6

Applications of the Derivative

6.1 Optimization

Many important applied problems involve finding the best way to accomplish some task. Often this involves finding the maximum or minimum value of some function: the minimum time to make a certain journey, the minimum cost for doing a task, the maximum power that can be generated by a device, and so on. Many of these problems can be solved by finding the appropriate function and then using techniques of calculus to find the maximum or the minimum value required.

Generally such a problem will have the following mathematical form: Find the largest (or smallest) value of $f(x)$ when $a \le x \le b$. Sometimes a or b are infinite, but frequently the real world imposes some constraint on the values that x may have.

Such a problem differs in two ways from the local maximum and minimum problems we encountered when graphing functions: We are interested only in the function between a and b, and we want to know the largest or smallest value that $f(x)$ takes on, not merely values that are the largest or smallest in a small interval. That is, we seek not a local maximum or minimum but a **global** maximum or minimum, sometimes also called an **absolute** maximum or minimum.

Any global maximum or minimum must of course be a local maximum or minimum. If we find all possible local extrema, then the global maximum, *if it exists*, must be the largest of the local maxima and the global minimum, *if it exists*, must be the smallest of the local minima. We already know where local extrema can occur: only at those points at which $f'(x)$ is zero or undefined. Actually, there are two additional points at which a maximum or minimum can occur if the endpoints a and b are not infinite, namely, at a

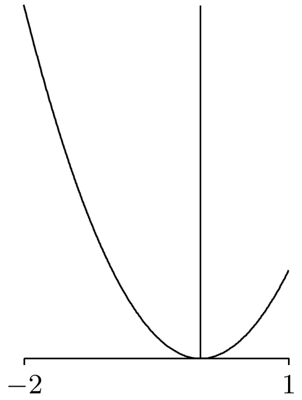

Figure 6.1.1 The function $f(x) = x^2$ restricted to $[-2, 1]$

and b. We have not previously considered such points because we have not been interested in limiting a function to a small interval. An example should make this clear.

EXAMPLE 6.1.1 Find the maximum and minimum values of $f(x) = x^2$ on the interval $[-2, 1]$, shown in figure 6.1.1. We compute $f'(x) = 2x$, which is zero at $x = 0$ and is always defined.

Since $f'(1) = 2$ we would not normally flag $x = 1$ as a point of interest, but it is clear from the graph that *when $f(x)$ is restricted to $[-2, 1]$ there is a local maximum at $x = 1$.* Likewise we would not normally pay attention to $x = -2$, but since we have truncated f at -2 we have introduced a new local maximum there as well. In a technical sense nothing new is going on here: When we truncate f we actually create a new function, let's call it g, that is defined only on the interval $[-2, 1]$. If we try to compute the derivative of this new function we actually find that it does not have a derivative at -2 or 1. Why? Because to compute the derivative at 1 we must compute the limit

$$\lim_{\Delta x \to 0} \frac{g(1 + \Delta x) - g(1)}{\Delta x}.$$

This limit does not exist because when $\Delta x > 0$, $g(1 + \Delta x)$ is not defined. It is simpler, however, simply to remember that we must always check the endpoints.

So the function g, that is, f restricted to $[-2, 1]$, has one critical value and two finite endpoints, any of which might be the global maximum or minimum. We could first determine which of these are local maximum or minimum points (or neither); then the largest local maximum must be the global maximum and the smallest local minimum must be the global minimum. It is usually easier, however, to compute the value of f at every point at which the global maximum or minimum might occur; the largest of these is the global maximum, the smallest is the global minimum.

So we compute $f(-2) = 4$, $f(0) = 0$, $f(1) = 1$. The global maximum is 4 at $x = -2$ and the global minimum is 0 at $x = 0$. □

It is possible that there is no global maximum or minimum. It is difficult, and not particularly useful, to express a complete procedure for determining whether this is the case. Generally, the best approach is to gain enough understanding of the shape of the graph to decide. Fortunately, only a rough idea of the shape is usually needed.

