10 Polar Coordinates, Parametric Equations

10.1 Polar Coordinates

Coordinate systems are tools that let us use algebraic methods to understand geometry. While the rectangular (also called Cartesian) coordinates that we have been using are the most common, some problems are easier to analyze in alternate coordinate systems.

A coordinate system is a scheme that allows us to identify any point in the plane or in three-dimensional space by a set of numbers. In rectangular coordinates these numbers are interpreted, roughly speaking, as the lengths of the sides of a rectangle. In polar coordinates a point in the plane is identified by a pair of numbers \((r, \theta)\). The number \(r\) measures the distance from the origin to the point. Figure 10.1.1 shows the point with rectangular coordinates \((1, 2)\) and polar coordinates \((2, \pi/3)\), 2 units from the origin and \(\pi/3\) radians from the positive \(x\)-axis.

![Figure 10.1.1](image1.png)

EXAMPLE 10.1.4 Graph the polar equation \(r = 2\sin \theta\).

Just as we describe curves in the plane using equations involving \(x\) and \(y\), so can we describe curves using equations involving \(r\) and \(\theta\). Most common are equations of the form \(r = f(\theta)\).

EXAMPLE 10.1.5 Graph the curve given by \(r = (\theta + \pi)/2\). All points with \(r = 2\) are at distance 2 from the origin, so \(r = 2\) describes the circle of radius 2 with center at the origin.

EXAMPLE 10.1.6 Graph the curve given by \(r = 1 + \cos \theta\). We first consider \(y = 1 + \cos x\), as in figure 10.1.2. As \(\theta\) goes through the values in \([0, 2\pi]\), the value of \(r\) tracks the value of \(y\), forming the “cardioid” shape of figure 10.1.2. For example, when \(\theta = \pi/2\), \(r = 1 + \cos(\pi/2) = 1\), so we graph the point at distance 1 from the origin along the positive \(y\)-axis, which is at an angle of \(\pi/2\) from the positive \(x\)-axis. When \(\theta = 7\pi/4\), \(r = 1 + \cos(7\pi/4) = 1 + \sqrt{2}/2 \approx 1.71\), and the corresponding point appears in the fourth quadrant. This illustrates one of the potential benefits of using polar coordinates: the equation for this curve in rectangular coordinates would be quite complicated.

Each point in the plane is associated with exactly one pair of numbers in the rectangular coordinate system; each point is associated with an infinite number of pairs in polar coordinates. In the cardioid example, we considered only the range \(0 \leq \theta \leq 2\pi\), and already there was a duplicate: \((2, 0)\) and \((2, 2\pi)\) are the same point. Indeed, every value of \(\theta\) outside the interval \([0, 2\pi]\) duplicates a point on the curve \(r = 1 + \cos \theta\) when \(0 \leq \theta < 2\pi\). We can even make sense of polar coordinates like \((-2, \pi/4)\) by going to the direction \(-\pi/4\) and then move a distance 2 in the opposite direction; see figure 10.1.3. As usual, a negative angle \(\theta\) means an angle measured clockwise from the positive \(x\)-axis. The point in figure 10.1.3 also has coordinates \((2.5\pi/4)\) and \((-3\pi/4)\).

The relationship between rectangular and polar coordinates is quite easy to understand. The point with polar coordinates \((r, \theta)\) has rectangular coordinates \(x = r \cos \theta\) and \(y = r \sin \theta\); this follows immediately from the definition of the sine and cosine functions. Using figure 10.1.3 as an example, the point shown has rectangular coordinates \((1, \sqrt{2})\).
In the exercises below, find an equation in rectangular coordinates that has the same graph as the given equation in polar coordinates.

