

# Experimentally Deriving Newton's Universal Law of Gravitation by Measuring Mass, Distance, and G in a Simulation

**Name:** Keshav Anand

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## OBJECTIVES

Use the Gravitational force simulation to determine the dependence of the gravitational force on the mass of the objects involved.

Use the same simulation to determine the dependence of the gravitational force on the distance between the two masses.

Determine the experimental value of the universal gravitational constant (G). (This is what relates the gravitational force to the masses and distance rather than being these proportional. G must be included in your final equation.)

Determine an Equation for the Universal Law of Gravitation based on your data, using only symbols.

## INTRODUCTION

### BACKGROUND

The concept of gravitational force has been misunderstood for most of history, commonly attributed to divine or supernatural causes until Sir Isaac Newton published his groundbreaking *Principia*. In the Principia, Newton asserted that every mass exerts an attractive force on every other mass, a phenomenon described by Newton's Universal Law of Gravitation (NLUG). This law states that the magnitude of the gravitational force between two masses is

$$F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2},$$

where  $F$  is the gravitational force,  $m_1$  and  $m_2$  are the interacting masses,  $r$  is the distance between their centers.  $G$  is the universal gravitational constant, a constant of proportionality that has been calculated to be

$$G = 6.674 \times 10^{-11} \text{ N m}^2 \text{ kg}^{-2}.$$

In the scientific community, NLUG is treated as an absolute truth, and many important discoveries and applications rely on its accuracy. From engineering to astrophysics, NLUG has profound importance, and its validity is vital to the functioning of scientific advancement.

## PURPOSE

This lab aims to use a computer simulation to verify NLUG by deriving the relationship between gravitational force, masses of objects, and the distance between them. First, a gravitation simulation will be used to derive the relationship between objects' masses and the gravitational force. Then, the same process will be repeated with comparing gravitational force to the distance between objects. Data collected from these two setups will be used to (hopefully) re-establish the relationship of proportionality proposed by Newton, and the collected data will also solve for the universal Gravitational constant,  $G$ .

## RESEARCH PROBLEM

The research objective for this project is to verify the gravitational relationship between two objects and verify the constant  $G$ . The primary problem of investigation is that theoretical mathematics often fails to adequately capture a true relationship in the real world. Moreover, using physical objects and tools of measurements can result in unwanted noisy data and is limited by the precision of measurement. Ergo, a simulation bridges this gap, allowing for an accurate verification of NLUG.

## METHODOLOGY

### MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

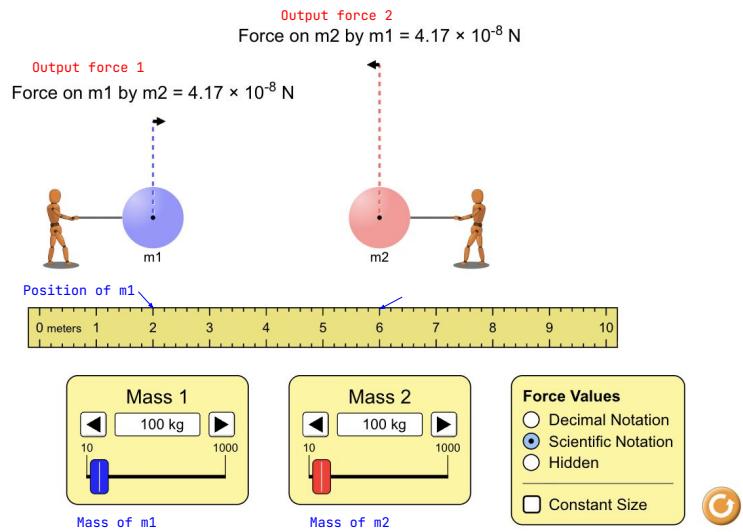
As this lab was performed within a simulation, all physical materials are limited to a computer with at least 400 MB of memory to render the simulation.

Within the simulation, the simulated materials include

- Adjustable Mass,  $m_1$
- Adjustable Mass,  $m_2$
- 10 Meter Scale
- Automatic Force Scale to Measure Gravitational Attraction
- Two simulated people holding  $m_1$  and  $m_2$  from colliding into each other due to gravitation

### EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

Note that in Figure 1, all inputs (independent variables) are denoted in blue, whereas outputs (dependent variables) are denoted in red



**Figure 1:** Experimental setup for the gravity simulation

## PROCEDURE

1. Set the location of mass 1 to exactly 2 meters on the scale, and set mass 2 to exactly 6 meters on the scale, with a distance between of 4 meters
2. Set the mass of objects 1 and 2 to exactly 100 kg
3. Set the force values to scientific notation, and uncheck the option for masses of constant size
4. Leaving the mass of  $m_2$  constant, change the mass of  $m_1$  to be the values listed below, and record both the force on  $m_1$  by  $m_2$  and the force on  $m_2$  by  $m_1$ 

