DIRECTIONAL DERIVATIVE & GRADIENT:

Directional Derivatives

Recall that if $z = f(x, y)$, then the partial derivatives f_x and f_y are defined as

1
$$f_x(x_0, y_0) = \lim_{h \to 0} \frac{f(x_0 + h, y_0) - f(x_0, y_0)}{h}$$
$$f_y(x_0, y_0) = \lim_{h \to 0} \frac{f(x_0, y_0 + h) - f(x_0, y_0)}{h}$$

and represent the rates of change of z in the x- and y-directions, that is, in the directions of the unit vectors $\mathbf{i}$ and $\mathbf{j}$.

Suppose that we now wish to find the rate of change of z at (x_0, y_0) in the direction of an arbitrary unit vector $\mathbf{u} = \langle a, b \rangle$. (See Figure 2.) To do this we consider the surface S with the equation $z = f(x, y)$ (the graph of f) and we let $z_0 = f(x_0, y_0)$. Then the point $P(x_0, y_0, z_0)$ lies on S. The vertical plane that passes through P in the direction of $\mathbf{u}$ intersects S in a curve C. (See Figure 3.) The slope of the tangent line T to C at the point P is the rate of change of z in the direction of $\mathbf{u}$.

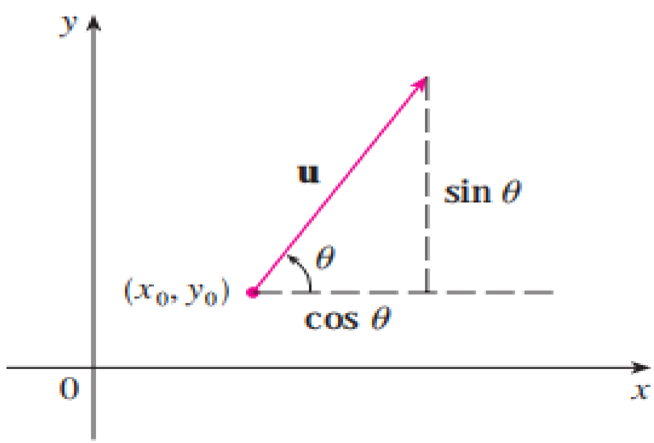
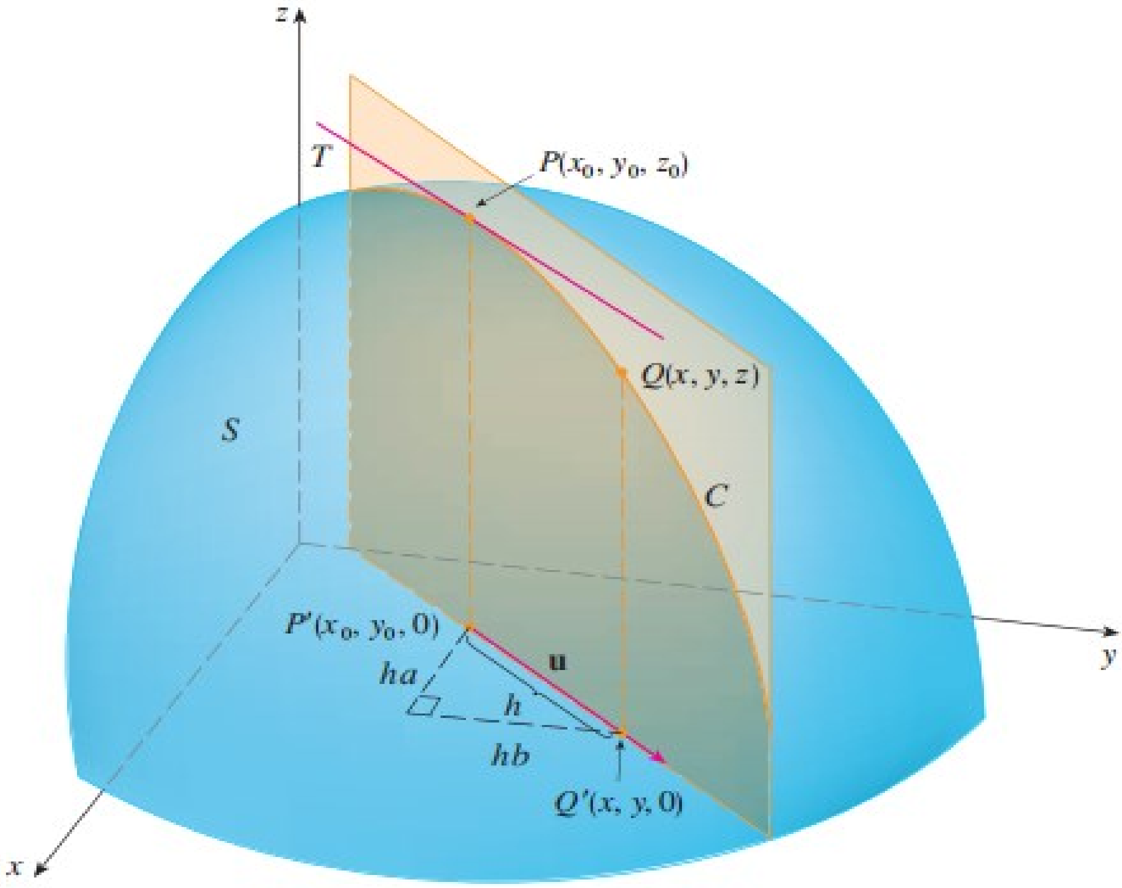


