumstances.

**Anelastic deformation (Kelvin-Voigt body)**

Although the pre-seismic strain in the upper crust is mostly recoverable, the complete response of rocks is not instantaneous. This type of non-perfectly elastic behaviour where unstraining is recoverable but not instantaneous (time dependent) is called **anelastic**.

The mechanical model of a standard linear solid comprising a spring (a Hookean body) in series with a unit of parallel dashpot and spring (a firmo-viscous Kelvin body) represents the anelastic behaviour. A plot of strain against time illustrates this for a specimen loaded axially. When the force is applied there is an instantaneous elastic response due to the first spring. Stretching of the second spring is inhibited by the viscosity of the fluid in the dashpot with which it is in parallel. Later flow comprises elastic deformation delayed by the action of viscosity. When the force is removed, there is again an instantaneous elastic response and then the strain decays asymptotically back to zero.
Anelasticity is of great importance in many rock mechanics problems associated with mining, tunnelling and quarrying. Anelastic behaviour is associated with reversible, time-dependent slipping along grain boundaries (internal friction). This strain response absorbs energy from seismic and any sound waves moving through a rock. The magnitude of this attenuation depends on environmental parameters such as temperature, pressure, and the frequency of the propagating wave, for example as they pass through parts of the upper mantle of the earth. This behaviour is also termed recoverable transient creep. The anelastic motion of a fluid phase, either as a melt or a saturated hydrous fluid, will give rise to energy losses from sound waves propagating through a rock and to a parallel decrease in the velocity of the waves through the rock. This phenomenon has been widely postulated as the source of the upper mantle low velocity zone.

**Elasto-plastic behaviour (Prandtl body)**

The elasto-plastic deformation is simulated by the series arrangement of a spring and a weight (the Prandtl body).

Stress below the yield strength first stretches the spring. Then the weight is pulled at yield stress close to the frictional resistance of the weight, and comes to rest in a new position where the stress state is the same as in the initial state. Yield defines the point where permanent deformation begins.
Viscoplastic deformation

To eliminate the indeterminacy on $\dot{\lambda}$ in the flow rule of perfectly plastic materials, one must introduce hardening in the model. The conceptual model (Bingham body) to simulate this type of deformation and response is a weight resting on a flat and rough surface (Saint-Venant body) in parallel with a linear viscous dashpot (Newton body).

If the stress is smaller than the yield stress of the weight, the model is rigid. At the yield stress, an over stress $(\sigma - K)$ is exerted on the dashpot. Accordingly, the flow rule of a viscoplastic material is:

$$\dot{\epsilon} = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } \sigma < K \\ \frac{(\sigma - K)}{\eta} & \text{if } \sigma \geq K \end{cases}$$

Visco-elasto-plastic deformation

If a viscoelastic material has also a yield stress, the behaviour is \textit{visco-elasto-plastic}. Materials that behave in this manner are called Bingham materials. They are represented by a spring, a dashpot and a friction block on a raw surface (Hookean + Newtonian + Saint-Venant bodies) arranged in series or in parallel. The deformation is distributed between the mechanisms according to their material properties.

On applying a load there immediately is elastic deformation (from the spring). If the applied force is greater than friction resistance of the weight, this element will come into play together with the dashpot and visco-plastic flow will take place at a constant rate. The strain/time curve is similar in shape as for an elasto-viscous behaviour in both loading and unloading phases. The main difference is that flow begins only after the force applied on the Bingham material has exceeded the frictional resistance of the Saint-Venant body, which simulates the limit of plasticity. Below this limit, only elastic deformation can take place, whereas flow takes place no matter how low the load is on the elasto-viscous body. In this respect, visco-elasto-plastic models portray the properties of rocks more accurately than other models.
**Brittle / ductile behaviour**

Rocks like many usual materials are reacting in an elastic manner only for small strains. When the yield stress is attended, there are two possible behaviours:

- rupture, when the continuity of the deformation is lost. This behaviour is **brittle**, where elastic deformation leads to *failure* before plastic deformation and the material loses cohesion through the development of *fractures* or *faults*.
- a plastic, irreversible flow (*creep*) while, apparently, the continuity holds. The deformation is quite similar to the usual viscous flow, but it can be observed only when the yield stress is attended. This behaviour is **ductile**.

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**Brittle behaviour**

The maximum stress a rock can withstand before beginning to deform permanently (inelastic behaviour) is its *yield point*, or *elastic limit*.

At this stress level, and at low confining pressure and low temperature, most rocks and minerals break into fragments. Localised deformation at the yield stress is permanent; therefore, the brittle behaviour yields a plastic deformation. With this definition, brittle behaviour refers to a state of stress at which rupture, i.e. loss of cohesion occurs.

The brittle mode of deformation includes both fracturing and sliding, hence governs the development of joints and faults. Open fractures are generally parallel to the axis of loading and there is no offset parallel to the fracture surface. Faults are inclined to the axis of loading, and show a localised offset parallel to their surface.

**Cataclastic flow** is achieved by distributed fracturing and the relative movement of rock fragments. The mechanical properties of rocks deforming in the brittle regime are nearly insensitive to temperature, but very sensitive to strain rate and confining pressure. Indeed, friction critically depends on the pressure acting across planes. Therefore, the fracture strength of rocks at the Earth's surface is the lowest and is controlled by the failure criteria only, but it increases with depth due to increasing *lithostatic pressure*. In reality, friction is controlled at any depth by the *effective pressure*, the difference between the lithostatic pressure and the *pore fluid pressure* acting against it.

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**Ductile behaviour**

The **ductile** behaviour is a non-mechanistic, phenomenological term to describe the non-brittle modes of deformation; rocks exceeding their yield point deform by distributing the permanent strain in a smoothly varying manner throughout the deformed mass without any marked discontinuity. The term *ductility* is used in geology to indicate the capacity (% of strain) of a rock to undergo permanent deformation.
deformation without the development of macroscopic fractures. The term does not refer to the microscopic deformation mechanisms:

- **Ductile flow** commonly involves deformation of individual grains by a number of solid state deformation mechanisms such as crystallographic slip, twinning, or other processes in which atomic diffusion plays a part.

- **Diffusion flow** refers to transport of material from one site to another. The three diffusion processes are volume diffusion, grain-boundary diffusion and pressure solution. A set of conditions (relative heat, pressure, time, fluids, etc.) must be met before the rock deforms.

- **Granular flow** applies to pervasive microcracking permitting movement of microfragments and grains, what is often compared to the flow of dry sand. Grain boundary sliding plays a major role. The mechanism under high confining pressure is sometimes called **superplastic flow** to account for friction on the moving particle (grain) boundaries.

The ductile behaviour is dominantly temperature-dependent and prevails in the deeper crustal and lithospheric levels or in regions with a high thermal gradient. The stress magnitude, strain rate and the mineral composition of the rock medium are other important controlling parameters. The effect of increased temperature and decreased strain rate is to promote **thermally activated** processes such as crystal slip and atomic diffusion. Creep is the time-dependent flow of solid material under constant stress. Creep can be by viscous or by plastic flow. **Plasticity** refers to the property of crystals to deform permanently by slip along lattice planes. **Crystal plasticity** is basically due to the movement of dislocations and is not systematically proportional to time.

![Diagram](image)

Provided the temperatures are sufficient, rocks begin to creep at low stresses. It means that ductile parts of the lithosphere are very weak in comparison to the elastic-rigid lithospheric parts and may be treated as viscous at long time scales.