There are some particularly nice cases that are easy. A continuous function on a closed interval $[a, b]$ *always* has both a global maximum and a global minimum, so examining the critical values and the endpoints is enough:

THEOREM 6.1.2 Extreme value theorem If f is continuous on a closed interval $[a, b]$, then it has both a minimum and a maximum point. That is, there are real numbers c and d in $[a, b]$ so that for every x in $[a, b]$, $f(x) \leq f(c)$ and $f(x) \geq f(d)$. ■

Another easy case: If a function is continuous and has a single critical value, then if there is a local maximum at the critical value it is a global maximum, and if it is a local minimum it is a global minimum. There may also be a global minimum in the first case, or a global maximum in the second case, but that will generally require more effort to determine.

EXAMPLE 6.1.3 Let $f(x) = -x^2 + 4x - 3$. Find the maximum value of $f(x)$ on the interval $[0, 4]$. First note that $f'(x) = -2x+4 = 0$ when $x = 2$, and $f(2) = 1$. Next observe that $f'(x)$ is defined for all x, so there are no other critical values. Finally, $f(0) = -3$ and $f(4) = -3$. The largest value of $f(x)$ on the interval $[0, 4]$ is $f(2) = 1$. □

EXAMPLE 6.1.4 Let $f(x) = -x^2 + 4x - 3$. Find the maximum value of $f(x)$ on the interval $[-1, 1]$.

First note that $f'(x) = -2x + 4 = 0$ when $x = 2$. But $x = 2$ is not in the interval, so we don't use it. Thus the only two points to be checked are the endpoints; $f(-1) = -8$ and $f(1) = 0$. So the largest value of $f(x)$ on $[-1, 1]$ is $f(1) = 0$. □

EXAMPLE 6.1.5 Find the maximum and minimum values of the function $f(x) = 7 + |x - 2|$ for x between 1 and 4 inclusive. The derivative $f'(x)$ is never zero, but $f'(x)$ is undefined at $x = 2$, so we compute $f(2) = 7$. Checking the end points we get $f(1) = 8$ and $f(4) = 9$. The smallest of these numbers is $f(2) = 7$, which is, therefore, the minimum value of $f(x)$ on the interval $1 \leq x \leq 4$, and the maximum is $f(4) = 9$. □

EXAMPLE 6.1.6 Find all local maxima and minima for $f(x) = x^3 - x$, and determine whether there is a global maximum or minimum on the open interval $(-2, 2)$. In example 5.1.2 we found a local maximum at $(-\sqrt{3}/3, 2\sqrt{3}/9)$ and a local minimum at $(\sqrt{3}/3, -2\sqrt{3}/9)$. Since the endpoints are not in the interval $(-2, 2)$ they cannot be con-

30. If you fit the cone with the largest possible surface area (lateral area plus area of base) into a sphere, what percent of the volume of the sphere is occupied by the cone? ⇒

31. Two electrical charges, one a positive charge A of magnitude a and the other a negative charge B of magnitude b, are located a distance c apart. A positively charged particle P is situated on the line between A and B. Find where P should be put so that the pull away from A towards B is minimal. Here assume that the force from each charge is proportional to the strength of the source and inversely proportional to the square of the distance from the source. ⇒

32. Find the fraction of the area of a triangle that is occupied by the largest rectangle that can be drawn in the triangle (with one of its sides along a side of the triangle). Show that this fraction does not depend on the dimensions of the given triangle. ⇒

33. How are your answers to Problem 9 affected if the cost per item for the x items, instead of being simply \$2, decreases below \$2 in proportion to x (because of economy of scale and volume discounts) by 1 cent for each 25 items produced? ⇒

34. You are standing near the side of a large wading pool of uniform depth when you see a child in trouble. You can run at a speed v_1 on land and at a slower speed v_2 in the water. Your perpendicular distance from the side of the pool is a, the child's perpendicular distance is b, and the distance along the side of the pool between the closest point to you and the closest point to the child is c (see the figure below). Without stopping to do any calculus, you instinctively choose the quickest route (shown in the figure) and save the child. Our purpose is to derive a relation between the angle θ_1 your path makes with the perpendicular to the side of the pool when you're on land, and the angle θ_2 your path makes with the perpendicular when you're in the water. To do this, let x be the distance between the closest point to you at the side of the pool and the point where you enter the water. Write the total time you run (on land and in the water) in terms of x (and also the constants a, b, c, v_1, v_2). Then set the derivative equal to zero. The result, called "Snell's law" or the "law of refraction," also governs the bending of light when it goes into water. ⇒

