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Instantaneous Rate of Change: The Derivative

2.1 The slope of a function

Suppose that \( y \) is a function of \( x \), say \( y = f(x) \). It is often necessary to know how sensitive the value of \( y \) is to small changes in \( x \).

**EXAMPLE 2.1.1** Take, for example, \( y = \sqrt{625 - x^2} \) (the upper semicircle of radius 25 centered at the origin). When \( x = 7 \), we find that \( y = \sqrt{625 - 49} = 24 \). Suppose we want to know how much \( y \) changes when \( x \) increases a little, say to 7.1 or 7.01.

In the case of a straight line \( y = mx + A \), the slope \( m = \Delta y/\Delta x \) measures the change in \( y \) per unit change in \( x \). This can be interpreted as a measure of "sensitivity"; for example, if \( y = 100x + 5 \), a small change in \( x \) corresponds to a change one hundred times as large in \( y \), so \( y \) is quite sensitive to changes in \( x \).

Let us look at the same ratio \( \Delta y/\Delta x \) for our function \( y = f(x) = \sqrt{625 - x^2} \) when \( x \) changes from 7 to 7.1. Here \( \Delta x = 7.1 - 7 = 0.1 \) is the change in \( x \), and

\[
\Delta y = f(x + \Delta x) - f(x) = f(7.1) - f(7)
\]

\[
= \sqrt{625 - (7.1)^2} - \sqrt{625 - 7^2} \approx 23.9706 - 24 = -0.0294.
\]

Thus, \( \Delta y/\Delta x \approx -0.0294/0.1 = -0.294 \). This means that \( y \) changes by less than one third the change in \( x \), and apparently \( y \) is not very sensitive to changes in \( x \) at \( x = 7 \). We say "apparently" here because we don't really know what happens between 7 and 7.1. Perhaps \( y \) changes dramatically as \( x \) runs through the values from 7 to 7.1, but at 7.1 \( y \) just happens to be close to its value at 7. This is not in fact the case for this particular function, but we don't yet know why.

![Figure 2.1.1](image.png)

Figure 2.1.1 Chords approximating the tangent line. (AP)

So far we have found the slopes of two chords that should be close to the slope of the tangent line, but what is the slope of the tangent line exactly? Since the tangent line touches the circle at just one point, we will never be able to calculate its slope directly, using two "known" points on the line. What we need is a way to capture what happens to the slopes of the chords as they "get closer and closer" to the tangent line.

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2.2 The slope of a function

Instead of looking at more particular values of \( \Delta x \), let's see what happens if we do some algebra with the difference quotient using just \( \Delta x \). The slope of a chord from (7, 24) to a nearby point is given by

\[
\frac{\sqrt{625 - (x + \Delta x)^2} - \sqrt{625 - (7 + \Delta x)^2}}{\Delta x} = \frac{\sqrt{625 - x^2} - \sqrt{625 - 49}}{\Delta x} = \frac{\sqrt{625 - x^2} - \sqrt{625 - 49}}{\Delta x} = \frac{\sqrt{625 - x^2} - \sqrt{625 - 49}}{\Delta x}.
\]

Now, can we tell by looking at this last formula what happens when \( \Delta x \) gets very close to zero? The numerator clearly gets very close to -14 as \( \Delta x \) gets very close to \( \sqrt{625 - 7^2} = 24 \). However, the denominator gets very close to \( 2 \sqrt{625 - 7^2} + 48 \). So it is not surprising that the quotient gets very close to \( -14/48 = -7/24 \approx -0.29167 \). It certainly seems reasonable, and in fact it is true: as \( \Delta x \) gets closer and closer to zero, the difference quotient does in fact get closer and closer to \(-7/24\), and so the slope of the tangent line is exactly \(-7/24\).

What about the slope of the tangent line at \( x = 12 \)? Well, 12 can't be all that different from 7, we just have to redo the calculation with 12 instead of 7. This won't be hard, but it will be a bit tedious. What if we try to do all the algebra without using a specific value for \( x \)? Let's copy from above, replacing 7 by \( x \). We'll have to do a bit more than that—

\[
\frac{\sqrt{625 - (x + \Delta x)^2} - \sqrt{625 - (7 + \Delta x)^2}}{\Delta x} = \frac{\sqrt{625 - x^2} - \sqrt{625 - 49}}{\Delta x} = \frac{\sqrt{625 - x^2} - \sqrt{625 - 49}}{\Delta x} = \frac{\sqrt{625 - x^2} - \sqrt{625 - 49}}{\Delta x}.
\]

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example, the "24" in the calculation came from \( \sqrt{625 - 7^2} \), so we'll need to fix that too.

\[
\frac{\sqrt{625 - x^2} - \sqrt{625 - 49}}{\Delta x} = \frac{\sqrt{625 - x^2} - \sqrt{625 - 49}}{\Delta x} = \frac{\sqrt{625 - x^2} - \sqrt{625 - 49}}{\Delta x} = \frac{\sqrt{625 - x^2} - \sqrt{625 - 49}}{\Delta x}.
\]

Replacing \( x \) by 7 gives \(-7/24\), as before, and now we can easily do the computation for 12 or any other value of \( x \) between \(-25 \) and 25.

