

Chapter 2

Mathematical Preliminaries and Notation

A *quantitative* understanding of evolution will require the language of mathematics, so we'll have to spend a little time reviewing the relevant concepts and establishing a common notation. We'll assume you have a general comfort with manipulating equations, calculus, and basic differential equations (ODEs).¹

However, there is one set of concepts that you might not have seen in previous math or physics courses, but will be extremely useful for studying evolutionary problems. These methods fall under the general headings of *series expansions* / *asymptotic approximations* / *self-consistency arguments*.

2.1 Series expansions / asymptotic approximations

We can illustrate these concepts with a simple example which we already know how to solve. Suppose we want to find the positive root of the quadratic equa-

¹See the *Mathematical Background* document for more details: https://bgoodlab.github.io/courses/apphys237/math_background.pdf.

tion

$$\epsilon \cdot x^2 + x - 1 = 0 \quad (2.1)$$

Using the quadratic formula, we can see that this equation has one positive root:

$$x = \frac{-1 + \sqrt{1 + 4\epsilon}}{2\epsilon} \equiv F(\epsilon) \quad (2.2)$$

which we can write as some arbitrary function of ϵ .

As anticipated by our choice of variables, we will often want to understand the behavior of this function in certain limits, e.g. as $\epsilon \rightarrow 0$. We can do this by performing a Taylor series of $F(\epsilon)$ around $\epsilon = 0$:

$$x = F(0) + F'(0) \cdot \epsilon + \dots \quad (2.3)$$

In this case, we find² that:

$$x = \underbrace{(1)}_{\text{leading order}} + \underbrace{(-\epsilon)}_{\text{next order}} + \underbrace{\dots}_{\text{(h.o.t.)}} \quad (2.4)$$

We'll call the first (non-zero) term in an expansion like this the *leading-order term*, and we'll call next one the *next-order term* (and so on for the higher-order terms, or h.o.t.).

When ϵ is small, each term in this expansion will often be smaller than the one before it, and this suggests a natural approximation scheme for x . The most extreme version is to take the leading-order term and forget the rest. This is how we'll often look at these expansions: the leading-order term will tell us how to approximate x , and the next-order term will tell us how “good” that approximation is.

²WolframAlpha can be really useful for calculating series expansions, so feel free to use it if you want to save yourself some time. You can use a query like “expand $(-1 + \sqrt{1 + 4 \cdot \text{epsilon}})/(2 \cdot \text{epsilon})$ around $\text{epsilon} = 0$ ”

In other words, we expect that $F(0)$ will be a good approximation for x if the next-order term is much smaller:

$$F'(0)\epsilon \ll F(0) . \quad (2.5)$$

We can also write this in terms of ϵ as

$$\epsilon \ll \epsilon^* \equiv \frac{F(0)}{F'(0)} . \quad (2.6)$$

In this example, we have $F(0) = 1$ and $\epsilon^* = 1$, so we will write this as

$$x \approx 1; \quad (\epsilon \ll 1) \quad (2.7)$$

and read it as “ x is approximately equal to 1 when ϵ is much smaller than 1”.

2.1.1 Dominant balance

The use of a Taylor expansion to approximate a function will likely be familiar to many readers. What may be slightly less familiar is that one can do this whole process directly from Eq. (2.1) using a technique known as the *method of dominant balance*.

This technique gets its name from the observation that, for a random equation involving multiple terms, it will often be the case that two of them are much larger than the others, and are therefore providing the *dominant* contribution to *balance*-ing the two sides of the equation. This leads to an approximation method that involves two steps:

- **Step 1.** We first *guess* that one of the terms (in this case, ϵx^2) is much smaller than the others (i.e., we guess that x and -1 are providing the dominant balance in the equation). This yields a much simpler equation,

$$x - 1 \approx 0 , \quad (2.8)$$

which allows us to obtain the *leading-order approximation*:

$$x \approx 1 . \quad (2.9)$$

- **Step 2.** We can then substitute this solution to the original equation to *check* whether the approximation is *self-consistent*. In this case, the neglected term would be equal to

$$\epsilon x^2 \approx \epsilon(1)^2 \approx \epsilon \quad (2.10)$$

so the assumption that ϵx^2 is smaller than the other two terms (x and -1) will be self-consistent if

$$\epsilon \ll 1. \quad (2.11)$$

This self-consistency argument will naturally tell us if we had guessed wrong at the beginning. E.g. if we had assumed that the dominant balance was between the ϵx^2 and -1 terms (and that the x term was negligible) we would have found that

$$\epsilon x^2 - 1 \approx 0 \implies x \approx \frac{1}{\sqrt{\epsilon}} \gg 1, \quad (2.12)$$

which would have contradicted our assumption that $x \ll 1$. Thus, a good (but rather brute force) is can be to try *all* the possible dominant balances, and see which ones are self-consistent.

Another nice feature of this approach is that it tells us *when* our leading-order approximation will break down. E.g., if we had started from the slightly different quadratic equation,

$$100 \cdot \epsilon \cdot x^2 + x - 1 = 0, \quad (2.13)$$

we would have found the same leading-order approximation, but with a slightly different condition of validity:

$$\epsilon \ll \frac{1}{100}, \quad (2.14)$$

which is much smaller than above. We can compare this to the more traditional math notation, $\lim_{\epsilon \rightarrow 0} x = 1$, which gives us little indication of the region of validity. This feature can be really important when we start making connections to data and experiments. A big theme of this course will be figuring out leading order approximations ($x \approx 1$) as well as their regions of validity ($\epsilon \ll 1$) for a variety of evolutionary problems.

Higher-order corrections. We can use an extension of this dominant balance approach calculate the next-order correction:

- **Step 1.** We *guess* that x is approximately equal to the leading-order term, *plus a small correction*:

$$x \approx 1 + \delta \leftarrow \text{correction term} \quad (2.15)$$

- **Step 2.** We then substitute this guess into Eq. (2.1), expand to lowest order in δ , and solve:

$$\begin{aligned} \epsilon(1 + \delta)^2 + (1 + \delta) - 1 &\approx 0 \\ \downarrow \\ \epsilon(1 + 2\delta) + (1 + \delta) - 1 &\approx 0 \\ \downarrow \\ \delta = \frac{-\epsilon}{1 + 2\epsilon} &\approx -\epsilon \end{aligned} \quad (2.16)$$

where we have kept only the leading-order contribution in ϵ . We can *verify* that this answer is *self-consistent* by checking that δ is small compared to the leading order term (as we assumed in step 1):

$$|\delta| \ll 1 \implies \epsilon \ll 1 \quad (2.17)$$

We notice that this is the same condition required for the leading-order approximation to be valid.

Approximations for other regimes. We could have used this same approach to understand the behavior in the opposite limit where $\epsilon \rightarrow \infty$. From the Taylor expansion of the quadratic formula in Eq. (2.2), we have

$$x \approx \frac{1}{\sqrt{\epsilon}} - \frac{1}{2\epsilon}; \quad (\epsilon \gg 1) \quad (2.18)$$

Can you derive this result using the dominant balance procedure above?

Why is this useful? This whole approximation procedure might seem like a lot of work, given that we could have just directly calculated the answer — for any value of ϵ — from our original quadratic formula in Eq. (2.2). The real payoff comes from the fact that the dominant balance approach still works even when the exact solution is not known. E.g., if we were instead interested in the solution to the quintic equation

$$\epsilon \cdot x^5 + x - 1 = 0 \quad (2.19)$$

then a famous result from group theory tells us that there is *no analytical solution*. However, all of our approximations above still work, and are not really any harder to carry out. This is left as an exercise for the reader. In contrast to some of your other physics and math courses, which tend to emphasize problems that are solvable like Eq. (2.1), we'll see that vast majority of the problems we'll encounter in evolutionary settings will be more like Eq. (2.19). Approximation methods will therefore be very useful for us for understanding what is going on.

