Tangents and the Derivative

In this section we define the slope and tangent to a curve at a point, and the derivative of a function at a point. Later in the chapter we interpret the derivative as the instantaneous rate of change of a function, and apply this interpretation to the study of certain types of motion.

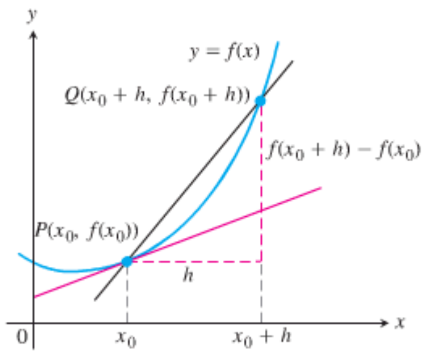

FIGURE 3.1 The slope of the tangent line at P is $\lim_{h\to 0} \dfrac{f(x_0+h)-f(x_0)}{h}$.

Finding a Tangent to the Graph of a Function

To find a tangent to an arbitrary curve $y = f(x)$ at a point $P(x_0, f(x_0))$, we use the procedure introduced in Section 2.1. We calculate the slope of the secant through P and a nearby point $Q(x_0 + h, f(x_0 + h))$. We then investigate the limit of the slope as $h \to 0$ (Figure 3.1). If the limit exists, we call it the slope of the curve at P and define the tangent at P to be the line through P having this slope.

DEFINITIONS The **slope of the curve** $y = f(x)$ at the point $P(x_0, f(x_0))$ is the number

$$m = \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{f(x_0+h)-f(x_0)}{h} \qquad \text{(provided the limit exists).}$$

The **tangent line** to the curve at P is the line through P with this slope.

EXAMPLE 1

(a) Find the slope of the curve $y = 1/x$ at any point $x = a \neq 0$. What is the slope at the point $x = -1$?

(b) Where does the slope equal $-1/4$?

(c) What happens to the tangent to the curve at the point $(a, 1/a)$ as a changes?

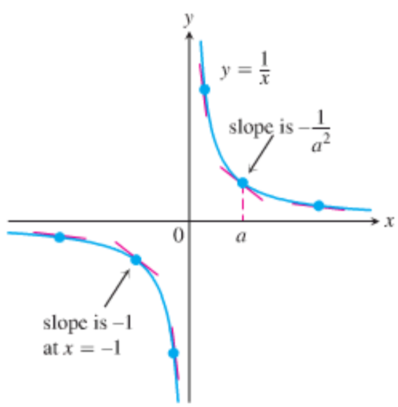

FIGURE 3.2 The tangent slopes, steep near the origin, become more gradual as the point of tangency moves away (Example 1).

Solution

(a) Here $f(x) = 1/x$. The slope at $(a, 1/a)$ is

$$\lim_{h\to 0} \frac{f(a+h)-f(a)}{h} = \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{\dfrac{1}{a+h} - \dfrac{1}{a}}{h} = \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{1}{h}\,\frac{a-(a+h)}{a(a+h)}$$

$$= \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{-h}{ha(a+h)} = \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{-1}{a(a+h)} = -\frac{1}{a^2}.$$

Notice how we had to keep writing "$\lim_{h\to 0}$" before each fraction until the stage where we could evaluate the limit by substituting $h = 0$. The number a may be positive or negative, but not 0. When $a = -1$, the slope is $-1/(-1)^2 = -1$ (Figure 3.2).

(b) The slope of $y = 1/x$ at the point where $x = a$ is $-1/a^2$. It will be $-1/4$ provided that

$$-\frac{1}{a^2} = -\frac{1}{4}.$$

This equation is equivalent to $a^2 = 4$, so $a = 2$ or $a = -2$. The curve has slope $-1/4$ at the two points $(2, 1/2)$ and $(-2, -1/2)$ (Figure 3.3).

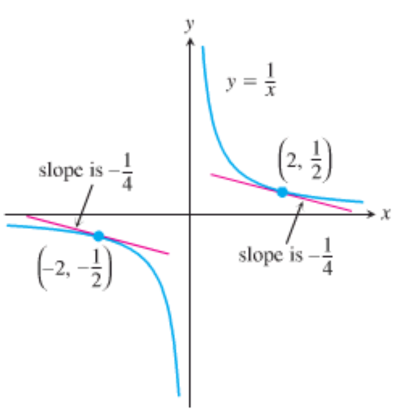

FIGURE 3.3 The two tangent lines to $y = 1/x$ having slope $-1/4$ (Example 1).

