What is Mechanical Engineering?

6.1 Definition: Mechanical engineering is a diverse subject that derives its breadth from the need to design and manufacture everything from small individual parts and devices (e.g., microscale sensors and inkjet printer nozzles) to large systems (e.g., spacecraft and machine tools). The role of a mechanical engineer is to take a product from an idea to the marketplace. In order to accomplish this, a broad range of skills are needed. The mechanical engineer needs to acquire particular skills and knowledge. He/she needs to understand the forces and the thermal environment that a product, its parts, or its subsystems will encounter; to design them for functionality, aesthetics, and the ability to withstand the forces and the thermal environment they will be subjected to; and to determine the best way to manufacture them and ensure they will operate without failure. Perhaps the one skill that is the mechanical engineer's exclusive domain is the ability to analyze and design objects and systems with motion.

Since these skills are required for virtually everything that is made, mechanical engineering is perhaps the broadest and most diverse of engineering disciplines. Mechanical engineers play a central role in such industries as automotive (from the car chassis to its every subsystem—engine, transmission, sensors); aerospace (airplanes, aircraft engines, control systems for airplanes and spacecraft); biotechnology (implants, prosthetic devices, fluidic systems for pharmaceutical industries); computers and electronics (disk drives, printers, cooling systems, semiconductor tools); microelectromechanical systems, or MEMS (sensors, actuators, micropower generation); energy conversion (gas turbines, wind turbines, solar energy, fuel cells); environmental control (HVAC, air-conditioning, refrigeration, compressors); automation (robots, data and image acquisition, recognition, control); manufacturing (machining, machine tools, prototyping, microfabrication).

To put it simply, mechanical engineering deals with anything that moves, including the human body, a very complex machine. Mechanical engineers learn about materials, solid and fluid mechanics, thermodynamics, heat transfer, control, instrumentation, design, and manufacturing to understand mechanical systems. Specialized mechanical engineering subjects include biomechanics, cartilage-tissue engineering, energy conversion, laser-assisted materials processing, combustion, MEMS, microfluidic devices, fracture mechanics, nanomechanics, mechanisms, micropower generation, tribology (friction and wear), and vibrations. The American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) currently lists 36 technical divisions, from advanced energy systems and aerospace engineering to solid-waste engineering and textile engineering.

The breadth of the mechanical engineering discipline allows students a variety of career options beyond some of the industries listed above. Regardless of the particular path they envision for themselves after they graduate, their education will have provided them with the creative thinking that allows them to design an exciting product or system, the analytical tools to achieve their design goals, the ability to overcome all constraints, and the teamwork needed to design, market, and produce a system. These valuable skills could also launch a career in medicine, law, consulting, management, banking, finance, and so on.

For those interested in applied scientific and mathematical aspects of the discipline, graduate study in mechanical engineering can lead to a career of research and teaching.

6.2 Modern Tools: Many mechanical engineering companies, especially those in industrialized nations, have begun to incorporate computer-aided engineering (CAE) programs into their existing design and analysis processes, including 2D and 3D solid modeling computer-aided design (CAD). This method has many benefits, including easier and more exhaustive visualization of products, the ability to create virtual assemblies of parts, and the ease of use in designing mating interfaces and tolerances.

Other CAE programs commonly used by mechanical engineers include product lifecycle management (PLM) tools and analysis tools used to perform complex simulations. Analysis tools may be used to predict product response to expected loads, including fatigue life and manufacturability. These tools include finite element analysis (FEA), computational fluid dynamics (CFD), and computer-aided manufacturing (CAM).

Using CAE programs, a mechanical design team can quickly and cheaply iterate the design process to develop a product that better meets cost, performance, and other constraints. No physical prototype need be created until the design nears completion, allowing hundreds or thousands of designs to be evaluated, instead of a relative few. In addition, CAE analysis programs can model complicated physical phenomena which cannot be solved by hand, such as viscoelasticity, complex contact between mating parts, or non-Newtonian flows.

