EXPERIMENT 7
ATTERBERG LIMITS

Purpose:

This lab is performed to determine the plastic and liquid limits of a fine-grained soil. The liquid limit (LL) is arbitrarily defined as the water content, in percent, at which a pat of soil in a standard cup and cut by a groove of standard dimensions will flow together at the base of the groove for a distance of 13 mm (1/2 in.) when subjected to 25 shocks from the cup being dropped 10 mm in a standard liquid limit apparatus operated at a rate of two shocks per second. The plastic limit (PL) is the water content, in percent, at which a soil can no longer be deformed by rolling into 3.2 mm (1/8 in.) diameter threads without crumbling.

Standard Reference:

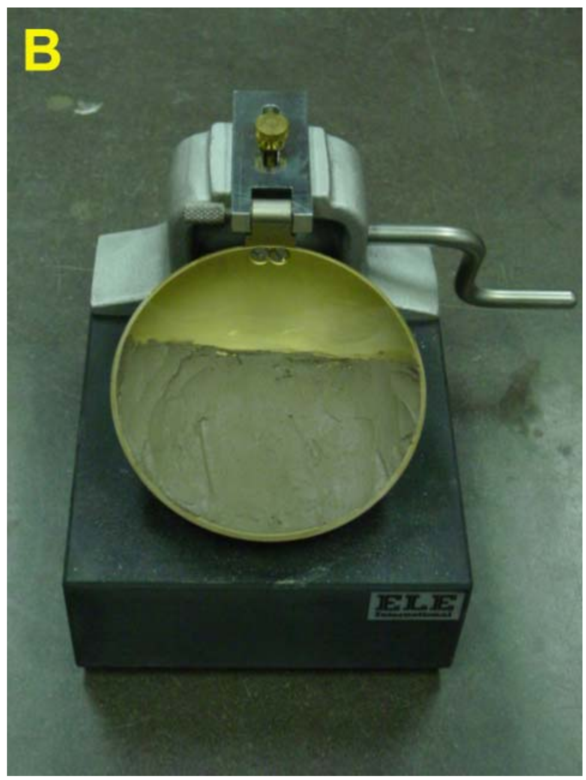
ASTM D 4318 - Standard Test Method for Liquid Limit, Plastic Limit, and Plasticity Index of Soils