(c) The slope $-1/a^2$ is always negative if $a \neq 0$. As $a \to 0^+$, the slope approaches $-\infty$ and the tangent becomes increasingly steep (Figure 3.2). We see this situation again as $a \to 0^-$. As a moves away from the origin in either direction, the slope approaches 0 and the tangent levels off to become horizontal. ■

Rates of Change: Derivative at a Point

The expression

$$\frac{f(x_0 + h) - f(x_0)}{h}, \quad h \neq 0$$

is called the **difference quotient of f at x_0 with increment h**. If the difference quotient has a limit as h approaches zero, that limit is given a special name and notation.

DEFINITION The **derivative of a function f at a point x_0**, denoted $f'(x_0)$, is

$$f'(x_0) = \lim_{h \to 0} \frac{f(x_0 + h) - f(x_0)}{h}$$

provided this limit exists.

If we interpret the difference quotient as the slope of a secant line, then the derivative gives the slope of the curve $y = f(x)$ at the point $P(x_0, f(x_0))$. Exercise 31 shows

that the derivative of the linear function $f(x) = mx + b$ at any point x_0 is simply the slope of the line, so

$$f'(x_0) = m,$$

which is consistent with our definition of slope.

Summary

We have been discussing slopes of curves, lines tangent to a curve, the rate of change of a function, and the derivative of a function at a point. All of these ideas refer to the same limit.

The following are all interpretations for the limit of the difference quotient,

$$\lim_{h \to 0} \frac{f(x_0 + h) - f(x_0)}{h}.$$

1. The slope of the graph of $y = f(x)$ at $x = x_0$
2. The slope of the tangent to the curve $y = f(x)$ at $x = x_0$
3. The rate of change of $f(x)$ with respect to x at $x = x_0$
4. The derivative $f'(x_0)$ at a point

In the last section we defined the derivative of $y = f(x)$ at the point $x = x_0$ to be the limit

$$f'(x_0) = \lim_{h \to 0} \frac{f(x_0 + h) - f(x_0)}{h}.$$

We now investigate the derivative as a *function* derived from f by considering the limit at each point x in the domain of f.

> **DEFINITION** The **derivative** of the function $f(x)$ with respect to the variable x is the function f' whose value at x is
>
> $$f'(x) = \lim_{h \to 0} \frac{f(x + h) - f(x)}{h},$$
>
> provided the limit exists.

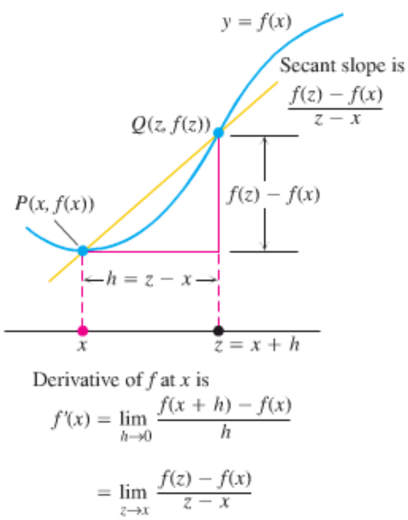

FIGURE 3.4 Two forms for the difference quotient.

We use the notation $f(x)$ in the definition to emphasize the independent variable x with respect to which the derivative function $f'(x)$ is being defined. The domain of f' is the set of points in the domain of f for which the limit exists, which means that the domain may be the same as or smaller than the domain of f. If f' exists at a particular x, we say that f is **differentiable (has a derivative) at x**. If f' exists at every point in the domain of f, we call f **differentiable**.

If we write $z = x + h$, then $h = z - x$ and h approaches 0 if and only if z approaches x. Therefore, an equivalent definition of the derivative is as follows (see Figure 3.4). This formula is sometimes more convenient to use when finding a derivative function.