As mechanical engineering begins to merge with other disciplines, as seen in mechatronics, multidisciplinary design optimization (MDO) is being used with other CAE programs to automate and improve the iterative design process. MDO tools wrap around existing CAE processes, allowing product evaluation to continue even after the analyst goes home for the day. They also utilize sophisticated optimization algorithms to more intelligently explore possible designs, often finding better, innovative solutions to difficult multidisciplinary design problems.

6.3 Sub-disciplines: The field of mechanical engineering can be thought of as a collection of many mechanical engineering science disciplines. Several of these subdisciplines which are typically taught at the undergraduate level are listed below, with a brief explanation and the most common application of each. Some of these subdisciplines are unique to mechanical engineering, while others are a combination of mechanical engineering and one or more other disciplines. Most work that a mechanical engineer does uses skills and techniques from several of these subdisciplines, as well as specialized subdisciplines. Specialized subdisciplines, as used in this article, are more likely to be the subject of graduate studies or on-the-job training than undergraduate research. Several specialized subdisciplines are discussed in this section.

Mechanics: Mechanics is, in the most general sense, the study of forces and their effect upon matter. Typically, engineering mechanics is used to analyze and predict the acceleration and deformation (both elastic and plastic) of objects under known forces (also called loads) or stresses. Subdisciplines of mechanics include:

- Statics, the study of non-moving bodies under known loads, how forces affect static bodies
- Dynamics (or kinetics), the study of how forces affect moving bodies
- Mechanics of materials, the study of how different materials deform under various types of stress
- Fluid mechanics, the study of how fluids react to forces[25]
- Kinematics, the study of the motion of bodies (objects) and systems (groups of objects), while ignoring the forces that cause the motion. Kinematics is often used in the design and analysis of mechanisms.
- Continuum mechanics, a method of applying mechanics that assumes that objects are continuous (rather than discrete)

Mechanical engineers typically use mechanics in the design or analysis phases of engineering. If the engineering project were the design of a vehicle, statics might be employed to design the frame of the vehicle, in order to evaluate where the stresses will be most intense. Dynamics might be used when designing the car's engine, to evaluate the forces in the pistons and cams as the engine cycles. Mechanics of materials might be used to choose appropriate materials for the frame and engine. Fluid mechanics might be used to design a ventilation system for the vehicle (see HVAC), or to design the intake system for the engine.

Mechatronics and robotics: Mechatronics is the combination of mechanics and electronics. It is an interdisciplinary branch of mechanical engineering, electrical engineering and software engineering that is concerned with integrating electrical and mechanical engineering to create hybrid systems. In this way, machines can be automated through the use of electric motors, servo-mechanisms, and other electrical systems in conjunction with special software. A common example of a mechatronics system is a CD-ROM drive. Mechanical systems open and close the drive, spin the CD and move the laser, while an optical system reads the data on the CD and converts it to bits. Integrated software controls the process and communicates the contents of the CD to the computer.

Robotics is the application of mechatronics to create robots, which are often used in industry to perform tasks that are dangerous, unpleasant, or repetitive. These robots may be of any shape and size, but all are preprogrammed and interact physically with the world. To create a robot, an engineer typically employs kinematics (to determine the robot's range of motion) and mechanics (to determine the stresses within the robot).

Robots are used extensively in industrial engineering. They allow businesses to save money on labor, perform tasks that are either too dangerous or too precise for humans to perform them economically, and to ensure better quality. Many companies employ assembly lines of robots,especially in Automotive Industries and some factories are so robotized that they can run by themselves. Outside the factory, robots have been employed in bomb disposal, space exploration, and many other fields. Robots are also sold for various residential applications, from recreation to domestic applications.