Now what happens when \( \Delta x \) is very close to zero? Again it seems apparent that the quotient will be very close to

\[
\frac{-7}{24} \approx \frac{-2x}{\Delta x} \approx \frac{-x}{\Delta x}.
\]

Replacing \( x \) by 7 gives \(-7/24\), as before, and now we can easily do the computation for 12 or any other value of \( x \) between \(-25 \) and 25.

So now we have a simple, simple formula, \(-x/\sqrt{625 - x^2}\), that tells us the slope of the tangent line for any value of \( x \). This slope, in turn, tells us how sensitive the value of \( y = f(x) \) gets to changes in the value of \( x \).

What do we call such a formula? That is, a formula with one variable, so that substituting an "input" value for the variable produces a "new" output" value? This is a function. Starting with one function, \( \sqrt{625 - x^2} \), we have derived, by means of some slightly more algebra, a new function, \(-x/\sqrt{625 - x^2}\), that gives us important information about the original function. This new function in fact is called the derivative of the original function. If the original is referred to as \( f \) or \( y \) then the derivative is often written \( f'(x) \) or \( y' \) and pronounced "f prime" or "y prime", so in this case we might write \( f'(x) = -x/\sqrt{625 - x^2}\).

At a particular point, say \( x = 7 \), we say that \( f'(7) = -7/24 \) or "f prime of 7 is \(-7/24\)" or "the derivative of \( f \) at \( x = 7 \) is \(-7/24\)."

To summarize, we compute the derivative of \( f \) by forming the difference quotient

\[
\frac{f(x + \Delta x) - f(x)}{\Delta x},
\]

which is the slope of a line, then we figure out what happens when \( \Delta x \) gets very close to 0.

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7. Sketch the unit circle. Describe the behavior of the slope of the tangent line at various angles around the circle. Which trigonometric function gives the slope of the tangent line at an angle \( \theta \)? Why? Hint: think in terms of ratios of sides of triangles.

8. Sketch the parabola \( y = x^2 \). For what values of \( x \) on the parabola is the slope of the tangent line positive? Negative? What do you notice about the graph at the point(s) where the sign of the slope changes from positive to negative and vice versa?

2.2 An example

We started the last section by saying, “It is often necessary to know how sensitive the value of \( y \) is to small changes in \( x \).” We have seen one purely mathematical example of this: finding the “steepness” of a curve at a point is precisely this problem. Here is a more applied example.

With careful measurement it might be possible to discover that a dropped ball has height \( h(t) = h_0 - \frac{1}{2}gt^2 \) seconds after it is released. (Here \( h_0 \) is the initial height of the ball, when \( t = 0 \), and \( g \) is some number determined by the experiment.) A natural question is then, “How fast is the ball going at time \( t \)?” We can certainly get a pretty good idea with a little simple arithmetic. To make the calculation more concrete, let’s say \( h_0 = 100 \) meters and \( g = 4.9 \) and suppose we are interested in the speed of \( t = 2 \). We know that when \( t = 2 \) the height is 100 − 4.9 · 2 = 90.5 meters, so in that second the ball has traveled 80.4 − 59.2 = 21.24 meters. This means that the average speed during that time was 24.5 meters per second. So we might guess that 24.5 meters per second is not a terrible estimate of the speed at \( t = 2 \). But certainly we can do better. At \( t = 2.5 \) the height is 100 − 4.9(2.5) = 69.375. During the half second from \( t = 2 \) to \( t = 2.5 \), the ball has traveled 90.4 − 69.375 = 21.025 meters, at an average speed of 84.05 meters per second; this should be a better estimate of the speed at \( t = 2 \). So it’s clear now how to better and better approximations: compute average speeds over shorter and shorter time intervals. Between \( t = 2 \) and \( t = 2.01 \), for example, the ball drops 0.19649 meters in one hundredth of a second, at an average speed of 19.649 meters per second.

We can’t do this forever, and we still might reasonably ask what the actual speed precisely at \( t = 2 \) is. If \( \Delta t \) is some tiny amount of time, what we want to know is what happens to the average speed \( \frac{h(2 + \Delta t) − h(2)}{\Delta t} \) as \( \Delta t \) gets smaller and smaller. Doing this,

Exercises 2.2.