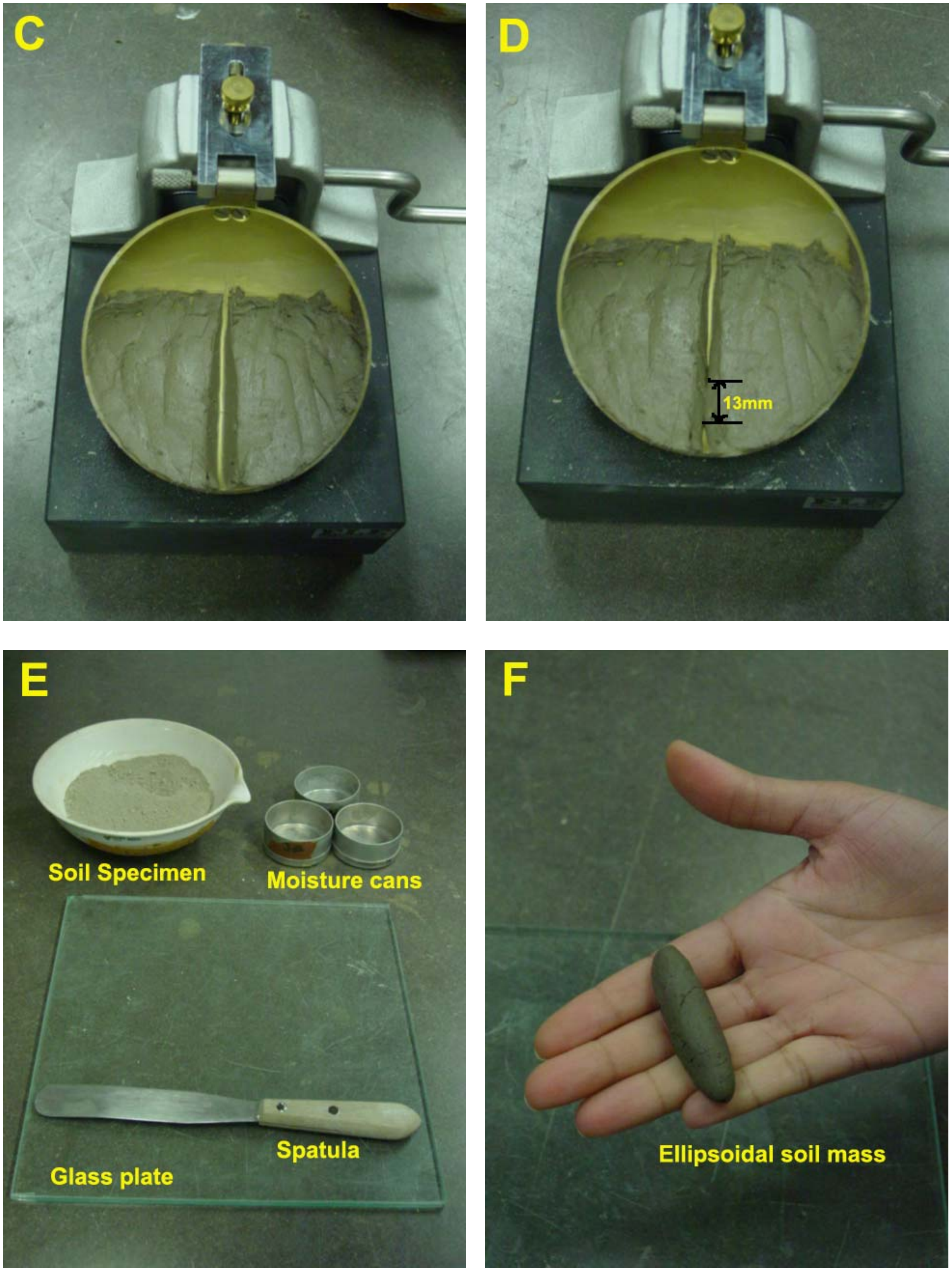
Significance:

The Swedish soil scientist Albert Atterberg originally defined seven “limits of consistency” to classify fine-grained soils, but in current engineering practice only two of the limits, the liquid and plastic limits, are commonly used. (A third limit, called the shrinkage limit, is used occasionally.) The Atterberg limits are based on the moisture content of the soil. The plastic limit is the moisture content that defines where the soil changes from a semi-solid to a plastic (flexible) state. The liquid limit is the moisture content that defines where the soil changes from a plastic to a viscous fluid state. The shrinkage limit is the moisture content that defines where the soil volume will not reduce further if the moisture content is reduced. A wide variety of soil engineering properties have been correlated to the liquid and plastic limits, and these Atterberg limits are also used to classify a fine-grained soil according to the Unified Soil Classification system or AASHTO system.

Equipment:

Liquid limit device, Porcelain (evaporating) dish, Flat grooving tool with gage, Eight moisture cans, Balance, Glass plate, Spatula, Wash bottle filled with distilled water, Drying oven set at 105°C.




C
D
13mm
E
Soil Specimen
Moisture cans
Spatula
Glass plate
F
Ellipsoidal soil mass

Test Procedure:

Liquid Limit:

(1) Take roughly 3/4 of the soil and place it into the porcelain dish. Assume that the soil was previously passed though a No. 40 sieve, air-dried, and then pulverized. Thoroughly mix the soil with a small amount of distilled water until it appears as a smooth uniform paste. Cover the dish with cellophane to prevent moisture from escaping.

(2) Weigh four of the empty moisture cans with their lids, and record the respective weights and can numbers on the data sheet.

(3) Adjust the liquid limit apparatus by checking the height of drop of the cup. The point on the cup that comes in contact with the base should rise to a height of 10 mm. The block on the end of the grooving tool is

10 mm high and should be used as a gage. Practice using the cup and determine the correct rate to rotate the crank so that the cup drops approximately two times per second.

