Implicit Differentiation

This technique for taking the derivative applies to functions that implicitly defined, that is, they aren't written in the form $y = \ldots$, where everything on the right side of the equation is an x-term or a constant.

Most of the functions we have dealt with so far have been described by an equation of the form $y = f(x)$ that expresses y explicitly in terms of the variable x. We have learned rules for differentiating functions defined in this way. Another situation occurs when we encounter equations like

$$x^3 + y^3 - 9xy = 0, \qquad y^2 - x = 0, \qquad \text{or} \qquad x^2 + y^2 - 25 = 0.$$

(See Figures 3.28, 3.29, and 3.30.) These equations define an *implicit* relation between the variables x and y. In some cases we may be able to solve such an equation for y as an explicit function (or even several functions) of x. When we cannot put an equation $F(x, y) = 0$ in the form $y = f(x)$ to differentiate it in the usual way, we may still be able to find dy/dx by *implicit differentiation*. This section describes the technique.

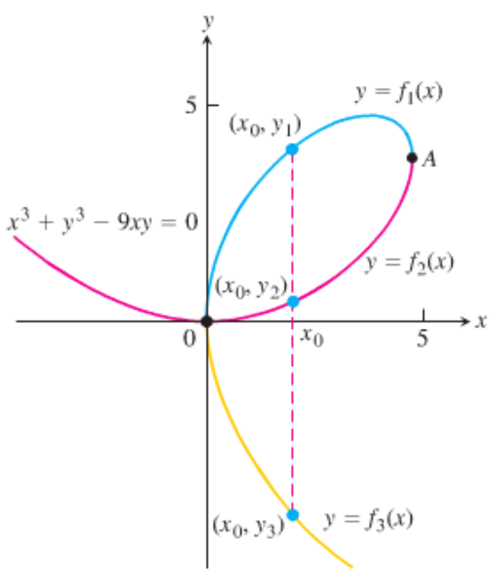

FIGURE 3.28 The curve $x^3 + y^3 - 9xy = 0$ is not the graph of any one function of x. The curve can, however, be divided into separate arcs that *are* the graphs of functions of x. This particular curve, called a *folium*, dates to Descartes in 1638.

Thomas' Calculus, Early Transcendentals, 12th ed. Pearson, 2010. Section 3.7, p 170-172.

EXAMPLE 1 Find dy/dx if $y^2 = x$.

Solution The equation $y^2 = x$ defines two differentiable functions of x that we can actually find, namely $y_1 = \sqrt{x}$ and $y_2 = -\sqrt{x}$ (Figure 3.29). We know how to calculate the derivative of each of these for $x > 0$:

$$\frac{dy_1}{dx} = \frac{1}{2\sqrt{x}} \quad \text{and} \quad \frac{dy_2}{dx} = -\frac{1}{2\sqrt{x}}.$$

But suppose that we knew only that the equation $y^2 = x$ defined y as one or more differentiable functions of x for $x > 0$ without knowing exactly what these functions were. Could we still find dy/dx?

The answer is yes. To find dy/dx, we simply differentiate both sides of the equation $y^2 = x$ with respect to x, treating $y = f(x)$ as a differentiable function of x:

$$y^2 = x \qquad \text{The Chain Rule gives } \frac{d}{dx}\left(y^2\right) =$$

$$2y\frac{dy}{dx} = 1 \qquad \frac{d}{dx}[f(x)]^2 = 2f(x)f'(x) = 2y\frac{dy}{dx}.$$

$$\frac{dy}{dx} = \frac{1}{2y}.$$

This one formula gives the derivatives we calculated for *both* explicit solutions $y_1 = \sqrt{x}$ and $y_2 = -\sqrt{x}$:

$$\frac{dy_1}{dx} = \frac{1}{2y_1} = \frac{1}{2\sqrt{x}} \quad \text{and} \quad \frac{dy_2}{dx} = \frac{1}{2y_2} = \frac{1}{2\left(-\sqrt{x}\right)} = -\frac{1}{2\sqrt{x}}.$$ ■

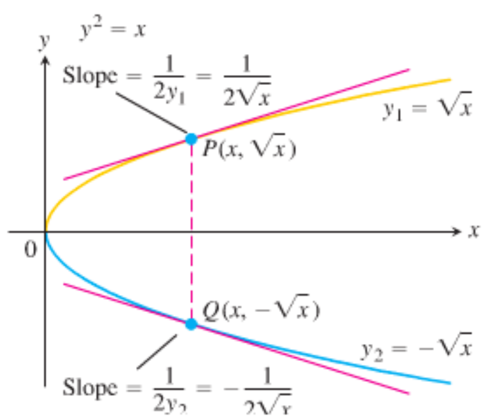

FIGURE 3.29 The equation $y^2 - x = 0$, or $y^2 = x$ as it is usually written, defines two differentiable functions of x on the interval $x > 0$. Example 1 shows how to find the derivatives of these functions without solving the equation $y^2 = x$ for y.