**Brittle-ductile transition**

The effect of increased confining pressure is to inhibit fracturing and cracking. As the confining pressure (i.e. the lithostatic pressure in the Earth) is increased the behaviour of rocks passes through a transition from brittle to ductile behaviour for each particular type of rock. This **brittle-ductile transition** is generally placed at the lower limit of most crustal seismicity. This transition is not sharp, nor is it a consistent depth or temperature. It is a function not only of hydrostatic pressure, but of temperature and of strain rate as well. In general, the lower the temperature and hydrostatic pressure, and the higher the strain rate, the more likely is a rock to behave in a brittle manner. On the other hand, the higher the temperature and hydrostatic pressure and the lower the strain rate (or the longer time the stress is applied), the more likely is a rock to behave in a ductile manner. In reality, there is a broad transition between brittle and ductile behaviours, where “semi-brittle” or “semi-ductile” deformation involves a mixture of frictional sliding and ductile flow on the microscale.
STRESS AND STRAIN IN ROCKS

Rocks and minerals are natural solid materials. To investigate the behaviour of rocks and relate strain and strain rates with stress, one need to experimentally deform rocks under varied and controlled conditions of temperature, pressure, fluids and time. Such experiments are the foundation of rock mechanics.

Most mechanical tests consist in compressing a small cylindrical rock sample along its axis with a piston while exerting a confining pressure to all sides of the sample with a pressurised fluid. The fluid, contained in a pressure chamber, transmits a uniform confining pressure to the rock cylinder through an impermeable, flexible sleeve called jacket, made of a material (usually copper) sufficiently weak at experimental conditions to not distort measurements. The confining pressure simulates the pressure to which rocks deep in the Earth are subjected, i.e. the weight of the overlying rock. The axial compression replicates a geologically realistic tectonic force. This experimental
setting is known as **triaxial test** because it allows predetermining stress to be applied along each of the three principal axes, with the main compression oriented parallel to the cylinder long axis. However, two of the principal stresses are equal to the confining pressure. The stress along the axis of the cylinder is calculated knowing the axial force applied by the pistons and the area of the cylinder extremities. The difference between the axial stress and the confining pressure is the differential stress \( \sigma_1 - \sigma_3 \). Pore pressure, if necessary, is introduced through additional devices. By varying any or all the pressures (axial load, confining and pore pressures), one can obtain different stress configurations: The axial stress can be either larger (compression) or smaller (tensile) than the confining pressure. Axial loading allows only few % of strains. Experiments reaching high shear strains are in torsion, whereby samples are twisted between coaxially rotating plates. Results are graphically displayed in diagrams where the differential stress \( \sigma_1 - \sigma_3 \) is plotted against the strain \( \varepsilon \), which is calculated from the measured displacement of the piston \( \Delta\ell \) reported to the initial length of the specimen \( \ell_0 \): \( \varepsilon = \Delta\ell / \ell_0 \). This displacement is timed to access strain rate. The detailed shape of the stress/strain curve depends on the rate of loading, and on other parameters that will be discussed after a general description.

**Constant strain-rate experiments - Effects of variation in stress**

In constant strain rate experiments, the piston of the machine moves at a constant rate throughout the experiment. The specimen deforms at a constant rate. In order to maintain this rate, the stress is allowed to vary and this is recorded. Three main fields in terms of progressive increase in tension (elastic, viscous and final break = ultimate failure) can be identified on a typical strain-time diagram.

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**Elasticity limit**

Starting from the origin, i.e. at the onset of experiment, the stress-strain graph begins with a straight linear segment along which the strain increment is proportional to the stress increment. The sample recovers its initial size as soon as the load is removed.
This linear plot documents that the rock first deforms as a perfectly elastic material. The stress corresponding to the end of this linear section is called **proportionality limit**. For slightly larger values of differential stress, a change in slope of the stress-strain graph indicates the beginning of permanent deformation: The stress is no longer proportional to strain. The point where permanent strain begins is the **yield point** (corresponding to a **yield stress**). This critical stress is generally difficult to identify accurately because the stress-strain graph starts to curve rather gradually. In most materials the proportionality and the yield points are practically the same. For other materials, such as rubber, the segment of the stress-strain graph between the proportionality limit and the higher yield point documents inelasticity (i.e. non-linear elasticity).

### Strain hardening
Continuing an experiment at low temperatures, the slope of the stress-strain graph of many materials diminishes but remains positive beyond the yield point. An ever-increasing (but slower than in the elastic domain) stress is required for deformation to increase from the yield point onward. The material exhibits essentially ductile behaviour while undergoing irreversible deformation. This effect is the **strain hardening**.

Strain hardening reflects intracrystalline deformation. Deformation displaces atoms of the crystal lattice with the introduction of dislocations, which in turn create local elastic strain. The movement of these dislocations (**dislocation glide**) results in permanent deformation. The dislocation density increases, hence the elastic energy in the crystal lattice increases during hardening, which explains why the material becomes stronger. Inversely, strain hardening can be suppressed by prolonged but moderate heating (**recovery**) or by intense heating that induces a total recrystallization of the material (**annealing**).

### Resilience
Strain hardening is responsible for another phenomenon. If load is removed during an experiment, the unloading stress-strain curve is linear and has the same slope as its initial, elastic part, down to the strain axis. Elastic strain is recovered but strain due to ductile-plastic deformation remains. Unloading does not interrupt the stress-strain curve. If a load is reapplied to the same sample, it follows the same line as the unloading path up to the point where unloading was prompted. Re-initiated deformation is again elastic, but the new elasticity limit is higher than the first one (note that the slope, the elasticity modulus, remains the same, though). Then the strain hardening curve resumes.
The yield strength of the specimen has increased (work hardening) because the original fabric, thus properties of the sample, has been modified by permanent plastic deformation. The rock has acquired more resilience.

Resilience is the strain energy stored per unit volume of material before failure. Elastic materials give back the strain energy they absorbed when load is removed before failure.

**Stress relaxation**

If the experiment is interrupted and the specimen held at constant strain, the stress will relax slowly. If loading is resumed, the specimen will behave as if it had been unloaded and reloaded elastically up to the point where straining was interrupted. Stress relaxation does not interrupt the stress-strain curve.
**Steady state**
The yield strength is a variable that depends on the past plastic deformation of the sample. At high temperatures or slow strain rates, the curve becomes horizontal from the yield point onward: no strain hardening accompanies permanent deformation, and conditions approach steady state. Strain increases indefinitely with no increase in stress. This slow deformation, known as creep, is the essential characteristic of plastic strain. A perfectly plastic material is in steady state at the yield stress, and from that point on the stress-strain graph.

Steady state follows minor strain softening in most rocks.

**Strain softening**
Above a second critical value of highest stress known as the ultimate strength, the stress-strain curve may descend either to a plateau value or (ultimately and) to a failure point. The material needs progressively lower stresses to further deform. This behaviour is called strain softening.

**Failure**
The stress-strain curve falls to finish the experimental strain softening or steady state. The material exhibits accelerated viscous flow (necking for tension experiments) leading to rupture at the failure stress. Breakage of the sample occurring before the yield point is brittle failure.

**Shear fracture criteria**
At rupture, the normal stress $\sigma_N$ and the shear stress $\sigma_S$ acting on a plane are related by an equation of the form:

$$\sigma_S = f(\sigma_N)$$

and experiments have shown that, for materials with no cohesion strength such as soils, the relationship is

$$\sigma_S = \sigma_N \tan \phi$$

where $\phi$ is known as the angle of internal friction (it is in this linear equation the slope of a line). The term internal friction describes a material property of slip resistance along the fracture.

**Coulomb criterion**
Coulomb proposed in 1773 that shear fracture occurs when the shear stress on a potential fault plane reaches and overcomes a critical value. The relationship (6) becomes the Coulomb failure criterion:

$$\sigma_S = c + \mu \sigma_N$$

where $c$ is a material constant known as the cohesion or the shear strength;

$\mu$ is another material constant known as the coefficient of internal friction equivalent to the term $\tan \phi$ seen for soils.

Equation (7) assumes that shear fracture in solids involves two factors: breaking cohesive bonds between particles of intact rock (the $c$ term), together with frictional sliding (the term $\mu$, proportional to the normal compressive stress $\sigma_N$ acting across the potential fracture plane). This physical interpretation predicts a linear increase of rock strength with normal stresses acting on the rock and fits reasonably well much experimental data. Experiments provide cohesive strength of the order of 10-20 MPa for most sedimentary rocks and 50 MPa for crystalline rocks. The average angle of internal friction is 30°.

