

# Topic 5: Center of Mass

## Advanced Placement Physics

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## Files to Download

- PhysAP-05-CM-print.pdf—The “print version” of this topic.
- PhysAP-05-Homework.pdf

# Center of Mass

Finding an object's center of mass is important, because

- Newton's laws of motion are formulated by treating an objects as point masses (for real-life objects, we let the forces apply to the center of mass)
- Objects can have *rotational* motion in addition to *translational* motion as well (we will examine that a bit more next week)

## Start with a Definition

The **center of mass** (“CM”) is the *weighted average of the masses in a system*.  
The “system” may be:

- A collection of individual particles (use summation to compute CM)
- A continuous distribution of mass with constant density (use integration to compute CM); in this case, CM is also the geometric center of the object (*centroid*)
- A continuous distribution of mass with varying density (use integral to compute CM)
- If the objects are inside of a gravitational field, then the CM is also its **center of gravity** (“CG”)

## Simple Example

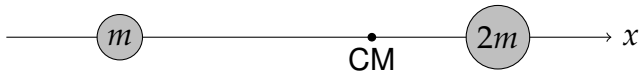
We start with a very simple example: there are two equal masses along the  $x$ -axis. What is the center of mass of the system?



The answer is really simple: it's at the half way point between the two masses!

## Things Aren't Always That Example

- What if one of the masses are increased to  $2m$ ?
- This is still not a terribly difficult problem; you can still *guess* the right answer without know the equation for center of mass.

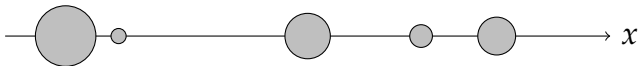


- The answer is still simple. The CM is no longer at the half way point between the two masses, but now  $\frac{1}{3}$  the total distance from the larger masses.

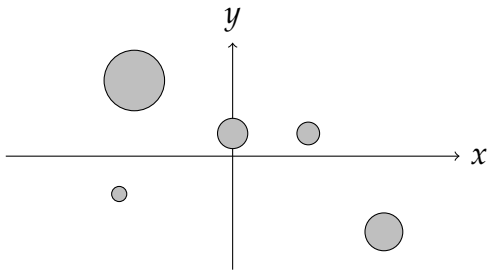
# Complicating Things Further

## Many Point Masses

If we increase the number of point masses along the  $x$ -axis, our problem can become much more complicated (although still not devastatingly so)



Difficulties really arises when there are many masses in the system in 2D or 3D:



## An Equation Helps

The center of mass is defined as:

$$\mathbf{x}_{\text{CM}} = \frac{\sum \mathbf{x}_i m_i}{\sum m_i}$$

Quantity	Symbol	SI Unit
Position of center of mass (vector)	$\mathbf{x}_{\text{CM}}$	m
Position of point mass $i$ (vector)	$\mathbf{x}_i$	m
Point mass $i$	$m_i$	kg
Total mass	$\sum m_i$	kg



## Breaking Down Into Components

$$\mathbf{x}_{\text{CM}} = \frac{\sum \mathbf{x}_i m_i}{\sum m_i}$$

Position vectors have  $x$ ,  $y$  and  $z$  components:  $\mathbf{x} = x\hat{\mathbf{i}} + y\hat{\mathbf{j}} + z\hat{\mathbf{k}}$  which we can deal with each component individually, i.e.:

$$x_{\text{CM}} = \frac{\sum x_i m_i}{\sum m_i} \quad y_{\text{CM}} = \frac{\sum y_i m_i}{\sum m_i} \quad z_{\text{CM}} = \frac{\sum z_i m_i}{\sum m_i}$$

## An Example

**Example 1:** Consider the following masses and their coordinates which make up a “discrete mass” rigid body”

$$m_1 = 5.0 \text{ kg}$$

$$\mathbf{x}_1 = 3\hat{i} - 2\hat{k}$$

$$m_2 = 10.0 \text{ kg}$$

$$\mathbf{x}_2 = -4\hat{i} + 2\hat{j} + 7\hat{k}$$

$$m_3 = 1.0 \text{ kg}$$

$$\mathbf{x}_3 = 10\hat{i} - 17\hat{j} + 10\hat{k}$$

What are the coordinates for the center of mass of this system?

