Limits at Infinity and Infinite Limits

In this section we investigate the behavior of a function when the magnitude of the independent variable x becomes increasingly large, or $x \to \pm\infty$. We further extend the concept of limit to *infinite limits*, which are not limits as before, but rather a new use of the term limit. Infinite limits provide useful symbols and language for describing the behavior of functions whose values become arbitrarily large in magnitude. We use these limit ideas to analyze the graphs of functions having *horizontal* or *vertical asymptotes*.

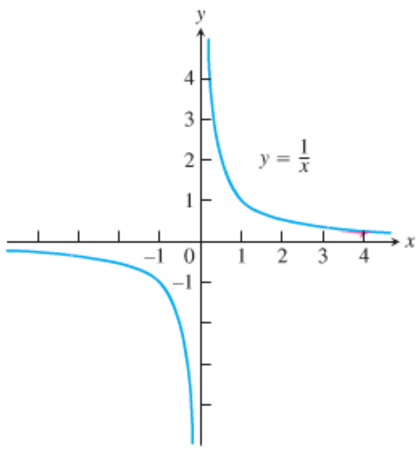

FIGURE 2.49 The graph of $y = 1/x$ approaches 0 as $x \to \infty$ or $x \to -\infty$.

Finite Limits as $x \to \pm\infty$

The symbol for infinity (∞) does not represent a real number. We use ∞ to describe the behavior of a function when the values in its domain or range outgrow all finite bounds. For example, the function $f(x) = 1/x$ is defined for all $x \neq 0$ (Figure 2.49). When x is positive and becomes increasingly large, $1/x$ becomes increasingly small. When x is negative and its magnitude becomes increasingly large, $1/x$ again becomes small. We summarize these observations by saying that $f(x) = 1/x$ has limit 0 as $x \to \infty$ or $x \to -\infty$, or that 0 is a *limit of* $f(x) = 1/x$ *at infinity and negative infinity*. Here are precise definitions.

Intuitively, $\lim_{x\to\infty} f(x) = L$ if, as x moves increasingly far from the origin in the positive direction, $f(x)$ gets arbitrarily close to L. Similarly, $\lim_{x\to-\infty} f(x) = L$ if, as x moves increasingly far from the origin in the negative direction, $f(x)$ gets arbitrarily close to L.

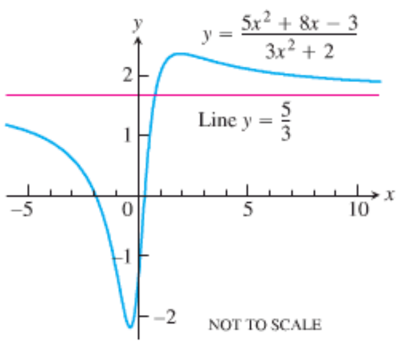

FIGURE 2.51 The graph of the function in Example 3a. The graph approaches the line $y = 5/3$ as $|x|$ increases.

Limits at Infinity of Rational Functions

To determine the limit of a rational function as $x \to \pm\infty$, we first divide the numerator and denominator by the highest power of x in the denominator. The result then depends on the degrees of the polynomials involved.

EXAMPLE 3 These examples illustrate what happens when the degree of the numerator is less than or equal to the degree of the denominator.

(a) $$\lim_{x\to\infty} \frac{5x^2 + 8x - 3}{3x^2 + 2} = \lim_{x\to\infty} \frac{5 + (8/x) - (3/x^2)}{3 + (2/x^2)}$$ Divide numerator and denominator by x^2.

$$= \frac{5 + 0 - 0}{3 + 0} = \frac{5}{3}$$ See Fig. 2.51.

(b) $$\lim_{x\to-\infty} \frac{11x + 2}{2x^3 - 1} = \lim_{x\to-\infty} \frac{(11/x^2) + (2/x^3)}{2 - (1/x^3)}$$ Divide numerator and denominator by x^3.

$$= \frac{0 + 0}{2 - 0} = 0$$ See Fig. 2.52. ■

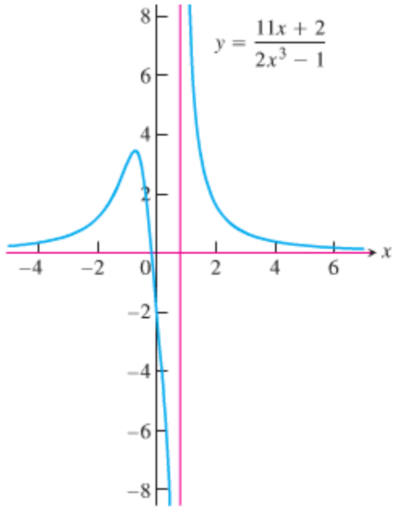

FIGURE 2.52 The graph of the function in Example 3b. The graph approaches the x-axis as $|x|$ increases.