21. \( r = \sin(\theta) \) \( \Rightarrow \) 22. \( r = \sin^2 \theta \) \( \Rightarrow \) 23. \( r = \sec \theta \cos \theta \) \( \Rightarrow \) 24. \( r = \tan \theta \) \( \Rightarrow \)

10.2 SLOPES IN POLAR COORDINATES

When we describe a curve using polar coordinates, it is still a curve in the \( x-y \) plane. We would like to be able to compute slopes and areas for these curves using polar coordinates.

We have seen that \( x = r \cos \theta \) and \( y = r \sin \theta \) describe the relationship between polar and rectangular coordinates. If in turn we are interested in a curve given by \( r = f(\theta) \), then we can write \( x = f(\theta) \cos \theta \) and \( y = f(\theta) \sin \theta \) describing \( x \) and \( y \) in terms of \( \theta \) alone. The first of these equations describes a vertical or horizontal tangent line. Since this function has period \( 2\pi \), both equations have period \( 2\pi \) as well. A curve can have a horizontal tangent line at \( \theta = \pm \pi/2 \) or \( \pm 3\pi/2 \), but not at \( \theta = \pi/2 \) or \( 3\pi/2 \).

The second of these equations describes the relationship between polar and rectangular coordinates.

Since \( \frac{dy}{dx} = \frac{dy/d\theta}{dx/d\theta} \), we can instead compute
\[
\frac{dy}{dx} = \frac{dy/d\theta}{dx/d\theta} = \frac{f(\theta) \cos \theta + f'(\theta) \sin \theta}{f(\theta) \sin \theta - f'(\theta) \cos \theta}.
\]

EXAMPLE 10.2.1 Find the points at which the curve given by \( r = 1 + \cos \theta \) has a vertical or horizontal tangent line. Since this function has period \( 2\pi \), we may restrict our attention to the interval \([0, 2\pi]\) or \([-\pi, \pi]\), as convenience dictates. First, we compute the slope:
\[
\frac{dy}{dx} = \frac{(1 + \cos \theta) \cos \theta - \sin \theta \sin \theta}{(1 + \cos \theta) \sin \theta - \sin \theta \cos \theta} = \frac{\cos \theta - \sin \theta}{\sin \theta - \cos \theta}.
\]

This fraction is zero when the numerator is zero (and the denominator is not zero). The numerator is 
\[
\cos \theta - \sin \theta = -\frac{1}{\sqrt{2}} = -\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}.
\]

This means that \( \theta = \pm \pi/3 \). However, when \( \theta = \pi \), the denominator is also 0, so we cannot conclude that the tangent line is horizontal.

Setting the denominator to zero we get
\[
\sin \theta = 1 + \cos \theta = 0.
\]

So either \( \sin \theta = 0 \) or \( \cos \theta = -1 \). The first is true when \( \theta = 0 \text{ or } \pi \), the second when \( \theta = 2\pi/3 \text{ or } 4\pi/3 \).

We find the first intersection of the circle and the line when \( \theta = \pi \):
\[
r = 1 + \cos \theta = 1 + \cos \pi = 1 - 1 = 0.
\]

We find the second intersection of the circle and the line when \( \theta = 2\pi/3 \):
\[
r = 1 + \cos \theta = 1 + \cos 2\pi/3 = 1 + \frac{1}{2} = \frac{3}{2}.
\]

EXAMPLE 10.2.2 We find the second derivative for the cardioid \( r = 1 + \cos \theta \):
\[
\frac{d}{d\theta} \left( \frac{d}{d\theta} \left( \frac{d}{d\theta} (1 + \cos \theta) \right) \right) = \frac{d}{d\theta} \left( \frac{d}{d\theta} \left( -\sin \theta \right) \right) = d^{2}/d\theta^{2} = \sin \theta.
\]

We find the area inside the cardioid \( r = 1 + \cos \theta \):
\[
\frac{1}{2} \int_{\alpha}^{\beta} r^2 d\theta = \frac{1}{2} \int_{\alpha}^{\beta} (1 + \cos \theta)^2 d\theta.
\]

EXAMPLE 10.3 AREAS IN POLAR COORDINATES

We can use the equation of a curve in polar coordinates to compute some areas bounded by such curves. The basic approach is the same as with any application of integration: find an approximation that approaches the true value. For areas in rectangular coordinates, we approximated the region using rectangles; in polar coordinates, we use sectors of circles.