FIGURE 2
A unit vector $\mathbf{u} = \langle a, b \rangle = \langle \cos\theta, \sin\theta \rangle$



If $Q(x, y, z)$ is another point on C and P', Q' are the projections of P, Q onto the xy-plane, then the vector $\overrightarrow{P'Q'}$ is parallel to $\mathbf{u}$ and so

$$\overrightarrow{P'Q'} = h\mathbf{u} = \langle ha, hb \rangle$$

for some scalar h. Therefore $x - x_0 = ha$, $y - y_0 = hb$, so $x = x_0 + ha$, $y = y_0 + hb$, and

$$\frac{\Delta z}{h} = \frac{z - z_0}{h} = \frac{f(x_0 + ha, y_0 + hb) - f(x_0, y_0)}{h}$$

If we take the limit as $h \to 0$, we obtain the rate of change of z (with respect to distance) in the direction of $\mathbf{u}$, which is called the directional derivative of f in the direction of $\mathbf{u}$.

2 Definition The **directional derivative** of f at (x_0, y_0) in the direction of a unit vector $\mathbf{u} = \langle a, b\rangle$ is

$$D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x_0, y_0) = \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{f(x_0 + ha, y_0 + hb) - f(x_0, y_0)}{h}$$

if this limit exists.

Remark:

By comparing Definition 2 with Equations 1, we see that if $\mathbf{u} = \mathbf{i} = \langle 1, 0\rangle$, then $D_{\mathbf{i}} f = f_x$ and if $\mathbf{u} = \mathbf{j} = \langle 0, 1\rangle$, then $D_{\mathbf{j}} f = f_y$. In other words, the partial derivatives of f with respect to x and y are just special cases of the directional derivative.

- **When we compute the directional derivative of a function defined by a formula, we generally use the following theorem.**

3 Theorem If f is a differentiable function of x and y, then f has a directional derivative in the direction of any unit vector $\mathbf{u} = \langle a, b\rangle$ and

$$D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x, y) = f_x(x, y)\, a + f_y(x, y)\, b$$

PROOF If we define a function g of the single variable h by

$$g(h) = f(x_0 + ha, y_0 + hb)$$

then, by the definition of a derivative, we have

$$\boxed{4} \qquad g'(0) = \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{g(h) - g(0)}{h} = \lim_{h\to 0} \frac{f(x_0 + ha, y_0 + hb) - f(x_0, y_0)}{h}$$

$$= D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x_0, y_0)$$

On the other hand, we can write $g(h) = f(x, y)$, where $x = x_0 + ha$, $y = y_0 + hb$, so the Chain Rule (Theorem 14.5.2) gives

$$g'(h) = \frac{\partial f}{\partial x}\frac{dx}{dh} + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y}\frac{dy}{dh} = f_x(x, y)\,a + f_y(x, y)\,b$$

If we now put $h = 0$, then $x = x_0$, $y = y_0$, and

5 $$g'(0) = f_x(x_0, y_0)\,a + f_y(x_0, y_0)\,b$$

Comparing Equations 4 and 5, we see that

$$D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x_0, y_0) = f_x(x_0, y_0)\,a + f_y(x_0, y_0)\,b$$

