

Mechanics I: Kinematics

See chapters 3 and 4 of Morin for material on solving differential equations. For general review on kinematics, see chapter 1 of Kleppner and Kolenkow. For fun, see chapters I-1 through I-8 of the Feynman lectures. There is a total of **84** points.

1 Motion in One Dimension

Example 1

When a projectile moves slowly through air, the drag is linear in the velocity, $F = -\alpha mv$. Find the velocity $v(t)$ of a projectile thrown upward at time $t = 0$ with speed v_0 .

Solution

We write Newton's second law as

$$\frac{dv}{dt} = -g - \alpha v$$

and multiply through by dt . Integrating both sides from the initial condition to time t_f gives

$$\int_{v_0}^{v(t_f)} \frac{dv}{g + \alpha v} = - \int_0^{t_f} dt.$$

Performing the integrals gives

$$\frac{1}{\alpha} \log(g + \alpha v) \Big|_{v_0}^{v(t_f)} = -t_f.$$

Renaming t_f to t and solving for v yields

$$v(t) = e^{-\alpha t} v_0 + \frac{g}{\alpha} (e^{-\alpha t} - 1).$$

This renaming is necessary because we don't want to confuse t , the dummy variable that we integrating over, with t_f , the time at which we want to evaluate the velocity; t ranges from zero to t_f . Unfortunately, often people just call both of these t , so you need to watch out.

[2] **Problem 1.** Investigating some features of this solution.

- (a) By using results from **P1**, verify that $v(t)$ makes sense for both small times and large times.
- (b) If the projectile is then caught at the launch point, did it spend more time going up or down?
- (c) Do you think the total time is longer or shorter than for a projectile without drag?

[3] **Problem 2.** Now assume quadratic drag, $F = -\alpha m v^2$, which applies for fast-moving projectiles.

- (a) Integrate Newton's second law to get an implicit equation for $v(t)$ with the same initial conditions as above. That is, you don't need to solve for $v(t)$, as it'll just make things messy.

- (b) Your equation will only be valid when the projectile is going up; explain why.
- (c) Find $v(t)$ for an object released from rest at time $t = 0$. (It may be helpful to look up some standard integrals involving hyperbolic trigonometric functions. These will be given to you if necessary on the USAPhO, but they will be useful for several problems in this program.)

Some people only call this quadratic case drag; they call the linear case viscous resistance. This is because they behave fundamentally differently at the microscopic level, as we will explore in **M7**.

- [3] **Problem 3.** A projectile of mass m is dropped from a height h above the ground. It falls and bounces elastically, experiencing the same quadratic drag as in problem 2. Find the maximum height to which it subsequently rises. (Hint: don't try to use your results from problem 2.)

Example 2

Find how the speed of a rowing boat depends on the number of rowers N .

Solution

A fast-moving boat experiences quadratic friction, so a drag force

$$F \propto v^2 A$$

where A is the submerged cross-sectional area of the boat. Since the submerged volume scales as $V \propto N$ in hydrostatic equilibrium, we have $A \propto N^{2/3}$. (This is the sketchy step of the analysis, since the scaling of A depends on how we adjust the shape of the boat as N increases.) Thus, the power the rowers need to provide scales as $P = Fv \propto v^3 N^{2/3}$, but we also have $P \propto N$. Combining gives the exceptionally weak dependence $v \propto N^{1/9}$, which agrees decently with Olympic rowing times.

Idea 1

A linear differential equation is one that contains only terms like x , its derivative v , or higher derivatives, without any products. For example, the simple harmonic oscillator $ma = -kx$ is linear. Linear differential equations have a number of wonderful properties.

- Solutions to linear differential equations obey the superposition principle: if $x_1(t)$ and $x_2(t)$ are both solutions, so is $c_1 x_1(t) + c_2 x_2(t)$. So any n independent solutions gives you an entire n -dimensional space of solutions.
- If the highest time derivative is the second, as in Newton's second law, then two parameters are needed to specify a solution: an initial position and initial velocity. So the space of solutions is only two-dimensional, which means that once you find two different solutions $x_1(t)$ and $x_2(t)$, the general solution takes the form $c_1 x_1(t) + c_2 x_2(t)$, where c_1 and c_2 are determined by the boundary conditions.
- If $x(t)$ is real, we can always replace it with a complex variable $\tilde{x}(t)$, then take the real part to get a valid solution in the end. This works because if we have

$$m\ddot{\tilde{x}} = -k\tilde{x}$$

then we can define $x(t) = \operatorname{Re} \tilde{x}(t)$. Taking the real part of both sides shows that $ma = -kx$, as required. This doesn't work if there are nonlinear terms, like x^2 .