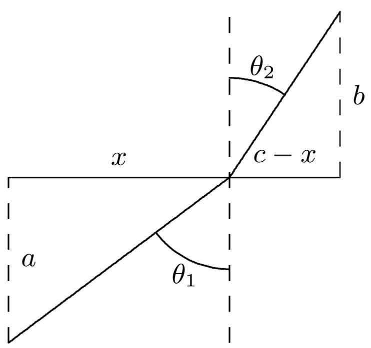

Figure 6.1.7 Wading pool rescue.

6.2 Related Rates

Suppose we have two variables x and y (in most problems the letters will be different, but for now let's use x and y) which are both changing with time. A "related rates" problem is a problem in which we know one of the rates of change at a given instant—say,

$\dot{x} = dx/dt$—and we want to find the other rate $\dot{y} = dy/dt$ at that instant. (The use of $\dot{x}$ to mean dx/dt goes back to Newton and is still used for this purpose, especially by physicists.)

If y is written in terms of x, i.e., $y = f(x)$, then this is easy to do using the chain rule:

$$\dot{y} = \frac{dy}{dt} = \frac{dy}{dx} \cdot \frac{dx}{dt} = \frac{dy}{dx}\dot{x}.$$

That is, find the derivative of $f(x)$, plug in the value of x at the instant in question, and multiply by the given value of $\dot{x} = dx/dt$ to get $\dot{y} = dy/dt$.

EXAMPLE 6.2.1 Suppose an object is moving along a path described by $y = x^2$, that is, it is moving on a parabolic path. At a particular time, say $t = 5$, the x coordinate is 6 and we measure the speed at which the x coordinate of the object is changing and find that $dx/dt = 3$. At the same time, how fast is the y coordinate changing?

Using the chain rule, $dy/dt = 2x \cdot dx/dt$. At $t = 5$ we know that $x = 6$ and $dx/dt = 3$, so $dy/dt = 2 \cdot 6 \cdot 3 = 36$. □

In many cases, particularly interesting ones, x and y will be related in some other way, for example $x = f(y)$, or $F(x, y) = k$, or perhaps $F(x, y) = G(x, y)$, where $F(x, y)$ and $G(x, y)$ are expressions involving both variables. In all cases, you can solve the related rates problem by taking the derivative of both sides, plugging in all the known values (namely, x, y, and $\dot{x}$), and then solving for $\dot{y}$.

To summarize, here are the steps in doing a related rates problem:

1. Decide what the two variables are.
2. Find an equation relating them.
3. Take d/dt of both sides.
4. Plug in all known values at the instant in question.
5. Solve for the unknown rate.

EXAMPLE 6.2.2 A plane is flying directly away from you at 500 mph at an altitude of 3 miles. How fast is the plane's distance from you increasing at the moment when the plane is flying over a point on the ground 4 miles from you?

To see what's going on, we first draw a schematic representation of the situation, as in figure 6.2.1.

Because the plane is in level flight directly away from you, the rate at which x changes is the speed of the plane, $dx/dt = 500$. The distance between you and the plane is y; it is dy/dt that we wish to know. By the Pythagorean Theorem we know that $x^2 + 9 = y^2$.

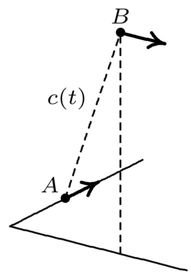

Figure 6.2.8 Car and airplane.

25. The two blades of a pair of scissors are fastened at the point A as shown in figure 6.2.9. Let a denote the distance from A to the tip of the blade (the point B). Let β denote the angle at the tip of the blade that is formed by the line $\overline{AB}$ and the bottom edge of the blade, line $\overline{BC}$, and let θ denote the angle between $\overline{AB}$ and the horizontal. Suppose that a piece of paper is cut in such a way that the center of the scissors at A is fixed, and the paper is also fixed. As the blades are closed (i.e., the angle θ in the diagram is decreased), the distance x between A and C increases, cutting the paper.