Sketch the curves over the interval \([0, 2\pi]\) unless otherwise stated.

7. \( r = \sin \theta + \cos \theta \) 8. \( r = 2 + 2 \sin \theta \) 9. \( r = 1 + \sin \theta \) 10. \( r = 2 + 2 \cos \theta \)

EXAMPLE 10.3.1 We find the area inside the cardioid \( r = 1 + \cos \theta \):
\[
\frac{1}{2} \int_{\alpha}^{\beta} (1 + \cos \theta)^2 d\theta = \frac{1}{2} \int_{\alpha}^{\beta} 1 + 2 \cos \theta + \cos^2 \theta d\theta = \frac{1}{2} \left( \theta + 2 \sin \theta + \frac{\sin 2\theta}{2} \right) \bigg|_{\alpha}^{\beta} = \frac{3\pi}{2}.
\]

EXAMPLE 10.3.2 We find the area between the circles \( r = 2 \) and \( r = 4 \sin \theta \), as shown in figure 10.3.2. The two curves intersect where \( 2 = 4 \sin \theta \), or \( \sin \theta = 1/2 \), so \( \theta = \pi/6 \) or \( 5\pi/6 \).

EXAMPLE 10.3.3 We find the shaded area in the first graph of figure 10.3.3 as the difference of the other two shaded areas. The cardioid is \( r = 1 + \sin \theta \) and the circle is \( r = 3 \sin \theta \). We attempt to find points of intersection:
\[
1 + \sin \theta = 3 \sin \theta
1 = 2 \sin \theta
1/2 = \sin \theta.
\]

This has solutions \( \theta = \pi/6 \text{ or } 5\pi/6 \). \( \pi/6 \) corresponds to the intersection in the first quadrant that we need. Note that no solution of this equation corresponds to the intersection

10.3 Areas in polar coordinates 245

Sketch the curves over the interval \([0, 2\pi]\) unless otherwise stated.

7. \( r = \sin \theta + \cos \theta \) 8. \( r = 2 + 2 \sin \theta \) 9. \( r = 1 + \sin \theta \) 10. \( r = 2 + 2 \cos \theta \)

EXAMPLE 10.3.1 We find the area inside the cardioid \( r = 1 + \cos \theta \):
\[
\frac{1}{2} \int_{\alpha}^{\beta} (1 + \cos \theta)^2 d\theta = \frac{1}{2} \int_{\alpha}^{\beta} 1 + 2 \cos \theta + \cos^2 \theta d\theta = \frac{1}{2} \left( \theta + 2 \sin \theta + \frac{\sin 2\theta}{2} \right) \bigg|_{\alpha}^{\beta} = \frac{3\pi}{2}.
\]

EXAMPLE 10.3.2 We find the area between the circles \( r = 2 \) and \( r = 4 \sin \theta \), as shown in figure 10.3.2. The two curves intersect where \( 2 = 4 \sin \theta \), or \( \sin \theta = 1/2 \), so \( \theta = \pi/6 \) or \( 5\pi/6 \).

