HISTORICAL ESSAY

Limits

Limits of Function Values

Frequently when studying a function $y = f(x)$, we find ourselves interested in the function's behavior *near* a particular point x_0, but not *at* x_0. This might be the case, for instance, if x_0 is an irrational number, like π or $\sqrt{2}$, whose values can only be approximated by "close" rational numbers at which we actually evaluate the function instead. Another situation occurs when trying to evaluate a function at x_0 leads to division by zero, which is undefined. We encountered this last circumstance when seeking the instantaneous rate of change in y by considering the quotient function $\Delta y/h$ for h closer and closer to zero. Here's a specific example where we explore numerically how a function behaves near a particular point at which we cannot directly evaluate the function.

EXAMPLE 1 How does the function

$$f(x) = \frac{x^2 - 1}{x - 1}$$

behave near $x = 1$?

Solution The given formula defines f for all real numbers x except $x = 1$ (we cannot divide by zero). For any $x \neq 1$, we can simplify the formula by factoring the numerator and canceling common factors:

$$f(x) = \frac{(x - 1)(x + 1)}{x - 1} = x + 1 \qquad \text{for} \qquad x \neq 1.$$

The graph of f is the line $y = x + 1$ with the point (1, 2) *removed*. This removed point is shown as a "hole" in Figure 2.7. Even though $f(1)$ is not defined, it is clear that we can make the value of $f(x)$ *as close as we want* to 2 by choosing x *close enough* to 1 (Table 2.2). ■

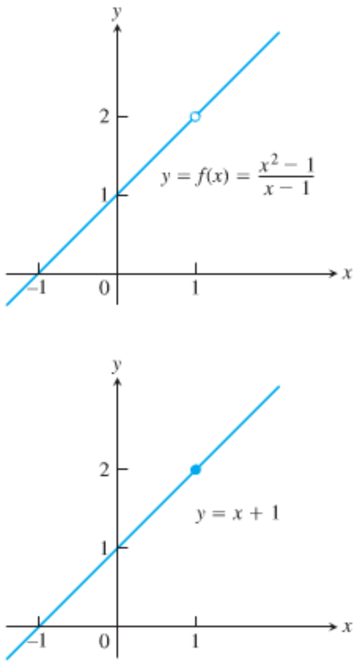


FIGURE 2.7 The graph of f is identical with the line $y = x + 1$ except at $x = 1$, where f is not defined (Example 1).

TABLE 2.2 The closer x gets to 1, the closer $f(x) = (x^2 - 1)/(x - 1)$ seems to get to 2

Values of x below and above 1	$f(x) = \frac{x^2 - 1}{x - 1} = x + 1, \quad x \neq 1$
0.9	1.9
1.1	2.1
0.99	1.99
1.01	2.01
0.999	1.999
1.001	2.001
0.999999	1.999999
1.000001	2.000001

Let's generalize the idea illustrated in Example 1.

Suppose $f(x)$ is defined on an open interval about x_0, *except possibly at x_0 itself.* If $f(x)$ is arbitrarily close to L (as close to L as we like) for all x sufficiently close to x_0, we say that f approaches the **limit** L as x approaches x_0, and write

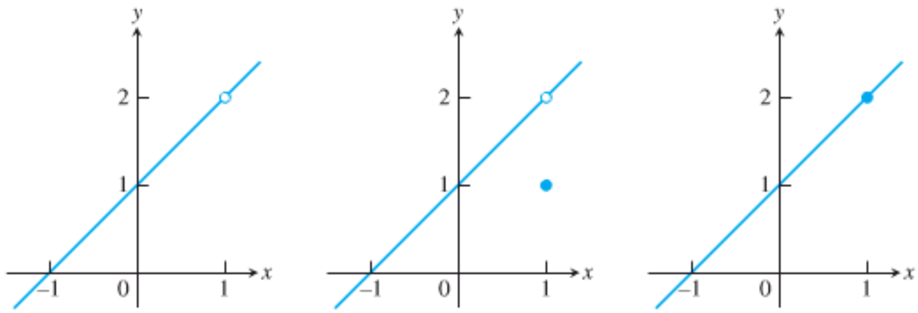
$$\lim_{x \to x_0} f(x) = L,$$

which is read "the limit of $f(x)$ as x approaches x_0 is L." For instance, in Example 1 we would say that $f(x)$ approaches the *limit* 2 as x approaches 1, and write

$$\lim_{x \to 1} f(x) = 2, \qquad \text{or} \qquad \lim_{x \to 1} \frac{x^2 - 1}{x - 1} = 2.$$

Essentially, the definition says that the values of $f(x)$ are close to the number L whenever x is close to x_0 (on either side of x_0). This definition is "informal" because phrases like *arbitrarily close* and *sufficiently close* are imprecise; their meaning depends on the context. (To a machinist manufacturing a piston, *close* may mean *within a few thousandths of an inch*. To an astronomer studying distant galaxies, *close* may mean *within a few thousand light-years*.) Nevertheless, the definition is clear enough to enable us to recognize and evaluate limits of specific functions. We will need the precise definition of Section 2.3, however, when we set out to prove theorems about limits. Here are several more examples exploring the idea of limits.