A case for which the degree of the numerator is greater than the degree of the denominator is illustrated in Example 10.

Horizontal Asymptotes

If the distance between the graph of a function and some fixed line approaches zero as a point on the graph moves increasingly far from the origin, we say that the graph approaches the line asymptotically and that the line is an *asymptote* of the graph.

Looking at $f(x) = 1/x$ (see Figure 2.49), we observe that the x-axis is an asymptote of the curve on the right because

$$\lim_{x\to\infty} \frac{1}{x} = 0$$

and on the left because

$$\lim_{x\to-\infty} \frac{1}{x} = 0.$$

We say that the x-axis is a *horizontal asymptote* of the graph of $f(x) = 1/x$.

> **DEFINITION** A line $y = b$ is a **horizontal asymptote** of the graph of a function $y = f(x)$ if either
>
> $$\lim_{x\to\infty} f(x) = b \qquad \text{or} \qquad \lim_{x\to-\infty} f(x) = b.$$

The graph of the function

$$f(x) = \frac{5x^2 + 8x - 3}{3x^2 + 2}$$

sketched in Figure 2.51 (Example 3a) has the line $y = 5/3$ as a horizontal asymptote on both the right and the left because

$$\lim_{x\to\infty} f(x) = \frac{5}{3} \qquad \text{and} \qquad \lim_{x\to-\infty} f(x) = \frac{5}{3}.$$

You Try It

EXAMPLE 4 Find the horizontal asymptotes of the graph of

$$f(x) = \frac{x^3 - 2}{|x|^3 + 1}.$$

Solution We calculate the limits as $x \to \pm\infty$.

For $x \ge 0$: $$\lim_{x\to\infty} \frac{x^3 - 2}{|x|^3 + 1} = \lim_{x\to\infty} \frac{x^3 - 2}{x^3 + 1} = \lim_{x\to\infty} \frac{1 - (2/x^3)}{1 + (1/x^3)} = 1.$$

For $x < 0$: $$\lim_{x\to-\infty} \frac{x^3 - 2}{|x|^3 + 1} = \lim_{x\to-\infty} \frac{x^3 - 2}{(-x)^3 + 1} = \lim_{x\to-\infty} \frac{1 - (2/x^3)}{-1 + (1/x^3)} = -1.$$

The horizontal asymptotes are $y = -1$ and $y = 1$. The graph is displayed in Figure 2.53. Notice that the graph crosses the horizontal asymptote $y = -1$ for a positive value of x. ■

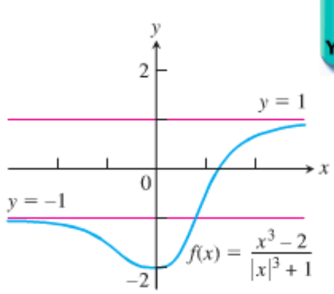

FIGURE 2.53 The graph of the function in Example 4 has two horizontal asymptotes.

Let us look again at the function $f(x) = 1/x$. As $x \to 0^+$, the values of f grow without bound, eventually reaching and surpassing every positive real number. That is, given any positive real number B, however large, the values of f become larger still (Figure 2.59).

FIGURE 2.59 One-sided infinite limits: $\lim_{x\to 0^+} \frac{1}{x} = \infty$ and $\lim_{x\to 0^-} \frac{1}{x} = -\infty$.

Thus, f has no limit as $x \to 0^+$. It is nevertheless convenient to describe the behavior of f by saying that $f(x)$ approaches ∞ as $x \to 0^+$. We write

$$\lim_{x\to 0^+} f(x) = \lim_{x\to 0^+} \frac{1}{x} = \infty.$$

In writing this equation, we are *not* saying that the limit exists. Nor are we saying that there is a real number ∞, for there is no such number. Rather, we are saying that $\lim_{x\to 0^+}(1/x)$ *does not exist because* $1/x$ *becomes arbitrarily large and positive as* $x \to 0^+$.