10.3 AREAS IN POLAR COORDINATES

We can use the equation of a curve in polar coordinates to compute some areas bounded by such curves. The basic approach is the same as with any application of integration: find an approximation that approaches the true value. For areas in rectangular coordinates, we approximated the region using rectangles; in polar coordinates, we use sectors of circles, as depicted in figure 10.3.1. Recall that the area of a sector of a circle is \( \alpha r^2/2 \), where \( \alpha \) is the angle subtended by the sector. So if the curve is given by \( r = f(\theta) \), and the angle subtended by a small sector in \( \Delta \theta \), the area is \( \Delta \theta f(\theta)^2/2 \). Thus we approximate the total area as
\[
\sum_{i=1}^{n} \frac{1}{2} f(\theta_i)^2 \Delta \theta.
\]

In the limit this becomes
\[
\int_{\alpha}^{\beta} \frac{1}{2} f(\theta)^2 d\theta.
\]

EXAMPLE 10.3.1 We find the area inside the cardioid \( r = 1 + \cos \theta \):
\[
\int_{\alpha}^{\beta} \frac{1}{2} (1 + \cos \theta)^2 d\theta = \int_{\alpha}^{\beta} \frac{1}{2} (1 + 2 \cos \theta + \cos^2 \theta) d\theta = \frac{1}{2} \left( \theta + 2 \sin \theta + \frac{\sin 2\theta}{2} \right) \bigg|_{\alpha}^{\beta} = \frac{3\pi}{2}.
\]

EXAMPLE 10.3.2 We find the area between the circles \( r = 2 \) and \( r = 4 \sin \theta \), as shown in figure 10.3.2. The two curves intersect where \( 2 = 4 \sin \theta \), or \( \sin \theta = 1/2 \), so \( \theta = \pi/6 \) or \( 5\pi/6 \).
point at the origin, but fortunately that one is obvious. The cardioid goes through the origin when \( \theta = -\pi/2 \); the circle goes through the origin at multiples of \( \pi \), starting with \( \theta = \pi/2 \).

Now the larger region has area
\[
\frac{1}{2} \int_{-\pi/2}^{\pi/2} (1 + \sin \theta)^2 \, d\theta = \frac{1}{2} \left( \frac{9}{\sqrt{3}} \right) = \frac{3\sqrt{3}}{2}
\]
and the smaller has area
\[
\frac{1}{2} \int_{\pi/2}^{\pi} (3\sin \theta)^2 \, d\theta = \frac{27}{\pi} \left( \frac{27}{2} \right)
\]

so the area we seek is \( \pi/8 \).

Figure 10.3.3: An area between curves.

Exercises 10.3.

Find the area enclosed by the curve.

1. \( r = \sqrt{3\cos 2\theta} \)
2. \( r = 2 - \cos \theta \)
3. \( r = \cos \theta; \pi/6 \leq \theta \leq \pi/3 \)
4. \( r = \cos \theta; \theta \leq \theta \leq \pi/3 \)
5. \( r = 2\cos \theta; a > 0 \)
6. \( r = 4 + 3\sin \theta \)
7. Find the area inside the loop formed by \( r = \tan(\theta/2) \).
8. Find the area inside one loop of \( r = \cos(3\theta) \).
9. Find the area inside one loop of \( r = \sin^2 \theta \).
10. Find the area inside the small loop of \( r = (1/2) + \cos \theta \).
11. Find the area inside \( r = (1/2) + \cos \theta \), including the area inside the small loop.
12. Find the area inside one loop of \( r^2 = \cos 2\theta \).
13. Find the area enclosed by \( r = \tan \theta \) and \( r = \sec \theta \).

10.4 Parametric Equations

When we computed the derivative \( dy/dx \) using polar coordinates, we used the expressions \( x = f(\theta)\cos \theta \) and \( y = f(\theta)\sin \theta \). These two equations completely specify the curve, though the form \( r = f(\theta) \) is simpler. The expanded form has the virtue that it can easily be generalized to describe a wider range of curves than can be specified in rectangular or polar coordinates.

Suppose \( f(t) \) and \( g(t) \) are functions. Then the equations \( x = f(t) \) and \( y = g(t) \) describe a curve in the plane. In the case of the polar coordinates equations, the variable \( t \) is replaced by \( \theta \) which has a natural geometric interpretation. But \( t \) is generally an arbitrary variable, often called in this case a parameter, and this method of specifying a curve is known as parametric equations. One important interpretation of \( t \) is time. In this interpretation, the equations \( x = f(t) \) and \( y = g(t) \) give the position of an object at time \( t \).