The Coulomb criterion predicts that shear fractures form at less than 45° to $\sigma_1$ because of the positive slope of the shearing resistance curve and the symmetrical shape of the shear stress curve. This
criterion, also termed Mohr-Coulomb and Navier-Coulomb yield criterion, governs the creation of a new fracture.

**Byerlee’s law**

The frictional strength on fault planes is generally constant. The coefficient of internal friction $\mu$ on existing fractures in consolidated rocks determines which shear stress is required to cause further movement on the fault planes:

$$\sigma_S = \mu \sigma_N$$

(8)

This equation, usually valid when two rough surfaces are in contact, is known as Amonton’s law. A direct consequence of this law (and the Coulomb criterion) is that the shear stress required for sliding is independent of the surface contact area and increases with normal stress, therefore with confining pressure. The parameter $\mu$, in this general sense, is also referred to as the **coefficient of static friction**.

James Byerlee, an American geophysicist, compiled experimentally determined values of the shear stress required for frictional sliding on pre-cut fault surfaces in a wide range of rock types. He found two best-fit lines that depend on the confining pressure. For confining pressures corresponding to shallow crustal depths (up to $200 \text{ MPa} \approx 8 \text{ km}$), $\mu = 0.85$ and equation (8) becomes:

$$\sigma_S = 0.85 \sigma_N$$

(9)

Two diagrams actually illustrate this linear function. The first one refers to very low (<5 MPa) normal stress conditions. The second one fits laboratory results generated under higher (up to 100 MPa) normal stress conditions.

The second one fits laboratory results generated under higher (up to 100 MPa) normal stress conditions.
The large scatter of data point under very low normal stress reflects surface roughness, the area of contact of the asperities, less influential under higher confining pressure because the latter prevents dilatancy of the shear fracture, hence unlocking of interwoven surface irregularities. Instead, shearing and smearing of asperities tends to stabilize frictional properties.

For confining pressures between 200 and 2000 MPa, the frictional strength of pre-cut rocks is better described by including a "cohesion-like" parameter:

\[ \sigma_S = 50\text{MPa} + 0.6\sigma_N \]  \hspace{1cm} (10)

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The Byerlee’s law refers to equations (9) and (10), together. They are empirical and indicate that the shear stress required to activate frictional slip along a pre-existing fracture surface is largely insensitive to the composition of the rock. These laws seem to be valid for normal stresses up to 1500 MPa and temperatures < 400°C, which allows defining a lower boundary to stresses acting in the brittle lithosphere.

**Constant stress experiments - Ductile flow**

Deformation experiments lasting for days at constant differential stress and temperature produce very slow, continuous and plastic creep (time-dependent flow) of the sample. The resulting strain / time curve can generally be divided, after the initial elastic response, into three regions representing decelerating, steady (constant rate) and accelerating creep:

- In the first region, the slope of the curve (i.e. the strain rate) decreases progressively; this decelerating behaviour is called **primary** or **transient creep**; it is logarithmic because the total strain increases with the logarithm of time. The phenomenon of decreasing creep rate at constant stress is called **cold working**, a strain hardening because the material becomes less ductile with increasing strain. Primary creep is reversible if experimental load is ended, visco-elastic strain being slowly removed after instantaneous retrieval of the elastic strain. Primary creep strain is usually < 1% of the sum of the three creep regions.
- In the second, usually largest regions of creep curves, the slope (strain rate) is constant and residual, plastic strain is irrecoverable; this linear flow behaviour is called **secondary** or **steady-state creep**. Even with a constant stress steady-state creep could continue indefinitely. It may represent the long-term deformation processes that occur within the Earth over geological times without failure. Therefore it is the part of the experiment that interests most geologists. The material behaves like a viscous, yet non-Newtonian fluid. As a first order but approximate explanation, steady-state creep results from recovery processes (mostly thermal softening) balancing strain hardening (due to dislocations) as it appears.

- In the third region, not always observed or absorbing a very small amount of strain, the strain rate increases exponentially until **rupture** of the specimen. Accelerating flow is mainly caused by the spread of microfractures or slip surfaces through the rock in such a way that they link up (accumulating damage) to form continuous pervasive cracks causing loss of cohesion, and failure; this is called **tertiary** or **accelerating creep**.

### Failure criteria
Ductile isotropic materials have equal or nearly equal strength values in uniaxial tension and uniaxial compression. Yield is generally caused by the slip of crystal planes along the plane of maximum shear stress. Therefore, and independent from the state of stress, a given point in the an isotropic body does not deform plastically as long as the maximum shear stress at that point is under the yield shear stress, which defines plasticity.

**Tresca criterion**
The maximum shear stress criterion, known as Tresca criterion, assumes that the differential stress and the maximal principal stress are smaller than the plastic, yield shear strength \( K \):

- In uniaxial compression: \( \sigma_1 \leq K \)
- In uniaxial tension: \( \sigma_3 \leq K \)
- In general: \( (\sigma_1 - \sigma_3) \leq K \)

Graphically, this criterion requires that the two principal stresses plot within an irregular hexagon of a two-dimensional space.

The six-sided prism in the two-dimensional stress space is an hexagone of infinite length in the along the hydrostatic axis, inclined at 45° to all principal stress axes (planes of maximum resolved shear stress are at 45° to stress axes).
**Von Mises criterion**

The maximum distortion energy (a.k. von Mises) criterion, states that ductile failure occurs when the energy of distortion per unit volume of isotropic material reaches the same energy for yield/failure. Mathematically, this is expressed as

\[
\frac{1}{2} \left[ (\sigma_1 - \sigma_2)^2 + (\sigma_2 - \sigma_3)^2 + (\sigma_3 - \sigma_1)^2 \right] \leq K^2
\]

The left side of this equation is known as equivalent stress, and the equation holds regardless the relative magnitudes of \(\sigma_1\), \(\sigma_2\) and \(\sigma_3\). In plane stress, \(\sigma_2 = 0\) and the criterion reduces to:

\[
\sigma_1^2 - \sigma_1\sigma_3 + \sigma_3^2 \leq K^2
\]

This equation represents a principal stress ellipse in which the Tresca hexagon is inscribed. This geometrical relationship shows that the maximum shear stress criterion is more conservative than the von Mises criterion since it lies inside the von Mises ellipse. Like for the Tresca criterion, the ellipse has infinite length in the \(\sigma_1 = \sigma_2 = \sigma_3\), i.e. the hydrostatic axis direction (the ellipse actually is an oblique section of an infinite cylinder).

Deformation tests yield results better reproduced by the von Mises stress than by the Tresca criterion.

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**Steady-state creep function**

Creep mechanisms depend strongly on temperature. Dislocation glide is dominant in the lower temperature range, giving way to dislocation and lattice diffusion (Nabarro-Herring) creep at increasing temperature, followed by grain boundary diffusional (Coble) creep at very high temperature. These mechanisms are not described here. In general, the differential stress \((\sigma_1 - \sigma_3)\) is related to the rate of steady state creep \(\dot{\varepsilon}\) by the non-linear, empirical (phenomenological) equation of the form:

\[
\dot{\varepsilon} = A\sigma^n d^{-m} \text{fluid} \exp\left(-\frac{Q}{RT} + pV\right)
\]

where
- \(A\), the **frequency factor**, is a material constant defined for the particular creep mechanism in \(Pa^{-n} \cdot s^{-1}\).
- \(\sigma\) the differential stress
- \(n\) is also an experimentally determined constant depending on the material and the creep mechanism; it commonly varies between 3 and 5, but can be higher for dislocation glide.
- \(d\) is the grain size with exponent \(-m\)
$f_{\text{fluid}}$ is the fluid fugacity (generally water) with exponent $r$.

$Q$ is a creep activation energy, a constant that must be determined experimentally. $Q$ has a unit of kcal (or Joules) / mole.

$p$ is pressure

$V$ is the activation volume

$R$ is the gas constant (in $J \cdot mol^{-1} \cdot K^{-1}$).