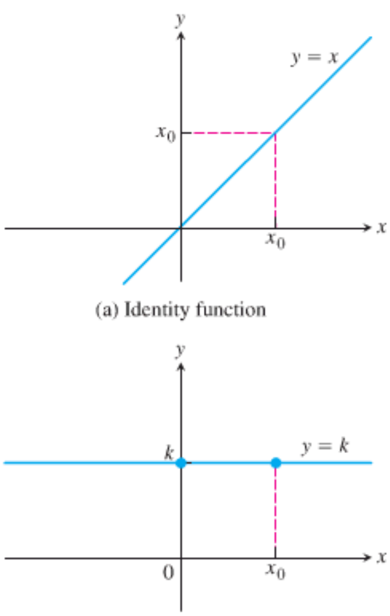
EXAMPLE 2 This example illustrates that the limit value of a function does not depend on how the function is defined at the point being approached. Consider the three functions in Figure 2.8. The function f has limit 2 as $x \to 1$ even though f is not defined at $x = 1$.



(a) $f(x) = \dfrac{x^2 - 1}{x - 1}$ (b) $g(x) = \begin{cases} \dfrac{x^2-1}{x-1}, & x \neq 1 \\ 1, & x = 1 \end{cases}$ (c) $h(x) = x + 1$

FIGURE 2.8 The limits of $f(x)$, $g(x)$, and $h(x)$ all equal 2 as x approaches 1. However, only $h(x)$ has the same function value as its limit at $x = 1$ (Example 2).

The function g has limit 2 as $x \to 1$ even though $2 \neq g(1)$. The function h is the only one of the three functions in Figure 2.8 whose limit as $x \to 1$ equals its value at $x = 1$. For h, we have $\lim_{x\to 1} h(x) = h(1)$. This equality of limit and function value is significant, and we return to it in Section 2.5. ■



(a) Identity function

(b) Constant function

FIGURE 2.9 The functions in Example 3 have limits at all points x_0.

EXAMPLE 3

(a) If f is the **identity function** $f(x) = x$, then for any value of x_0 (Figure 2.9a),

$$\lim_{x\to x_0} f(x) = \lim_{x\to x_0} x = x_0.$$

(b) If f is the **constant function** $f(x) = k$ (function with the constant value k), then for any value of x_0 (Figure 2.9b),

$$\lim_{x\to x_0} f(x) = \lim_{x\to x_0} k = k.$$

For instances of each of these rules we have

$$\lim_{x\to 3} x = 3 \qquad \text{and} \qquad \lim_{x\to -7}(4) = \lim_{x\to 2}(4) = 4.$$

We prove these rules in Example 3 in Section 2.3. ■

Some ways that limits can fail to exist are illustrated in Figure 2.10 and described in the next example.

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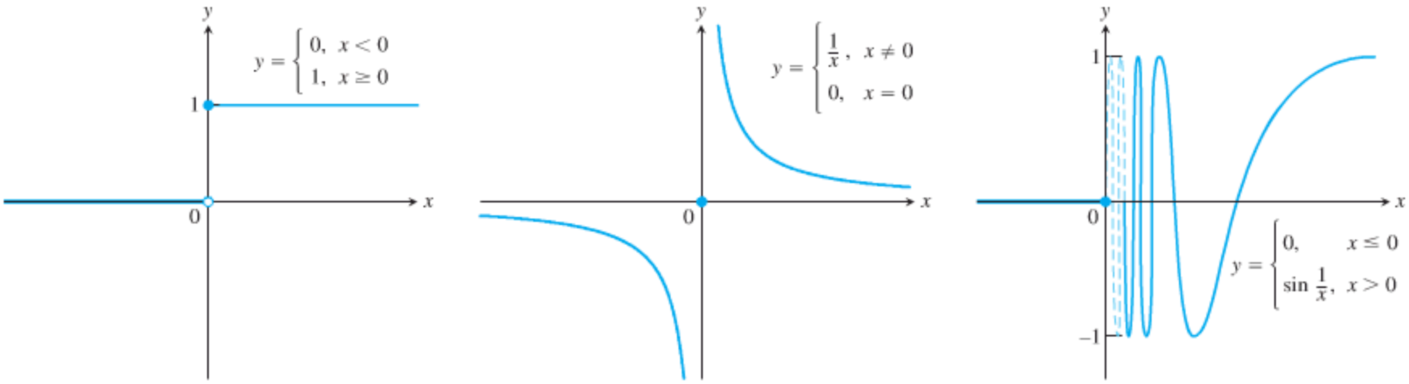

(a) Unit step function $U(x)$ (b) $g(x)$ (c) $f(x)$

FIGURE 2.10 None of these functions has a limit as x approaches 0 (Example 4).

EXAMPLE 4 Discuss the behavior of the following functions as $x \to 0$.

(a) $U(x) = \begin{cases} 0, & x < 0 \\ 1, & x \geq 0 \end{cases}$

(b) $g(x) = \begin{cases} \dfrac{1}{x}, & x \neq 0 \\ 0, & x = 0 \end{cases}$

(c) $f(x) = \begin{cases} 0, & x \leq 0 \\ \sin \dfrac{1}{x}, & x > 0 \end{cases}$

Solution

(a) It *jumps*: The **unit step function** $U(x)$ has no limit as $x \to 0$ because its values jump at $x = 0$. For negative values of x arbitrarily close to zero, $U(x) = 0$. For positive values of x arbitrarily close to zero, $U(x) = 1$. There is no *single* value L approached by $U(x)$ as $x \to 0$ (Figure 2.10a).

(b) It *grows too "large" to have a limit*: $g(x)$ has no limit as $x \to 0$ because the values of g grow arbitrarily large in absolute value as $x \to 0$ and do not stay close to *any* fixed real number (Figure 2.10b).

(c) It *oscillates too much to have a limit*: $f(x)$ has no limit as $x \to 0$ because the function's values oscillate between $+1$ and -1 in every open interval containing 0. The values do not stay close to any one number as $x \to 0$ (Figure 2.10c). ■