The Tangent Problem

Consider the problem of trying to find an equation of the tangent line t to a curve with equation $y = f(x)$ at a given point P. (We will give a precise definition of a tangent line in Chapter 2. For now you can think of it as a line that touches the curve at P as in Figure 5.) Since we know that the point P lies on the tangent line, we can find the equation of t if we know its slope m. The problem is that we need two points to compute the slope and we know only one point, P, on t. To get around the problem we first find an approximation to m by taking a nearby point Q on the curve and computing the slope m_{PQ} of the secant line PQ. From Figure 6 we see that

1

$$m_{PQ} = \frac{f(x) - f(a)}{x - a}$$

Figure 5

The tangent line at P

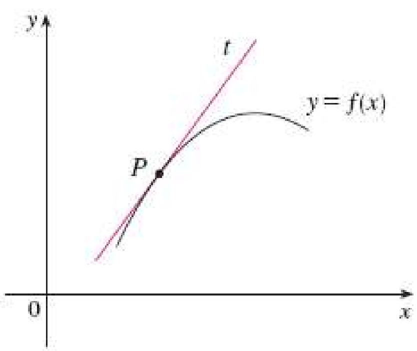
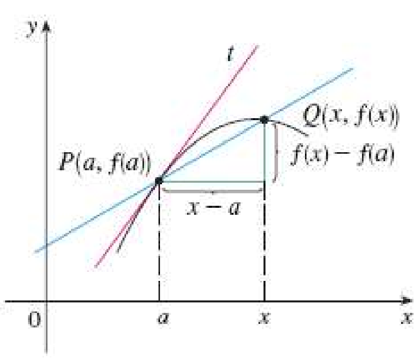


Figure 6

The secant line at PQ



Now imagine that Q moves along the curve toward P as in Figure 7. You can see that the secant line rotates and approaches the tangent line as its limiting position. This means that the slope m_{PQ} of the secant line becomes closer and closer to the slope m of the tangent line. We write

$$m = \lim_{Q \to P} m_{PQ}$$

and we say that m is the limit of m_{PQ} as Q approaches P along the curve. Because x approaches a as Q approaches P, we could also use Equation 1 to write

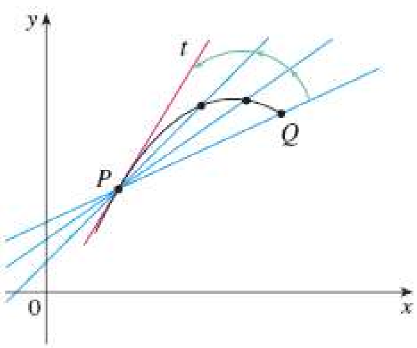
2

$$m = \lim_{x \to a} \frac{f(x) - f(a)}{x - a}$$

Specific examples of this procedure will be given in Chapter 2.

Figure 7

Secant lines approaching the tangent line



The tangent problem has given rise to the branch of calculus called *differential calculus*, which was not invented until more than 2000 years after integral calculus. The main ideas behind differential calculus are due to the French mathematician Pierre Fermat (1601–1665) and were developed by the English mathematicians John Wallis (1616–1703), Isaac Barrow (1630–1677), and Isaac Newton (1642–1727) and the German mathematician Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716).

The two branches of calculus and their chief problems, the area problem and the tangent problem, appear to be very different, but it turns out that there is a very close connection between them. The tangent problem and the area problem are inverse problems in a sense that will be described in Chapter 5.