$T$ is the absolute temperature in Kelvin.

Grain size and fluid fugacity have nearly no effect on dislocation creep because it results from practically rigid displacement of matter by motion of within crystal lattice defects (the dislocations). The generalized equation is thus reduced to:

$$\dot{\varepsilon} = \frac{d\varepsilon}{dt} = A (\sigma_1 - \sigma_3)^n \exp \left( \frac{-Q}{RT} \right)$$

The right part of equation (11), referred to as Weertman equation, implies that viscosity decreases exponentially with temperature. High temperature diffusion creep involves the additional grain size, power law dependency and $A$ includes a diffusion coefficient. Since diffusion implies material transport on the scale of the grain, coarser grains lead to slower creep rates.

Equation (11) can be rearranged into logarithm form:

$$\ln \dot{\varepsilon} = \ln A + n (\ln \sigma) - \frac{Q}{RT}$$

The thermal activation energy $Q$ can be obtained from the gradient $-Q/R$ of the natural log-linear of creep rate plotted against the reciprocal of temperature.

The stress exponent $n$ can be determined by plotting the strain rate as a function of stress in a log/log diagram.

The steady-state rheology of rocks is of great importance to establish constitutive relationships involving stress, strain-rate and intrinsic flow parameters. One particular strain rate yields only one particular deviatoric stress in steady state. A power law with $n = 3$ is often used to represent mantle rocks.
Effects of strain-rate

If $n = 1$ in equation (11), then the stress is proportional to the strain rate and the material behaves like a Newtonian, perfectly viscous fluid (equation 3). The viscosity of rocks with $n > 1$ is characteristically dependent on the strain-rate. The strain rate $\dot{\varepsilon}$ is related to the applied stress by the power law expressed in equation (4):

$$\sigma^n = A\dot{\varepsilon}$$

with $A = A\exp \frac{-Q}{RT}$ of equation (11), a function of material properties, pressure and temperature. Since the proportionality between strain rate and stress is non-linear, only the effective viscosity can be defined according to:

$$\eta_{\text{eff}} = \sigma/\dot{\varepsilon} = A^{1/n}\dot{\varepsilon}^{(1/n)-1}$$

It results from equation (12), a small increase in the strain-rate results in a rapid decrease of the effective viscosity, provided $n > 1$. For this reason, the effective viscosity is also called stress dependent or strain rate-dependent viscosity.

Effects of material components and environmental parameters

All effects reported in this paragraph differ from rock to rock, shales showing some particularity. However, behaviours are generally comparable in shape if not in values, and descriptions are summaries that do not document detailed material properties and responses to varying parameters.

Effect of temperature

Increasing the temperature under constant loading conditions reduces the yield stress without changing the shape of the stress-strain curve. For example, the yield stress of marble at 800°C is about one-sixth of its value at room temperature. Lowering the yield stress has for effect to enlarge the field of ductile, permanent deformation at the expense of the elastic and failure fields. Moreover, the rate at which the material deforms under a given applied stress is increased while strain hardening is reduced or even eliminated. Consequently the material shows an increase in ductility (i.e. the % of strain a rock can take without fracturing at a macroscopic scale). A simplified explanation is that heat weakens the bonds between the atoms without breaking them. The temperature effect is well known to blacksmiths who heat metals to fashion ironwork out of a ductile material that does not break. Similarly, the Earth’s internal heat renders brittle rocks more ductile.
These observations are consistent with the geological observation of metamorphic rocks deformed at elevated temperature and pressure. These exhibit much more ductile structures than do the equivalent rocks at the surface. In fact, temperature affects all properties and rocks (importantly density) and therefore the mechanical properties of lithosphere.

The geothermal gradient, i.e. the distribution of temperature with depth, varies between 15°C/km in stable cratons and 35°C/km in much thinned crust. Theoretical considerations refer to two types of geothermal gradients:
- Steady state geothermal gradients are those for which the temperature at any given depth does not change through time.
- Transient geothermal gradients are those for which the temperature at any given depth varies through time.

Steady state geothermal gradients are valid for instantaneous or short-lived processes; it is obvious that all parameters, including temperature and depth vary over long-lasting geological processes. This variation depends on processes producing, consuming, or transporting heat at the same time. In the lithosphere the main mechanisms are heat conduction, heat advection and the heat production from the decay of radioactive elements.

Geothermal gradients are not linear, in particular for the continental crust whose upper parts are enriched in incompatible elements (large radius elements such as U, Th and K) which tend to be transported in melt. Due to repeated events of melting / magmatism, the continental radiogenic heat production decreases with depth.

**Effect of hydrostatic (confining) pressure**

Rocks deeply buried in the crust are subjected to the **lithostatic pressure** (the vertical normal stress $\sigma_{zz}$) which can be assumed to be effectively hydrostatic (i.e. equal in all directions), and simply related to the thickness and mean density of the overlying column of rock. Accordingly, the lithostatic pressure is generally calculated by a simple integration:

$$P_{\text{lith}} = g \int_0^z \rho(z) \, dz$$

with $\rho$ rock densities, $g$ the gravitational acceleration and $z$ the depth.

Variations in **confining pressure** are experimentally introduced to reproduce pressures deep in the crust and mantle. The hydrostatic stress (the experimental confining pressure) causes elastic volume changes which depend on the compressibility of the material. The size of these volume changes is negligible except at great depth.
Realistic confining pressures for most naturally deformed crustal rocks increase approximately by 26 MPa/km in the crust and by 35 MPa/km in the mantle. The pressure at the base of a 35 km thick crust is about 10 GPa.

A more important aspect of increasing confining pressure is to cause a significant, in general almost linear increase in both the yield stress and the failure stress, giving the material a higher effective strength whether in compression or in extension. In other words, increasing the confining pressure allows a greater amount of strain to accumulate before failure; it increases the rock ability to flow ductilely.
To give a simplified explanation, moderate lithostatic pressures near the Earth’s surface allow the atoms of stressed rocks to move freely and easily break their bonds; as a result, near-surface rocks under sufficient stress can undergo brittle failure. The same rock at several kilometres depth would deform ductile instead, because the greater lithostatic pressure impedes breakage of chemical bonds.

The dihedral angle between conjugate fractures widens with increasing confining pressure. The experimental observation is consistent with the Mohr criterion of failure.

**Effect of pore-fluid pressure and impurities**

Since the fluid pressure is hydrostatic and opposed to the lithostatic pressure, increasing pore pressure is equivalent to decreasing confining pressure. Fluids in rocks reduces both the rock strength (failure occurs at lower differential stress) and its ductility (failure occurs at lower strain). The combined reduced ductility and strength promotes flow under high pore pressure.

The presence of a fluid phase in rocks undergoing deformation is important in two ways.  
- Firstly it can promote mineralogical reactions, particularly at elevated temperatures, which affect the mechanical properties of the rock.  
- Secondly, it can reduce the effect of the lithostatic or confining pressure (the effective normal stresses) by countering the direct pressure between adjoining grains by the power of the pore-fluid pressure.

The chemical effect is often small compared to the mechanical influence of the pore-fluid pressure, which is expressed by:

\[ P_{\text{eff}} = P_{\text{lith}} - P_{\text{fluid}} \]  \hspace{1cm} (14)

where \( P_{\text{eff}} \) is the effective pressure on the solid material, \( P_{\text{lith}} \) is the confining pressure, and \( P_{\text{fluid}} \) the fluid pressure.

A coefficient of fluid pressure, \( \lambda \) is often used to denote the ratio of fluid pressure and lithostatic load)

\[ \lambda = P_{\text{fluid}}/P_{\text{lith}} \]  \hspace{1cm} (15)
Exercise

Calculate the coefficient of fluid pressure in the upper part of the crust, where fractures reach the surface. Bulk rock density is 2400 kg.m⁻³. Water density = 1000 kg.m⁻³, builds columns in open fractures, \( \lambda = 0.42 \)

For saturated rocks, in which the pore-fluid pressure may be very high, the effect of the confining pressure is cancelled out and the rock strength is reduced to near-surface conditions. In boreholes, high \( P_{\text{fluid}} \) may cause fracturing of the casing or wall rocks, whereas low \( P_{\text{fluid}} \) are responsible for blow-out and borehole closure.