Structural analysis: Structural analysis is the branch of mechanical engineering (and also civil engineering) devoted to examining why and how objects fail and to fix the objects and their performance. Structural failures occur in two general modes: static failure, and fatigue failure. *Static structural failure* occurs when, upon being loaded (having a force applied) the object being analyzed either breaks or is deformed plastically, depending on the criterion for failure. *Fatigue failure* occurs when an object fails after a number of repeated loading and unloading cycles. Fatigue failure occurs because of imperfections in the object: a microscopic crack on the surface of the object, for instance, will grow slightly with each cycle (propagation) until the crack is large enough to cause ultimate failure.

Failure is not simply defined as when a part breaks, however; it is defined as when a part does not operate as intended. Some systems, such as the perforated top sections of some plastic bags, are designed to break. If these systems do not break, failure analysis might be employed to determine the cause.

Structural analysis is often used by mechanical engineers after a failure has occurred, or when designing to prevent failure. Engineers often use online documents and books such as those published by ASM to aid them in determining the type of failure and possible causes.

Structural analysis may be used in the office when designing parts, in the field to analyze failed parts, or in laboratories where parts might undergo controlled failure tests.

Thermodynamics and thermo-science: Thermodynamics is an applied science used in several branches of engineering, including mechanical and chemical engineering. At its simplest, thermodynamics is the study of energy, its use and transformation through a system. Typically, engineering thermodynamics is concerned with changing energy from one form to another. As an example, automotive engines convert chemical energy (enthalpy) from the fuel into heat, and then into mechanical work that eventually turns the wheels.

Thermodynamics principles are used by mechanical engineers in the fields of heat transfer, thermofluids, and energy conversion. Mechanical engineers use thermo-science to design engines and power plants, heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems, heat exchangers, heat sinks, radiators, refrigeration, insulation, and others.

Design and drafting: Drafting or technical drawing is the means by which mechanical engineers design products and create instructions for manufacturing parts. A technical drawing can be a computer model or hand-drawn schematic showing all the dimensions necessary to manufacture a part, as well as assembly notes, a list of required materials, and other pertinent information. A U.S. mechanical engineer or skilled worker who creates technical drawings may be referred to as a drafter or draftsman. Drafting has historically been a two-dimensional process, but computer-aided design (CAD) programs now allow the designer to create in three dimensions.

Instructions for manufacturing a part must be fed to the necessary machinery, either manually, through programmed instructions, or through the use of a computer-aided manufacturing (CAM) or combined CAD/CAM program. Optionally, an engineer may also manually manufacture a part using the technical drawings, but this is becoming an increasing rarity, with the advent of computer numerically controlled (CNC) manufacturing. Engineers primarily manually manufacture parts in the areas of applied spray coatings, finishes, and other processes that cannot economically or practically be done by a machine.

Drafting is used in nearly every subdiscipline of mechanical engineering, and by many other branches of engineering and architecture. Three-dimensional models created using CAD software are also commonly used in finite element analysis (FEA) and computational fluid dynamics (CFD).

Frontiers of research: Mechanical engineers are constantly pushing the boundaries of what is physically possible in order to produce safer, cheaper, and more efficient machines and mechanical systems. Some technologies at the cutting edge of mechanical engineering are listed below (see also exploratory engineering).

Micro electro-mechanical systems (MEMS)

Micron-scale mechanical components such as springs, gears, fluidic and heat transfer devices are fabricated from a variety of substrate materials such as silicon, glass and polymers like SU8. Examples of MEMS components are the accelerometers that are used as car airbag sensors, modern cell phones, gyroscopes for precise positioning and microfluidic devices used in biomedical applications.

