

Category theory basics

Alyson Mei

January 5, 2026

1 Category

1.1 Basic definitions

Category theory extensively uses the language of commutative diagrams.

Definition 1.1 (Diagram). A diagram consists of a directed graph whose vertices are objects and whose edges are maps between these objects.

Definition 1.2 (Commutative diagram). A diagram is called commutative if for any two directed paths with the same starting object and the same ending object, the corresponding compositions of maps are equal.

Conventions:

- All diagrams shown are assumed to be commutative by default;
- By “satisfying the diagrams” we mean “such that the diagrams commute”.

Example 1.3. Commutativity of the diagram below means that $g \circ f = h \circ p$:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} A & \xrightarrow{f} & B \\ p \downarrow & & \downarrow g \\ C & \xrightarrow{h} & D \end{array}.$$

Definition 1.4 (Category). A category \mathcal{C} consists of:

- a collection $\text{obj}(\mathcal{C})$ of objects,
- a collection $\text{arr}(\mathcal{C})$ of morphisms (arrows) of the form $f : C \rightarrow D$, where $C, D : \text{obj}(\mathcal{C})$,

satisfying the following diagrams for any morphisms f, g, h of compatible types:

- Composition:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} A & \xrightarrow{f} & B \\ & \searrow g \circ f & \downarrow g \\ & & C \end{array},$$

- Identity:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} A & \xrightarrow{\text{id}_A} & A \\ & \searrow f \circ \text{id}_A = f & \downarrow f \\ & & B \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{ccc} C & & \\ g \downarrow & \searrow \text{id}_A \circ g = g & \\ A & \xrightarrow{\text{id}_A} & A \end{array},$$

- Associativity:

$$\begin{array}{ccccc}
 A & \xrightarrow{f} & B & & \\
 & \searrow & \downarrow g & \nearrow h \circ g & \\
 & g \circ f & C & \xrightarrow{h} & D
 \end{array}
 .$$

1.2 Additional definitions

Definition 1.5 (Mono, epi, iso). Consider the category \mathcal{C} .

- A morphism $m : \text{arr}(\mathcal{C})$ is called a monomorphism (mono) if it is left-cancellative:

$$A \begin{array}{c} \xrightarrow{f_1} \\ \xrightarrow{f_2} \end{array} B \xrightarrow{m} C, \quad m \circ f_1 = m \circ f_2 \Rightarrow f_1 = f_2 ;$$

- A morphism $e : \text{arr}(\mathcal{C})$ is called an epimorphism (epi) if it is right-cancellative:

$$A \xrightarrow{e} B \begin{array}{c} \xrightarrow{g_1} \\ \xrightarrow{g_2} \end{array} C, \quad g_1 \circ e = g_2 \circ e \Rightarrow g_1 = g_2 ;$$

- A morphism $i : \text{arr}(\mathcal{C})$ is called an isomorphism (iso) if has an inverse $i^{-1} : \text{arr}(\mathcal{C})$:

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
 A & \xrightarrow{i} & B \\
 & \searrow \text{id}_A & \downarrow i^{-1} \\
 & & A
 \end{array}
 \quad
 \begin{array}{ccc}
 B & & \\
 i^{-1} \downarrow & \nearrow \text{id}_B & \\
 A & \xrightarrow{i} & B
 \end{array}
 .$$

Remark 1.6.

- Mono, epi and iso are the generalizations of injection, surjection and bijection respectively;
- Every isomorphism is both mono and epi, but the converse is not generally true.

Definition 1.7 (Initial, terminal and zero objects). Consider the category \mathcal{C} .

- $I : \text{obj}(\mathcal{C})$ is called initial object if for every $C : \text{obj}(\mathcal{C})$ there exists a unique morphism $I \rightarrow C$;
- $T : \text{obj}(\mathcal{C})$ is called terminal object if for every $C : \text{obj}(\mathcal{C})$ there exists a unique morphism $C \rightarrow T$;
- $0 : \text{obj}(\mathcal{C})$ is called zero object if it is both initial and terminal.

An object is called universal if it is initial or terminal.

Remark 1.8.

- Every two initial objects / every two terminal objects are isomorphic to each other;

- The concept of universal object combined with comma categories allows to gracefully define the variety of categorical structures.