(4) Place a portion of the previously mixed soil into the cup of the liquid limit apparatus at the point where the cup rests on the base. Squeeze the soil down to eliminate air pockets and spread it into the cup to a depth of about 10 mm at its deepest point. The soil pat should form an approximately horizontal surface (See Photo B).

(5) Use the grooving tool carefully cut a clean straight groove down the center of the cup. The tool should remain perpendicular to the surface of the cup as groove is being made. Use extreme care to prevent sliding the soil relative to the surface of the cup (See Photo C).

(6) Make sure that the base of the apparatus below the cup and the underside of the cup is clean of soil. Turn the crank of the apparatus at a rate of approximately two drops per second and count the number of drops, N, it takes to make the two halves of the soil pat come into contact at the bottom of the groove along a distance of 13 mm (1/2 in.) (See Photo D). If the number of drops exceeds 50, then go directly to step eight and do not record the number of drops, otherwise, record the number of drops on the data sheet.

(7) Take a sample, using the spatula, from edge to edge of the soil pat. The sample should include the soil on both sides of where the groove came into contact. Place the soil into a moisture can cover it. Immediately weigh the moisture can containing the soil, record its

mass, remove the lid, and place the can into the oven. Leave the moisture can in the oven for at least 16 hours. Place the soil remaining in the cup into the porcelain dish. Clean and dry the cup on the apparatus and the grooving tool.

(8) Remix the entire soil specimen in the porcelain dish. Add a small amount of distilled water to increase the water content so that the number of drops required to close the groove decrease.

(9) Repeat steps six, seven, and eight for at least two additional trials producing successively lower numbers of drops to close the groove. One of the trials shall be for a closure requiring 25 to 35 drops, one for closure between 20 and 30 drops, and one trial for a closure requiring 15 to 25 drops. Determine the water content from each trial by using the same method used in the first laboratory. Remember to use the same balance for all weighing.

Plastic Limit:

(1) Weigh the remaining empty moisture cans with their lids, and record the respective weights and can numbers on the data sheet.

(2) Take the remaining 1/4 of the original soil sample and add distilled water until the soil is at a consistency where it can be rolled without sticking to the hands.

(3) Form the soil into an ellipsoidal mass (See Photo F). Roll the mass between the palm or the fingers and the glass plate (See Photo G). Use sufficient pressure to roll the mass into a thread of uniform

diameter by using about 90 strokes per minute. (A stroke is one complete motion of the hand forward and back to the starting position.) The thread shall be deformed so that its diameter reaches 3.2 mm (1/8 in.), taking no more than two minutes.

(4) When the diameter of the thread reaches the correct diameter, break the thread into several pieces. Knead and reform the pieces into ellipsoidal masses and re-roll them. Continue this alternate rolling, gathering together, kneading and re-rolling until the thread crumbles under the pressure required for rolling and can no longer be rolled into a 3.2 mm diameter thread (See Photo H).

(5) Gather the portions of the crumbled thread together and place the soil into a moisture can, then cover it. If the can does not contain at least 6 grams of soil, add soil to the can from the next trial (See Step 6). Immediately weigh the moisture can containing the soil, record its mass, remove the lid, and place the can into the oven. Leave the moisture can in the oven for at least 16 hours.

(6) Repeat steps three, four, and five at least two more times. Determine the water content from each trial by using the same method used in the first laboratory. Remember to use the same balance for all weighing.

Analysis:

Liquid Limit:

(1) Calculate the water content of each of the liquid limit moisture cans after they have been in the oven for at least 16 hours.

(2) Plot the number of drops, N, (on the log scale) versus the water content (w). Draw the best-fit straight line through the plotted points and determine the liquid limit (LL) as the water content at 25 drops.

Plastic Limit:

(1) Calculate the water content of each of the plastic limit moisture cans after they have been in the oven for at least 16 hours.

(2) Compute the average of the water contents to determine the plastic limit, PL. Check to see if the difference between the water contents is greater than the acceptable range of two results (2.6 %).

(3) Calculate the plasticity index, PI=LL-PL.
Report the liquid limit, plastic limit, and plasticity index to the nearest whole number, omitting the percent designation.