> **Alternative Formula for the Derivative**
>
> $$f'(x) = \lim_{z \to x} \frac{f(z) - f(x)}{z - x}.$$

Calculating Derivatives from the Definition

The process of calculating a derivative is called **differentiation**. To emphasize the idea that differentiation is an operation performed on a function $y = f(x)$, we use the notation

$$\frac{d}{dx} f(x)$$

as another way to denote the derivative $f'(x)$. Example 1 of Section 3.1 illustrated the differentiation process for the function $y = 1/x$ when $x = a$. For x representing any point in the domain, we get the formula

$$\frac{d}{dx}\left(\frac{1}{x}\right) = -\frac{1}{x^2}.$$

Derivative of the Reciprocal Function

$$\frac{d}{dx}\left(\frac{1}{x}\right) = -\frac{1}{x^2}, \quad x \neq 0$$

Here are two more examples in which we allow x to be any point in the domain of f.

EXAMPLE 1 Differentiate $f(x) = \dfrac{x}{x-1}$.

Solution We use the definition of derivative, which requires us to calculate $f(x+h)$ and then subtract $f(x)$ to obtain the numerator in the difference quotient. We have

$$f(x) = \frac{x}{x-1} \quad \text{and} \quad f(x+h) = \frac{(x+h)}{(x+h)-1}, \text{ so}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
f'(x) &= \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{f(x+h) - f(x)}{h} && \text{Definition} \\
&= \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{\dfrac{x+h}{x+h-1} - \dfrac{x}{x-1}}{h} \\
&= \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{1}{h} \cdot \frac{(x+h)(x-1) - x(x+h-1)}{(x+h-1)(x-1)} && \frac{a}{b} - \frac{c}{d} = \frac{ad-cb}{bd} \\
&= \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{1}{h} \cdot \frac{-h}{(x+h-1)(x-1)} && \text{Simplify.} \\
&= \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{-1}{(x+h-1)(x-1)} = \frac{-1}{(x-1)^2}. && \text{Cancel } h \neq 0.
\end{aligned}$$

■

EXAMPLE 2

(a) Find the derivative of $f(x) = \sqrt{x}$ for $x > 0$.

(b) Find the tangent line to the curve $y = \sqrt{x}$ at $x = 4$.

Derivative of the Square Root Function

$$\frac{d}{dx}\sqrt{x} = \frac{1}{2\sqrt{x}}, \quad x > 0$$

Solution

(a) We use the alternative formula to calculate f':

$$\begin{aligned}
f'(x) &= \lim_{z\to x} \frac{f(z) - f(x)}{z - x} \\
&= \lim_{z\to x} \frac{\sqrt{z} - \sqrt{x}}{z - x} \\
&= \lim_{z\to x} \frac{\sqrt{z} - \sqrt{x}}{\left(\sqrt{z} - \sqrt{x}\right)\left(\sqrt{z} + \sqrt{x}\right)} \\
&= \lim_{z\to x} \frac{1}{\sqrt{z} + \sqrt{x}} = \frac{1}{2\sqrt{x}}.
\end{aligned}$$

(b) The slope of the curve at $x = 4$ is

$$f'(4) = \frac{1}{2\sqrt{4}} = \frac{1}{4}.$$

The tangent is the line through the point (4, 2) with slope 1/4 (Figure 3.5):

$$y = 2 + \frac{1}{4}(x - 4)$$

$$y = \frac{1}{4}x + 1.$$

■

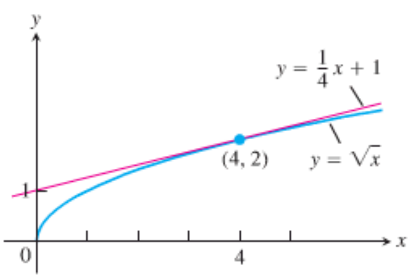

FIGURE 3.5 The curve $y = \sqrt{x}$ and its tangent at (4, 2). The tangent's slope is found by evaluating the derivative at $x = 4$ (Example 2).