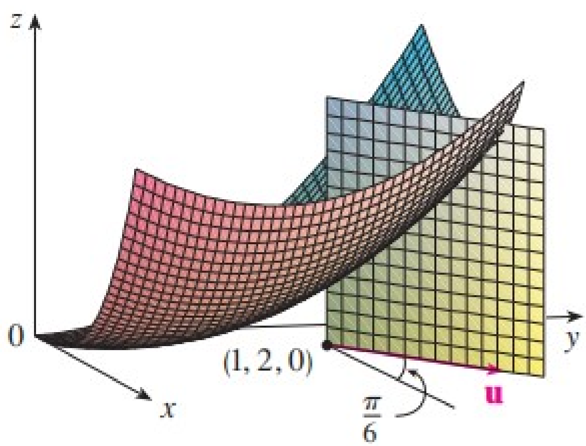
If the unit vector $\mathbf{u}$ makes an angle θ with the positive x-axis (as in Figure 2), then we can write $\mathbf{u} = \langle \cos\theta, \sin\theta \rangle$ and the formula in Theorem 3 becomes

6 $$D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x, y) = f_x(x, y)\cos\theta + f_y(x, y)\sin\theta$$

EXAMPLE 2 **Find the directional derivative $D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x, y)$ if**

$$f(x, y) = x^3 - 3xy + 4y^2$$

and $\mathbf{u}$ is the unit vector given by angle $\theta = \pi/6$. What is $D_{\mathbf{u}} f(1, 2)$?



The directional derivative $D_{\mathbf{u}} f(1, 2)$ in Example 2 represents the rate of change of z in the direction of $\mathbf{u}$. This is the slope of the tangent line to the curve of intersection of the surface $z = x^3 - 3xy + 4y^2$ and the vertical plane through $(1, 2, 0)$ in the direction of $\mathbf{u}$ shown in Figure 5.

SOLUTION Formula 6 gives

$$
\begin{aligned}
D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x, y) &= f_x(x, y)\cos\frac{\pi}{6} + f_y(x, y)\sin\frac{\pi}{6} \\
&= (3x^2 - 3y)\frac{\sqrt{3}}{2} + (-3x + 8y)\frac{1}{2} \\
&= \tfrac{1}{2}\left[3\sqrt{3}\,x^2 - 3x + \left(8 - 3\sqrt{3}\right)y\right]
\end{aligned}
$$

Therefore

$$D_{\mathbf{u}} f(1, 2) = \tfrac{1}{2}\left[3\sqrt{3}\,(1)^2 - 3(1) + \left(8 - 3\sqrt{3}\right)(2)\right] = \frac{13 - 3\sqrt{3}}{2}$$

The Gradient Vector

Notice from Theorem 3 that the directional derivative of a differentiable function can be written as the dot product of two vectors:

7
$$
\begin{aligned}
D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x, y) &= f_x(x, y)\,a + f_y(x, y)\,b \\
&= \langle f_x(x, y), f_y(x, y)\rangle \cdot \langle a, b\rangle \\
&= \langle f_x(x, y), f_y(x, y)\rangle \cdot \mathbf{u}
\end{aligned}
$$

The first vector in this dot product occurs not only in computing directional derivatives but in many other contexts as well. So we give it a special name (the *gradient* of f) and a special notation (**grad** f or ∇f, which is read "del f").

8 Definition If f is a function of two variables x and y, then the **gradient** of f is the vector function ∇f defined by

$$\nabla f(x, y) = \langle f_x(x, y), f_y(x, y)\rangle = \frac{\partial f}{\partial x}\mathbf{i} + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y}\mathbf{j}$$

EXAMPLE 3 If $f(x, y) = \sin x + e^{xy}$, then

$$\nabla f(x, y) = \langle f_x, f_y \rangle = \langle \cos x + ye^{xy}, xe^{xy} \rangle$$

and $$\nabla f(0, 1) = \langle 2, 0 \rangle$$

With this notation for the gradient vector, we can rewrite Equation 7 for the directional derivative of a differentiable function as

9 $$\boxed{D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x, y) = \nabla f(x, y) \cdot \mathbf{u}}$$

This expresses the directional derivative in the direction of a unit vector **u** as the scalar projection of the gradient vector onto **u**.