1. An object is traveling in a straight line so that its position (that is, distance from some fixed point) is given by this table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (seconds)</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distance (meters)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Find the average speed of the object during the following time intervals: \( [0, 1] \), \( [0, 2] \), \( [0, 3] \), \( [1, 2] \), \( [1, 3] \), \( [2, 3] \). If you had to guess the speed at \( t = 2 \) just on the basis of these, what would you guess?

2. Let \( y = f(t)^2 \), where \( t \) is the time in seconds and \( y \) is the distance in meters that an object falls on a certain airless planet. Draw a graph of this function between \( t = 0 \) and \( t = 3 \). Make a table of the average speed of the falling object between \( [a, b] \) sec and \( [c, d] \) sec. Use algebra to find a simple formula for the average speed during time period \( [a, b] \) and \( [c, d] \). Determine what happens as \( \Delta t \) approaches 0. In your graph of \( y = f(t)^2 \), draw the straight line through the point \( (0,0) \) whose slope is equal to the value you just found.

3. A ball is dropped from an 80-meter high window, its height \( h \) above the ground at time \( t = 2 \) is 19.6 meters per second. This calculation should look very familiar. In the language of the previous section, we might have started with \( f(x) = 100 − 4.9x^2 \) and asked for the slope of the tangent line at \( x = 2 \). We would have answered that question by computing

\[
\frac{f(2 + \Delta x) - f(2)}{\Delta x} = \frac{-9.8\Delta x^2}{\Delta x} = -9.8\Delta x.
\]

The algebra is the same, except that following the pattern of the previous section the subtraction would be reversed, and we would say that the slope of the tangent line is \(-9.8\). Indeed, in hindsight, perhaps we should have subtracted the other way even for the dropping ball. At \( t = 2 \) the ball is 19.6 above the height is 55.9. The usual way to compute a “distance traveled” is to subtract the earlier position from the later one, or 55.9 − 80.4 = 24.5. This tells us that the distance traveled is 24.5 meters, and the negative sign tells us that the height went down during the second. If we continue the original calculation we then subtract 19.6 meters per second as the exact speed at \( t = 2 \). If we interpret the negative sign as meaning that the motion is downward, which seems reasonable, then in fact this is the same answer as before, but with even more information, since the numerical answer contains the direction of motion as well as the speed. Thus, the speed of the ball is the value of the derivative of a certain function, namely, of the function that gives the position of the ball. (More properly, this is the velocity of the ball, velocity is signed speed, that is, speed with a direction indicated by the sign.)

The upshot is that this problem, finding the speed of the ball, is exactly the same problem methodologically as finding the slope of a curve. This may already be enough evidence to convince you that whenever you consider some quantity (the height of the curve or the height of a ball or the size of the economy or the distance of a space probe from earth or the population of the world) the rate at which the quantity is changing can, in principle, be computed in exactly the same way, by finding a derivative.
as "substituting zero for $\Delta x$," as that would give
\[19.6 - 0 = 4.9 - 0 \]
which is meaningless. The quantity we are really interested in does not make sense "at zero," and this is why the answer to the original problem (finding a velocity or a slope) was not immediately obvious. In other words, we are generally going to want to figure out what a quantity "approaches" in situations where we can't merely plug in a value. If you would like to think about a hard example (which we will analyze later) consider what happens to $\sin(x)/x$ as $x$ approaches zero.

**EXAMPLE 2.3.1** Does $\sqrt{2}$ approach $1.41$ as $x$ approaches $2$? In this it is possible to compute the actual value $\sqrt{2}$ to a high precision to answer the question. But since in general we won't be able to do that, let's not. We might start by computing $\sqrt{x}$ for values of $x$ close to $2$ as we did in the previous sections. Here are some values:
\[\sqrt{1.99} = 1.413782106, \quad \sqrt{2} = 1.414213562, \quad \sqrt{2.01} = 1.414647029.\]
So it looks at least possible that indeed these values "approach" $1.41$—already $\sqrt{1.99}$ is quite close. As we continue this process, however, at some point we will approach "stall". In fact, $\sqrt{1.999} = 1.414213562$, so we may never even get as far as $1.4142$, no matter how long we continue the sequence.