Notations

There are many ways to denote the derivative of a function $y = f(x)$, where the independent variable is x and the dependent variable is y. Some common alternative notations for the derivative are

$$f'(x) = y' = \frac{dy}{dx} = \frac{df}{dx} = \frac{d}{dx} f(x) = D(f)(x) = D_x f(x).$$

The symbols d/dx and D indicate the operation of differentiation. We read dy/dx as "the derivative of y with respect to x," and df/dx and $(d/dx)f(x)$ as "the derivative of f with respect to x." The "prime" notations y' and f' come from notations that Newton used for derivatives. The d/dx notations are similar to those used by Leibniz. The symbol dy/dx should not be regarded as a ratio (until we introduce the idea of "differentials" in Section 3.11).

To indicate the value of a derivative at a specified number $x = a$, we use the notation

$$f'(a) = \left.\frac{dy}{dx}\right|_{x=a} = \left.\frac{df}{dx}\right|_{x=a} = \left.\frac{d}{dx} f(x)\right|_{x=a}.$$

For instance, in Example 2

$$f'(4) = \left.\frac{d}{dx}\sqrt{x}\right|_{x=4} = \left.\frac{1}{2\sqrt{x}}\right|_{x=4} = \frac{1}{2\sqrt{4}} = \frac{1}{4}.$$

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Graphing the Derivative

We can often make a reasonable plot of the derivative of $y = f(x)$ by estimating the slopes on the graph of f. That is, we plot the points $(x, f'(x))$ in the xy-plane and connect them with a smooth curve, which represents $y = f'(x)$.

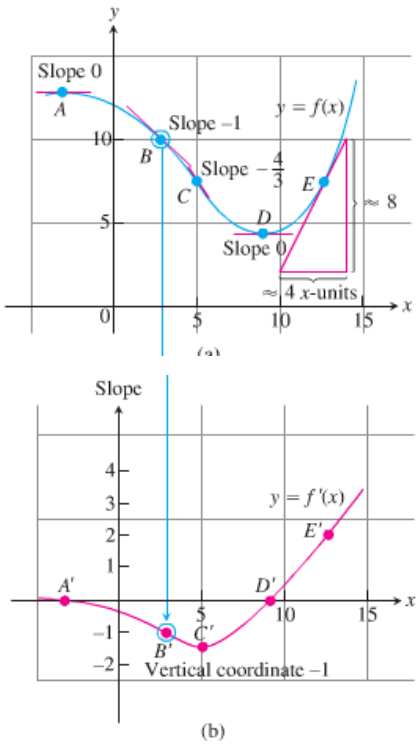

FIGURE 3.6 We made the graph of $y = f'(x)$ in (b) by plotting slopes from the graph of $y = f(x)$ in (a). The vertical coordinate of B' is the slope at B and so on. The slope at E is approximately $8/4 = 2$. In (b) we see that the rate of change of f is negative for x between A' and D'; the rate of change is positive for x to the right of D'.

EXAMPLE 3 Graph the derivative of the function $y = f(x)$ in Figure 3.6a.

Solution We sketch the tangents to the graph of f at frequent intervals and use their slopes to estimate the values of $f'(x)$ at these points. We plot the corresponding $(x, f'(x))$ pairs and connect them with a smooth curve as sketched in Figure 3.6b. ■

What can we learn from the graph of $y = f'(x)$? At a glance we can see

1. where the rate of change of f is positive, negative, or zero;
2. the rough size of the growth rate at any x and its size in relation to the size of $f(x)$;
3. where the rate of change itself is increasing or decreasing.

Differentiable on an Interval; One-Sided Derivatives

A function $y = f(x)$ is **differentiable on an open interval** (finite or infinite) if it has a derivative at each point of the interval. It is **differentiable on a closed interval** $[a, b]$ if it is differentiable on the interior (a, b) and if the limits

$$\lim_{h\to 0^+} \frac{f(a+h) - f(a)}{h} \qquad \textbf{Right-hand derivative at } \boldsymbol{a}$$

$$\lim_{h\to 0^-} \frac{f(b+h) - f(b)}{h} \qquad \textbf{Left-hand derivative at } \boldsymbol{b}$$

exist at the endpoints (Figure 3.7).

Right-hand and left-hand derivatives may be defined at any point of a function's domain. Because of Theorem 6, Section 2.4, a function has a derivative at a point if and only if it has left-hand and right-hand derivatives there, and these one-sided derivatives are equal.