V EXAMPLE 4 Find the directional derivative of the function $f(x, y) = x^2 y^3 - 4y$ at the point $(2, -1)$ in the direction of the vector $\mathbf{v} = 2\,\mathbf{i} + 5\,\mathbf{j}$.

SOLUTION We first compute the gradient vector at $(2, -1)$:

$$\nabla f(x, y) = 2xy^3\,\mathbf{i} + (3x^2y^2 - 4)\,\mathbf{j}$$

$$\nabla f(2, -1) = -4\,\mathbf{i} + 8\,\mathbf{j}$$

Note that **v** is not a unit vector, but since $|\mathbf{v}| = \sqrt{29}$, the unit vector in the direction of **v** is

$$\mathbf{u} = \frac{\mathbf{v}}{|\mathbf{v}|} = \frac{2}{\sqrt{29}}\,\mathbf{i} + \frac{5}{\sqrt{29}}\,\mathbf{j}$$

Therefore, by Equation 9, we have

$$D_{\mathbf{u}} f(2, -1) = \nabla f(2, -1) \cdot \mathbf{u} = (-4\,\mathbf{i} + 8\,\mathbf{j}) \cdot \left(\frac{2}{\sqrt{29}}\,\mathbf{i} + \frac{5}{\sqrt{29}}\,\mathbf{j} \right)$$

$$= \frac{-4 \cdot 2 + 8 \cdot 5}{\sqrt{29}} = \frac{32}{\sqrt{29}}$$

Functions of Three Variables

For functions of three variables we can define directional derivatives in a similar manner. Again $D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x, y, z)$ can be interpreted as the rate of change of the function in the direction of a unit vector $\mathbf{u}$.

10 Definition The **directional derivative** of f at (x_0, y_0, z_0) in the direction of a unit vector $\mathbf{u} = \langle a, b, c \rangle$ is

$$D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x_0, y_0, z_0) = \lim_{h \to 0} \frac{f(x_0 + ha, y_0 + hb, z_0 + hc) - f(x_0, y_0, z_0)}{h}$$

if this limit exists.

If we use vector notation, then we can write both definitions (2 and 10) of the directional derivative in the compact form

11
$$D_{\mathbf{u}} f(\mathbf{x}_0) = \lim_{h \to 0} \frac{f(\mathbf{x}_0 + h\mathbf{u}) - f(\mathbf{x}_0)}{h}$$

where $\mathbf{x}_0 = \langle x_0, y_0 \rangle$ if $n = 2$ and $\mathbf{x}_0 = \langle x_0, y_0, z_0 \rangle$ if $n = 3$. This is reasonable because the vector equation of the line through $\mathbf{x}_0$ in the direction of the vector $\mathbf{u}$ is given by $\mathbf{x} = \mathbf{x}_0 + t\mathbf{u}$ (Equation 12.5.1) and so $f(\mathbf{x}_0 + h\mathbf{u})$ represents the value of f at a point on this line.

If $f(x, y, z)$ is differentiable and $\mathbf{u} = \langle a, b, c \rangle$, then the same method that was used to prove Theorem 3 can be used to show that

12 $$D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x, y, z) = f_x(x, y, z)\, a + f_y(x, y, z)\, b + f_z(x, y, z)\, c$$

For a function f of three variables, the **gradient vector**, denoted by ∇f or **grad** f, is

$$\nabla f(x, y, z) = \langle f_x(x, y, z), f_y(x, y, z), f_z(x, y, z) \rangle$$

or, for short,

13 $$\boxed{\nabla f = \langle f_x, f_y, f_z \rangle = \frac{\partial f}{\partial x}\mathbf{i} + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y}\mathbf{j} + \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}\mathbf{k}}$$

Then, just as with functions of two variables, Formula 12 for the directional derivative can be rewritten as

14 $$\boxed{D_{\mathbf{u}} f(x, y, z) = \nabla f(x, y, z) \cdot \mathbf{u}}$$

V EXAMPLE 5 If $f(x, y, z) = x \sin yz$, (a) find the gradient of f and (b) find the directional derivative of f at $(1, 3, 0)$ in the direction of $\mathbf{v} = \mathbf{i} + 2\mathbf{j} - \mathbf{k}$.