- **a.** Express x in terms of a, θ, and β.
- **b.** Express dx/dt in terms of a, θ, β, and $d\theta/dt$.
- **c.** Suppose that the distance a is 20 cm, and the angle β is 5°. Further suppose that θ is decreasing at 50 deg/sec. At the instant when $\theta = 30^\circ$, find the rate (in cm/sec) at which the paper is being cut. ⇒

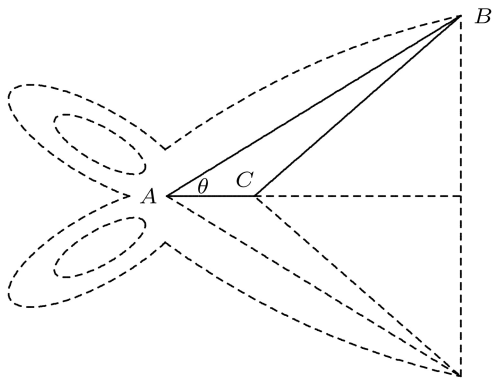

Figure 6.2.9 Scissors.

6.3 Newton's Method

Suppose you have a function $f(x)$, and you want to find as accurately as possible where it crosses the x-axis; in other words, you want to solve $f(x) = 0$. Suppose you know of no way to find an exact solution by any algebraic procedure, but you are able to use an approximation, provided it can be made quite close to the true value. Newton's method is a way to find a solution to the equation to as many decimal places as you want. It is what is called an "iterative procedure," meaning that it can be repeated again and again to get an answer of greater and greater accuracy. Iterative procedures like Newton's method are well suited to programming for a computer. Newton's method uses the fact that the tangent line to a curve is a good approximation to the curve near the point of tangency.

EXAMPLE 6.3.1 Approximate $\sqrt{3}$. Since $\sqrt{3}$ is a solution to $x^2 = 3$ or $x^2 - 3 = 0$, we use $f(x) = x^2 - 3$. We start by guessing something reasonably close to the true value; this is usually easy to do; let's use $\sqrt{3} \approx 2$. Now use the tangent line to the curve when $x = 2$ as an approximation to the curve, as shown in figure 6.3.1. Since $f'(x) = 2x$, the slope of this tangent line is 4 and its equation is $y = 4x - 7$. The tangent line is quite close to $f(x)$, so it crosses the x-axis near the point at which $f(x)$ crosses, that is, near $\sqrt{3}$. It is easy to find where the tangent line crosses the x-axis: solve $0 = 4x - 7$ to get $x = 7/4 = 1.75$. This is certainly a better approximation than 2, but let us say not close enough. We can improve it by doing the same thing again: find the tangent line at $x = 1.75$, find where this new tangent line crosses the x-axis, and use that value as a better approximation. We can continue this indefinitely, though it gets a bit tedious. Lets see if we can shortcut the process. Suppose the best approximation to the intercept we have so far is x_i. To find a better approximation we will always do the same thing: find the slope of the tangent line at x_i, find the equation of the tangent line, find the x-intercept. The slope is $2x_i$. The tangent line is $y = (2x_i)(x - x_i) + (x_i^2 - 3)$, using the point-slope formula for a line. Finally, the intercept is found by solving $0 = (2x_i)(x - x_i) + (x_i^2 - 3)$. With a little algebra this turns into $x = (x_i^2 + 3)/(2x_i)$; this is the next approximation, which we naturally call x_{i+1}. Instead of doing the whole tangent line computation every time we can simply use this formula to get as many approximations as we want. Starting with $x_0 = 2$, we get $x_1 = (x_0^2 + 3)/(2x_0) = (2^2 + 3)/4 = 7/4$ (the same approximation we got above, of course), $x_2 = (x_1^2 + 3)/(2x_1) = ((7/4)^2 + 3)/(7/2) = 97/56 \approx 1.73214$, $x_3 \approx 1.73205$, and so on. This is still a bit tedious by hand, but with a calculator or, even better, a good computer program, it is quite easy to get many, many approximations. We might guess already that 1.73205 is accurate to two decimal places, and in fact it turns out that it is accurate to 5 places. □

Let's think about this process in more general terms. We want to approximate a solution to $f(x) = 0$. We start with a rough guess, which we call x_0. We use the tangent line to $f(x)$ to get a new approximation that we hope will be closer to the true value. What is the equation of the tangent line when $x = x_0$? The slope is $f'(x_0)$ and the line goes through $(x_0, f(x_0))$, so the equation of the line is

$$y = f'(x_0)(x - x_0) + f(x_0).$$

Exercises 6.4.