While these approximations might seem restrictive, they can also be surprisingly useful in practical contexts, e.g. when we are interested in making connections to data. One reason for this is that, given all the possible values of ϵ , the vast majority have an order-of-magnitude that is either $\ll 1$ or $\gg 1$, or much less than one. Some amount of fine-tuning would be needed for a completely random value of ϵ to be of order 1. This means that in practice, we can often get a lot of mileage out of our $\epsilon \ll 1$ and $\epsilon \gg 1$ approximations. Moreover, in the

subset of cases where this breaks down, it often signals that there is some additional physical or biological process that is responsible for tuning the value of ϵ to be close to 1. In this way, enumerating the possible asymptotic regimes (and comparing them to data) can be a useful engine of discovery in its own right. We will see several examples of this throughout the course.

Finally, while we have illustrated our dominant balance method using polynomial equations, this same basic approach also works for differential equations, stochastic differential equations, integrals, and many other problems.³ So we will utilize this technique many times throughout this course (and will illustrate with more concrete examples as we go along).

2.1.2 Randomness and Probability

Since many aspects of evolution are stochastic, the other big tool we'll need is *probability theory*.

Random variables. We'll assume that you are familiar with the concept of a *random variable*, \hat{x} , which is distributed according to some probability distribution $p(x)$:

We'll often write this as $\hat{x} \sim p(x)$ [pronounced “ \hat{x} is distributed according to the distribution $p(x)$ ”]. If we're getting sloppy, we might drop the hat.

Means and variances. The *average* / *mean* / *expected value* of \hat{x} will be denoted by

$$\langle x \rangle \equiv \mathbb{E}[x] \equiv \int x \cdot p(x) dx, \quad (2.20)$$

³You can take a whole course on these topics. If you are interested in learning more, I highly recommend Michael Brenner's *Physical Mathematics* (http://esag.harvard.edu/rice/AM201_Brenner,Michael_Course_Notes_2010.pdf) or Hinch's *Perburbation Methods* book.

while the *variance* (or *mean squared deviation*) is defined by

$$\text{Var}(x) \equiv \sigma_x^2 \equiv \langle x^2 \rangle - \langle x \rangle^2. \quad (2.21)$$

and satisfies the scaling property $\text{Var}(c \cdot x) = c^2 \text{Var}(x)$.

Common distributions. We will assume that you are familiar with some common probability distributions. These include discrete distributions like the *binomial distribution*,

$$n \sim \text{Binomial}(N, p) \implies P(n) = \binom{N}{n} p^n (1-p)^{N-n} \quad (2.22)$$

which models the number of successes in N independent coin flips with success probability p , as well as the *Poisson distribution*,

$$n \sim \text{Poisson}(\langle n \rangle) \implies P(n) = \frac{\langle n \rangle^n}{n!} e^{-\langle n \rangle} \quad (2.23)$$

which is the limiting form of the Binomial distribution when $N \rightarrow \infty$ and $p \rightarrow 0$ with $\langle x \rangle = Np$ held fixed. Another common distribution we'll encounter is the *Gaussian* or *Normal distribution*,

$$x \sim \text{Gaussian}(\mu, \sigma^2) \implies p(x) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi\sigma^2}} e^{-\frac{x^2}{2\sigma^2}}, \quad (2.24)$$

which has mean $\langle x \rangle = \mu$ and variance σ^2 . To save space, we will sometimes write this as $x \sim N(\mu, \sigma^2)$.

Note: *Wikipedia is extremely useful for common probability distributions.⁴ It lists formulas for the means, variances, and other moments (when they are known), as well as useful identities connecting the different distributions.*

⁴e.g. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binomial_distribution.