Thomas' Calculus, Early Transcendentals, 12th ed. Pearson, 2010. Section 3.7, p 170-172.

EXAMPLE 2 Find the slope of the circle $x^2 + y^2 = 25$ at the point $(3, -4)$.

Solution The circle is not the graph of a single function of x. Rather it is the combined graphs of two differentiable functions, $y_1 = \sqrt{25 - x^2}$ and $y_2 = -\sqrt{25 - x^2}$ (Figure 3.30). The point $(3, -4)$ lies on the graph of y_2, so we can find the slope by calculating the derivative directly, using the Power Chain Rule:

$$\left.\frac{dy_2}{dx}\right|_{x=3} = -\left.\frac{-2x}{2\sqrt{25 - x^2}}\right|_{x=3} = -\frac{-6}{2\sqrt{25 - 9}} = \frac{3}{4}.$$

$$\frac{d}{dx} - (25 - x^2)^{1/2} = -\frac{1}{2}(25 - x^2)^{-1/2}(-2x)$$

We can solve this problem more easily by differentiating the given equation of the circle implicitly with respect to x:

$$\frac{d}{dx}(x^2) + \frac{d}{dx}(y^2) = \frac{d}{dx}(25)$$

$$2x + 2y\frac{dy}{dx} = 0$$

$$\frac{dy}{dx} = -\frac{x}{y}.$$

The slope at $(3, -4)$ is $\left.-\frac{x}{y}\right|_{(3,-4)} = -\frac{3}{-4} = \frac{3}{4}.$

Notice that unlike the slope formula for dy_2/dx, which applies only to points below the x-axis, the formula $dy/dx = -x/y$ applies everywhere the circle has a slope. Notice also that the derivative involves *both* variables x and y, not just the independent variable x. ■

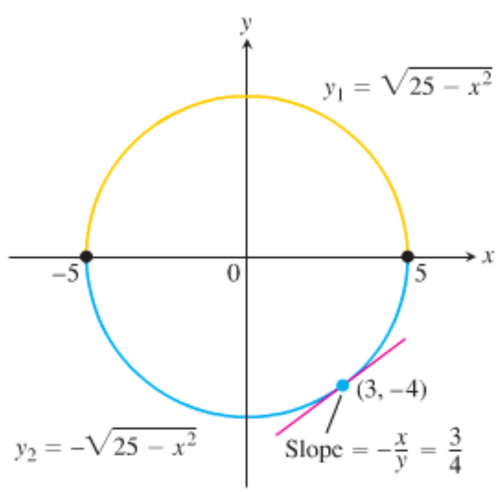

FIGURE 3.30 The circle combines the graphs of two functions. The graph of y_2 is the lower semicircle and passes through $(3, -4)$.

Thomas' Calculus, Early Transcendentals, 12th ed. Pearson, 2010. Section 3.7, p 170-172.

Implicit Differentiation

1. Differentiate both sides of the equation with respect to x, treating y as a differentiable function of x.
2. Collect the terms with dy/dx on one side of the equation and solve for dy/dx.

Derivatives of Higher Order

Implicit differentiation can also be used to find higher derivatives.

EXAMPLE 4 Find d^2y/dx^2 if $2x^3 - 3y^2 = 8$.

Solution To start, we differentiate both sides of the equation with respect to x in order to find $y' = dy/dx$.

$$\frac{d}{dx}(2x^3 - 3y^2) = \frac{d}{dx}(8)$$

$$6x^2 - 6yy' = 0 \qquad \text{Treat } y \text{ as a function of } x.$$

$$y' = \frac{x^2}{y}, \qquad \text{when } y \neq 0 \qquad \text{Solve for } y'.$$

We now apply the Quotient Rule to find y''.

$$y'' = \frac{d}{dx}\left(\frac{x^2}{y}\right) = \frac{2xy - x^2y'}{y^2} = \frac{2x}{y} - \frac{x^2}{y^2} \cdot y'$$

Finally, we substitute $y' = x^2/y$ to express y'' in terms of x and y.

$$y'' = \frac{2x}{y} - \frac{x^2}{y^2}\left(\frac{x^2}{y}\right) = \frac{2x}{y} - \frac{x^4}{y^3}, \qquad \text{when } y \neq 0$$

■