So in a fuzzy, everyday sort of sense, it is true that $\sqrt{2}$ "gets close to" $1.41$, but it does not approach $1.41$ in the sense we want. To compute an exact slope or an exact velocity, what we want to know is that a given quantity becomes "arbitrarily close" to a fixed value, meaning that the first quantity can be made "as close as we like" to the fixed value. Consider again the quantities
\[\frac{19.6 \Delta x - 4.9 \Delta x^2}{\Delta x} = -19.6 - 4.9 \Delta x.\]
These two quantities are equal as long as $\Delta x$ is not zero, if $\Delta x$ is zero, the left hand side is meaningless, while the right hand one is $-19.6$. Can we say more than we did before about why the right hand "approaches" $-19.6$ in the desired sense? Can we really make it "as close as we want" to $-19.6$? Let's try a test case. Can we make $-19.6 - 4.9 \Delta x$ within one millionth (0.000001) of $-19.6$? The values within a millionth of $-19.6$ are in the interval $[-19.600001, -19.599999]$. As $\Delta x$ approaches zero, does $-19.6 - 4.9 \Delta x$ eventually reside inside this interval? If $\Delta x$ is positive, this would require that $-19.6 - 4.9 \Delta x > -19.600001$. This is something we can manipulate with a little algebra:
\[19.6 - 4.9 \Delta x > -19.600001\]
\[-4.9 \Delta x > -19.600001 + 19.6\]
\[-4.9 \Delta x > -0.000001\]
\[\Delta x < 0.000001/4.9 = 0.000001.\]
Thus, we can say with certainty that if $\Delta x$ is positive and less than $0.000001$, then $\Delta x < 0.000001/4.9 = 0.000001$. We could do a similar calculation if $\Delta x$ is negative.

Now so we know that we can make $-19.6 - 4.9 \Delta x$ within one millionth of $-19.6$. But can we make it "as close as we want"? In this case, it is quite simple to see that the answer is yes, by modifying the calculation we’ve just done. It may be helpful to think of this as a game. I claim that I can make $-19.6 - 4.9 \Delta x$ as close as you desire to $-19.6$ by making $\Delta x$ "close enough" to zero. So the game is: you give me a number, like $10^{-6}$, and I have to come up with a number representing how $\Delta x$ has to be zero to guarantee that $-19.6 - 4.9 \Delta x$ is at least close to $-19.6$ as you have requested.

Now if we actually play this game, I could redo the calculation above for each new number you provide. What I'd like to do is somehow see that I will always succeed, and even more, I'd like to have a simple strategy so that I don’t have to do all that algebra every time. A strategy in this case would be a formula that gives me a correct answer no matter what you specify. So suppose the number you give me is $c$. How close does $\Delta x$ have to be to zero to guarantee that $-19.6 - 4.9 \Delta x$ is in $(-19.6 - c, -19.6 + c)$? If $\Delta x$ is positive, we need:
\[-19.6 - 4.9 \Delta x > -19.6 - c\]
\[-4.9 \Delta x > -c\]
\[\Delta x < c/4.9\]
So if I pick any number $\delta$ that is less than $c/4.9$, the algebra tells me that whenever $\Delta x < \delta$ then $-19.6 - 4.9 \Delta x$ is in $(-19.6 - c, -19.6 + c)$. This is exactly what I did in the example: I picked $\delta = 0.0000002$ (0.000001/4.9). A similar calculation again works for negative $\Delta x$. The important fact is that is now a completely general result—it shows that I can always win, no matter what number "move" you make.

Now we can codify this by giving a precise definition to replace the fuzzy, "gets closer and closer" language we have used so far. Hereinafter, we will say something like "the limit of $-(19.6 - 4.9 \Delta x)$ as $\Delta x$ goes to zero is $-19.6$" and abbreviate this mouthful

\[\frac{\text{guarantees that } |x - 2| < 6 \text{ implies } |x - 2| < 6.} \]
\[\text{Of course: no matter what } \epsilon \text{ is, } \delta = \epsilon \text{ works.} \]
So it turns out to be very easy to prove something "obvious," which is nice. It doesn’t take long before things get trickier, however.

**EXAMPLE 2.3.4** It seems clear that $\sqrt{2} = 4$. Let’s try to prove it. We will want to be able to show that $|x - 2| < \delta$ whenever $|x - 2| < \delta$, by choosing $\delta$ carefully. Is there any connection between $|x - 2|$ and $|x^2 - 4|$? Yes, and it’s not hard to spot, but it is not so simple as the previous example. We can write $|x^2 - 4| = |(x - 2)(x + 2)|$. Now when $|x - 2|$ is small, part of $|x - 2|$ is a small, namely, $|x - 2|$. What about $|x + 2|$? If $x$ is close to 2, $|x + 2|$ certainly can’t be too big, but we need to somehow be precise about it. Let’s recall the “game” version of what is going on here. You get to pick an $\epsilon$ and I have to pick a $\delta$ that makes things work out. Presumably it is the really tiny values of $\epsilon$ I need to worry about, but I have to be prepared for anything, even an apparently “bad” move like $\epsilon = 100$. I expect that $\epsilon$ is going to be small, and that the corresponding $\delta$ will be small, or possibly less than 1. If $\delta = 1$ then $|x - 2| < 5$ when $|x - 2| < \delta$ (because $x$ is within 1 of 2, then $x$ is between 1 and 3 and $x + 2$ is between 3 and 5). So then I’d be trying to show that $|x + 2| < 5$ when $|x - 2| < \delta$. Now how can I pick $\delta$ so that $|x - 2| < \delta$ implies $5(|x - 2| < \epsilon$? This is easy: use $\delta < 5\epsilon/5$, so $5(|x - 2| < 5(5\epsilon/5) = \delta$. But if we keep $\delta$ any smaller, I will be able to choose $\epsilon$ smaller. If you choose $\epsilon = 1000$, I should pick $\delta = 200!$. No, to keep the things "same" I will never pick a $\delta$ bigger than 1. Here’s the final “game” strategy. When you pick a value for $\epsilon$ I will pick $\delta = \epsilon/\delta$ or $\delta = 1$, whichever is smaller. Now $|x - 2| < \delta$, I know both that $|x + 2| < 5$ and that $|x + 2| < \epsilon$. Thus $|x + 2| < 5(|x + 2| < \epsilon$ has been a long discussion, but most of it was explanation and scratch work. If this were written down as a proof, it would be quite short, like this:

Proof that $\sqrt{x} = 4$. Given any $\epsilon$, pick $\delta = \epsilon/\delta$ or $\delta = 1$, whichever is smaller. Then when $x - 2 < \delta$, $|x - 2| < 5$ and $|x - 2| < \epsilon$. Hence $|x + 2| < 5(|x - 2| < 5(5\epsilon/5) = \delta = \epsilon$

It probably seems obvious that $\sqrt{x} = 4$, and it is worth examining more closely why it seems obvious. If we write $x = x$, and ask what happens when $x$ approaches 2, we might say something like, “Well, the first $x$ approaches 2, and the second $x$ approaches 2, so the product must approach $2^2$.” In fact this is pretty much right on the money, except for that word “must.” It is really true that if $x$ approaches $a$ and $y$ approaches $b$, then $xy$ approaches $ab$. It is, but it is not really obvious, since $x$ and $y$ might be quite complicated. The good news is that we can see that this is true once and for all, and then
we don’t have to worry about it ever again. When we say that \( x \) might be “complicated” we really mean that in practice it might be a function. Here is then what we want to know:

**Theorem 2.3.5** Suppose \( \lim_{x \to a} f(x) = L \) and \( \lim_{x \to a} g(x) = M \). Then \( \lim_{x \to a} f(g(x)) = LM \).

**Proof.** We have to use the official definition of limit to make sense of this. So given any \( \varepsilon > 0 \) we need to find a \( \delta > 0 \) so that \( 0 < |x - a| < \delta \) implies \( |f(g(x)) - LM| < \varepsilon \). What do we have to work with? We know that we can make \( f(x) \) close to \( L \) and \( g(x) \) close to \( M \), and we have to somehow connect these facts to make \( f(g(x)) \) close to \( LM \).

We use, as is so often the case, a little algebraic trick:

\[
|f(g(x)) - LM| = |f(g(x)) - f(M)| + |f(M) - LM |
\]

\[
\leq |f(g(x)) - f(M)| + |f(M) - LM |< \varepsilon
\]

This is all straightforward except perhaps for the “\( \leq \)”. That is an example of the triangle inequality, which says that if \( a \) and \( b \) are any real numbers then \( |a| \leq |a| + |b| \). If you look at a few examples, using positive and negative numbers in various combinations for \( a \) and \( b \), you should quickly understand why this is true; we will not prove it formally.

Since \( \lim_{x \to a} f(x) = L \) there is a \( \delta_1 > 0 \) so that \( 0 < |x - a| < \delta_1 \) implies \( |f(x) - L| < \epsilon/|LM| \). This means that \( 0 < |x - a| < \delta_1 \) implies \( |f(x) - L)| < \epsilon/|LM| < \epsilon/2 \). You can see where this is going: if we can make \( |f(g(x)) - f(M)| < \epsilon/2 \) also then we’ll be done.

We can make \( |g(x) - M| \) smaller than any fixed number by making \( x \) close enough to \( a \); unfortunately, \( /2(2M) \) is not a fixed number, since \( x \) is a variable. Here we need another little trick, just like the one we used in analyzing \( x^2 \). We can find a \( \delta_2 \) so that \( |x - a| < \delta_2 \) implies \( |f(x) - L| < 1 \), meaning that \( L - 1 < f(x) < L + 1 \). This means that \( |f(x)| < N \), where \( N \) is either \( L - 1 \) or \( L + 1 \), depending on whether \( L \) is negative or positive. The important point is that \( N \) doesn’t depend on \( x \). Finally, we know that there is a \( \delta_3 \) so that \( 0 < |x - a| < \delta_3 \) implies \( |g(x) - M| < \epsilon/(2N) \). Now we’re ready to put everything together. Let \( \delta \) be the smallest of \( \delta_1 \), \( \delta_2 \), and \( \delta_3 \). Then \( |x - a| < \delta \) implies \( |f(x) - L| < \epsilon/(2|LM|) \), \(|f(x)| < N \), and \(|g(x) - M| < \epsilon/(2N) \). Then

\[
|f(g(x)) - LM| \leq |f(g(x)) - f(M)| + |f(M) - LM |
\]

\[
< \frac{\epsilon}{2|LM|} \cdot \frac{2}{2N} = \frac{\epsilon}{2} = \epsilon.
\]