The effect of high fluid pressure on rocks at elevated temperature is illustrated by the stress-strain curves for wet and dry quartz crystals. The yield stress at 950°C in wet quartz is only about one-tenth of that required for the dry quartz at the same temperature. The ductility in this case is increased by the presence of water, which explains why certain materials, normally strong even at high temperature, can flow under metamorphic conditions in the presence of aqueous fluids.

![Stress-strain curves of wet and dry quartz crystals](image)

By comparison, the activation energy in equations (10) and (12) is dependent on any fluid phase or impurity, for example such as depending on the diffusion of CO₂ through the calcite structure, or amounts of (OH) in the quartz structure. Impurities usually lower the yield stress values and increase the field of viscosity in the stress-strain curves.
Effects of strain-rate

Under similar temperature and confining pressure conditions, rocks change from ductile to brittle with increasing strain rate. This corresponds to a reduction of ductility. The increased contribution of cataclasis is particularly important at lower confining pressure, which favours granulation and subsequent dilation accompanying brittle grain rotation.

If \( n = 1 \) in equation (11), then the stress is proportional to the strain rate and the material behaves like a Newtonian, perfectly viscous fluid (equation 3). The viscosity of rocks with \( n > 1 \) is characteristically dependent on the strain-rate. The strain rate \( \dot{\varepsilon} \) is related to the applied stress by the power law expressed in equation (4):

\[
\sigma^n = A\dot{\varepsilon}
\]

with \( A = A \exp\left(-\frac{Q}{RT}\right) \) of equation (11), a function of material properties, pressure and temperature.

Since the proportionality between strain rate and stress is non-linear, only the effective viscosity can be defined according to:

\[
\eta_{\text{eff}} = \sigma/\dot{\varepsilon} = A^{1/n} \dot{\varepsilon}^{(1/n)-1}
\]

It results from equation (12), a small increase in the strain-rate results in a rapid decrease of the effective viscosity, provided \( n > 1 \). For this reason, the effective viscosity is also called stress dependent or strain rate-dependent viscosity.
The constant $A$ also depends on the deformation mechanisms (intra-/inter-crystalline, diffusion etc) which, in turn, depend on the rock type and on the conditions of deformation. For any of these non-linear mechanisms, changes in strain rate alter significantly the strength of rock. This is opposed to cataclastic flow, which is time, hence strain rate independent.

**Time factor**

Time plays a prominent role in deformation. Rapid loading of rate-sensitive materials exhibit different stress-strain curves than those obtained under slow loading. Experimentally, the effect of a slow strain rate is analogous to increasing temperature: Decreasing strain rate decreases the rock strength and increases ductility. Values of the yield and ultimate strengths of rocks are much higher if measured over short time periods than over geologically significant time periods. Ductile flow has been observed to take place under a constant long-term load whose value is considerably lower than the elastic and plastic limits (e.g. bending of graves and candles under their own weight). Accordingly, rocks under geological load flow much below the yield strength measured under experimental conditions of temperature and confining pressure comparable to those in the earth.

**Plastic properties of rocks**

The rheology of polymineralic rocks is controlled by the behaviour of the weakest mineral phase, on condition that it constitutes an interconnecting network in a rock, commonly above 30 volume %. Since natural rocks are mostly polycrystalline materials, some mathematical techniques, like those of Reuss and Voigt, have been designed to “average” material properties of each constituting phase and by such means approximate perhaps better the bulk rock behaviour. These techniques consider the volume fractions of the various components, their physical properties and their relative arrangement. For sake of simplicity, we introduce the topic by considering mixtures of two linear, isotropic, purely elastic or purely viscous phases only. The Reuss and Voigt calculations produce lower and upper “bounds” of the possible effective parameter under investigation, while the real answer might lie between these two solutions.

**STRENGTH PROFILES**

Knowing the amounts and rates of displacements involved in plate tectonics, the rheology of the lithosphere has been assumed to be viscous. However, several types of observations show that the rheology changes with depth. Geologists observed that rocks from shallow crustal levels have deformed in a brittle fashion, while rocks from lower crustal levels deformed in a ductile manner. Supportively seismicity occurs within the upper crust in both strong and thin oceanic lithospheres and comparatively weaker and thicker continental lithospheres. Rheological models of the lithosphere should account for these variations. They are graphically summarized as strength versus depth profiles called **yield-strength envelopes**.

Strength profiles use intuitive relationships on the constitutive relationships that govern the rheology of rocks. The first intuitive principle is that of minimum effort: a rock will break if it requires less stress than to flow and vice-versa, according to physical conditions considered. At least two contrasting and superposed lithospheric regions are distinguished: (1) pressure-controlled regions of elastic-rigid behaviour where it is easier to obey laws for the fracture strength, and (2) temperature-controlled parts with ductile (viscous or plastic), non-linear flow laws for the yield strength.

**Construction**

The construction of strength profiles is based on considerations of two experimentalists whose names have been attached to the resulting model: “Brace-Goetze lithosphere”. These models combine the brittle and ductile deformation laws into a simple strength profile of the lithosphere, i.e. the profile of maximum rock strength with depth.

Assuming validity when extrapolated to macroscopic scales and geological times, the rheological data obtained from laboratory tests on the mechanics of cold and hot rocks can be assembled to produce a simple, first-order model of the mechanical behaviour of the lithosphere. The integrated
strength of the considered lithosphere (in N m\(^{-1}\)) is defined by the integration over depth of the assembled rheological profile.

**Brittle levels**

The upper part of the lithosphere can be considered elastic on a wide range of time scales. This hypothesis explains that loads such as seamounts are supported by the lithosphere for millions of years. On shorter time scales, the Earth behaves elastically in the case of seismic events and seismic wave propagation. The main importance of the elastic behaviour of rocks for geodynamic processes lies in the fact that the lithosphere is strong and capable of supporting and transmitting large loads for long periods of times. Elasticity controls the stress field in rigid domains, which in turn controls the position and timing of deformation in non-rigid domains. This means that it is fundamentally impossible to assess the stress-state of the lithosphere without considering the effects of elasticity. Stresses in the Earth cannot exceed the strength of rocks. The upper part of the model uses Byerlee's friction law for the limiting strength and assumes a hydrostatic pore-pressure gradient. With this law, which involves zero strength at the surface (the failure envelope goes through the origin of the diagram), the upper crust is assumed to be crossed by many discontinuities of every shape and size. The relevant deformation process is therefore sliding along such pre-existing surfaces. An Andersonian stress state and fault orientation (which means that one of the principal stresses is vertical and that conjugate faults make an acute angle bisected by the maximum principal stress) is also assumed. According to Byerlee's law, the brittle strength of rocks increases linearly with depth and is independent of material. Thus, the brittle shear strength of the lithosphere will increase roughly linearly throughout the crust and mantle layers of the lithosphere.

![Elementary construction of a rheological profile](image-url)
**Ductile levels**

The lower part of the model is based on the extrapolation to relevant temperatures of the steady-state power-law (equation 10). It is generally agreed that the bulk viscous behaviour of the lithosphere may be described by such a non-linear, temperature and stress dependent power-law rheology. The curved strength envelope of rocks in ductile deformation is largely insensitive to pressure variations (hence to depth) but decreases exponentially downwards due to thermal softening. Accordingly, the viscous shear strength is likely to decrease with depth. Depending on the state of stress, grain size and composition, rocks with a non-linear viscosity at moderate temperature/depth may follow a linear, Newtonian constitutive law at very high temperatures.

To calculate the strength of the lithosphere, a strain rate and a geothermal gradient must be applied to appropriate rocks (e.g. wet quartzite in the crust, olivine in the mantle).