Mass values for  $m_1$  (kg): 50, 100, 250, 500, 750, 1000
5. Reset the simulation as detailed by steps 1-3
6. Leaving the mass of  $m_1$  constant, change the mass of  $m_2$  to be the values listed below, and record both the force on  $m_1$  by  $m_2$  and the force on  $m_2$  by  $m_1$ 

Mass values for  $m_2$  (kg): 50, 100, 250, 500, 750, 1000
7. Reset the simulation as detailed by steps 1-3
8. Change the masses of both  $m_1$  and  $m_2$  to be the values listed below, and record both the force on  $m_1$  by  $m_2$  and the force on  $m_2$  by  $m_1$ 

Mass values for  $m_1$  and  $m_2$  (kg): 50, 100, 250, 500, 750, 1000
9. Reset the simulation as detailed by steps 1-3

10. Leave  $m_2$  at 10 meters on the scale (align the black dot for center of mass), and move  $m_1$  based on its center to the below values on the scale, and record both the force on  $m_1$  by  $m_2$  and the force on  $m_2$  by  $m_1$

Position values for  $m_1$  (m): 0, 2, 4, 6, 8

11. Reset the simulation as detailed by steps 1-3

12. Leave  $m_1$  at 0 meters on the scale (align the black dot for center of mass), and move  $m_2$  based on its center to the below values on the scale, and record both the force on  $m_1$  by  $m_2$  and the force on  $m_2$  by  $m_1$

Position values for  $m_1$  (m): 10, 8, 6, 4, 2

Note that the above steps require the following raw data to be collected at each datapoint

- Position of the center of mass of  $m_1$ , (m)
- Position of the center of mass of  $m_2$ , (m)
- Mass of  $m_1$ , (kg)
- Mass of  $m_2$ , (kg)
- Force on  $m_1$  by  $m_2$ , (N)
- Force on  $m_2$  by  $m_1$ , (N)

## RESULTS

### RAW DATA

**Table 1:** Measured critical angles for static and kinetic friction.

Trial	Static Friction Angle (°)	Kinetic Friction Angle (°)
1	19.0	15.0
2	17.5	14.5
3	18.5	15.0
4	18.0	16.0
5	19.0	14.0
<b>Average</b>	18.4	14.9

The coefficients of static and kinetic friction were calculated using the relationship:

$$\mu = \tan(\theta)$$

where  $\theta$  is the average critical angle measured for each case.

Average angle for static friction:

$$\theta_s = 18.4^\circ$$

Coefficient of static friction:

$$\mu_s = \tan(18.4^\circ) = 0.33$$

Average angle for kinetic friction:

$$\theta_k = 14.9^\circ$$

Coefficient of kinetic friction:

$$\mu_k = \tan(14.9^\circ) = 0.27$$

Note that the minute acceleration due to the tapping of the block is neglected, as it's acceleration is assumed to be negligible. Also neglected is the force of air resistance, as it is assumed to be very small compared to the other forces acting on the block.

## ERROR ANALYSIS

The first major source of error lies in the method of raising the angle to the right amount. The acceleration of the raising of the block must be zero; otherwise, the block may start to slide earlier than it should have. Hence, the raising of the block is assumed to be the major source of error in this experiment. Alongside this, the human reaction time to accurately read the protractor within decent tolerance is also a source of error. Since the coefficients of static and kinetic friction were calculated using  $\tan \theta$  and involved precise decimal values, inconsistency in the measured angles could result in either an overestimate or underestimate of the actual coefficients.

## DISCUSSION

The physics concepts used in the lab are the coefficients of static and kinetic friction, which have major applications in the real world, specifically in materials science and engineering. For example, understanding friction is crucial in designing systems like car wheels, where controlling the friction is vital to driving in different conditions (especially slippery roads). Another such application of friction is in the design of screws, as the friction within threads is what allows them to hold materials together securely. Hence, a lower coefficient of static friction would result in a looser screw, while a higher coefficient would result in a tighter screw, which can be crucial in construction, manufacturing, and architecture. Understanding static and kinetic friction is not only important in product design but can be crucial to ensure safety in various applications, impacting everyday life.

Another way that this lab can be carried out is by using a spring scale to directly measure the force needed to start moving the block and keep it moving at a constant velocity.

This method would also accurately measure the coefficients of static and kinetic friction, although it may be prone to different sources of error. A second method this lab can be carried out is by using a motion sensor to track the block's movement down the incline, and similar to the cart and ramp lab, the motion sensor can be used to derive the acceleration (by differentiating the velocity data). From the acceleration, the net force acting on the block can be calculated using Newton's Second Law, which can be used to calculate the frictional coefficients.

## CONCLUSION

Through this lab, it was determined that the coefficient of static friction ( $\mu_s$ ) of wood on metal is roughly **0.33**, and the coefficient of kinetic friction ( $\mu_k$ ) is roughly **0.27**. The coefficient of static friction can be compared to the established range 0.2 – 0.6 for such surfaces. The experimentally determined value falls within this range, indicating that the results are accurate and that the lab was completed successfully.