SOLUTION

(a) The gradient of f is

$$\begin{aligned} \nabla f(x, y, z) &= \langle f_x(x, y, z), f_y(x, y, z), f_z(x, y, z) \rangle \\ &= \langle \sin yz, xz \cos yz, xy \cos yz \rangle \end{aligned}$$

(b) At $(1, 3, 0)$ we have $\nabla f(1, 3, 0) = \langle 0, 0, 3 \rangle$. The unit vector in the direction of $\mathbf{v} = \mathbf{i} + 2\mathbf{j} - \mathbf{k}$ is

Therefore Equation 14 gives

$$
\begin{aligned}
D_{\mathbf{u}} f(1, 3, 0) &= \nabla f(1, 3, 0) \cdot \mathbf{u} \\
&= 3\mathbf{k} \cdot \left(\frac{1}{\sqrt{6}}\mathbf{i} + \frac{2}{\sqrt{6}}\mathbf{j} - \frac{1}{\sqrt{6}}\mathbf{k} \right) \\
&= 3\left(-\frac{1}{\sqrt{6}} \right) = -\sqrt{\frac{3}{2}}
\end{aligned}
$$

Maximizing the Directional Derivative

Suppose we have a function f of two or three variables and we consider all possible directional derivatives of f at a given point. These give the rates of change of f in all possible directions. We can then ask the questions: In which of these directions does f change fastest and what is the maximum rate of change? The answers are provided by the following theorem.

15 Theorem Suppose f is a differentiable function of two or three variables. The maximum value of the directional derivative $D_{\mathbf{u}} f(\mathbf{x})$ is $|\nabla f(\mathbf{x})|$ and it occurs when $\mathbf{u}$ has the same direction as the gradient vector $\nabla f(\mathbf{x})$.

PROOF From Equation 9 or 14 we have

$$D_{\mathbf{u}} f = \nabla f \cdot \mathbf{u} = |\nabla f||\mathbf{u}| \cos\theta = |\nabla f| \cos\theta$$

where θ is the angle between ∇f and $\mathbf{u}$. The maximum value of $\cos\theta$ is 1 and this occurs when $\theta = 0$. Therefore the maximum value of $D_{\mathbf{u}} f$ is $|\nabla f|$ and it occurs when $\theta = 0$, that is, when $\mathbf{u}$ has the same direction as ∇f.

- **The maximum rate of increase is the length of the gradient vector.**

EXAMPLE 6

(a) If $f(x, y) = xe^y$, find the rate of change of f at the point $P(2, 0)$ in the direction from P to $Q(\frac{1}{2}, 2)$.

(b) In what direction does f have the maximum rate of change? What is this maximum rate of change?

SOLUTION

(a) We first compute the gradient vector:

$$\nabla f(x, y) = \langle f_x, f_y \rangle = \langle e^y, xe^y \rangle$$

$$\nabla f(2, 0) = \langle 1, 2 \rangle$$

The unit vector in the direction of $\overrightarrow{PQ} = \langle -1.5, 2 \rangle$ is $\mathbf{u} = \langle -\frac{3}{5}, \frac{4}{5} \rangle$, so the rate of change of f in the direction from P to Q is

$$D_{\mathbf{u}} f(2, 0) = \nabla f(2, 0) \cdot \mathbf{u} = \langle 1, 2 \rangle \cdot \langle -\tfrac{3}{5}, \tfrac{4}{5} \rangle$$

$$= 1\left(-\tfrac{3}{5}\right) + 2\left(\tfrac{4}{5}\right) = 1$$

(b) According to Theorem 15, f increases fastest in the direction of the gradient vector $\nabla f(2, 0) = \langle 1, 2 \rangle$. The maximum rate of change is

$$|\nabla f(2, 0)| = |\langle 1, 2 \rangle| = \sqrt{5}$$

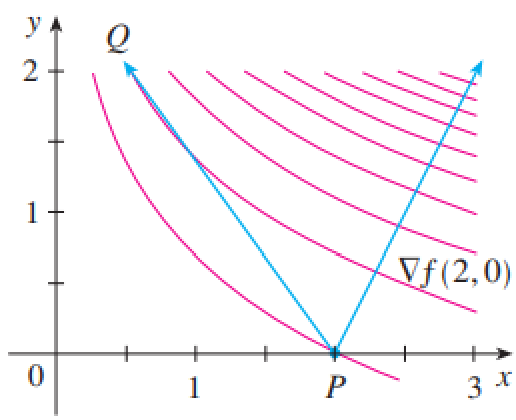


FIGURE 7

At $(2, 0)$ the function in Example 6 increases fastest in the direction of the gradient vector $\nabla f(2, 0) = \langle 1, 2 \rangle$. Notice from Figure 7 that this vector appears to be perpendicular to the level curve through $(2, 0)$. Figure 8 shows the graph of f and the gradient vector.