**Effect of stress regime**

The Mohr construction demonstrates that the normal stress $\sigma_N$ and the shear stress $\sigma_S$ are related to the maximum and minimum principal stresses:

$$\sigma_N = \sigma_1 \cos^2 \theta + \sigma_3 \sin^2 \theta$$

and

$$\sigma_S = \frac{1}{2} \sin 2 \theta (\sigma_1 - \sigma_3)$$

with $\theta$ the angle between $\sigma_1$ and the normal to the fault plane, which is the same angle as between the fault plane and $\sigma_3$ (script on stresses).

The application of the Byerlee’s law to the lithosphere requires that it is reformulated in terms of the principal stresses, instead of using normal and shear stress. In effect, we need to know the total differential stress $(\sigma_1 - \sigma_3)$ sufficient to activate fault slip. For this purpose, one substitutes equations (16) into equations (8) and (9).

For $\sigma_N \leq 200 \text{ MPa}$:

$$(1/2) \sin 2 \theta (\sigma_1 - \sigma_3) = 0.85 \left( \sigma_1 \cos^2 \theta + \sigma_3 \sin^2 \theta \right)$$

For $200 \leq \sigma_N \leq 2000 \text{ MPa}$:

$$(1/2) \sin 2 \theta (\sigma_1 - \sigma_3) = 50 + 0.6 \left( \sigma_1 \cos^2 \theta + \sigma_3 \sin^2 \theta \right)$$

Remembering the trigonometric identity $\sin 2 \theta = 2 \sin \theta \cos \theta$:

For $\sigma_N \leq 200 \text{ MPa}$:

$$\left( \sin \theta \cos \theta \right) (\sigma_1 - \sigma_3) = 0.85 \left( \sigma_1 \cos^2 \theta + \sigma_3 \sin^2 \theta \right)$$

For $200 \leq \sigma_N \leq 2000 \text{ MPa}$:

$$\left( \cos \theta \sin \theta \right) (\sigma_1 - \sigma_3) = 50 + 0.6 \left( \sigma_1 \cos^2 \theta + \sigma_3 \sin^2 \theta \right)$$

Developing these equations to group $\sigma_1$ and $\sigma_3$ one obtains:

For $\sigma_N \leq 200 \text{ MPa}$:

$$\sigma_1 = \frac{\sin \theta (\cos \theta + 0.85 \sin \theta)}{\cos \theta (\sin \theta - 0.85 \cos \theta)} \sigma_3 = \frac{\tan \theta (\cos \theta + 0.85 \sin \theta)}{(\sin \theta - 0.85 \cos \theta)} \sigma_3$$

For $200 \leq \sigma_N \leq 2000 \text{ MPa}$:

$$\sigma_1 = \frac{\sigma_3 \sin \theta (\cos \theta + 0.6 \sin \theta)}{\cos \theta (\sin \theta - 0.6 \cos \theta)} + \frac{50}{\cos \theta (\sin \theta - 0.6 \cos \theta)}$$

Taking $\theta = \pi/3$ as standard angle for numerical application, Byerlee’s law in terms of the principal stresses become:

$$\sigma_1 = 4.85 \sigma_3 \approx 5 \sigma_3 \quad \text{for} \quad \sigma_3 < 101 \text{ MPa}$$

$$\sigma_1 = 3.12 \sigma_3 + 176 \quad \text{for} \quad \sigma_3 > 101 \text{ MPa}$$
**Exercise**

*Draw a Mohr diagram that refers to the last set of equations, and discuss how it verifies the Byerlee’s Law.*

In an Andersonian stress state and fault orientation, the condition for failure is given by the maximum value of:

\[(\sigma_v - \sigma_h)\]

where \(\sigma_h\) and \(\sigma_v\) are the vertical and horizontal stresses, respectively. In the Earth, \(v\) is usually due to the weight of the overburden (equation 12). In Extension \(\sigma_v = \sigma_1\) and in compression \(\sigma_v = \sigma_3\).

Under low stress, in extension:

\[\sigma_3 = \sigma_h \approx \sigma_1/5 = \rho \cdot g \cdot z/5\]

The condition for failure in extension is therefore given by:

\[(\sigma_v - \sigma_h) = 4\rho \cdot g \cdot z/5\]

Substituting \(g = 9.81\) m.s\(^{-2}\) and \(\rho = 2800\) kg.m\(^{-3}\) gives a slope of 21.97 MPa.km\(^{-1}\) for extension. For high stresses the slope is 18.6 MPa.km\(^{-1}\)+67.7 MPa.

In compression failure occurs when the horizontal compressive stress has built up to a sufficient value that it has effectively balanced the horizontal stress. This occurs when:

\[\sigma_h = 5\rho \cdot g \cdot z\] (17)

the condition of failure is therefore given by:

\[(\sigma_v - \sigma_h) = -4\rho \cdot g \cdot z\] (18)

Substituting \(g\) and \(\rho\) gives a slope of -109.87 MPa.km\(^{-1}\) for compression. For high stresses the slope is -57.7 MPa.km\(^{-1}\)-210 MPa.
To summarize: Effects of traction and compression are not symmetric.

The Byerlee’s law tends to give a lower bound on the yield stress because it assumes that the lithosphere is already fractured. Seismic waves propagate through the lithosphere, thus suggesting that rocks are dominated by elastic behaviour and that the background stress state of the lithosphere is lithostatic. The condition of failure should be considered for a perfectly elastic material. In a perfectly elastic body the principal stresses are given by:

\[
\sigma_2 = \sigma_3 = \sigma_1 \left[ \frac{\nu}{1-\nu} \right]
\]

where \( \nu \) is the Poisson’s ratio (Equation 2), about 0.25 for rocks. Therefore, in the elastic lithosphere:

\[
\sigma_1 = 3\sigma_3
\]

Substituting the weight of overburden for these principal strains we see that failure will occur if:

In extension

\[
(\sigma_v - \sigma_h) = \rho \cdot g \cdot z - (\rho \cdot g \cdot z/3) = 2 \rho \cdot g \cdot z/3
\]

(19)

In compression

\[
(\sigma_v - \sigma_h) = \rho \cdot g \cdot z - 3 \rho \cdot g \cdot z = -2 \rho \cdot g \cdot z
\]

(20)

The same parameters as above yield a slope of 18.3 MPa.km\(^{-1}\) in extension and –54.9 MPa.km\(^{-1}\) in compression.

The increase of the frictional strength with depth for normal, reverse and strike-slip faults all will be different because of the difference in orientation with the vertical stress. Minimum stress levels for movement on normal faults are only a quarter of those required for thrust faulting and about half that for strike-slip faulting.

**Effect of pore pressure**

Water may weaken a rock through hydrolytic weakening and diffusive processes enhancing ductile flow. In addition, pore pressure modifies the Coulomb frictional failure criterion (equation 7) that adequately describes the brittle behaviour of most rocks. In the case of pre-existing faults of favourable orientation and negligible cohesion (e.g. \( c = 0 \)), the normal pressure is the lithostatic overburden counteracted by the fluid pressure. The failure criterion can be written as:

\[
\sigma_1 - \sigma_3 \geq \beta \rho g z (1 - \lambda)
\]

(21)

where the same abbreviations as in previous equations represent the same terms, \( \rho \) is the average density of rocks above the depth \( z \), and \( \lambda \) the ratio of pore fluid pressure to lithostatic pressure (equation 15); the typical hydrostatic value is \( \lambda = 0.4 \). \( \beta \) is a numerical parameter comparable to the friction coefficient \( \mu \) of equation (8) and depending on the type of faulting with values 3, 1.2 and 0.75 for thrust, strike-slip and normal faulting, respectively. These variables invite reformulating faulting conditions for each tectonic regime. This is done combining the classical relationship between normal and shear stress (equations 16) with equations involving pore pressure.