Idea 2

Almost all linear differential equations can be solved using the same method: the basic solutions $x_i(t)$ are complex exponentials,

$$x_i(t) = e^{i\omega t} = \cos(\omega t) + i \sin(\omega t)$$

where the allowed ω are determined by the differential equation. (You might have learned about “guessing an exponential” in physics class and thought it was just some random trick. But this trick is actually a deep principle, because it almost always works!)

Example 3

Solve the simple harmonic oscillator, $ma + kx = 0$, using the above principles.

Solution

We'll go straight to complex solutions, suppressing the tildes. We guess $x(t) = e^{i\omega t}$. Plugging this in and using the chain rule gives

$$m(i\omega)^2 e^{i\omega t} + k e^{i\omega t} = 0$$

and canceling $e^{i\omega t}$ and solving gives two solutions,

$$\omega = \pm\omega_0, \quad \omega_0 = \sqrt{k/m}.$$


The most general solution is thus given by superposition,

$$x(t) = A e^{i\omega_0 t} + B e^{-i\omega_0 t}$$

where A and B are complex numbers. We can get a real solution by taking the real part,

$$\operatorname{Re} x(t) = C \cos(\omega_0 t) + D \sin(\omega_0 t)$$

which is indeed the familiar general sinusoidal solution.

- [1] **Problem 4.** To make sure you know how to go from the complex solution to the real one, write C and D in terms of A and B .
- [2] **Problem 5.** Now assume there is an additional damping force $F_d = -bv$. Using the same procedure, solve for the frequencies ω assuming b is small. See section 4.3 of Morin if you have trouble with this. We'll consider this system in more detail in **M4**.
- [3] **Problem 6.**  USAPhO 2012, problem B1.

[3] **Problem 7.** The reason the exponential guess works is because the derivative of an exponential is the exponential itself; at the end of the day the exponential cancels out and we're left with a polynomial in ω , which has just the right number of roots. But you could worry about multiple roots, in which case there are fewer distinct solutions for ω and hence not enough solutions.

- (a) Consider a second order differential equation with a double root ω . What is the other solution, besides $e^{i\omega t}$? (Hint: to help find a good guess, consider the case $m\ddot{x} = 0$, where $\omega = 0$ is the double root. Then generalize your guess to nonzero ω and check that it works.)
- (b) This should be setting off alarm bells: the form of the solutions to the equation changes when the two roots are *exactly* equal, while it's just exponentials/sinusoids if the roots are different, no matter how small the difference is. Since no two roots are *ever* exactly equal in practice, it seems the behavior of part (a) can never actually happen in the real world. But it gets taught in applied differential equations courses. Why?
- (c) [A] Generalize to an n^{th} order linear differential equation

$$\left(a_n \frac{d^n}{dt^n} + a_{n-1} \frac{d^{n-1}}{dt^{n-1}} + \dots + a_1 \frac{d}{dt} + a_0 \right) x = 0.$$

What does the general solution look like? (The answer to this part is basically the punchline of a college course on differential equations; it means *every* linear differential is “easy”.)

2 Tricks

In this section we'll consider some kinematics problems that require cleverness, not computation.

Idea 3

Many problems can be solved by a clever choice of reference frame. It is often useful to go to the frame moving with one of the objects in the problem, or to go into a frame that makes the motion in the problem more symmetric. For the purposes of kinematics it can even be useful to use noninertial reference frames, such as a falling frame where projectiles don't accelerate, or a rotating frame, though this will introduce fictitious forces into the dynamics. It is also useful to tilt the coordinate axes to be parallel to various objects.

Example 4

A projectile is fired directly downward with speed v_0 , while simultaneously another projectile a distance L below it is fired directly upward with speed v_0 . Find the time until they collide.

Solution

Use the reference frame that falls with acceleration g . In this reference frame, there is no gravity at all. The projectiles move with constant speeds $\pm v_0$, and hence clearly collide in time $L/2v_0$.