Figure 10.4.3: A hypercycloid and a hypocycloid.

Exercises 10.4.

1. What curve is described by \( x = t^2, \ y = e^t \)? If \( t \) is interpreted as time, describe how the object moves on the curve.
2. What curve is described by \( x = 3\cos t, \ y = 3\sin t \)? If \( t \) is interpreted as time, describe how the object moves on the curve.
3. What curve is described by \( x = 3\cos t, \ y = 2\sin t \)? If \( t \) is interpreted as time, describe how the object moves on the curve.
4. What curve is described by \( x = 3\sin t, \ y = 3\cos t \)? If \( t \) is interpreted as time, describe how the object moves on the curve.
5. Sketch the curve described by \( x = e^t - t, \ y = e^t \). If \( t \) is interpreted as time, describe how the object moves on the curve.
6. A wheel of radius 1 rolls along a straight line, say the x-axis. A point \( P \) is located halfway between the center of the wheel and the rim; assume \( P \) starts at the point \( (0, 1/2) \). As the wheel rolls, \( P \) traces a curve; find parametric equations for the curve.
7. A wheel of radius 1 rolls around the outside of a circle of radius 3. A point \( P \) on the rim of the wheel rolls out a curve called a hypocycloid, as indicated in figure 10.4.3. Assuming \( P \) starts at the point \( (3, 0) \), find parametric equations for the curve.

Figure 10.4.4: A hypocycloid, as indicated in figure 10.4.3. Assuming \( P \) starts at the point \( (0, 1/2) \), find parametric equations for the curve.
Exercises 10.5.

1. Consider the curve of exercise 6 in section 10.4. Find all values of \( t \) for which the curve has a horizontal tangent line. ⇒

2. Consider the curve of exercise 6 in section 10.4. Find the area under one arch of the curve. ⇒

3. Consider the curve of exercise 6 in section 10.4. Set up an integral for the length of one arch of the curve. ⇒

4. Consider the hypocycloid of exercise 7 in section 10.4. Find all points at which the curve has a horizontal tangent line. ⇒

5. Consider the hypocycloid of exercise 7 in section 10.4. Find the area between the large circle and one arch of the curve. ⇒

6. Consider the hypocycloid of exercise 7 in section 10.4. Find the length of one arch of the curve. ⇒

7. Consider the hypocycloid of exercise 8 in section 10.4. Find the area inside the curve. ⇒

8. Consider the hypocycloid of exercise 8 in section 10.4. Find the length of one arch of the curve. ⇒

9. Recall the involute of a circle from exercise 9 in section 10.4. Find the point in the first quadrant in figure 10.4.4 at which the tangent line is vertical. ⇒

10. Recall the involute of a circle from exercise 9 in section 10.4. Instead of an infinite string, suppose we have a string of length \( v \) attached to the unit circle at \((-1, 0)\), and initially laid around the top of the circle with its end at \((1, 0)\). If we grasp the end of the string and begin to unwind it, we get a piece of the involute, until the string is vertical. If we then keep the string taut and continue to rotate it counter-clockwise, the end traces out a semicircle with center at \((-1, 0)\), until the string is vertical again. Continuing, the end of the string traces out the mirror image of the initial portion of the curve; see figure 10.5.1. Find the area of the region inside this curve and outside the unit circle. ⇒

11. Find the length of the curve from the previous exercise, shown in figure 10.5.1. ⇒

12. Find the length of the spiral of Archimedes (figure 10.3.4) for \( 0 \leq \theta \leq 2\pi \). ⇒

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{Figure 10.4.4} & \quad \text{An involute of a circle.} \\
\text{Figure 10.5.1} & \quad \text{A region formed by the end of a string.}
\end{align*} \]