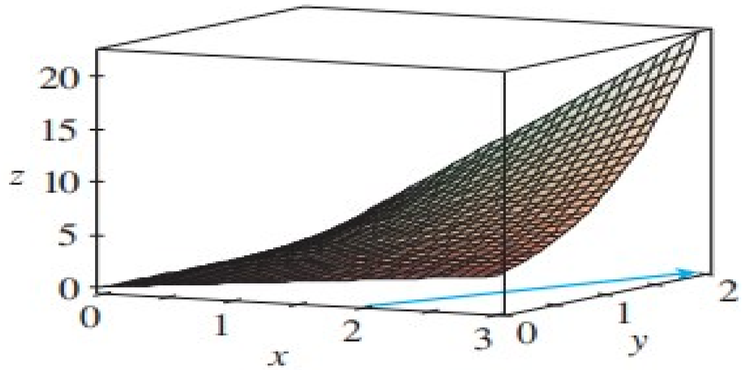


FIGURE 8

Tangent Planes to Level Surfaces

Suppose S is a surface with equation $F(x, y, z) = k$, that is, it is a level surface of a function F of three variables, and let $P(x_0, y_0, z_0)$ be a point on S. Let C be any curve that lies on the surface S and passes through the point P. Recall from Section 13.1 that the curve C is described by a continuous vector function $\mathbf{r}(t) = \langle x(t), y(t), z(t) \rangle$. Let t_0 be the parameter value corresponding to P; that is, $\mathbf{r}(t_0) = \langle x_0, y_0, z_0 \rangle$. Since C lies on S, any point $(x(t), y(t), z(t))$ must satisfy the equation of S, that is,

16 $$F(x(t), y(t), z(t)) = k$$

If x, y, and z are differentiable functions of t and F is also differentiable, then we can use the Chain Rule to differentiate both sides of Equation 16 as follows:

17 $$\frac{\partial F}{\partial x}\frac{dx}{dt} + \frac{\partial F}{\partial y}\frac{dy}{dt} + \frac{\partial F}{\partial z}\frac{dz}{dt} = 0$$

But, since $\nabla F = \langle F_x, F_y, F_z \rangle$ and $\mathbf{r}'(t) = \langle x'(t), y'(t), z'(t) \rangle$, Equation 17 can be written in terms of a dot product as

$$\nabla F \cdot \mathbf{r}'(t) = 0$$

But, since $\nabla F = \langle F_x, F_y, F_z \rangle$ and $\mathbf{r}'(t) = \langle x'(t), y'(t), z'(t) \rangle$, Equation 17 can be written in terms of a dot product as

$$\nabla F \cdot \mathbf{r}'(t) = 0$$

In particular, when $t = t_0$ we have $\mathbf{r}(t_0) = \langle x_0, y_0, z_0 \rangle$, so

$$\boxed{18} \qquad \nabla F(x_0, y_0, z_0) \cdot \mathbf{r}'(t_0) = 0$$

Equation 18 says that *the gradient vector at P, $\nabla F(x_0, y_0, z_0)$, is perpendicular to the tangent vector $\mathbf{r}'(t_0)$ to any curve C on S that passes through P.* (See Figure 9.) If $\nabla F(x_0, y_0, z_0) \neq \mathbf{0}$, it is therefore natural to define the **tangent plane to the level surface $F(x, y, z) = k$ at $P(x_0, y_0, z_0)$** as the plane that passes through P and has normal vector $\nabla F(x_0, y_0, z_0)$. Using the standard equation of a plane (Equation 12.5.7), we can write the equation of this tangent plane as

$$\boxed{19} \qquad F_x(x_0, y_0, z_0)(x - x_0) + F_y(x_0, y_0, z_0)(y - y_0) + F_z(x_0, y_0, z_0)(z - z_0) = 0$$