- [2] **Problem 8** (KoMaL 2019). A cannon A is at the edge of a cliff with a 800 m drop. Cannon B is on the ground below the cliff and 600 m horizontally away from it. Cannon A shoots a cannonball directly towards cannon B at 60 m/s. Cannon B shoots a cannonball directly towards cannon A at 40 m/s. Will the two cannonballs hit each other in midair?
- [2] **Problem 9** (Wang). Two particles are released in gravitational acceleration g with leftward and rightward speeds v_1 and v_2 . Find the distance between them when their velocities are perpendicular.
- [3] **Problem 10** (Kalda). Two intersecting circles of radius r have centers a distance a apart. If one circle moves towards the other with speed v , what is the speed of one of the points of intersection?
- [2] **Problem 11** (Kalda). A mirror rotates about its center with angular speed ω . A stationary point source of light sits at a distance a from the rotation axis. What is the speed of its mirror image?
- [2] **Problem 12** (Kalda). Two circles of radius r intersect at the point O . One of the circles rotates about the point O with constant angular speed ω . The other point of intersection O' is originally a distance d from O . Find the speed of O' as a function of time.

Idea 4

To find the minimum value of some quantity, it's often useful to think about all possible values of that quantity. This can reveal a solution using geometry or symmetry.

- [2] **Problem 13** (PPP 3). A boat can travel a speed of 3 m/s on still water. A boatman wants to cross a river while covering the shortest possible distance.
- (a) In what direction should he row if the speed of the water is 2 m/s?
- (b) How about if it is 4 m/s?

Idea 5

In problems with friction, the best reference frame to use is almost always the frame of whatever is causing the friction.

- [2] **Problem 14** (Kalda). A block is pushed onto a conveyor belt. The belt is moving with speed 1 m/s, and the block's initial speed is 2 m/s, with initial velocity perpendicular to that of the belt. During the subsequent motion, what is the minimum speed of the block with respect to the ground?

Idea 6

For a variety of kinematics problems, it can be useful to think about the motion from a different perspective. For example, if your problem involves complicated accelerations, it can be useful to think in “velocity space”, i.e. directly think about how the velocity vector evolves over time, and deal with the position later. Or, if your problem involves complicated processes occurring in time, it can be useful to think in “spacetime”, meaning to visualize the process on a space where time is one of the axes. It can also be useful to parametrize motion in terms of quantities other than the usual Cartesian coordinates.

- [2] **Problem 15** (Kalda). A boy enters a patch of ice with a coefficient of friction μ with speed v . By running on the ice, the boy turns his velocity vector by 90° in the minimum possible time, so that his final speed is also v . What is the minimum possible time, and what kind of curve is the trajectory? Assume the normal force with the ice is constant.
- [2] **Problem 16** (PPP 5). Four snails travel in uniform, rectilinear motion on a plane. The velocities are chosen so that three snails never meet at once, and no two of the velocities are equal. Since time $t = -\infty$, five of the $\binom{4}{2}$ possible encounters have already occurred. Must the sixth also occur?
- [2] **Problem 17**. Six bugs are placed at the vertices of a regular hexagon with side length s . At time $t = 0$ each bug starts moving directly towards the next with speed v . At what time do they collide?
- [3] **Problem 18**. A rabbit begins at the origin, and the fox begins at the point $(0, -a)$. The rabbit begins running with a constant speed $v\hat{x}$. At the same time, the fox begins chasing the rabbit, always moving towards it with speed v .

(a) Sketch the subsequent trajectory of the rabbit and fox.

(b) Let the displacement between the rabbit and fox be

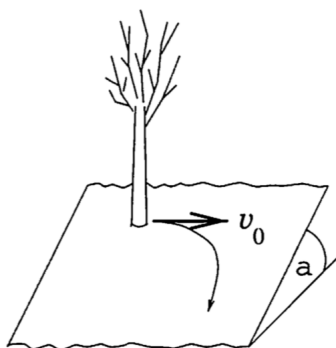
$$\mathbf{r}(t) = (x(t), y(t)).$$

Show that $r + x$ is conserved.

(c) Find the distance between the rabbit and fox after a long time.

(d) Now suppose the fox has speed $u > v$. How long does it take to catch the rabbit?

- [2] **Problem 19** (PPP 85). A child is standing on an icy hill, which may be modeled as an inclined plane.



The coefficient of friction $\mu_k = \mu_s$ is small enough so that, if the child gets the tiniest push, she will begin sliding down the plane. Now suppose the child gets a horizontal push, with initial speed v_0 . What is the child's final speed?

3 Motion in Two Dimensions

Idea 7

Often, motion in two dimensions can be treated as two independent one-dimensional problems. A change of reference frame may be necessary first.

