Second Derivative Test for Concavity

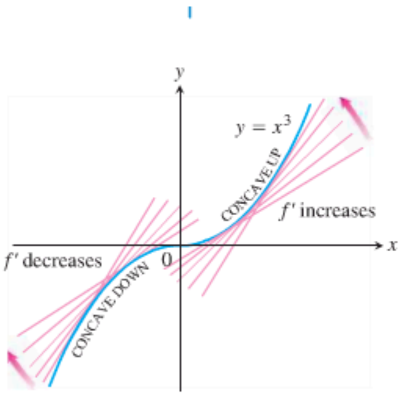

FIGURE 4.24 The graph of $f(x) = x^3$ is concave down on $(-\infty, 0)$ and concave up on $(0, \infty)$ (Example 1a).

We have seen how the first derivative tells us where a function is increasing, where it is decreasing, and whether a local maximum or local minimum occurs at a critical point. In this section we see that the second derivative gives us information about how the graph of a differentiable function bends or turns. With this knowledge about the first and second derivatives, coupled with our previous understanding of asymptotic behavior and symmetry studied in Sections 2.6 and 1.1, we can now draw an accurate graph of a function. By organizing all of these ideas into a coherent procedure, we give a method for sketching graphs and revealing visually the key features of functions. Identifying and knowing the locations of these features is of major importance in mathematics and its applications to science and engineering, especially in the graphical analysis and interpretation of data.

Concavity

As you can see in Figure 4.24, the curve $y = x^3$ rises as x increases, but the portions defined on the intervals $(-\infty, 0)$ and $(0, \infty)$ turn in different ways. As we approach the origin from the left along the curve, the curve turns to our right and falls below its tangents. The slopes of the tangents are decreasing on the interval $(-\infty, 0)$. As we move away from the origin along the curve to the right, the curve turns to our left and rises above its tangents. The slopes of the tangents are increasing on the interval $(0, \infty)$. This turning or bending behavior defines the *concavity* of the curve.

DEFINITION The graph of a differentiable function $y = f(x)$ is

(a) **concave up** on an open interval I if f' is increasing on I;

(b) **concave down** on an open interval I if f' is decreasing on I.

If $y = f(x)$ has a second derivative, we can apply Corollary 3 of the Mean Value Theorem to the first derivative function. We conclude that f' increases if $f'' > 0$ on I, and decreases if $f'' < 0$.

The Second Derivative Test for Concavity

Let $y = f(x)$ be twice-differentiable on an interval I.

1. If $f'' > 0$ on I, the graph of f over I is concave up.
2. If $f'' < 0$ on I, the graph of f over I is concave down.

If $y = f(x)$ is twice-differentiable, we will use the notations f'' and y'' interchangeably when denoting the second derivative.

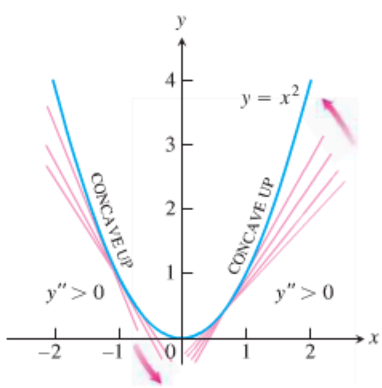

FIGURE 4.25 The graph of $f(x) = x^2$ is concave up on every interval (Example 1b).

EXAMPLE 1

(a) The curve $y = x^3$ (Figure 4.24) is concave down on $(-\infty, 0)$ where $y'' = 6x < 0$ and concave up on $(0, \infty)$ where $y'' = 6x > 0$.

(b) The curve $y = x^2$ (Figure 4.25) is concave up on $(-\infty, \infty)$ because its second derivative $y'' = 2$ is always positive. ■

EXAMPLE 2 Determine the concavity of $y = 3 + \sin x$ on $[0, 2\pi]$.

Solution The first derivative of $y = 3 + \sin x$ is $y' = \cos x$, and the second derivative is $y'' = -\sin x$. The graph of $y = 3 + \sin x$ is concave down on $(0, \pi)$, where $y'' = -\sin x$ is negative. It is concave up on $(\pi, 2\pi)$, where $y'' = -\sin x$ is positive (Figure 4.26). ■

Points of Inflection

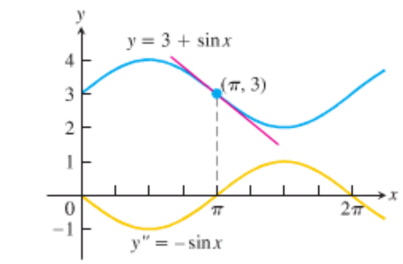

FIGURE 4.26 Using the sign of y'' to determine the concavity of y (Example 2).

The curve $y = 3 + \sin x$ in Example 2 changes concavity at the point $(\pi, 3)$. Since the first derivative $y' = \cos x$ exists for all x, we see that the curve has a tangent line of slope -1 at the point $(\pi, 3)$. This point is called a *point of inflection* of the curve. Notice from Figure 4.26 that the graph crosses its tangent line at this point and that the second derivative $y'' = -\sin x$ has value 0 when $x = \pi$. In general, we have the following definition.

DEFINITION A point where the graph of a function has a tangent line and where the concavity changes is a **point of inflection**.