Friction stir welding (FSW)

Friction stir welding, a new type of welding, was discovered in 1991 by The Welding Institute (TWI). The innovative steady state (non-fusion) welding technique joins materials previously un-weldable, including several aluminum alloys. It plays an important role in the future construction of airplanes, potentially replacing rivets. Current uses of this technology to date include welding the seams of the aluminum main Space Shuttle external tank, Orion Crew Vehicle test article, Boeing Delta II and Delta IV Expendable Launch Vehicles and the SpaceX Falcon 1 rocket, armor plating for amphibious assault ships, and welding the wings and fuselage panels of the new Eclipse 500 aircraft from Eclipse Aviation among an increasingly growing pool of uses.

Composites

Composites or composite materials are a combination of materials which provide different physical characteristics than either material separately. Composite material research within mechanical engineering typically focuses on designing (and, subsequently, finding applications for) stronger or more rigid materials while attempting to reduce weight, susceptibility to corrosion, and other undesirable factors. Carbon fiber reinforced composites, for instance, have been used in such diverse applications as spacecraft and fishing rods.

Mechatronics

Mechatronics is the synergistic combination of mechanical engineering, electronic engineering, and software engineering. The purpose of this interdisciplinary engineering field is the study of automation from an engineering perspective and serves the purposes of controlling advanced hybrid systems.

Nanotechnology

At the smallest scales, mechanical engineering becomes nanotechnology —one speculative goal of which is to create a molecular assembler to build molecules and materials via mechanosynthesis. For now that goal remains within exploratory engineering. Areas of current mechanical engineering research in nanotechnology include nanofilters, nanofilms, and nanostructures, among others.

Finite element analysis

This field is not new, as the basis of Finite Element Analysis (FEA) or Finite Element Method (FEM) dates back to 1941. But evolution of computers has made FEA/FEM a viable option for analysis of structural problems. Many commercial codes such as ANSYS, Nastran and ABAQUS are widely used in industry for research and design of components. Calculix is an open source and free finite element program. Some 3D modeling and CAD software packages have added FEA modules. Other techniques such as finite difference method (FDM) and finite-volume method (FVM) are employed to solve problems relating heat and mass transfer, fluid flows, fluid surface interaction etc.

Biomechanics: Biomechanics is the application of mechanical principles to biological systems, such as humans, animals, plants, organs, and cells.[33] Biomechanics also aids in creating prosthetic limbs and artificial organs for humans.

Biomechanics is closely related to engineering, because it often uses traditional engineering sciences to analyse biological systems. Some simple applications of Newtonian mechanics and/or materials sciences can supply correct approximations to the mechanics of many biological systems.

Over the past decade the Finite element method (FEM) has also entered the Biomedical sector highlighting further engineering aspects of Biomechanics. FEM has since then established itself as an alternative to in vivo surgical assessment and gained the wide acceptance of academia. The main advantage of Computational Biomechanics lies in its ability to determine the endo-anatomical response of an anatomy, without being subject to ethical restrictions.[34] This has led FE modelling to the point of becoming ubiquitous in several fields of Biomechanics while several projects have even adopted an open source philosophy (e.g. BioSpine).

Computational fluid dynamics

Computational fluid dynamics, usually abbreviated as CFD, is a branch of fluid mechanics that uses numerical methods and algorithms to solve and analyze problems that involve fluid flows. Computers are used to perform the calculations required to simulate the interaction of liquids and gases with surfaces defined by boundary conditions. With high-speed supercomputers, better solutions can be achieved. Ongoing research yields software that improves the accuracy and speed of complex simulation scenarios such as transonic or turbulent flows. Initial validation of such software is performed using a wind tunnel with the final validation coming in full-scale testing, e.g. flight tests.

Acoustical engineering

Acoustical engineering is one of many other sub disciplines of mechanical engineering and is the application of acoustics. Acoustical engineering is the study of Sound and Vibration. These engineers work effectively to reduce noise pollution in mechanical devices and in buildings by soundproofing or removing sources of unwanted noise. The study of acoustics can range from designing a more efficient hearing aid, microphone, headphone, or recording studio to enhancing the sound quality of an orchestra hall. Acoustical engineering also deals with the vibration of different mechanical systems.