



**A Geometric Approach to**

# **Matrices**

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Gunn High School Analysis H

A Geometric Approach To Matrices  
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Thanks to Josh Zucker who wrote the first draft of several chapters (particularly The Geometry of Complex Numbers, Vitamin  $i$ , Matrix Multiplication, and Inverses part I).

Also, thanks to my fellow teachers at Gunn High School Dave Deggeller and Danny Hahn for resurrecting the use of this pamphlet in their 11<sup>th</sup> grade Analysis classes and to their Analysis classes of 2013-14 who took on the project of retyping the text after the loss of the soft copy in a computer theft.

In addition, thanks to Gautam Mittal for editing the text for the 2017-18 academic year.

Above all, thanks to my student assistant Maya Sankar for her work on editing the text, standardizing the text in  $\text{\LaTeX}$ , and incorporating an answer key.

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# 1 It's a Snap

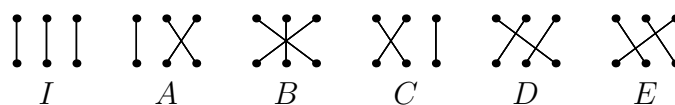


Figure 1: The six possibilities for connections between two rows of three posts.

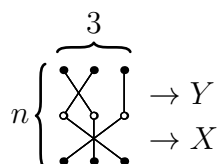


Figure 2: A grid with three strings.

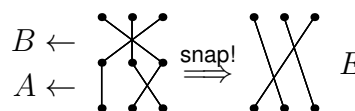


Figure 3:  $A \bullet B = E$ .

We begin with a problem that ties together ideas from geometry, complex numbers, matrices, combinatorics, and group theory. You likely studied geometry in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and complex numbers in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, so you should have a basis to start your investigation. The other three words may be unfamiliar at this point. You will be coming back to this problem in a series of investigations over the coming weeks.

Consider a rectangle of posts with  $n$  rows and 3 columns. An elastic string is anchored to one post in the topmost row and one post in the bottommost row. As the string descends top to bottom, it loops taut around one post in each row. Two other elastic strings are anchored and looped in the same way, with the condition that each post has exactly one string on it; no more, no less. An example where  $n = 3$  is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 1 shows the six “ways” that two consecutive rows can be connected in this way — convince yourself these are the only six. I have labeled them with letters  $I$ ,  $A$ ,  $B$ ,  $C$ ,  $D$ , and  $E$ .

Now, consider what happens when you look at a  $3 \times 3$  rectangle of posts, like the one in Figure 2. You should have two “ways,”  $X$  and  $Y$ , stacked one on top of the other so that  $Y$  is on top of  $X$ . When you withdraw the middle posts, indicated by  $\circ$ , the elastic string should **snap** to a configuration identical to one of the six ways you drew initially. Note that the second way ( $Y$ ) goes on top, and the first way ( $X$ ) goes on the bottom. Let’s call this operation **snap**, or  $\bullet$ , so that  $X \bullet Y$  reads “ $X$  snap  $Y$ .” For example,  $A \bullet B = E$ , as shown in Figure 3.

These six ways, along with the operation  $\bullet$ , form a mathematical *group*, and we say that each is an *element* of our group. In particular, we will call this the **snap group**. Groups are the central objects studied in *group theory*, which I mentioned at the beginning of this problem. Let’s study the snap group and characterize its properties.

## 1.1 Problems

1. Fill out a  $6 \times 6$  table like the one shown in Figure 4, showing the results of each of the  $6 \cdot 6 = 36$  possible snaps, where  $X \bullet Y$  is in  $X$ ’s row and  $Y$ ’s column.
2. Would this table look different if you named the elements  $A$  through  $E$  in a different order?

$\bullet$	$I$	$A$	$B$	$C$	$D$	$E$
$I$						
$A$			$E$			
$B$						
$C$						
$D$						
$E$						

Figure 4: Unfilled 3-post snap group table.

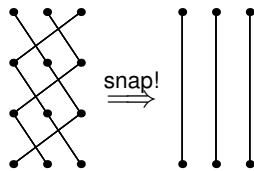


Figure 5:  $E \bullet E \bullet E = I$ ;  $E$  has period 3.