The governing equations are

in compressional faulting

\[
(\sigma_1 - \sigma_3) = \frac{2 \left[ c + \mu \rho g z (1 - \lambda) \right]}{\left( \mu^2 + 1 \right)^{1/2} - \mu}
\]

(22)

in tensional faulting

\[
(\sigma_1 - \sigma_3) = \frac{-2 \left[ c + \mu \rho g z (1 - \lambda) \right]}{\left( \mu^2 + 1 \right)^{1/2} + \mu}
\]

(23)
These equations (with $\mu$ the coefficient of friction) show that the stress required for slip will be lower if the confining effect of lithostatic pressure is reduced by higher fluid pressure, which increases $\lambda$.

**Effect of strain rate**

Equation 12 shows that the effective viscosity is strain rate-dependent. Strain rate has a comparable effect as temperature in shifting the exponential flow law, mostly upward for slower strain rate or higher temperature, downward for faster strain rate or lower temperature.
This shift moves the intersection of the creep strength curve with the Byerlee yield line. Therefore, it changes the depth and stress level at which, for a given model lithosphere with layers of constant composition, brittle failure switches to ductile flow. Importantly, the upper mantle, just below the Moho, becomes brittle when deformation is fast.

**Description**

A yield strength envelope shows that the relative importance of temperature and pressure changes in the brittle and ductile regimes of rock deformation. The result is asymmetric and emphasises the strength of the brittle-ductile transition significantly bigger and shallower in compression than in extension. The area under the yield strength envelope leads to the integrated strength, which is a measure of the total lithospheric strength. This implies that (1) the integrated yield strength transmits the global plate tectonic stress field and (2) the driving forces of plate tectonics cannot exceed the integrated lithospheric strength. This provides an important constraint on the geodynamics of oceans and continents.

The strength predicted in the brittle, frictional part of the crust depends only on the assumed pore pressure. As the slope of the brittle yield strength envelope depends on the mode of faulting, two profiles are plotted on both sides of the vertical temperature axis. One on the positive side of stresses refers to the profile in compression (equations 20 and 22), the one on the negative side corresponds to the profile in tension (equations 19 and 23).

The strength predicted in the ductile, deeper part depends strongly on the assumed rock type, temperature and strain rate. Usually a quartz rheology is applied for the continental crust. Rocks change with depth and the same sort of predictions can be made for any mineral phase. Different viscous envelopes become relevant and the lithosphere may appear rheologically stratified. In particular at the Moho, mantle (olivine) rocks are more creep resistant and stronger than other silicates at the same temperature.

Byerlee’s law combined with the quartz and olivine flow law provides a maximum stress profile to about 25 or 50 km, respectively. For a temperature gradient of 15°C/km, stress will be close to zero.
at the surface and reaches a maximum of 600 MPa (quartz) or 1100 MPa (olivine) for hydrostatic pore pressure.

The rheological stratification of oceanic lithospheres differs from that of continental lithospheres.

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**Oceanic lithosphere**

Strength profiles of oceanic lithosphere have simple shapes. The basaltic crust has a near 0 km thickness at the mid oceanic ridge and the thin sedimentary cover is too negligible to influence the overall rheology of the whole lithosphere. The oceanic crust thickens to about 5-7 km by cooling the sub-crustal mantle lithosphere. Thus, the bulk composition of an oceanic lithosphere is rather uniform and the rheology of olivine should govern its bulk behaviour. Strength profiles first increase linearly with depth according to the Byerlee law, then decrease exponentially according to the olivine viscous power law to grade into the nearly no strength of the asthenosphere (etymology: strength-less sphere). Since Byerlee laws apply whatever the type of rocks, the presence of plagioclase and pyroxene in the cold crust of basalts and gabbros can be omitted. The brittle and viscous yield envelopes intersect at the brittle-ductile transition.

![Strength profile of the oceanic lithosphere in function of age](image)

During cooling, the depth of the brittle-ductile transition increase and the size of integrated region below the strength profile varies. In other words, the bulk strength of the oceanic lithosphere increases with age until the lithosphere reaches a steady-state thickness of about 90-100 km at the 60-80 Ma age. Whatever this age, the profiles are characterized by a single strength maximum.
Construct the thickness evolution of the oceanic lithosphere from the MOR outward. Assume that the 5km thick oceanic crust at the MOR does not change with time. Conversely, the thickness ($H$) of the oceanic mantle lithosphere varies according to:

$$H(\text{km}) = 10 \times \sqrt[3]{\text{Age in Million Years}}$$

Calculate the thickness and the average density of the lithosphere when it is 2.5, 5, 10 and 20 Ma old. Use 2900 kg.m$^{-3}$ as density of the oceanic crust and 3300 kg.m$^{-3}$ for the mantle. At which age and thickness the lithosphere reaches the same average density as the asthenosphere (3250 kg.m$^{-3}$)? Comment this result.

**Continental lithosphere**

The concept is more complex to apply to continents where the crust is compositionally heterogeneous and thicker than in oceans.

**Continental crust**

The rheology of the crust is generally approximated as that of the most common mineral, wet quartz, which is brittle at shallow depth but typically ductile at temperatures $>300$-$350^\circ$C, well above the Moho (about $500^\circ$C). If the crust deforms at constant strain rate, then its brittle strength increases with depth and crosses the viscous strength envelope at the "brittle-ductile" transition, at about 15 km depth for a typical geothermal gradient of $20^\circ$C km$^{-1}$. The crust above this depth deforms in a brittle fashion. Below this depth the crust is viscous and the viscous strength decreases with depth. The brittle ductile transition supports the highest shear stresses anywhere in the crust and it is within this depth range that the highest moment release might be anticipated from intraplate earthquakes. At increased strain rate, the viscous stresses will become larger so that the brittle ductile transition moves downwards and vice versa.

**Mantle**

Below the Moho, the viscous curve for wet quartz is replaced by that for olivine. Olivine supports substantially higher shear stresses than quartz and the Moho is therefore the region of highest strength.
in the lithosphere. As for the oceanic lithosphere, the thickness of the continental mantle lithosphere is age-dependent, being the thickest under oldest cratons.

**Total lithosphere**

Known experimental data seem to indicate that the lower crust is markedly weaker than the peridotite mantle immediately above the Moho. As a consequence, the continental lithosphere has one (at the bottom of the crust) or two (the previous one plus another at mid-crustal levels) soft ductile layers sandwiched between brittle layers.

The prevailing model (commonly referred to as the “jelly sandwich” model) is that of a strong upper crust, down to about 15 km, overlying a soft middle to lower crust (down to 20-30 km) and a strong lower crust and uppermost mantle down to the depth at which the olivine viscous law applies. On a rheological profile, the strong brittle levels reaching the Byerlee line are superposed and alternate with strength indentations corresponding to the various ductile levels. The continental lithosphere is thus rheologically layered. Owing to their shape, these diagrams are popularly called “Christmas trees”. A rheologically stratified lithosphere has resulted in generally good agreement with the depth distribution of earthquakes in oceanic and continental lithospheres.

In this model, a significant part of the total strength resides in the lithospheric mantle. Where the geothermal gradient is very high, the thickness of the viscous levels increases which causes both lower crust and mantle to be softer. Following the same reasoning, the rigid levels will be much thicker in old, cold cratonic areas than in areas of thinned lithosphere with high heat flow, or in thickened orogenic zones. This may account for a long-term focussing of lithospheric deformation into orogenic zones. Once a part of the continental lithosphere has become a locus of internal deformation and crustal thickening, it may concentrate the deformation for a long time, until it cools below the plastic limit of crustal rocks or the tectonic forces cease.

The rheological layering may be complicated if the lower crust is mafic or granulitic. In that case the rheology of plagioclase or dry quartz, respectively, is applied. Molten rocks may be significantly
weaker, resulting in decoupling horizons where contrasting rheologies occur. In that perspective, the continental mantle can be attenuated by positive thermal anomalies due to, for instance, plume heads. In that manner, one may include many layers and quite a variety of strength profiles for the continental lithosphere. In short, the many parameters involved prevent defining a standard strength for the continental lithosphere. Yet, the integrated strength for the continent will usually be less than that of the ocean of same age.

