

Problem 2.80

[Difficulty: 2]

2.80 Slowly fill a glass with water to the maximum possible level. Observe the water level closely. Explain how it can be higher than the rim of the glass.

Open-Ended Problem Statement: Slowly fill a glass with water to the maximum possible level before it overflows. Observe the water level closely. Explain how it can be higher than the rim of the glass.

Discussion: Surface tension can cause the maximum water level in a glass to be higher than the rim of the glass. The same phenomenon causes an isolated drop of water to “bead up” on a smooth surface. Surface tension between the water/air interface and the glass acts as an invisible membrane that allows trapped water to rise above the level of the rim of the glass. The mechanism can be envisioned as forces that act in the surface of the liquid above the rim of the glass. Thus the water appears to defy gravity by attaining a level higher than the rim of the glass.

To experimentally demonstrate that this phenomenon is the result of surface tension, set the liquid level nearly as far above the glass rim as you can get it, using plain water. Add a drop of liquid detergent (the detergent contains additives that reduce the surface tension of water). Watch as the excess water runs over the side of the glass.