As $x \to 0^-$, the values of $f(x) = 1/x$ become arbitrarily large and negative. Given any negative real number $-B$, the values of f eventually lie below $-B$. (See Figure 2.59.) We write

$$\lim_{x\to 0^-} f(x) = \lim_{x\to 0^-} \frac{1}{x} = -\infty.$$

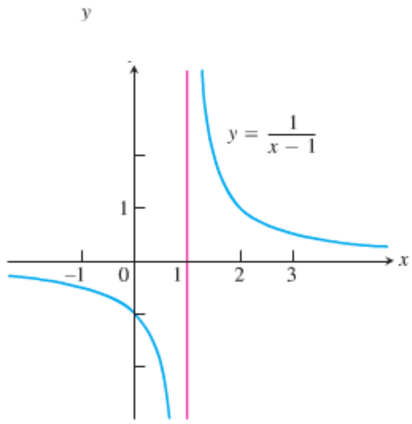

FIGURE 2.60 Near $x = 1$, the function $y = 1/(x-1)$ behaves the way the function $y = 1/x$ behaves near $x = 0$. Its graph is the graph of $y = 1/x$ shifted 1 unit to the right (Example 11).

Again, we are not saying that the limit exists and equals the number $-\infty$. There *is* no real number $-\infty$. We are describing the behavior of a function whose limit as $x \to 0^-$ *does not exist because its values become arbitrarily large and negative.*

EXAMPLE 11 Find $\lim_{x\to 1^+} \dfrac{1}{x-1}$ and $\lim_{x\to 1^-} \dfrac{1}{x-1}$.

Geometric Solution The graph of $y = 1/(x-1)$ is the graph of $y = 1/x$ shifted 1 unit to the right (Figure 2.60). Therefore, $y = 1/(x-1)$ behaves near 1 exactly the way $y = 1/x$ behaves near 0:

$$\lim_{x\to 1^+} \frac{1}{x-1} = \infty \qquad \text{and} \qquad \lim_{x\to 1^-} \frac{1}{x-1} = -\infty.$$

Analytic Solution Think about the number $x - 1$ and its reciprocal. As $x \to 1^+$, we have $(x-1) \to 0^+$ and $1/(x-1) \to \infty$. As $x \to 1^-$, we have $(x-1) \to 0^-$ and $1/(x-1) \to -\infty$. ■

You Try It

EXAMPLE 12 Discuss the behavior of

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{x^2} \qquad \text{as} \qquad x \to 0.$$

Solution As x approaches zero from either side, the values of $1/x^2$ are positive and become arbitrarily large (Figure 2.61). This means that

$$\lim_{x\to 0} f(x) = \lim_{x\to 0} \frac{1}{x^2} = \infty. \qquad ■$$

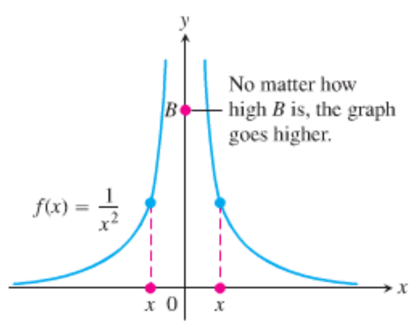

FIGURE 2.61 The graph of $f(x)$ in Example 12 approaches infinity as $x \to 0$.

The function $y = 1/x$ shows no consistent behavior as $x \to 0$. We have $1/x \to \infty$ if $x \to 0^+$, but $1/x \to -\infty$ if $x \to 0^-$. All we can say about $\lim_{x\to 0}(1/x)$ is that it does not exist. The function $y = 1/x^2$ is different. Its values approach infinity as x approaches zero from either side, so we can say that $\lim_{x\to 0}(1/x^2) = \infty$.

EXAMPLE 13 These examples illustrate that rational functions can behave in various ways near zeros of the denominator.

(a) $\displaystyle\lim_{x\to 2} \frac{(x-2)^2}{x^2-4} = \lim_{x\to 2} \frac{(x-2)^2}{(x-2)(x+2)} = \lim_{x\to 2} \frac{x-2}{x+2} = 0$

(b) $\displaystyle\lim_{x\to 2} \frac{x-2}{x^2-4} = \lim_{x\to 2} \frac{x-2}{(x-2)(x+2)} = \lim_{x\to 2} \frac{1}{x+2} = \frac{1}{4}$

$$\textbf{(c)}\quad \lim_{x\to 2^+}\frac{x-3}{x^2-4}=\lim_{x\to 2^+}\frac{x-3}{(x-2)(x+2)}=-\infty$$

The values are negative for $x > 2$, x near 2.