1. Let $f(x) = x^4$. If $a = 1$ and $dx = \Delta x = 1/2$, what are Δy and dy? $\Rightarrow$
2. Let $f(x) = \sqrt{x}$. If $a = 1$ and $dx = \Delta x = 1/10$, what are Δy and dy? $\Rightarrow$
3. Let $f(x) = \sin(2x)$. If $a = \pi$ and $dx = \Delta x = \pi/100$, what are Δy and dy? $\Rightarrow$
4. Use differentials to estimate the amount of paint needed to apply a coat of paint 0.02 cm thick to a sphere with diameter 40 meters. (Recall that the volume of a sphere of radius r is $V = (4/3)\pi r^3$. Notice that you are given that $dr = 0.0002$.) $\Rightarrow$
5. Show in detail that the linear approximation of $\sin x$ at $x = 0$ is $L(x) = x$ and the linear approximation of $\cos x$ at $x = 0$ is $L(x) = 1$.

6.5 The Mean Value Theorem

Here are two interesting questions involving derivatives:

1. Suppose two different functions have the same derivative; what can you say about the relationship between the two functions?
2. Suppose you drive a car from toll booth on a toll road to another toll booth at an average speed of 70 miles per hour. What can be concluded about your actual speed during the trip? In particular, did you exceed the 65 mile per hour speed limit?

While these sound very different, it turns out that the two problems are very closely related. We know that "speed" is really the derivative by a different name; let's start by translating the second question into something that may be easier to visualize. Suppose that the function $f(t)$ gives the position of your car on the toll road at time t. Your change in position between one toll booth and the next is given by $f(t_1) - f(t_0)$, assuming that at time t_0 you were at the first booth and at time t_1 you arrived at the second booth. Your average speed for the trip is $(f(t_1) - f(t_0))/(t_1 - t_0)$. If we think about the graph of $f(t)$, the average speed is the slope of the line that connects the two points $(t_0, f(t_0))$ and $(t_1, f(t_1))$. Your speed at any particular time t between t_0 and t_1 is $f'(t)$, the slope of the curve. Now question (2) becomes a question about slope. In particular, if the slope between endpoints is 70, what can be said of the slopes at points between the endpoints?

As a general rule, when faced with a new problem it is often a good idea to examine one or more simplified versions of the problem, in the hope that this will lead to an understanding of the original problem. In this case, the problem in its "slope" form is somewhat easier to simplify than the original, but equivalent, problem.

Here is a special instance of the problem. Suppose that $f(t_0) = f(t_1)$. Then the two endpoints have the same height and the slope of the line connecting the endpoints is zero. What can we say about the slope between the endpoints? It shouldn't take much experimentation before you are convinced of the truth of this statement: Somewhere between t_0 and t_1 the slope is exactly zero, that is, somewhere between t_0 and t_1 the slope is equal to the slope of the line between the endpoints. This suggests that perhaps the same is true even if the endpoints are at different heights, and again a bit of experimentation will probably convince you that this is so. But we can do better than "experimentation"—we can prove that this is so.

We start with the simplified version:

THEOREM 6.5.1 Rolle's Theorem Suppose that $f(x)$ has a derivative on the interval (a, b), is continuous on the interval $[a, b]$, and $f(a) = f(b)$. Then at some value $c \in (a, b)$, $f'(c) = 0$.

Proof. We know that $f(x)$ has a maximum and minimum value on $[a, b]$ (because it is continuous), and we also know that the maximum and minimum must occur at an endpoint, at a point at which the derivative is zero, or at a point where the derivative is undefined. Since the derivative is never undefined, that possibility is removed.

