#linear_algebra

We can now give a *recursive* definition of a determinant. When $n = 3$, det A is defined using determinants of the 2×2 submatrices A_{1j}, as in (3) above. When $n = 4$, det A uses determinants of the 3×3 submatrices A_{1j}. In general, an $n \times n$ determinant is defined by determinants of $(n-1) \times (n-1)$ submatrices.

DEFINITION

For $n \geq 2$, the **determinant** of an $n \times n$ matrix $A = [a_{ij}]$ is the sum of n terms of the form $\pm a_{1j} \det A_{1j}$, with plus and minus signs alternating, where the entries $a_{11}, a_{12}, \ldots, a_{1n}$ are from the first row of A. In symbols,

$$\begin{aligned}\det A &= a_{11} \det A_{11} - a_{12} \det A_{12} + \cdots + (-1)^{1+n} a_{1n} \det A_{1n} \\ &= \sum_{j=1}^{n} (-1)^{1+j} a_{1j} \det A_{1j}\end{aligned}$$

EXAMPLE 1 Compute the determinant of

$$A = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 5 & 0 \\ 2 & 4 & -1 \\ 0 & -2 & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

SOLUTION Compute $\det A = a_{11} \det A_{11} - a_{12} \det A_{12} + a_{13} \det A_{13}$:

$$\begin{aligned} \det A &= 1 \cdot \det \begin{bmatrix} 4 & -1 \\ -2 & 0 \end{bmatrix} - 5 \cdot \det \begin{bmatrix} 2 & -1 \\ 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix} + 0 \cdot \det \begin{bmatrix} 2 & 4 \\ 0 & -2 \end{bmatrix} \\ &= 1(0-2) - 5(0-0) + 0(-4-0) = -2 \end{aligned}$$

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Another common notation for the determinant of a matrix uses a pair of vertical lines in place of brackets. Thus the calculation in Example 1 can be written as

$$\det A = 1 \begin{vmatrix} 4 & -1 \\ -2 & 0 \end{vmatrix} - 5 \begin{vmatrix} 2 & -1 \\ 0 & 0 \end{vmatrix} + 0 \begin{vmatrix} 2 & 4 \\ 0 & -2 \end{vmatrix} = \cdots = -2$$

To state the next theorem, it is convenient to write the definition of $\det A$ in a slightly different form. Given $A = [a_{ij}]$, the **(i, j)-cofactor** of A is the number C_{ij} given by

$$C_{ij} = (-1)^{i+j} \det A_{ij} \tag{4}$$

Then

$$\det A = a_{11}C_{11} + a_{12}C_{12} + \cdots + a_{1n}C_{1n}$$

This formula is called a **cofactor expansion across the first row** of A. We omit the proof of the following fundamental theorem to avoid a lengthy digression.

THEOREM 1

The determinant of an $n \times n$ matrix A can be computed by a cofactor expansion across any row or down any column. The expansion across the ith row using the cofactors in (4) is

$$\det A = a_{i1}C_{i1} + a_{i2}C_{i2} + \cdots + a_{in}C_{in}$$

The cofactor expansion down the jth column is

$$\det A = a_{1j}C_{1j} + a_{2j}C_{2j} + \cdots + a_{nj}C_{nj}$$

The plus or minus sign in the (i, j)-cofactor depends on the position of a_{ij} in the matrix, regardless of the sign of a_{ij} itself. The factor $(-1)^{i+j}$ determines the following checkerboard pattern of signs:

$$\begin{bmatrix} + & - & + & \cdots \\ - & + & - & \\ + & - & + & \\ \vdots & & & \ddots \end{bmatrix}$$

SOLUTION The cofactor expansion down the first column of A has all terms equal to zero except the first. Thus

$$\det A = 3 \cdot \begin{vmatrix} 2 & -5 & 7 & 3 \\ 0 & 1 & 5 & 0 \\ 0 & 2 & 4 & -1 \\ 0 & 0 & -2 & 0 \end{vmatrix} - 0 \cdot C_{21} + 0 \cdot C_{31} - 0 \cdot C_{41} + 0 \cdot C_{51}$$

The matrix in Example 3 was nearly triangular. The method in that example is easily adapted to prove the following theorem.

THEOREM 2

If A is a triangular matrix, then $\det A$ is the product of the entries on the main diagonal of A.

The strategy in Example 3 of looking for zeros works extremely well when an entire row or column consists of zeros. In such a case, the cofactor expansion along such a row or column is a sum of zeros! So the determinant is zero. Unfortunately, most cofactor expansions are not so quickly evaluated.

NUMERICAL NOTE

By today's standards, a 25×25 matrix is small. Yet it would be impossible to calculate a 25×25 determinant by cofactor expansion. In general, a cofactor expansion requires over $n!$ multiplications, and $25!$ is approximately 1.5×10^{25}.

If a computer performs one trillion multiplications per second, it would have to run for over 500,000 years to compute a 25×25 determinant by this method. Fortunately, there are faster methods, as we'll soon discover.