EXAMPLE DATA

ATTERBERG LIMITS
DATA SHEETS

Date Tested: September 20, 2002

Tested By: CEMM315 Class, Group A

Project Name: CEMM315 Lab

Sample Number: B-1, SS-1, 8'-10'

Sample Description: Grayey silty clay

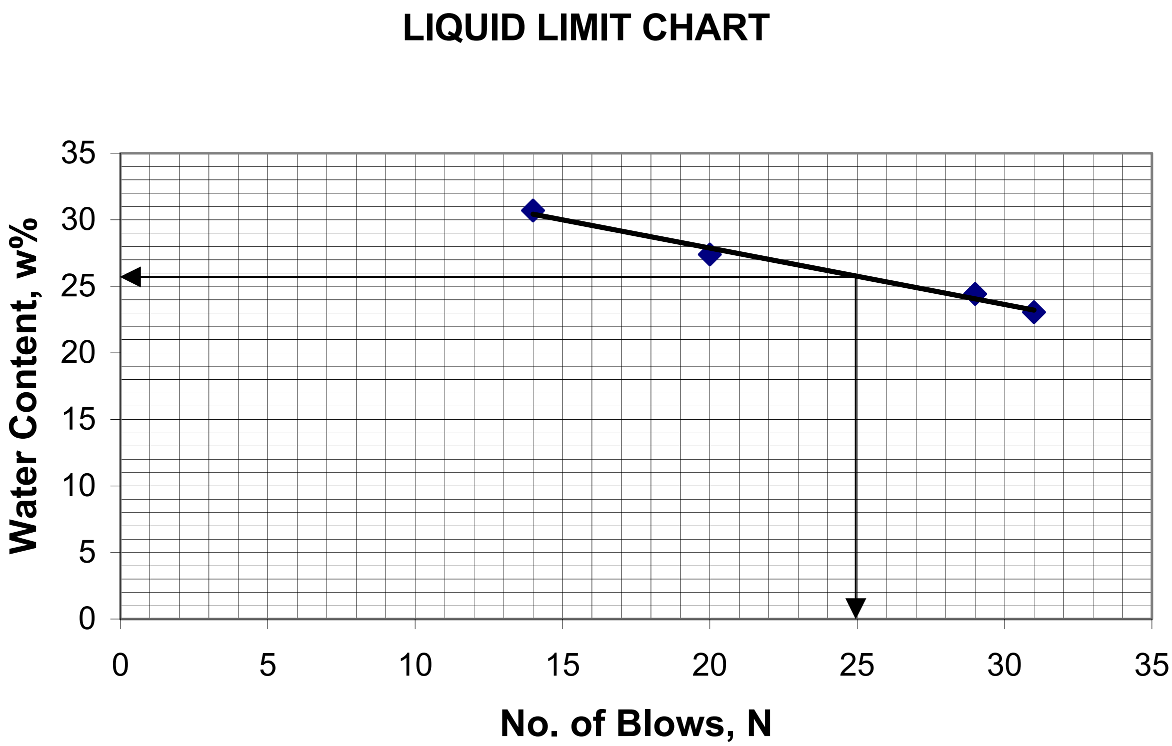
Liquid Limit Determination

Sample no.	1	2	3	4
Moisture can and lid number	11	1	5	4
M_C = Mass of empty, clean can + lid (grams)	22.23	23.31	21.87	22.58
M_{CMS} = Mass of can, lid, and moist soil (grams)	28.56	29.27	25.73	25.22
M_{CDS} = Mass of can, lid, and dry soil (grams)	27.40	28.10	24.90	24.60
M_S = Mass of soil solids (grams)	5.03	4.79	3.03	2.02
M_W = Mass of pore water (grams)	1.16	1.17	0.83	0.62
w = Water content, w%	23.06	24.43	27.39	30.69
No. of drops (N)	31	29	20	14

Plastic Limit Determination

Sample no.	1	2	3
Moisture can and lid number	7	14	13
M_C = Mass of empty, clean can + lid (grams)	7.78	7.83	15.16
M_{CMS} = Mass of can, lid, and moist soil (grams)	16.39	13.43	21.23
M_{CDS} = Mass of can, lid, and dry soil (grams)	15.28	12 .69	20.43
M_S = Mass of soil solids (grams)	7.5	4.86	5.27
M_W = Mass of pore water (grams)	1. 11	0.74	0.8
w = Water content, w%	14.8	15.2	15.1