## Continuous Mass Distribution

In general, objects are not a discrete collection of point masses, but a continuous distribution of mass. Therefore, we take the limit of when the number of masses approaches  $\infty$ :

$$\mathbf{x}_{\text{CM}} = \lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \left( \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n \mathbf{x}_i m_i}{\sum_{i=1}^n m_i} \right)$$

This gives us an integral form of our equation:

$$\mathbf{x}_{\text{CM}} = \frac{\int \mathbf{x} dm}{\int dm}$$

# Densities

- Linear density (for 1D problems)

$$\gamma = \frac{m}{L}$$

- Surface area density (for 2D problems)

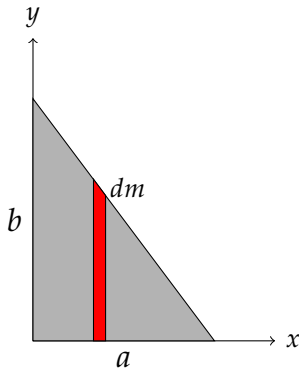
$$\sigma = \frac{m}{A}$$

- Volume density (for 3D problems)

$$\rho = \frac{m}{V}$$

## An Example with Integrals

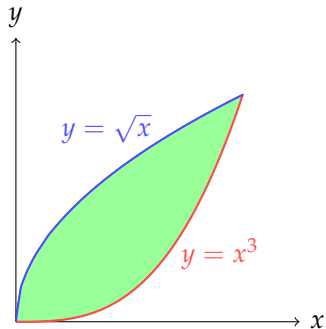
**Example 2:** A triangular plate is placed in a Cartesian coordinate system with two of its edges along the  $x$  and  $y$ -axis. The length of the edges along the axes are  $a$  and  $b$  respectively. Assuming that the surface area density  $\sigma$  is uniform, determine the coordinate of its center of mass.



## A Difficult Example to Try at Home

Not typically an AP problem, this example shows how we can use integral to find the center of mass for something very complicated.

**Example 3:** Find the  $x$ -coordinate of the center of mass in the shape bound by the two functions shown on the right.



# Symmetry

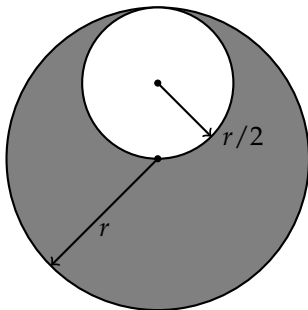
There are always shortcuts!

- Any plane of symmetry, mirror line, axis of rotation, point of inversion *must* contain the center of mass.
- Caveat: only works if the density distribution is also symmetric
- Again: if density is uniform, CM is also geometric center (centroid)

# “Negative Mass”

## A Mathematical Trick

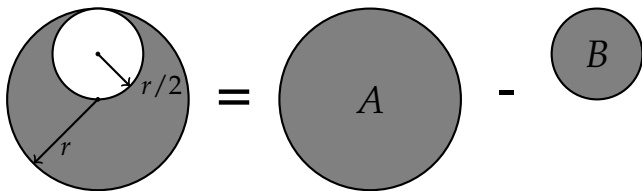
- Where there is a “hole” in the geometry, treat it as having negative mass density  $-\sigma$  in that region.
- Negative masses don’t exist, so this is really just a trick.
- **Example:** What is the center of mass of this shape?





## Negative Mass Example

- This is how we would think of it:



- Let the origin of the coordinate system to be located at the center of  $A$
- Based on symmetry:  $x_{\text{CM}} = 0$ ; only have to find  $y$ -coordinate.
- Sum our weighted average:

$$y_{\text{CM}} = \frac{\sum y_i m_i}{\sum m_i} = \frac{m_A(0) + m_B(r/2)}{m_A + m_B} = \frac{-\sigma\pi (r/2)^2 (r/2)}{\sigma\pi r^2 - \sigma\pi (r/2)^2} = \frac{-r}{6}$$

## Velocity, Acceleration and Momentum

Take time derivative of the equation for  $\mathbf{x}_{\text{CM}}$  to get the velocity of the CM:

$$\mathbf{v}_{\text{CM}} = \frac{d\mathbf{x}_{\text{CM}}}{dt} = \frac{1}{m} \frac{d}{dt} \left( \int \mathbf{x} dm \right) = \frac{1}{m} \int \frac{d\mathbf{x}}{dt} dm = \frac{\int \mathbf{v} dm}{m}$$

The integral in the numerator is the sum of the momentum of all the masses in the system ( $\mathbf{p}_{\text{net}}$ ) which means that we have

$$\mathbf{p}_{\text{net}} = m\mathbf{v}_{\text{CM}}$$

Taking the derivative of  $\mathbf{p}_{\text{net}}$  relates force and acceleration at the CM as well:

$$\mathbf{F}_{\text{net}} = \frac{d\mathbf{p}_{\text{net}}}{dt} = m \frac{d\mathbf{v}_{\text{CM}}}{dt} = m\mathbf{a}_{\text{CM}}$$