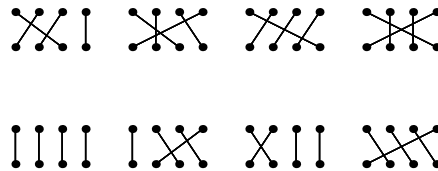


Figure 6: Some 4-post group elements.

3. Which of the elements is the *identity element*?
4. Does every element have an inverse? In other words, is there a way to get the identity element from every element using one snap?
5. Is the snap operation commutative? That is, does  $X \bullet Y = Y \bullet X$  for all  $X, Y$ ?
6. Is the snap operation associative? That is, does  $(X \bullet Y) \bullet Z = X \bullet (Y \bullet Z)$  for all  $X, Y, Z$ ?
7. (a) For given elements  $X, Y$ , is there always an element  $Z$  so that  $X \bullet Z = Y$ ?  
(b) Is  $Z$  always unique?
8. What do you think is the definition of a mathematical group? (Hint: consider your answers to Problems 2–6.)
9. If you constructed a  $5 \times 5$  table using only 5 of the snap elements, the table would not describe a group, because there would be entries in the table requiring an element outside of these 5. Therefore, a group must be *closed* under its operation; if  $X, Y \in G$ , then  $X \bullet Y \in G$  for all  $X, Y$ . Some subsets, however, are closed. Write valid group tables using exactly 1, 2, and 3 elements from the snap group.
10. Notice that  $E \bullet E \bullet E = I$ . (See Figure 5.) This means that  $E$  has a period of 3 when acting upon itself. Which elements have a period of 1, 2, and 3?
11. (a) How many elements would there be if there were only 2 posts per row?  
(b) Draw and name them systematically.  
(c) Make a group table of these elements.  
(d) What is the relationship of this new table to your original table?  
(e) Answer parts (a)–(c) if there was 1 post per row.  
(f) Answer parts (a), (b) and (d) if there was 4 posts per row.  
(g) Would you like to make a table for the 4-post group? How many entries would a table have?
12. Can you think of an easier way to construct the a snap group table without drawing all the possible configurations?
13. (a) How many elements would there be in the 5-post snap group?  
(b) How many entries would its table have?  
(c) What possible periods would its elements have?  
(d) Extend your answers for (a)–(c) to  $M$  posts per row.
14. As we learned, a *permutation* of some things is an order they can be arranged in. What is the relationship between the set of permutations of  $M$  things and the  $M$ -post snap group?

## 2 From Snaps to Flips

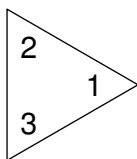


Figure 7: The paper triangle.

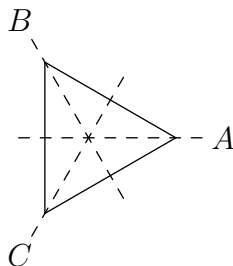


Figure 8: The triangles axes of reflection.

Cut out a paper equilateral triangle and label its vertices 1, 2, and 3 in permanent marker as shown in Figure 7, and place it down on a table in the shown orientation. This triangle has several *isometries* to itself, which are ways of mapping the triangle to itself. For example, you could *reflect* it around the three axes  $A$ ,  $B$  and  $C$ , as shown in Figure 8. You could also rotate it by  $120^\circ$  or  $240^\circ$ .

There are six isometries of the triangle to consider. These are shown in Figure 9.

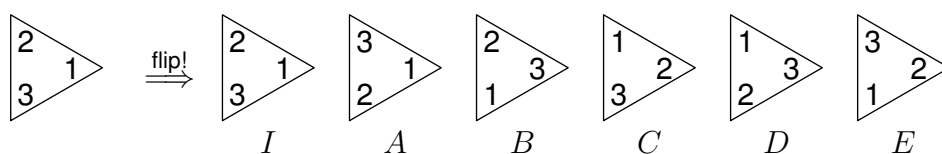


Figure 9: The six triangle isometries.