This is just what we needed, so by the official definition, \( \lim_{x \to a} f(g(x)) = LM \).

2.3 Limits

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A handful of such theorems give us the tools to compute many limits without explicitly working with the definition of limit.

**Theorem 2.3.6** Suppose that \( \lim_{x \to a} f(x) = L \) and \( \lim_{x \to b} g(x) = M \) and \( k \) is some constant. Then

\[
\lim_{x \to a} (k f(x)) = k \lim_{x \to a} f(x) = k L
\]

\[
\lim_{x \to a} (f(x) + g(x)) = \lim_{x \to a} f(x) + \lim_{x \to a} g(x) = L + M
\]

\[
\lim_{x \to a} (f(x) - g(x)) = \lim_{x \to a} f(x) - \lim_{x \to a} g(x) = L - M
\]

\[
\lim_{x \to a} (f(x) g(x)) = \lim_{x \to a} f(x) \lim_{x \to a} g(x) = LM
\]

\[
\lim_{x \to a} \left( \frac{f(x)}{g(x)} \right) = \frac{\lim_{x \to a} f(x)}{\lim_{x \to a} g(x)} = \frac{L}{M} \text{ if } M \neq 0
\]

Roughly speaking, these rules say that to compute the limit of an algebraic expression, it is enough to compute the limits of the “innermost bits” and then combine those limits. This often means that it is possible to simply plug in a value for the variable, since \( x \to a \).

**Example 2.3.7** Compute \( \lim_{x \to 0} x^2 - 3x + 5 \). If we apply the theorem in all its glory detail, we get

\[
\lim_{x \to 0} x^2 - 3x + 5 = \lim_{x \to 0} (x^2 - 3x) + \lim_{x \to 0} 5 = \lim_{x \to 0} x^2 - \lim_{x \to 0} 3x + \lim_{x \to 0} 5
\]

\[
= 0 - 3 + 5 = 2
\]

It is worth commenting on the trivial limit \( \lim_{x \to 0} 5 \). From one point of view this might seem meaningless, as the number 5 can’t “approach” any value, since it is simply a fixed number. But 5 can, and should, be interpreted here as the function that has value 5 everywhere, \( f(x) = 5 \), with graph a horizontal line. From this point of view it makes sense to ask what happens to the height of the function as \( x \) approaches 1.

Of course, as we’ve already seen, we’re primarily interested in limits that aren’t so easy, namely, limits in which a denominator approaches zero. There are a handful of algebraic tricks that work on many of these limits.

**Example 2.3.8** Compute \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 + 2x - 3 \). We can’t simply plug in \( x = 1 \) because that makes the denominator zero. However:

\[
\lim_{x \to 1} x^2 + 2x - 3 = \lim_{x \to 1} (x - 1)(x + 3) = \lim_{x \to 1} (x + 3) = 4
\]

While theorem 2.3.6 is very helpful, we need a bit more to work easily with limits. Since the theorem applies when some limits are already known, we need to know the behavior of some functions that cannot themselves be constructed from the simple arithmetic operations of the theorem, such as \( \sqrt{x} \). Also, there is one other extraordinarily useful way to put functions together: composition. If \( f(x) \) and \( g(x) \) are functions, we can form two functions by composition: \( g(f(x)) \) and \( f(g(x)) \). For example, if \( f(x) = \sqrt{x} \) and \( g(x) = x^2 + 5 \), then \( f(g(x)) = \sqrt{x^2 + 5} \) and \( g(f(x)) = (\sqrt{x})^2 + 5 = x + 5 \). E is a companion to theorem 2.3.6 for composition.

**Theorem 2.3.9** Suppose that \( \lim_{x \to a} f(x) = L \) and \( \lim_{x \to a} f(g(x)) = L \). Then \( \lim_{x \to a} f(g(x)) = L \).

Note the special form of the condition on \( f \). It is not enough to know that \( \lim_{x \to a} f(x) = M \), though it is a bit tricky to see why. Many of the most familiar functions do have this property, and this theorem can therefore be applied. For example:

**Theorem 2.3.10** Suppose that \( x \) is a positive integer. Then \( \lim_{x \to a} a = \sqrt{a} \), provided that \( a \) is positive if \( a \) is even.
lim x→0 1 = 1. The limit of f(x) must be equal to both the left and right limits; since they are different, the limit lim x→0 [f] does not exist.