Idea 8

In problems involving an inclined plane, always set the angle θ to be much closer to either 0° or 90° than to 45° . This reduces mistakes, because almost every angle will be either θ or $90^\circ - \theta$, and you can identify which by sight.

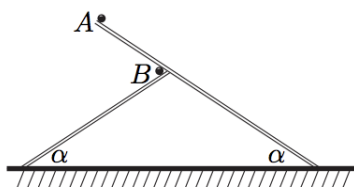
Example 5

Consider projectile motion where wind provides a constant horizontal force F . At what angle should a projectile of mass m be launched in order to return to the thrower?

Solution

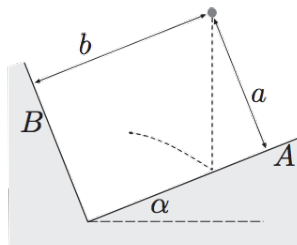
The key idea is to use tilted coordinate systems. Clearly, when the only force is downward, the projectile must be launched straight upward. Now, the horizontal force acts like an effective horizontal gravitational acceleration of F/m , so that gravity is effectively tilted an angle $\tan^{-1}(F/mg)$ away from the vertical. One must launch the projectile directly “upward” with respect to this effective gravitational field, so the launch angle is an angle $\tan^{-1}(F/mg)$ from the vertical. (For a related problem, see the infamous $F = ma$ 2014 problem 19.)

- [1] **Problem 20** (Quarterfinal 2002). A cart is rigged with a vertical cannon so that, when the cart is stationary on a horizontal track, the cannonball is fired straight up and lands back in the cannon. In each of the following situations, does the cannonball land back in the cannon, in front of it, or behind it?
- The cart is moving on a frictionless horizontal track with speed v .
 - The cart is accelerating down a frictionless inclined track with angle θ .
 - The cart is accelerating down an inclined track with angle θ , and friction slows it down.
- [2] **Problem 21** (Kalda). Two balls at points A and B are released from rest at the same moment, from the locations shown below. All surfaces are frictionless.



If it takes time t_A and t_B for the balls to hit the ground, at what time was the distance between the balls the smallest?

- [2] **Problem 22** (Kalda). Two planar frictionless walls are placed at right angles, where wall A makes an angle α to the horizontal. A perfectly elastic ball is released from rest at a point a distance a from wall A and b from wall B .



After a long time, what is the ratio of the number of times the ball has bounced against wall B to the number of times it has bounced against wall A ?

- [3] **Problem 23.** ⌚ USAPhO 2004, problem A4.
- [3] **Problem 24** (EFPPhO 2010). A sprinkler can be modeled as a small hemisphere on the ground. Water shoots out from the hemisphere in all directions, with speed v perpendicular to the hemisphere.
- Find the total surface area of ground watered by the sprinkler.
 - At what distance from the sprinkler does the ground get the wettest?

Example 6

A bug flies towards a light with constant speed v , always making an angle α with the radial direction. If the initial distance to the lamp is L and the radius of the lamp is R , through what total angle does it turn before hitting the lamp?

Solution

In this case we can't avoid solving differential equations, but they're not too hard. It's easiest to work in polar coordinates, with the center of the lamp at the origin. By decomposing the velocity into radial and tangential components, we have

$$\frac{dr}{dt} = -v \cos \alpha, \quad r \frac{d\theta}{dt} = v \sin \alpha.$$

We only care about the path, not the time-dependence, so we divide these equations to get

$$\frac{dr}{d\theta} = -\frac{r}{\tan \alpha}$$

where we manipulated differentials as in **P1**. Separating and integrating,

$$-\int_L^R \frac{dr}{r} = \frac{\Delta\theta}{\tan \alpha}$$

which tells us that

$$\Delta\theta = (\tan \alpha) \log \frac{L}{R}.$$

The shape traced out is a logarithmic spiral.

- [2] **Problem 25.** The pilot of a supersonic jet airplane wishes to make a big noise at the origin by flying around it in a path such that all of the noise he makes is heard simultaneously at the origin. The jet travels with Mach number M , meaning that its speed is M times the speed of sound. If the pilot starts at $(r, \theta) = (a, 0)$, find the pilot's path $r(\theta)$.
- [3] **Problem 26.** Consider a mass m on a table attached to a spring at the origin with zero relaxed length, which exerts the force

$$\mathbf{F} = -k\mathbf{r}$$

on the mass. We will find the general solution for $\mathbf{r}(t) = (x(t), y(t))$ in two different ways.