**Strength of the brittle-ductile transition**
Different geotherms, strain rates and thicknesses are used to generate rheological models covering a variety of geodynamic settings. On any model, at some depth, the flow law curve intersects the line representing Byerlee's law. The intersection of the brittle and ductile laws is taken to mark the brittle-ductile transition in the Earth. It is the strongest part of the strength profile.

![Diagram showing the brittle-ductile transition](image)

**High pressure brittle regime**
Friction (Byerlee’s) laws are experimentally verified for confining pressures up to a few hundred MPa, corresponding to the upper crust. In strength profiles, these linear laws are customarily extrapolated to lower crustal and even upper mantle depths. This extrapolation is valid only if shear fracture mechanisms are pressure independent. Growing experimental evidence for granite suggests that a change in fracture mechanism takes place at 250-300°C and ca. 1500 MPa. From that point, the fracture strength is almost constant down to the creep strength curve and decreases with increasing temperature. The brittle field is accordingly divided into two parts: a shallow part where frictional strength increases linearly and significantly with depth and a deeper part where frictional strength is nearly constant with depth. The result is to cut down the strength of the brittle-ductile intersection.
**Low temperature plasticity (Peierls creep)**

In addition, ductile creep is related to the intracrystalline dislocation mobility, which depends on a complex interplay between stress and thermal activation. In particular, measurements and calculations of dislocation dynamics pointed out that experimentally-derived creep curves overestimate the strength of rock-forming minerals at low temperature. The resulting stress-strain curve is expressed by a non-linear constitutive law similar in shape as equation (11), but shifted mostly towards lower temperature for similar deviatoric stresses. In other words, the creep curve intersects the brittle line at lower stress values than those inferred from high pressure experiments. Extrapolated to natural conditions, the **low-temperature plasticity** (a.k.a. Peierls mechanism) may limit the deviatoric stresses that can be sustained at the brittle-ductile intersection on the simple plot.

**Application**

The rheological knowledge is fundamental to laboratory, scaled experiments on analogue models. These tectonic models are attempts, in miniature, to simulate conceptually and mechanically the deformation of the Earth's lithosphere (in particular large-scale features such as sedimentary basin formation or orogen development) under defined loading conditions. Analogue models supplement numerical modelling because the inherent limitations of each method are different.

In theory, the lithospheric rheological profiles give a lower limit of the strength of the lithosphere, because they describe the stress levels required to drive suitably oriented faults. In practice, they only provide a qualitative guide to the actual strength, i.e. the greatest possible stress as a function of depth. These profiles show that most of the total strength of the lithosphere resides in the seismogenic crust. It is clear that the thermal structure of deforming plates, and therefore their age, is very important to the mechanics of the phenomenon. Such models are used to analyse observed variations in the crustal style of deformed continental and oceanic lithospheres.

**Limitations**

First order uncertainties limit a direct assessment of lithosphere rheology.

**Composition**

An exact knowledge of the composition of rocks belonging to the lithosphere under consideration is impossible. However, rocks are heterogeneous mineral aggregates constituted of a few main components. The first assumption is that the main constituents govern the rheology of aggregates.
Rocks are therefore simplified to their major constituents such as feldspar and quartz in continental crustal rocks, and olivine in mantle rocks.

**Oceanic lithosphere**
The oceanic crust is basaltic and wet. Wet basalts are therefore the reference rheology.

**Continental lithosphere**
The composition of continental lithosphere is envisioned from three information sources: (a) seismic data (b) petrology of surface exposures, and (c) xenolith data. All lead to very broad rheological approximations.
The bulk composition of the continental upper crust is usually dominated by granitoids, quartz-rich sediments, and quartz-bearing schists. Quartz is therefore considered to control the bulk rheology of the upper continental crust. Since the upper part of the crust is hydrated, the rheological parameters of wet quartzite are taken as best approximation.
The bulk of the continental lower crust generally has seismic velocities compatible with mafic composition. However, more felsic compositions may predominate in particular regions. Accordingly, the mechanical behaviour of the continental lower crust is modelled with the creep parameters of both mafic and felsic granulites, and also of wet and dry diabase.
This crustal stratification rests on an ultramafic upper mantle. Thus the flow properties of olivine and peridotites should be representative of the response of the upper mantle. A wet rheology may be appropriate for continental lithospheric mantle in zones recently affected by subduction of oceanic lithosphere and post-Paleozoic tectonothermal events, while a dry rheology may be more relevant for older regions.

**State variables**
A second type of uncertainty stems from errors in the state variables as pressure, temperature, stress level, grain size and fluid pressure. Temperature and grain size assert a direct control on the creep of rocks, whereas the effective pressure controls the frictional strength of fault.
Thermal conditions in the continental lithosphere are modelled using assumptions on the depth distribution of heat producing elements and either a fixed asthenosphere temperature or heat flux boundary conditions at the lithosphere / asthenosphere boundary. Thermal cooling of the lithosphere introduces an age-dependence in the rheology of the lithosphere.
The lithostatic pressure can be estimated as the overburden load with reasonable boundaries. The effective pressure (equation 14) is much less certain. However, typical crustal permeability is such that fluid pressures in excess of lithostatic cannot be maintained for geological times.
The shear stress level ranges from 1 to 150 MPa at depths between 1 and 100 km. Linear extrapolation of the Byerlee’s law probably overpredicts the stresses at depth greater than 5-10 km (fitting stresses in the KTB borehole at 8 km, but only 150 MPa at 11 km in the Kola well).

**Conclusion**
Rheology offers explicit equations, the quantitative constitutive laws that make responses of rocks to inherent physical properties and imparted forces predictable.
Increasing pressure strengthens rocks
Increasing temperature weakens rocks.
At depth, temperature overcomes the strengthening effect of confining pressure, which generally leads to ductile behaviour, by opposition to frictional processes that dominate at low temperatures. The lithosphere tends to have horizontally stratified mechanical properties. Different factors contribute to this stratification. Generally, pressure, temperature and composition are strongly dependent on depth and vary relatively less laterally. The horizontally stratified compositions reflect layering in undeformed sediments or stacks of structural units, such as thrust sheets.
The strength of the lithosphere (i.e. the total force per unit width necessary to deform a lithospheric section at a given strain rate) is a function of composition, crustal thickness, and geotherm. Confining
pressure increases rock strength. Lithospheric strength profiles illustrate, approximately, which levels of the lithosphere behave in brittle and ductile manners. The first-order rheological behaviour (brittle or ductile) at any given depth is determined by the relative magnitude of frictional and creep strength. However, the actual variation of strength with depth depends strongly on the deformation mechanism as well as on the type of rock. The brittle / ductile transition is likely to be gradual, but this is a second order effect that is often neglected.

The large-scale characteristics of a lithospheric system show a satisfactory agreement with the inferred rheological structure: sub-horizontal decrements should be the rule rather than the exception where the lithospheric rheology is strongly stratified. The most significant factors are the maximum in strength at the brittle-ductile transition in the continental crust and a second maximum at the Moho, where the rock composition changes from quartzo-feldspathic rocks to olivine-dominated peridotite. Comparison of the high temperature bulk steady-state rheologies of crustal rocks with flow laws for polycrystalline olivine indicates that the Moho should be a rheological discontinuity with the uppermost mantle being significantly stronger than the lowermost continental crust. Rocks are generally weaker at lower strain rate. The strain rate has a decisive influence on the rheology of rocks: materials deforming under low strain rates (geologically realistic) exhibit creep, whereas high strain rates are associated with geologically instantaneous strain. Slow deformation and creep allow diffusional crystal-plastic processes to more closely keep up with applied stress. Fluids weaken rocks by affecting bonding of materials while high fluid pressure reduces effective stress.

**Recommended literature**


http://seismo.berkeley.edu/~burgmann/EPS216/rheology.html
http://www.geo.arizona.edu/geo5xx/geo519.071/lectures/Rheology.pdf
http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~simkat/geol345_files/Lec3_Rheology.pdf