**Exercises 2.3.**

Compute the limits. If a limit does not exist, explain why.

1. \( \lim_{x \to 3} x^2 + x - 12 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 3} x^2 + x - 12 \)
2. \( \lim_{x \to 3} x^2 + x - 12 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 3} x^2 + x - 12 \)
3. \( \lim_{x \to \sqrt{3}} x^2 + x - 12 \) = \( \lim_{x \to \sqrt{3}} x^2 + x - 12 \)
4. \( \lim_{x \to \sqrt{3}} x^2 + x - 12 \) = \( \lim_{x \to \sqrt{3}} x^2 + x - 12 \)
5. \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 + x - 12 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 + x - 12 \)
6. \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 + x - 12 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 + x - 12 \)
7. \( \lim_{x \to 2} x^2 + x - 12 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 2} x^2 + x - 12 \)
8. \( \lim_{x \to 2} x^2 + x - 12 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 2} x^2 + x - 12 \)
9. \( \lim_{x \to 3} 4x - 5x^2 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 3} 4x - 5x^2 \)
10. \( \lim_{x \to 3} 4x - 5x^2 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 3} 4x - 5x^2 \)
11. \( \lim_{x \to 1} \sqrt{x^2 + 1} \) = \( \lim_{x \to 1} \sqrt{x^2 + 1} \)
12. \( \lim_{x \to 1} \sqrt{x^2 + 1} \) = \( \lim_{x \to 1} \sqrt{x^2 + 1} \)
13. \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \)
14. \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \)
15. \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \)
16. \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \)
17. \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \)
18. \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \)
19. \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \)
20. \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \) = \( \lim_{x \to 1} x^2 - x^2 \)

**2.4 The Derivative Function**

We have seen how to create, or derive, a new function \( f'(x) \) from a function \( f(x) \), summarized in the paragraph containing equation 2.11. Now that we have the concept of limits, we can make this more precise.

**Definition 2.4.1**

The derivative of a function \( f \), denoted \( f' \), is

\[
 f'(x) = \lim_{\Delta x \to 0} \frac{f(x + \Delta x) - f(x)}{\Delta x}.
\]

The function \( f(x) \) is written out in full we often write the last of these something like this.

**EXAMPLE 2.4.2**

Find the derivative of \( y = f(t) = t^2 \).

We compute

\[
y' = \lim_{\Delta t \to 0} \frac{y(t + \Delta t) - y(t)}{\Delta t} = \lim_{\Delta t \to 0} \frac{(t + \Delta t)^2 - t^2}{\Delta t} = \lim_{\Delta t \to 0} \frac{t^2 + 2t\Delta t + \Delta t^2 - t^2}{\Delta t} = \lim_{\Delta t \to 0} \frac{2t\Delta t + \Delta t^2}{\Delta t} = \lim_{\Delta t \to 0} \frac{2t + \Delta t}{1} = 2t.
\]

Remember that \( \Delta t \) is a small quantity, not a “\( \Delta \)” times a “\( t \)”, and so \( \Delta t^2 \) is \( \Delta t^3 \) not \( \Delta t^2 \).

**EXAMPLE 2.4.3**

Find the derivative of \( y = f(x) = 1/x \).

The computation:

\[
y' = \lim_{\Delta x \to 0} \frac{\Delta y}{\Delta x} = \lim_{\Delta x \to 0} \frac{\frac{1}{x+\Delta x} - \frac{1}{x}}{\Delta x} = \lim_{\Delta x \to 0} \frac{\frac{1}{x} - \frac{1}{x+\Delta x}}{\Delta x} = \lim_{\Delta x \to 0} \frac{\frac{1}{x} - \frac{1}{x+\Delta x}}{\Delta x} = \lim_{\Delta x \to 0} \frac{1}{x} \frac{1}{x+\Delta x} = -\frac{1}{x^2}.
\]

**Note.** If you happen to know some “derivative formulas” from an earlier course, for the time being you should pretend that you do not know them. In examples like the ones above and the exercises below, you are required to know how to find the derivative.
formula starting from basic principles. We will later develop some formulas so that we do not always need to do such computations, but we will continue to need to know how to do the more involved computations.

Sometimes one encounters a point in the domain of a function \( y = f(x) \) where there is no derivative, because there is no tangent line. In order for the notion of the tangent line at a point to make sense, the curve must be "smooth" at that point. This means that if you imagine a particle traveling at some steady speed along the curve, then the particle does not experience an abrupt change of direction. There are two types of situations you should be aware of—corners and cusps—where there’s a sudden change of direction and hence no derivative.