$$\textbf{(d)}\quad \lim_{x\to 2^-}\frac{x-3}{x^2-4}=\lim_{x\to 2^-}\frac{x-3}{(x-2)(x+2)}=\infty$$

The values are positive for $x < 2$, x near 2.

$$\textbf{(e)}\quad \lim_{x\to 2}\frac{x-3}{x^2-4}=\lim_{x\to 2}\frac{x-3}{(x-2)(x+2)}\text{ does not exist.}$$

See parts (c) and (d).

$$\textbf{(f)}\quad \lim_{x\to 2}\frac{2-x}{(x-2)^3}=\lim_{x\to 2}\frac{-(x-2)}{(x-2)^3}=\lim_{x\to 2}\frac{-1}{(x-2)^2}=-\infty$$

In parts (a) and (b) the effect of the zero in the denominator at $x = 2$ is canceled because the numerator is zero there also. Thus a finite limit exists. This is not true in part (f), where cancellation still leaves a zero factor in the denominator. ■

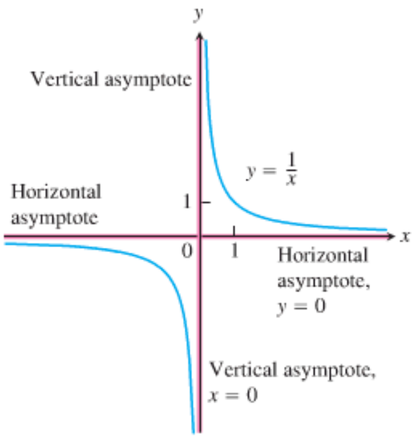

FIGURE 2.64 The coordinate axes are asymptotes of both branches of the hyperbola $y = 1/x$.

Vertical Asymptotes

Notice that the distance between a point on the graph of $f(x) = 1/x$ and the y-axis approaches zero as the point moves vertically along the graph and away from the origin (Figure 2.64). The function $f(x) = 1/x$ is unbounded as x approaches 0 because

$$\lim_{x\to 0^+}\frac{1}{x}=\infty \qquad\text{and}\qquad \lim_{x\to 0^-}\frac{1}{x}=-\infty.$$

We say that the line $x = 0$ (the y-axis) is a *vertical asymptote* of the graph of $f(x) = 1/x$. Observe that the denominator is zero at $x = 0$ and the function is undefined there.

DEFINITION A line $x = a$ is a **vertical asymptote** of the graph of a function $y = f(x)$ if either

$$\lim_{x\to a^+} f(x) = \pm\infty \qquad\text{or}\qquad \lim_{x\to a^-} f(x) = \pm\infty.$$

You Try It   Animation

EXAMPLE 15 Find the horizontal and vertical asymptotes of the curve

$$y=\frac{x+3}{x+2}.$$

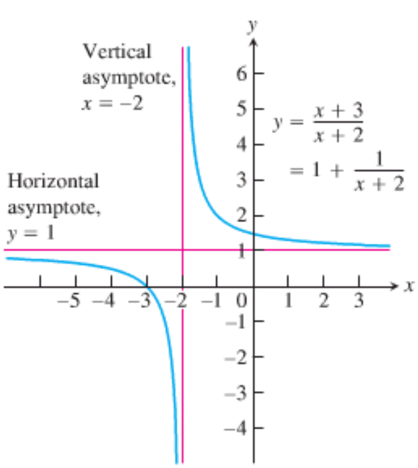

FIGURE 2.65 The lines $y = 1$ and $x = -2$ are asymptotes of the curve in Example 15.

Solution We are interested in the behavior as $x \to \pm\infty$ and the behavior as $x \to -2$, where the denominator is zero.

The asymptotes are quickly revealed if we recast the rational function as a polynomial with a remainder, by dividing $(x + 2)$ into $(x + 3)$:

$$\begin{array}{r} 1 \\ x+2\,\overline{)\,x+3} \\ \underline{x+2} \\ 1 \end{array}$$

This result enables us to rewrite y as:

$$y = 1 + \frac{1}{x+2}.$$

As $x \to \pm\infty$, the curve approaches the horizontal asymptote $y = 1$; as $x \to -2$, the curve approaches the vertical asymptote $x = -2$. We see that the curve in question is the graph of $f(x) = 1/x$ shifted 1 unit up and 2 units left (Figure 2.65). The asymptotes, instead of being the coordinate axes, are now the lines $y = 1$ and $x = -2$. ■