Continuity

When we plot function values generated in a laboratory or collected in the field, we often connect the plotted points with an unbroken curve to show what the function's values are likely to have been at the times we did not measure (Figure 2.34). In doing so, we are assuming that we are working with a *continuous function*, so its outputs vary continuously with the inputs and do not jump from one value to another without taking on the values in between. The limit of a continuous function as x approaches c can be found simply by calculating the value of the function at c. (We found this to be true for polynomials in Theorem 2.)

Intuitively, any function $y = f(x)$ whose graph can be sketched over its domain in one continuous motion without lifting the pencil is an example of a continuous function. In this section we investigate more precisely what it means for a function to be continuous.

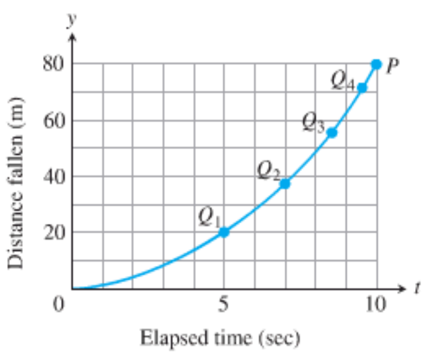

FIGURE 2.34 Connecting plotted points by an unbroken curve from experimental data $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \ldots$ for a falling object.

We also study the properties of continuous functions, and see that many of the function types presented in Section 1.1 are continuous.

Continuity at a Point

To understand continuity, it helps to consider a function like that in Figure 2.35, whose limits we investigated in Example 2 in the last section.

EXAMPLE 1 Find the points at which the function f in Figure 2.35 is continuous and the points at which f is not continuous.

Solution The function f is continuous at every point in its domain $[0, 4]$ except at $x = 1, x = 2$, and $x = 4$. At these points, there are breaks in the graph. Note the relationship between the limit of f and the value of f at each point of the function's domain.

Points at which f is continuous:

At $x = 0$,	$\lim_{x\to 0^+} f(x) = f(0)$.
At $x = 3$,	$\lim_{x\to 3} f(x) = f(3)$.
At $0 < c < 4, c \neq 1, 2$,	$\lim_{x\to c} f(x) = f(c)$.

Points at which f is not continuous:

At $x = 1$,	$\lim_{x\to 1} f(x)$ does not exist.
At $x = 2$,	$\lim_{x\to 2} f(x) = 1$, but $1 \neq f(2)$.
At $x = 4$,	$\lim_{x\to 4^-} f(x) = 1$, but $1 \neq f(4)$.
At $c < 0, c > 4$,	these points are not in the domain of f. ■

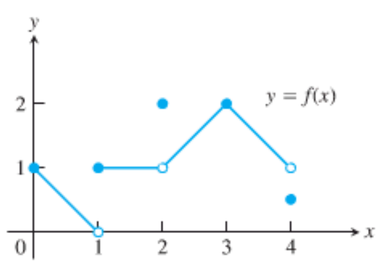

FIGURE 2.35 The function is continuous on $[0, 4]$ except at $x = 1, x = 2$, and $x = 4$ (Example 1).

To define continuity at a point in a function's domain, we need to define continuity at an interior point (which involves a two-sided limit) and continuity at an endpoint (which involves a one-sided limit) (Figure 2.36).

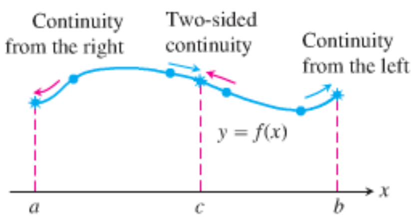

FIGURE 2.36 Continuity at points a, b, and c.

DEFINITION

Interior point: A function $y = f(x)$ is **continuous at an interior point *c*** of its domain if

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

Endpoint: A function $y = f(x)$ is **continuous at a left endpoint *a*** or is **continuous at a right endpoint *b*** of its domain if

$$\lim_{x \to a^+} f(x) = f(a) \quad \text{or} \quad \lim_{x \to b^-} f(x) = f(b), \quad \text{respectively.}$$

If a function f is not continuous at a point c, we say that f is **discontinuous** at c and that c is a **point of discontinuity** of f. Note that c need not be in the domain of f.