- Directly write down the answer, using the fact that the x and y coordinates are independent.
- Sketch a representative sample of solutions. What kind of curve does the trajectory follow?
- Here's a more unusual way to arrive at the same answer. Go to a noninertial reference frame rotating with angular velocity ω_0 about the origin, so that the centrifugal force cancels out the spring force. In this frame, the only relevant force is the Coriolis force $-2m\boldsymbol{\omega}_0 \times \mathbf{v}$. Find the general solution in this frame, then transform back to the original frame and show you get the same answer as in part (a). (This can get a bit messy; the easiest way is to treat the plane as the complex plane, i.e. work in terms of the variable $r = x + iy$.)

4 Optimal Launching

Finally, we'll consider projectile motion questions that involve optimization. These are rare on the USAPhO, but they are quite fun problems, with occasionally very slick solutions.

Example 7

A bug wishes to jump over a cylindrical log of radius R lying on the ground, so that it just grazes the top of the log horizontally as it passes by. What is the minimum launch speed v required to do this?

Solution

Let P be the point at the top of the log. For the bug to be moving horizontally at P , energy conservation applied to the vertical motion gives an initial v_y obeying

$$\frac{1}{2}mv_y^2 = 2mgR, \quad v_y = 2\sqrt{gR}.$$

Thus, we need to find the minimum v_x for the motion to be possible. If v_x is too low, the hypothetical trajectory of the bug will instead pass through the log. At the lowest possible v_x , the bug's trajectory is not just tangent to the log at point P , but also has the same radius of curvature (i.e. the trajectory and the log's shape have the same first and second derivatives).

For uniform motion in a circle of radius r , the acceleration is $a = v^2/r$. Conversely, when an object follows a trajectory of instantaneous radius of curvature r , its acceleration component

normal to the path must be $a = v^2/r$. So applying this to the bug at P gives

$$g = \frac{v_x^2}{R}, \quad v_x = \sqrt{gR}.$$

Thus, the minimum initial speed is


$$v = \sqrt{v_x^2 + v_y^2} = \sqrt{5} gR.$$

This radius of curvature trick doesn't come up often, but it's cool when it does.

- [2] **Problem 27.** NBPhO 2020, problem 3. A nice warmup for the problems below.
- [3] **Problem 28.** An object is launched from the top of a hill, where the ground lies an angle ϕ below the horizontal. Show that the range of a projectile is maximized if it is launched along the angle bisector of the vertical and the ground.
- [3] **Problem 29** (PPP 35). A point P is located above an inclined plane with angle α . It is possible to reach the plane by sliding under gravity down a straight frictionless wire, joining P to some point P' on the plane. Geometrically, how should P' be chosen so as to minimize the time taken? (Hint: think about the set of points that can be reached for all possible angles of the wire, after time t .)

Idea 9

Since mechanics is time-reversible, and the speed of a projectile only depends on its height and not the path taken, finding the way to reach point B from point A with the lowest possible initial speed is the same as finding the way to reach point A from point B with the lowest possible initial speed.

- [4] **Problem 30.** Two fences of heights h_1 and h_2 are set so that the *tops* of the fences are separated by a distance d . Show that the minimum speed needed to throw a projectile over both fences is $\sqrt{g(h_1 + h_2 + d)}$.
- [4] **Problem 31.** It's possible to solve problems 28 and 30 using pure geometry, with no computation. One can show that the set of points a projectile can reach with a fixed initial speed v is a parabola with a focus at the launching point. A parabola is defined as the set of points whose distance to the focus equals the distance to a line, called the directrix.
- Show that trajectories that touch the parabola must be tangent to it.
 - Show that if a point is hit with the smallest possible initial speed, then the initial velocity must be perpendicular to the final velocity.
 - Using the geometric definition of a parabola, recover the answers to problems 28 and 30.
- [3] **Problem 32.**  IPhO 2012, problem 1A.

5 Reading Graphs

In some kinematics problems, you'll have to infer what's going on from a diagram. To make progress, you'll have to print out the diagram to make measurements directly on it.

[3] **Problem 33.** [EFPhO 2015, problem 6](#).

[3] **Problem 34.** [EFPhO 2008, problem 3](#).

Remark

For a ridiculously hard problem from the same genre, see [EuPhO 2019, problem 3](#). Almost all competitors received zero points on it; you can try it for entertainment if you've finished everything else and really like kinematics. The official solutions are [here](#).