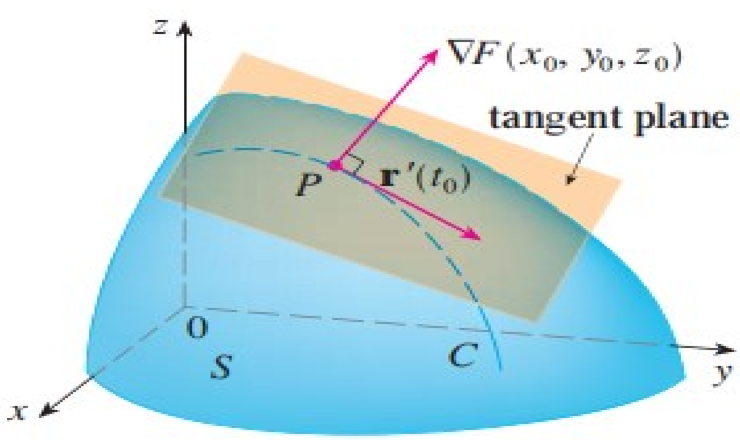


FIGURE 9

Normal Line to Level Surface at point P:

The **normal line** to S at P is the line passing through P and perpendicular to the tangent plane. The direction of the normal line is therefore given by the gradient vector $\nabla F(x_0, y_0, z_0)$ and so, by Equation 12.5.3, its symmetric equations are

20
$$\frac{x - x_0}{F_x(x_0, y_0, z_0)} = \frac{y - y_0}{F_y(x_0, y_0, z_0)} = \frac{z - z_0}{F_z(x_0, y_0, z_0)}$$

Special Case:

In the special case in which the equation of a surface S is of the form $z = f(x, y)$ (that is, S is the graph of a function f of two variables), we can rewrite the equation as

$$F(x, y, z) = f(x, y) - z = 0$$

and regard S as a level surface (with $k = 0$) of F. Then

$$F_x(x_0, y_0, z_0) = f_x(x_0, y_0)$$

$$F_y(x_0, y_0, z_0) = f_y(x_0, y_0)$$

$$F_z(x_0, y_0, z_0) = -1$$

so Equation 19 becomes

$$f_x(x_0, y_0)(x - x_0) + f_y(x_0, y_0)(y - y_0) - (z - z_0) = 0$$

which is equivalent to Equation 14.4.2. Thus our new, more general, definition of a tangent plane is consistent with the definition that was given for the special case of Section 14.4.

V EXAMPLE 8 Find the equations of the tangent plane and normal line at the point $(-2, 1, -3)$ to the ellipsoid

$$\frac{x^2}{4} + y^2 + \frac{z^2}{9} = 3$$

SOLUTION The ellipsoid is the level surface (with $k = 3$) of the function

$$F(x, y, z) = \frac{x^2}{4} + y^2 + \frac{z^2}{9}$$

Therefore we have

$$F_x(x, y, z) = \frac{x}{2} \qquad F_y(x, y, z) = 2y \qquad F_z(x, y, z) = \frac{2z}{9}$$

$$F_x(-2, 1, -3) = -1 \qquad F_y(-2, 1, -3) = 2 \qquad F_z(-2, 1, -3) = -\tfrac{2}{3}$$

Then Equation 19 gives the equation of the tangent plane at $(-2, 1, -3)$ as

$$-1(x + 2) + 2(y - 1) - \tfrac{2}{3}(z + 3) = 0$$

which simplifies to $3x - 6y + 2z + 18 = 0$.

By Equation 20, symmetric equations of the normal line are

$$\frac{x + 2}{-1} = \frac{y - 1}{2} = \frac{z + 3}{-\frac{2}{3}}$$

Figure 10 shows the ellipsoid, tangent plane, and normal line in Example 8.

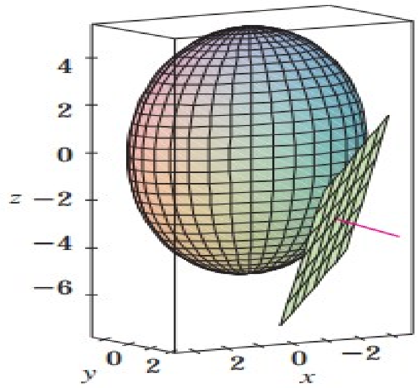


FIGURE 10

Problems to be Practice: EX#14.6: Q4-Q30.