A function f is **right-continuous (continuous from the right)** at a point $x = c$ in its domain if $\lim_{x \to c^+} f(x) = f(c)$. It is **left-continuous (continuous from the left)** at c if $\lim_{x \to c^-} f(x) = f(c)$. Thus, a function is continuous at a left endpoint a of its domain if it is right-continuous at a and continuous at a right endpoint b of its domain if it is left-continuous at b. A function is continuous at an interior point c of its domain if and only if it is both right-continuous and left-continuous at c (Figure 2.36).

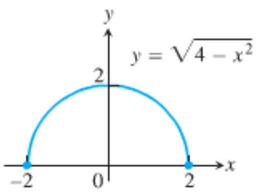

FIGURE 2.37 A function that is continuous at every domain point (Example 2).

EXAMPLE 2 The function $f(x) = \sqrt{4 - x^2}$ is continuous at every point of its domain $[-2, 2]$ (Figure 2.37), including $x = -2$, where f is right-continuous, and $x = 2$, where f is left-continuous. ■

EXAMPLE 3 The unit step function $U(x)$, graphed in Figure 2.38, is right-continuous at $x = 0$, but is neither left-continuous nor continuous there. It has a jump discontinuity at $x = 0$. ■

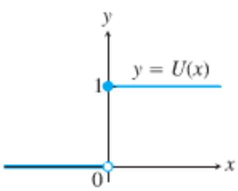

FIGURE 2.38 A function that has a jump discontinuity at the origin (Example 3).

We summarize continuity at a point in the form of a test.

Continuity Test

A function $f(x)$ is continuous at an interior point $x = c$ of its domain if and only if it meets the following three conditions.

1. $f(c)$ exists (c lies in the domain of f).
2. $\lim_{x \to c} f(x)$ exists (f has a limit as $x \to c$).
3. $\lim_{x \to c} f(x) = f(c)$ (the limit equals the function value).

Figure 2.40 displays several common types of discontinuities. The function in Figure 2.40a is continuous at $x = 0$. The function in Figure 2.40b would be continuous if it had $f(0) = 1$. The function in Figure 2.40c would be continuous if $f(0)$ were 1 instead of 2. The discontinuities in Figure 2.40b and c are **removable**. Each function has a limit as $x \to 0$, and we can remove the discontinuity by setting $f(0)$ equal to this limit.

The discontinuities in Figure 2.40d through f are more serious: $\lim_{x \to 0} f(x)$ does not exist, and there is no way to improve the situation by changing f at 0. The step function in Figure 2.40d has a **jump discontinuity**: The one-sided limits exist but have different values. The function $f(x) = 1/x^2$ in Figure 2.40e has an **infinite discontinuity**. The function in Figure 2.40f has an **oscillating discontinuity**: It oscillates too much to have a limit as $x \to 0$.