We observed that the second derivative of $f(x) = 3 + \sin x$ is equal to zero at the inflection point $(\pi, 3)$. Generally, if the second derivative exists at a point of inflection $(c, f(c))$, then $f''(c) = 0$. This follows immediately from the Intermediate Value Theorem whenever f'' is continuous over an interval containing $x = c$ because the second derivative changes sign moving across this interval. Even if the continuity assumption is dropped, it is still true that $f''(c) = 0$, provided the second derivative exists (although a more advanced agrument is required in this noncontinuous case). Since a tangent line must exist at the point of inflection, either the first derivative $f'(c)$ exists (is finite) or a vertical tangent exists at the point. At a vertical tangent neither the first nor second derivative exists. In summary, we conclude the following result.

At a point of inflection $(c, f(c))$, either $f''(c) = 0$ or $f''(c)$ fails to exist.

The next example illustrates a function having a point of inflection where the first derivative exists, but the second derivative fails to exist.

EXAMPLE 3 The graph of $f(x) = x^{5/3}$ has a horizontal tangent at the origin because $f'(x) = (5/3)x^{2/3} = 0$ when $x = 0$. However, the second derivative

$$f''(x) = \frac{d}{dx}\left(\frac{5}{3}x^{2/3}\right) = \frac{10}{9}x^{-1/3}$$

fails to exist at $x = 0$. Nevertheless, $f''(x) < 0$ for $x < 0$ and $f''(x) > 0$ for $x > 0$, so the second derivative changes sign at $x = 0$ and there is a point of inflection at the origin. The graph is shown in Figure 4.27. ■

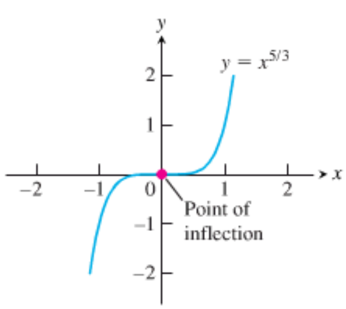

FIGURE 4.27 The graph of $f(x) = x^{5/3}$ has a horizontal tangent at the origin where the concavity changes, although f'' does not exist at $x = 0$ (Example 3).

Here is an example showing that an inflection point need not occur even though both derivatives exist and $f'' = 0$.

EXAMPLE 4 The curve $y = x^4$ has no inflection point at $x = 0$ (Figure 4.28). Even though the second derivative $y'' = 12x^2$ is zero there, it does not change sign. ■

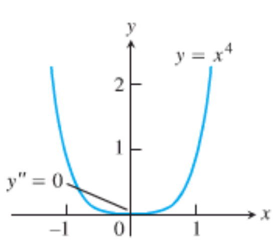

FIGURE 4.28 The graph of $y = x^4$ has no inflection point at the origin, even though $y'' = 0$ there (Example 4).

As our final illustration, we show a situation in which a point of inflection occurs at a vertical tangent to the curve where neither the first nor the second derivative exists.

EXAMPLE 5 The graph of $y = x^{1/3}$ has a point of inflection at the origin because the second derivative is positive for $x < 0$ and negative for $x > 0$:

$$y'' = \frac{d^2}{dx^2}\left(x^{1/3}\right) = \frac{d}{dx}\left(\frac{1}{3}x^{-2/3}\right) = -\frac{2}{9}x^{-5/3}.$$

However, both $y' = x^{-2/3}/3$ and y'' fail to exist at $x = 0$, and there is a vertical tangent there. See Figure 4.29. ■

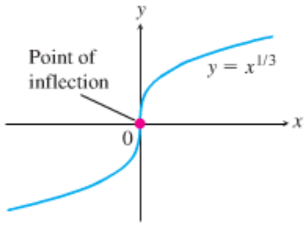

FIGURE 4.29 A point of inflection where y' and y'' fail to exist (Example 5).

To study the motion of an object moving along a line as a function of time, we often are interested in knowing when the object's acceleration, given by the second derivative, is positive or negative. The points of inflection on the graph of the object's position function reveal where the acceleration changes sign.

EXAMPLE 6 A particle is moving along a horizontal coordinate line (positive to the right) with position function

$$s(t) = 2t^3 - 14t^2 + 22t - 5, \qquad t \geq 0.$$

Find the velocity and acceleration, and describe the motion of the particle.

Solution The velocity is

$$v(t) = s'(t) = 6t^2 - 28t + 22 = 2(t - 1)(3t - 11),$$

and the acceleration is

$$a(t) = v'(t) = s''(t) = 12t - 28 = 4(3t - 7).$$

When the function $s(t)$ is increasing, the particle is moving to the right; when $s(t)$ is decreasing, the particle is moving to the left.

Notice that the first derivative ($v = s'$) is zero at the critical points $t = 1$ and $t = 11/3$.

Interval	$0 < t < 1$	$1 < t < 11/3$	$11/3 < t$
Sign of $v = s'$	$+$	$-$	$+$
Behavior of s	increasing	decreasing	increasing
Particle motion	right	left	right

The particle is moving to the right in the time intervals $[0, 1)$ and $(11/3, \infty)$, and moving to the left in $(1, 11/3)$. It is momentarily stationary (at rest) at $t = 1$ and $t = 11/3$.

The acceleration $a(t) = s''(t) = 4(3t - 7)$ is zero when $t = 7/3$.

Interval	$0 < t < 7/3$	$7/3 < t$
Sign of $a = s''$	$-$	$+$
Graph of s	concave down	concave up

The particle starts out moving to the right while slowing down, and then reverses and begins moving to the left at $t = 1$ under the influence of the leftward acceleration over the time interval $[0, 7/3)$. The acceleration then changes direction at $t = 7/3$ but the particle continues moving leftward, while slowing down under the rightward acceleration. At $t = 11/3$ the particle reverses direction again: moving to the right in the same direction as the acceleration. ■