**EXAMPLE 2.4.4** Discuss the derivative of the absolute value function \( y = f(x) = |x| \).

If \( x \) is positive, then this is the function \( y = x \), whose derivative is the constant 1. (Recall that when \( y = f(x) = mx + b \), the derivative is the slope \( m \).) If \( x \) is negative, then we’re dealing with the function \( y = -x \), whose derivative is the constant -1. If \( x = 0 \), then the function has a corner, i.e., there is no tangent line. A tangent line would have to point in the direction of the curve—but there are two directions of the curve that come together at the origin. We can summarize this as

\[
y' = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } x > 0; \\ -1 & \text{if } x < 0; \\ \text{undefined} & \text{if } x = 0. \end{cases}
\]

**EXAMPLE 2.4.5**

Discuss the derivative of the function \( y = x^{2/3} \) shown in figure 2.4.1. We will later see how to compute this derivative; for now we use the fact that \( y' = (2/3)x^{-1/3} \). Visually this looks much like the absolute value function, but it technically has a cusp, not a corner. The absolute value function has no tangent line at 0 because there are (at least) two obvious contenders—the tangent line of the left side of the curve and the tangent line of the right side. The function \( y = x^{2/3} \) does not have a tangent line at 0, but unlike the absolute value function it can be said to have a single direction: as we approach 0 from either side the tangent line becomes closer and closer to a vertical line; the curve is vertical at 0. But as before, if you imagine traveling along the curve, an abrupt change in direction is required at 0; a full 180 degree turn.

In practice we won’t worry much about the distinction between these examples; in both cases the function has a "sharp point" where there is no tangent line and no derivative.

### 2.5 Adjectives For Functions

As we have defined it in Section 1.3, a function is a very general object. At this point, it is useful to introduce a collection of adjectives to describe certain kinds of functions; these adjectives name useful properties that functions may have. Consider the graphs of the functions in Figure 2.5.1. It would clearly be useful to have words to help us describe the distinct features of each of them. We will point out and define a few adjectives (there are many more) for the functions pictured here. For the sake of the discussion, we will assume that the graphs do not exhibit any unusual behavior off-stage (i.e., outside the view of the graphs).

**Functions.** Each graph in Figure 2.5.1 certainly represents a function—since each passes the vertical line test. In other words, as you sweep a vertical line across the graph of each function, the line never intersects the graph more than once. If it did, then the graph would not represent a function.

**Bounded.** The graph in (c) appears to approach zero as \( x \) goes to both positive and negative infinity. It also never exceeds the value 1 or drops below the value 0. Because the

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**Exercises 2.4.**

1. Find the derivative of \( y = f(x) = \sqrt{169 - x^2} \). →

2. Find the derivative of \( y = f(x) = \cos(-x/2) \). →

3. Find the derivative of \( y = f(x) = x^2 - (1/x) \). →

4. Find the derivative of \( y = f(x) = ax^2 + bx + c \) (where \( a, b, \) and \( c \) are constants). →

5. Find the derivative of \( y = f(x) = x^3 \). →

6. Shown is the graph of a function \( f(x) \). Sketch the graph of \( f'(x) \) by estimating the derivative at a number of points in the interval: estimate the derivative at regular intervals from one end of the interval to the other, and also at "special" points, as when the derivative is zero. Make sure you indicate any places where the derivative does not exist.

7. Shown is the graph of a function \( f(x) \). Sketch the graph of \( f'(x) \) by estimating the derivative at a number of points in the interval: estimate the derivative at regular intervals from one end of the interval to the other, and also at "special" points, as when the derivative is zero.
DEFINITION 2.5.2 Continuous at a Point A function \( f \) is continuous at a point \( a \) if \( \lim_\limits{x \to a} f(x) = f(a) \).

DEFINITION 2.5.3 Continuous A function \( f \) is continuous if it is continuous at every point in its domain.

DEFINITION 2.5.4 Differentiable at a Point A function \( f \) is differentiable at \( a \) if \( f'(a) \) exists.

DEFINITION 2.5.5 Differentiable A function \( f \) is differentiable if it is differentiable at every point (excluding endpoints and isolated points in the domain of \( f \)) in the domain of \( f \).

Take note that, for technical reasons not discussed here, both of these definitions exclude endpoints and isolated points in the domain from consideration.

We now have a collection of adjectives to describe the very rich and complex set of objects known as functions.

We close with a useful theorem about continuous functions:

THEOREM 2.5.6 Intermediate Value Theorem If \( f \) is continuous on the interval \([a, b]\) and \( d \) is between \( f(a) \) and \( f(b) \), then there is a number \( c \) in \([a, b]\) such that \( f(c) = d \).

This is most frequently used when \( d = 0 \).