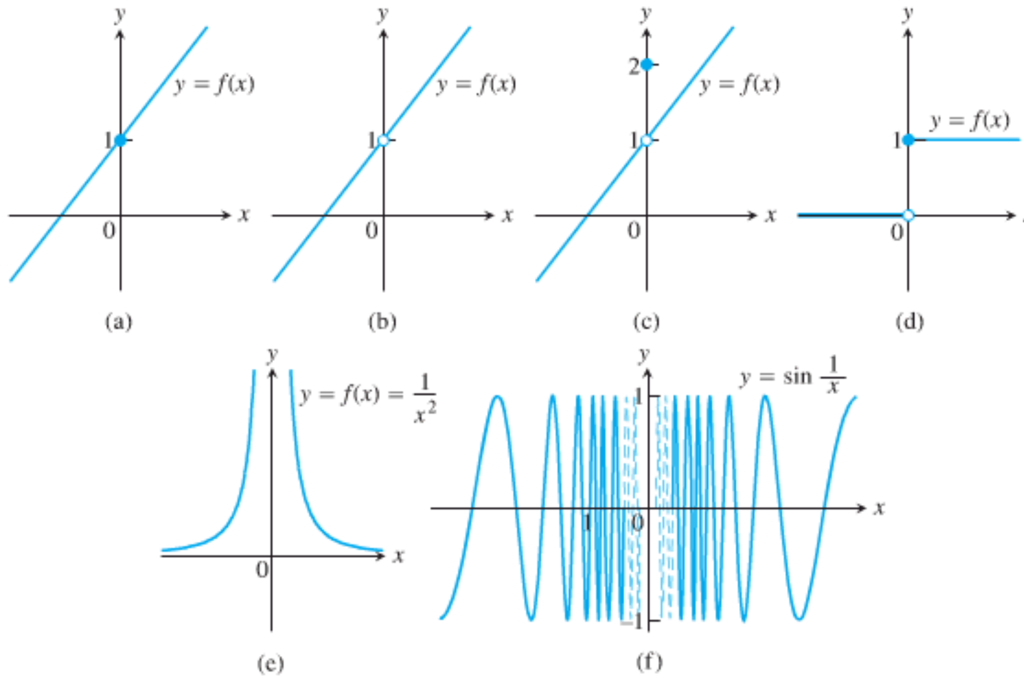

FIGURE 2.40 The function in (a) is continuous at $x = 0$; the functions in (b) through (f) are not.

Continuous Functions

A function is **continuous on an interval** if and only if it is continuous at every point of the interval. For example, the semicircle function graphed in Figure 2.37 is continuous on the interval $[-2, 2]$, which is its domain. A **continuous function** is one that is continuous at every point of its domain. A continuous function need not be continuous on every interval.

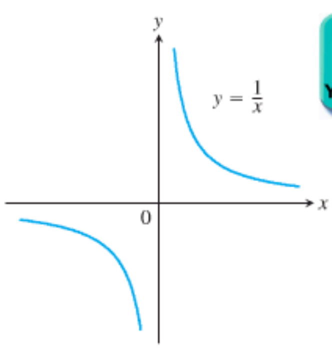

FIGURE 2.41 The function $y = 1/x$ is continuous at every value of x except $x = 0$. It has a point of discontinuity at $x = 0$ (Example 5).

You Try It

EXAMPLE 5

(a) The function $y = 1/x$ (Figure 2.41) is a continuous function because it is continuous at every point of its domain. It has a point of discontinuity at $x = 0$, however, because it is not defined there; that is, it is discontinuous on any interval containing $x = 0$.

(b) The identity function $f(x) = x$ and constant functions are continuous everywhere by Example 3, Section 2.3. ■

Algebraic combinations of continuous functions are continuous wherever they are defined.

THEOREM 8—Properties of Continuous Functions If the functions f and g are continuous at $x = c$, then the following combinations are continuous at $x = c$.

1. *Sums:* $f + g$
2. *Differences:* $f - g$
3. *Constant multiples:* $k \cdot f$, for any number k
4. *Products:* $f \cdot g$
5. *Quotients:* f/g, provided $g(c) \neq 0$
6. *Powers:* f^n, n a positive integer
7. *Roots:* $\sqrt[n]{f}$, provided it is defined on an open interval containing c, where n is a positive integer

Most of the results in Theorem 8 follow from the limit rules in Theorem 1, Section 2.2. For instance, to prove the sum property we have

$$\begin{aligned}\lim_{x \to c}(f + g)(x) &= \lim_{x \to c}(f(x) + g(x)) \\ &= \lim_{x \to c} f(x) + \lim_{x \to c} g(x), && \text{Sum Rule, Theorem 1} \\ &= f(c) + g(c) && \text{Continuity of } f, g \text{ at } c \\ &= (f + g)(c).\end{aligned}$$

This shows that $f + g$ is continuous.

EXAMPLE 6

(a) Every polynomial $P(x) = a_n x^n + a_{n-1}x^{n-1} + \cdots + a_0$ is continuous because $\lim_{x \to c} P(x) = P(c)$ by Theorem 2, Section 2.2.

(b) If $P(x)$ and $Q(x)$ are polynomials, then the rational function $P(x)/Q(x)$ is continuous wherever it is defined $(Q(c) \neq 0)$ by Theorem 3, Section 2.2. ■

You Try It

EXAMPLE 7 The function $f(x) = |x|$ is continuous at every value of x. If $x > 0$, we have $f(x) = x$, a polynomial. If $x < 0$, we have $f(x) = -x$, another polynomial. Finally, at the origin, $\lim_{x \to 0} |x| = 0 = |0|$. ■

Continuous Extension to a Point

The function $y = f(x) = (\sin x)/x$ is continuous at every point except $x = 0$. In this it is like the function $y = 1/x$. But $y = (\sin x)/x$ is different from $y = 1/x$ in that it has a finite limit as $x \to 0$ (Theorem 7). It is therefore possible to extend the function's domain to include the point $x = 0$ in such a way that the extended function is continuous at $x = 0$. We define a new function

$$F(x) = \begin{cases} \dfrac{\sin x}{x}, & x \neq 0 \\ 1, & x = 0. \end{cases}$$

The function $F(x)$ is continuous at $x = 0$ because

$$\lim_{x \to 0} \frac{\sin x}{x} = F(0)$$

(Figure 2.44).

