Introduction to quadratic equations

Tom Coleman

Solving quadratic equations of the form is a core skill in mathematics. A guaranteed method to solve these is use of the quadratic formula. This guide explains the terminology and usage of the quadratic formula, as well as an explanation of why the quadratic formula works.

*Before reading this guide, it is recommended that you read (Guide: Introduction to complex numbers).*

## What is a quadratic equation?

Equations in one variable come in all shapes and sizes.

One of the most important types of an equation is known as a **quadratic equation**. These appear almost everywhere in mathematics, from modelling projectile motion in mechanics to describing circles, ellipses, parabolas and hyperbolas in 2D space.

|  |
| --- |
| Definition of quadratic equation, root |
| A **quadratic equation** is an equation that can be rearranged into the form  where is a variable and are real numbers with .  Values of that satisfy the equation are known as **roots** of the equation. |

Here, as if it was, then the equation would no longer be a quadratic equation!

The general shape of a quadratic equation is known as a **parabola**. A figure of two parabolas is given in [Figure 1](#fig-1); the left hand graph is if , whereas the right hand graph is when .

|  |
| --- |
| Figure 1: A pair of parabolas. (left) A graph of a quadratic where . (right) A graph of a quadratic where . |

It is very important to be able to identify the variable in a quadratic equation, as well as the coefficients . In the course of your mathematical study, it may be that the variable of a quadratic equation is not only letters like , but squares or cubes like and , or even functions like , , and .

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Example 1**  You are given the quadratic equation . The variable of the quadratic equation is , and the coefficients are . |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Example 2**  Here, the equation may look like a quartic equation, but it is actually a quadratic equation. Using the laws of indices, you can rewrite the equation as . Therefore, the variable of the quadratic equation is , and the coefficients are , , . |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Example 3**  You are given the equation . Using the laws of indices, you can rewrite the equation as . The variable of the quadratic equation is , and the coefficients are , , . This is not the only solution to the coefficients; you can multiply the equation through by to get , which gives , and . Both solutions are equally valid. |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Example 4**  You are given the equation . This really is a quadratic equation! You can multiply both sides by to get  You can then expand the brackets to get  and so . Finally, you are able to subtract from both sides to get . It follows that the variable of the quadratic equation is , and the coefficients are , , . |

## Solving a quadratic equation

To solve the quadratic equation, you could use one of three methods:

* You could **factorise** the quadratic equation into linear equations , then work out the roots when each of these linear equations is zero. See (Guide: Factorisation) for more.
* You could **complete the square** in order to reduce the quadratic equation into the form , and then solve from there (not forgetting the negative root). See (Guide: Completing the square) for more.
* You could **use the quadratic formula**; for a quadratic equation , the two roots to the quadratic equation are given by

Each method is equally valid, but some may involve more work than others. It is up to you to decide which method is best for each quadratic you encounter; but it is thoroughly recommended that if you are not sure which method is best, then the quadratic formula is the one to choose. See [Guide: Using the quadratic formula](quadraticformula.qmd) for more.

## The discriminant

What the roots of the quadratic formula look like are determined by the term ; this term has a special name.

|  |
| --- |
| The discriminant |
| The term is known as the **discriminant** of the quadratic equation . |

There are then three separate cases for solutions to quadratic equations.

* If is positive, then is a real number and the two roots of the quadratic equation are
* These two roots are both real numbers and distinct from each other. You can observe this behaviour on a graph in [Figure 2](#fig-2); the parabola crosses the -axis in two places.

|  |
| --- |
| Figure 2: A pair of parabolas. (left) A graph of a quadratic where and . (right) A graph of a quadratic where and . |

* If is zero, then . In this case, the two roots of the quadratic equation are
* These two roots are given by the same real number. To be sure that you express both roots, you can write ‘ twice’. You can observe this behaviour on a graph in [Figure 3](#fig-3); the parabola touches the -axis in exactly one place.

|  |
| --- |
| Figure 3: A pair of parabolas. (left) A graph of a quadratic where and . (right) A graph of a quadratic where and . |

* If is negative, then is not a real number. In this case, the two roots of the quadratic equation are **complex numbers**. You can express the two roots of the quadratic equation by
* where is the imaginary unit (so ; see (Guide: Introduction to complex numbers)). In a graph, the parabola does not cross the -axis at all; this indicates that there are no real solutions to this quadratic equation. See [Figure 4](#fig-4) for a picture.

|  |
| --- |
| Figure 4: A pair of parabolas. (left) A graph of a quadratic where and . (right) A graph of a quadratic where and . |

|  |
| --- |
| Warning |
| You can use the discriminant to check how many roots a quadratic equation has in the variable given to you. However, this is at most a maximum number of solutions. Conditions on that variable may also reduce the number of valid solutions, particularly if you have real valued functions. For instance, since for all real number , there are no solutions in if you find . |

Here’s some examples of using the discriminant and known properties of functions to rule out solutions.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Example 5**  In Example 1, you identified the coefficients of as . Using these, you can work out the value of the discriminant as  Since , you can say that this quadratic equation has two distinct real roots in and . |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Example 6**  In Example 2, you identified the coefficients of as , and the variable as . Using these, you can work out the value of the discriminant as  Since , you can say that this quadratic equation has at most one real root .  Whether or not the equation itself has real solutions in depends on whether is positive or negative! |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Example 7**  In Example 3, you identified the coefficients of as , and the variable as . Using these, you can work out the value of the discriminant as  Since , you can say that this quadratic equation has complex roots.  This equation therefore has no real solutions in . This is because is real for any real ; if is complex, it follows that cannot be real. |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Example 8**  In Example 4, you rearranged the equation to , and therefore identifed the coefficients as , and the variable as . Using these, you can work out the value of the discriminant as  Since , you can say that this quadratic equation has two distinct real roots in . |

## Quick check problems

1. You are given three statements below. Decide whether they are true or false.
2. The quadratic equation has two distinct real roots.
3. The quadratic equation has exactly one real root.
4. The quadratic eqution has no real roots.

[For more questions on the subject, please click on this sentence.](qs-introtoquadratics.qmd)

## Further reading

(Guide: Using the quadratic formula)