Definition 1.9 (Small and locally small categories). The category is called

- Small, if both objects and morphisms form a set;
- Locally small, if morphisms between any two objects form a set.

1.3 List of examples

Example 1.10.

- Trivial and finite categories:
 - The empty category 0 ;
 - The terminal category 1 : $\text{obj}(1) = \{*\}$, $\text{arr}(1) = \{\text{id}_*\}$;
 - A monoid: a category with a single object;
 - The category 2 with two objects and a single non-identity arrow;
 - The discrete category \mathcal{C}_X on a set X : $\text{obj}(\mathcal{C}_X) = X$, $\text{arr}(\mathcal{C}_X) = \{\text{id}_x \mid x \in X\}$;
 - The diagram category \mathcal{C}_G associated to a directed graph G : $\text{obj}(\mathcal{C}_G) = \text{vertices}(G)$, $\text{arr}(\mathcal{C}_G) = \text{edges}(G)$, with all compatible paths commuting;
- Order-theoretic categories:
 - Preorders as categories: objects are elements of preorder P , and there is a unique arrow $x \rightarrow y$ whenever $x \leq y$;
 - Preorders / Lattices / Boolean algebras: same as above, only the arrows satisfy additional axioms;
- Basic concrete categories:
 - *Set*: objects are sets, morphisms are functions;
 - *FinSet*: objects are finite sets, morphisms are functions;
 - *Rel*: objects are sets, morphisms are binary relations;
 - *Part*: objects are sets, morphisms are partial functions;
 - *Point*: objects are pointed sets (sets with a distinguished element), morphisms are functions preserving the base point;
- Logical / type-theoretic categories:
 - Boolean algebras / Heyting algebras: objects are Boolean or Heyting algebras, morphisms are structure-preserving functions;
 - Cartesian closed categories: categories with finite products and exponentials;

- Syntactic categories: constructed from logical theories or type theories; objects are formulas or types, morphisms are proofs or terms;
- Toposes: categories with certain logical and categorical structure supporting an internal logic;
- Algebraic categories:
 - \mathcal{Mon} : monoids and monoid homomorphisms;
 - \mathcal{Grp} : groups and group homomorphisms;
 - \mathcal{Ab} : abelian groups;
 - $(\mathcal{C})\mathcal{Ring}$: (commutative) rings and ring homomorphisms;
 - $\mathcal{Vect}_{\mathbf{k}}$: vector spaces over a field \mathbf{k} and linear maps;
 - $\mathcal{Alg}_{\mathbf{k}}$: algebras over a field or ring \mathbf{k} ;
 - \mathcal{Mod}_R : modules over a ring R ;
 - \mathcal{LieAlg} and $\mathcal{HopfAlg}$: Lie and Hopf algebras and structure preserving maps;
- Topological / geometric categories:
 - \mathcal{Top} : topological spaces with continuous maps;
 - \mathcal{Top}_* : pointed spaces with basepoint-preserving maps;
 - $h\mathcal{Top}$: homotopy category; morphisms are homotopy classes of continuous maps;
 - \mathcal{Man} : smooth manifolds with smooth maps;
 - \mathcal{Diff} : diffeological spaces with smooth maps;
 - \mathcal{Sch} : schemes and morphisms of schemes;
 - $\mathcal{Var}_{\mathbf{k}}$: algebraic varieties over a field \mathbf{k} ;
 - \mathcal{Cob} : cobordisms; objects are manifolds, morphisms are cobordism classes;
- Higher level constructions:
 - \mathcal{Cat} : small categories and functors between them;
 - \mathcal{CAT} : (large) categories and functors — “set of all categories” is only valid if we allow a universe distinction to avoid size issues;
 - \mathcal{Grpd} : groupoids — categories in which all morphisms are invertible;
 - \mathcal{MonCat} : monoidal categories and monoidal functors;
 - \mathcal{AbCat} : abelian categories and additive functors;
 - $[\mathcal{C}, \mathcal{D}]$: functor category; objects are functors $\mathcal{C} \rightarrow \mathcal{D}$, morphisms are natural transformations;

- Comma categories $(F \downarrow G)$: objects are triples $(C, D, f : F(C) \rightarrow G(D))$, morphisms are pairs making the corresponding squares commute.