EXAMPLE 4 Show that the function $y = |x|$ is differentiable on $(-\infty, 0)$ and $(0, \infty)$ but has no derivative at $x = 0$.

Solution From Section 3.1, the derivative of $y = mx + b$ is the slope m. Thus, to the right of the origin,

$$\frac{d}{dx}(|x|) = \frac{d}{dx}(x) = \frac{d}{dx}(1 \cdot x) = 1. \qquad \frac{d}{dx}(mx+b) = m,\ |x| = x$$

To the left,

$$\frac{d}{dx}(|x|) = \frac{d}{dx}(-x) = \frac{d}{dx}(-1 \cdot x) = -1 \qquad |x| = -x$$

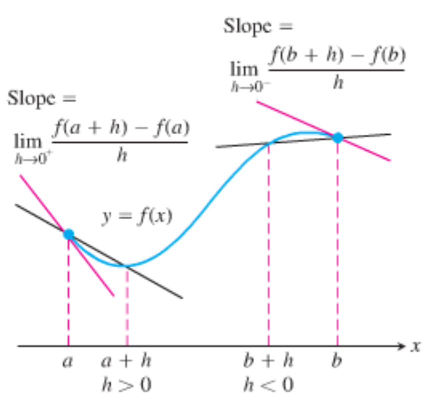

FIGURE 3.7 Derivatives at endpoints are one-sided limits.

(Figure 3.8). There is no derivative at the origin because the one-sided derivatives differ there:

$$\begin{aligned}
\text{Right-hand derivative of } |x| \text{ at zero} &= \lim_{h\to 0^+} \frac{|0+h| - |0|}{h} = \lim_{h\to 0^+} \frac{|h|}{h} \\
&= \lim_{h\to 0^+} \frac{h}{h} \qquad |h| = h \text{ when } h > 0 \\
&= \lim_{h\to 0^+} 1 = 1 \\
\text{Left-hand derivative of } |x| \text{ at zero} &= \lim_{h\to 0^-} \frac{|0+h| - |0|}{h} = \lim_{h\to 0^-} \frac{|h|}{h} \\
&= \lim_{h\to 0^-} \frac{-h}{h} \qquad |h| = -h \text{ when } h < 0 \\
&= \lim_{h\to 0^-} -1 = -1.
\end{aligned}$$

■

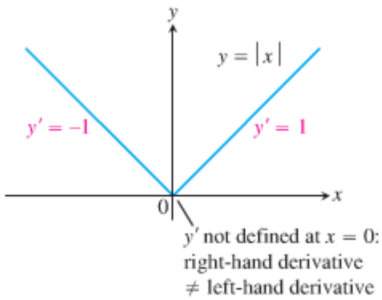

FIGURE 3.8 The function $y = |x|$ is not differentiable at the origin where the graph has a "corner" (Example 4).

EXAMPLE 5 In Example 2 we found that for $x > 0$,

$$\frac{d}{dx}\sqrt{x} = \frac{1}{2\sqrt{x}}.$$

We apply the definition to examine if the derivative exists at $x = 0$:

$$\lim_{h \to 0^+} \frac{\sqrt{0 + h} - \sqrt{0}}{h} = \lim_{h \to 0^+} \frac{1}{\sqrt{h}} = \infty.$$

Since the (right-hand) limit is not finite, there is no derivative at $x = 0$. Since the slopes of the secant lines joining the origin to the points $(h, \sqrt{h})$ on a graph of $y = \sqrt{x}$ approach ∞, the graph has a *vertical tangent* at the origin. (See Figure 1.17 on page 9). ■

Differentiable Functions Are Continuous

A function is continuous at every point where it has a derivative.

THEOREM 1—Differentiability Implies Continuity If f has a derivative at $x = c$, then f is continuous at $x = c$.

Similar arguments with one-sided limits show that if f has a derivative from one side (right or left) at $x = c$ then f is continuous from that side at $x = c$.

Theorem 1 says that if a function has a discontinuity at a point (for instance, a jump discontinuity), then it cannot be differentiable there. The greatest integer function $y = \lfloor x \rfloor$ fails to be differentiable at every integer $x = n$ (Example 4, Section 2.5).

Caution The converse of Theorem 1 is false. A function need not have a derivative at a point where it is continuous, as we saw in Example 4.