Plastic Limit (PL)= Average w % = $\frac{14.8 + 15.2 + 15.1}{3} = 15.0$



From the above graph, Liquid Limit = 26

Final Results:

Liquid Limit = 26
Plastic Limit = 15
Plasticity Index =11

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ATTERBERG LIMITS
DATA SHEETS

Date Tested:

Tested By:

Project Name:

Sample Number:

Sample Description:

Liquid Limit Determination

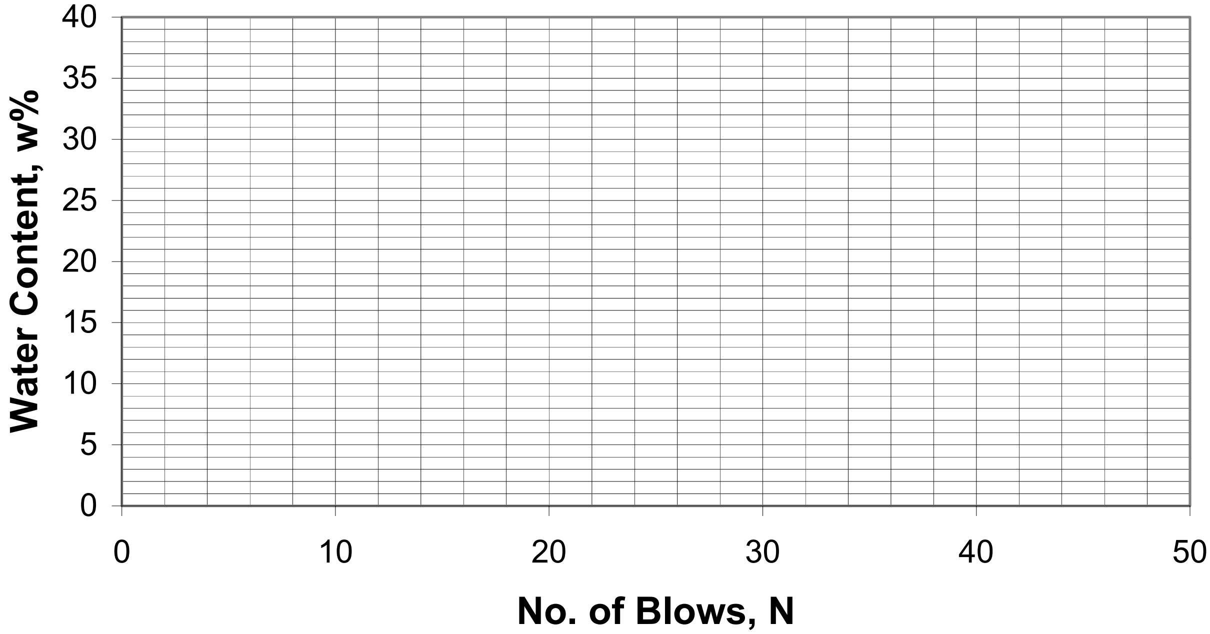
Sample no.	1	2	3	4
Moisture can and lid number				
M_C = Mass of empty, clean can + lid (grams)				
M_{CMS} = Mass of can, lid, and moist soil (grams)				
M_{CDS} = Mass of can, lid, and dry soil (grams)				
M_S = Mass of soil solids (grams)				
M_W = Mass of pore water (grams)				
w = Water content, w%				
No. of drops (N)				

Plastic Limit Determination

Sample no.	1	2	3
Moisture can and lid number			
M_C = Mass of empty, clean can + lid (grams)			
M_{CMS} = Mass of can, lid, and moist soil (grams)			
M_{CDS} = Mass of can, lid, and dry soil (grams)			
M_S = Mass of soil solids (grams)			
M_W = Mass of pore water (grams)			
w = Water content, w%			

Plastic Limit (PL) = Average w % =

LIQUID LIMIT CHART



Final Results:

Liquid Limit =
Plastic Limit =
Plasticity Index =