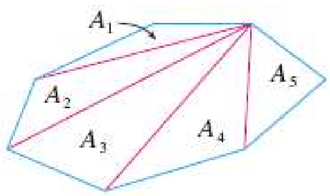
The Area Problem

The origins of calculus go back at least 2500 years to the ancient Greeks, who found areas using the "method of exhaustion." They knew how to find the area A of any polygon by dividing it into triangles as in Figure 1 and adding the areas of these triangles.

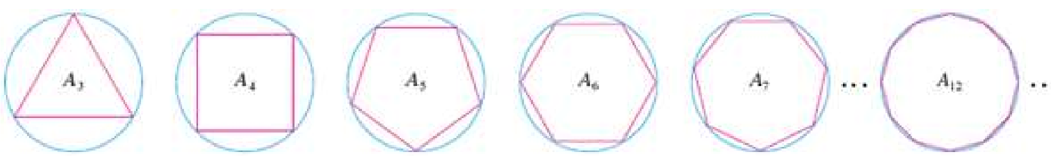
Figure 1



$A = A_1 + A_2 + A_3 + A_4 + A_5$

It is a much more difficult problem to find the area of a curved figure. The Greek method of exhaustion was to inscribe polygons in the figure and circumscribe polygons about the figure and then let the number of sides of the polygons increase. Figure 2 illustrates this process for the special case of a circle with inscribed regular polygons.

Figure 2



Let A_n be the area of the inscribed polygon with n sides. As n increases, it appears that A_n becomes closer and closer to the area of the circle. We say that the area of the circle is the limit of the areas of the inscribed polygons, and we write

$$A = \lim_{n \to \infty} A_n$$

The Greeks themselves did not use limits explicitly. However, by indirect reasoning, Eudoxus (fifth century BC) used exhaustion to prove the familiar formula for the area of a circle: $A = \pi r^2$.

We will use a similar idea in Chapter 5 to find areas of regions of the type shown in Figure 3. We will approximate the desired area A by areas of rectangles (as in Figure 4), let the width of the rectangles decrease, and then calculate A as the limit of these sums of areas of rectangles.

Figure 3

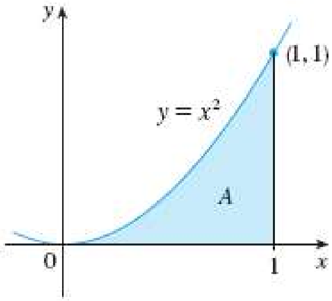
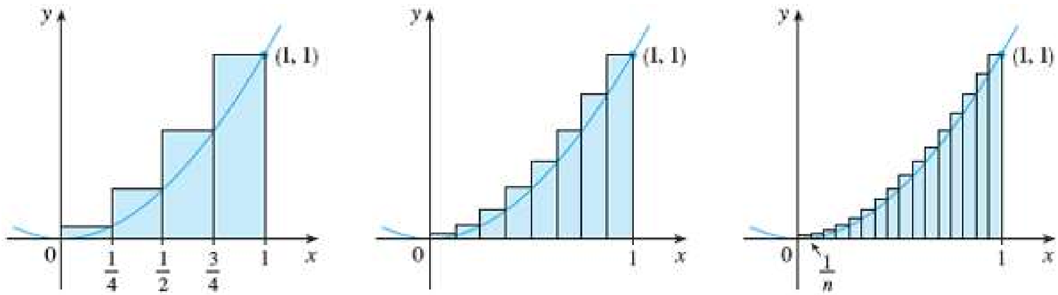


Figure 4



The area problem is the central problem in the branch of calculus called *integral calculus*. The techniques that we will develop in Chapter 5 for finding areas will also enable us to compute the volume of a solid, the length of a curve, the force of water against a dam, the mass and center of gravity of a rod, and the work done in pumping water out of a tank.