If the maximum or minimum occurs at a point c, other than an endpoint, where $f'(c) = 0$, then we have found the point we seek. Otherwise, the maximum and minimum both occur at an endpoint, and since the endpoints have the same height, the maximum and minimum are the same. This means that $f(x) = f(a) = f(b)$ at every $x \in [a, b]$, so the function is a horizontal line, and it has derivative zero everywhere in (a, b). Then we may choose any c at all to get $f'(c) = 0$. ∎

Perhaps remarkably, this special case is all we need to prove the more general one as well.

THEOREM 6.5.2 Mean Value Theorem Suppose that $f(x)$ has a derivative on the interval (a, b) and is continuous on the interval $[a, b]$. Then at some value $c \in (a, b)$, $f'(c) = \dfrac{f(b) - f(a)}{b - a}$.

Proof. Let $m = \dfrac{f(b) - f(a)}{b - a}$, and consider a new function $g(x) = f(x) - m(x - a) - f(a)$. We know that $g(x)$ has a derivative everywhere, since $g'(x) = f'(x) - m$. We can compute $g(a) = f(a) - m(a - a) - f(a) = 0$ and

$$\begin{aligned} g(b) = f(b) - m(b - a) - f(a) &= f(b) - \frac{f(b) - f(a)}{b - a}(b - a) - f(a) \\ &= f(b) - (f(b) - f(a)) - f(a) = 0. \end{aligned}$$

So the height of $g(x)$ is the same at both endpoints. This means, by Rolle's Theorem, that at some c, $g'(c) = 0$. But we know that $g'(c) = f'(c) - m$, so

$$0 = f'(c) - m = f'(c) - \frac{f(b) - f(a)}{b - a},$$

which turns into

$$f'(c) = \frac{f(b) - f(a)}{b - a},$$

exactly what we want. ∎

Returning to the original formulation of question (2), we see that if $f(t)$ gives the position of your car at time t, then the Mean Value Theorem says that at some time c, $f'(c) = 70$, that is, at some time you must have been traveling at exactly your average speed for the trip, and that indeed you exceeded the speed limit.

Now let's return to question (1). Suppose, for example, that two functions are known to have derivative equal to 5 everywhere, $f'(x) = g'(x) = 5$. It is easy to find such functions: $5x$, $5x + 47$, $5x - 132$, etc. Are there other, more complicated, examples? No—the only functions that work are the "obvious" ones, namely, $5x$ plus some constant. How can we see that this is true?

Although "5" is a very simple derivative, let's look at an even simpler one. Suppose that $f'(x) = g'(x) = 0$. Again we can find examples: $f(x) = 0$, $f(x) = 47$, $f(x) = -511$ all have $f'(x) = 0$. Are there non-constant functions f with derivative 0? No, and here's why: Suppose that $f(x)$ is not a constant function. This means that there are two points on the function with different heights, say $f(a) \neq f(b)$. The Mean Value Theorem tells us that at some point c, $f'(c) = (f(b) - f(a))/(b - a) \neq 0$. So any non-constant function does not have a derivative that is zero everywhere; this is the same as saying that the only functions with zero derivative are the constant functions.

Let's go back to the slightly less easy example: suppose that $f'(x) = g'(x) = 5$. Then $(f(x) - g(x))' = f'(x) - g'(x) = 5 - 5 = 0$. So using what we discovered in the previous paragraph, we know that $f(x) - g(x) = k$, for some constant k. So any two functions with derivative 5 must differ by a constant; since $5x$ is known to work, the only other examples must look like $5x + k$.

Now we can extend this to more complicated functions, without any extra work. Suppose that $f'(x) = g'(x)$. Then as before $(f(x) - g(x))' = f'(x) - g'(x) = 0$, so $f(x) - g(x) = k$. Again this means that if we find just a single function $g(x)$ with a certain derivative, then every other function with the same derivative must be of the form $g(x) + k$.

EXAMPLE 6.5.3 Describe all functions that have derivative $5x - 3$. It's easy to find one: $g(x) = (5/2)x^2 - 3x$ has $g'(x) = 5x - 3$. The only other functions with the same derivative are therefore of the form $f(x) = (5/2)x^2 - 3x + k$.