Joint distributions. We'll also assume you're familiar with the concept of a *joint distribution* of 2 (or more) random variables:

$$p(x, y) = \text{"probability that } \hat{x} = x \text{ and } \hat{y} = y \text{ at the same time"} \quad (2.25)$$

If we know the joint distribution, we can calculate the single-variable distribution (also known as the *marginal distribution*) for one of the variables by integrating over the possible values of the other

$$p(x) \equiv \int p(x, y) dy \quad (2.26)$$

which is sometimes known as the *law of total probability*. We can also define the *conditional probability*,

$$p(x|y) \equiv \frac{p(x, y)}{p(y)} \equiv \text{"probability of } x \text{ given } y" \quad (2.27)$$

An important concept is *statistical independence*, which occurs when the joint distribution factorizes:

$$p(x, y) = p(x)p(y) \quad (2.28)$$

Using the definition of the conditional probability in Eq. (2.27), we can equivalently write this as

$$p(x|y) = p(x) \iff \text{"x is independent of y"} \quad (2.29)$$

Using the definitions above, one can show that for independent random variables,

$$\text{Var}(x + y) = \text{Var}(x) + \text{Var}(y) \quad (2.30)$$

(This is left as an exercise for the reader.)

Moment Generating Functions. One topic that might be new is the concept of a *moment generating function*, defined by

$$H_x(z) \equiv \langle e^{-zx} \rangle = \int e^{-zx} p(x) dx. \quad (2.31)$$

We can also view this as the Laplace transform of the probability density $p(x)$ (or the Fourier transform if we considered imaginary values of z). One can show that the moment generating function contains all the same information as the probability density $p(x)$, so either one of them will suffice for describing the distribution of x . For example, the moment generating function of a Poisson distribution is given by

$$\text{Poisson}(\langle n \rangle) \iff H_n(z) = e^{-\langle n \rangle(1-e^{-z})} \quad (2.32)$$

while the moment generating function of the Gaussian distribution is

$$\text{Gaussian}(\mu, \sigma^2) \iff H_n(z) = e^{-\mu z + \frac{\sigma^2}{2} z^2} \quad (2.33)$$

Why are moment generating functions useful? As their name implies, they are closely connected to the moments of x . If we expand the exponential in Eq. (2.31) for small values of z , we see that

$$\begin{aligned} H_x(z) &= \int \left[1 - zx + \frac{1}{2} z^2 x^2 + \dots \right] p(x) dx \\ &= 1 - z \langle x \rangle + \frac{z^2}{2} \langle x^2 \rangle + \dots \end{aligned} \quad (2.34)$$

so expanding $H_x(z)$ around $z = 0$ lets us read off the moments of x . A useful shortcut is that if we can express $H_x(z)$ as an exponential of some function $\phi(x)$, then

$$H_x(z) = e^{\phi(x)} \implies \phi(x) \approx -\langle x \rangle \cdot z + \frac{1}{2} \cdot \text{Var}(x) \cdot z^2 + \dots \quad (2.35)$$

(This is left as an exercise for the reader.)

The big payoff for moment generating functions is that for *independent random variables*, the generating function of their *sum* satisfies

$$H_{x+y}(z) \equiv \langle e^{-z(x+y)} \rangle = \langle e^{-zx} \cdot e^{-zy} \rangle = \underbrace{\langle e^{-zx} \rangle}_{H_x(z)} \cdot \underbrace{\langle e^{-zy} \rangle}_{H_y(z)} \quad (2.36)$$

This is much easier to calculate than computing the density function of $x + y$ directly.

For related reasons, we will see that in many evolution problems it will often be easier to solve for the generating function $H(z)$ and then invert Eq. (2.31) if we need to find $p(x)$. In practice, this is easiest to do by remembering the generating function for common distributions and then inverting by inspection, as in Eqs. (2.32) and (2.33). (Wikipedia can be extremely useful for this task.)

Central Limit Theorem. Finally, an extremely important result for this course will be the *central limit theorem*. If X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n are independent random variables, then for sufficiently large n ,

$$\sum_{i=1}^n X_i \approx \text{Gaussian} \left[\sum_i \langle x_i \rangle, \sum_i \text{Var}(x_i) \right] \quad (2.37)$$

for certain classes of X_i . If the X_i all the same mean and variance, we will often write this as

$$\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n X_i \approx \langle x \rangle \pm \sqrt{\frac{\text{Var}(X)}{n}} \quad (2.38)$$

which shows that the spread of the mean of a bunch of observations scales like $1/\sqrt{n}$ when n is large. We will explore the limits of this approximation when we consider the Luria-Delbrück experiment in Problem Set 1.