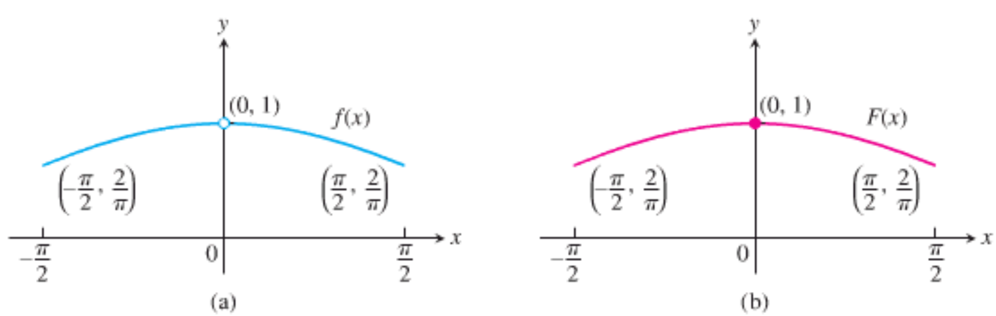

FIGURE 2.44 The graph (a) of $f(x) = (\sin x)/x$ for $-\pi/2 \leq x \leq \pi/2$ does not include the point (0, 1) because the function is not defined at $x = 0$. (b) We can remove the discontinuity from the graph by defining the new function $F(x)$ with $F(0) = 1$ and $F(x) = f(x)$ everywhere else. Note that $F(0) = \lim_{x \to 0} f(x)$.

More generally, a function (such as a rational function) may have a limit even at a point where it is not defined. If $f(c)$ is not defined, but $\lim_{x\to c} f(x) = L$ exists, we can define a new function $F(x)$ by the rule

$$F(x) = \begin{cases} f(x), & \text{if } x \text{ is in the domain of } f \\ L, & \text{if } x = c. \end{cases}$$

The function F is continuous at $x = c$. It is called the **continuous extension of f** to $x = c$. For rational functions f, continuous extensions are usually found by canceling common factors.

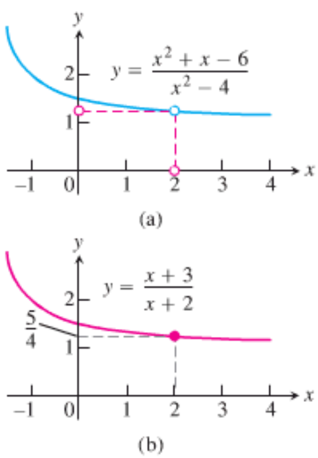

FIGURE 2.45 (a) The graph of $f(x)$ and (b) the graph of its continuous extension $F(x)$ (Example 10).

EXAMPLE 10 Show that

$$f(x) = \frac{x^2 + x - 6}{x^2 - 4}, \qquad x \neq 2$$

has a continuous extension to $x = 2$, and find that extension.

Solution Although $f(2)$ is not defined, if $x \neq 2$ we have

$$f(x) = \frac{x^2 + x - 6}{x^2 - 4} = \frac{(x - 2)(x + 3)}{(x - 2)(x + 2)} = \frac{x + 3}{x + 2}.$$

The new function

$$F(x) = \frac{x + 3}{x + 2}$$

is equal to $f(x)$ for $x \neq 2$, but is continuous at $x = 2$, having there the value of $5/4$. Thus F is the continuous extension of f to $x = 2$, and

$$\lim_{x\to 2} \frac{x^2 + x - 6}{x^2 - 4} = \lim_{x\to 2} f(x) = \frac{5}{4}.$$

The graph of f is shown in Figure 2.45. The continuous extension F has the same graph except with no hole at $(2, 5/4)$. Effectively, F is the function f with its point of discontinuity at $x = 2$ removed. ■