Solution (*b*). The corresponding system of equations is

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 \qquad\quad + 4x_4 &= -1 \\ x_2 \qquad + 2x_4 &= 6 \\ x_3 + 3x_4 &= 2 \end{aligned}$$

Since x_1, x_2, and x_3 correspond to leading 1's in the augmented matrix, we call them ***leading variables***. The nonleading variables (in this case x_4) are called ***free variables***. Solving for the leading variables in terms of the free variable gives

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 &= -1 - 4x_4 \\ x_2 &= 6 - 2x_4 \\ x_3 &= 2 - 3x_4 \end{aligned}$$

From this form of the equations we see that the free variable x_4 can be assigned an arbitrary value, say t, which then determines the values of the leading variables x_1, x_2, and x_3. Thus there are infinitely many solutions, and the general solution is given by the formulas

$$x_1 = -1 - 4t, \quad x_2 = 6 - 2t, \quad x_3 = 2 - 3t, \quad x_4 = t$$

Solution (*c*). The row of zeros leads to the equation $0x_1 + 0x_2 + 0x_3 + 0x_4 + 0x_5 = 0$, which places no restrictions on the solutions (why?). Thus, we can omit this equation and write the corresponding system as

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 + 6x_2 \qquad\qquad + 4x_5 &= -2 \\ x_3 \qquad + 3x_5 &= 1 \\ x_4 + 5x_5 &= 2 \end{aligned}$$

Here the leading variables are x_1, x_3, and x_4, and the free variables are x_2 and x_5. Solving for the leading variables in terms of the free variables gives

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 &= -2 - 6x_2 - 4x_5 \\ x_3 &= 1 - 3x_5 \\ x_4 &= 2 - 5x_5 \end{aligned}$$

Since x_5 can be assigned an arbitrary value, t, and x_2 can be assigned an arbitrary value, s, there are infinitely many solutions. The general solution is given by the formulas

$$x_1 = -2 - 6s - 4t, \quad x_2 = s, \quad x_3 = 1 - 3t, \quad x_4 = 2 - 5t, \quad x_5 = t$$

Solution (*d*). The last equation in the corresponding system of equations is

$$0x_1 + 0x_2 + 0x_3 = 1$$

Since this equation cannot be satisfied, there is no solution to the system. ◆

Elimination Methods We have just seen how easy it is to solve a system of linear equations once its augmented matrix is in reduced row-echelon form. Now we shall give a step-by-step ***elimination*** procedure that can be used to reduce any matrix to reduced row-echelon form. As we state each step in the procedure, we shall illustrate the idea by reducing the following matrix to reduced row-echelon form.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 0 & 0 & -2 & 0 & 7 & 12 \\ 2 & 4 & -10 & 6 & 12 & 28 \\ 2 & 4 & -5 & 6 & -5 & -1 \end{bmatrix}$$

Step 1. Locate the leftmost column that does not consist entirely of zeros.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 0 & 0 & -2 & 0 & 7 & 12 \\ 2 & 4 & -10 & 6 & 12 & 28 \\ 2 & 4 & -5 & 6 & -5 & -1 \end{bmatrix}$$

Leftmost nonzero column

Step 2. Interchange the top row with another row, if necessary, to bring a nonzero entry to the top of the column found in Step 1.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 2 & 4 & -10 & 6 & 12 & 28 \\ 0 & 0 & -2 & 0 & 7 & 12 \\ 2 & 4 & -5 & 6 & -5 & -1 \end{bmatrix}$$

The first and second rows in the preceding matrix were interchanged.

Step 3. If the entry that is now at the top of the column found in Step 1 is a, multiply the first row by $1/a$ in order to introduce a leading 1.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 2 & -5 & 3 & 6 & 14 \\ 0 & 0 & -2 & 0 & 7 & 12 \\ 2 & 4 & -5 & 6 & -5 & -1 \end{bmatrix}$$

The first row of the preceding matrix was multiplied by $\frac{1}{2}$.

Step 4. Add suitable multiples of the top row to the rows below so that all entries below the leading 1 become zeros.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 2 & -5 & 3 & 6 & 14 \\ 0 & 0 & -2 & 0 & 7 & 12 \\ 0 & 0 & 5 & 0 & -17 & -29 \end{bmatrix}$$

-2 times the first row of the preceding matrix was added to the third row.

Step 5. Now cover the top row in the matrix and begin again with Step 1 applied to the submatrix that remains. Continue in this way until the *entire* matrix is in row-echelon form.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 2 & -5 & 3 & 6 & 14 \\ 0 & 0 & -2 & 0 & 7 & 12 \\ 0 & 0 & 5 & 0 & -17 & -29 \end{bmatrix}$$

0 0 -5 0 15

Leftmost nonzero column in the submatrix

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 2 & -5 & 3 & 6 & 14 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & -\frac{7}{2} & -6 \\ 0 & 0 & 5 & 0 & -17 & -29 \end{bmatrix}$$

The first row in the submatrix was multiplied by $-\frac{1}{2}$ to introduce a leading 1.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 2 & -5 & 3 & 6 & 14 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & -\frac{7}{2} & -6 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & \frac{1}{2} & 1 \end{bmatrix}$$

-5 times the first row of the submatrix was added to the second row of the submatrix to introduce a zero below the leading 1.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 2 & -5 & 3 & 6 & 14 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & -\frac{7}{2} & -6 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & \frac{1}{2} & 1 \end{bmatrix}$$

The top row in the submatrix was covered, and we returned again to Step 1.

Leftmost nonzero column in the new submatrix

5×3/5

5

1/5

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 2 & -5 & 3 & 6 & 14 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & -\frac{7}{2} & -6 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 \end{bmatrix}$$

← The first (and only) row in the new submatrix was multiplied by 2 to introduce a leading 1.

The *entire* matrix is now in row-echelon form. To find the reduced row-echelon form we need the following additional step.

Step 6. Beginning with the last nonzero row and working upward, add suitable multiples of each row to the rows above to introduce zeros above the leading 1's.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 2 & -5 & 3 & 6 & 14 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 \end{bmatrix}$$

← $\frac{7}{2}$ times the third row of the preceding matrix was added to the second row.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 2 & -5 & 3 & 0 & 2 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 \end{bmatrix}$$

← -6 times the third row was added to the first row.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 2 & 0 & 3 & 0 & 7 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 \end{bmatrix}$$

← 5 times the second row was added to the first row.

The last matrix is in reduced row-echelon form.

If we use only the first five steps, the above procedure produces a row-echelon form and is called *Gaussian elimination*. Carrying the procedure through to the sixth step and producing a matrix in reduced row-echelon form is called ***Gauss–Jordan elimination***.

REMARK. It can be shown that *every matrix has a unique reduced row-echelon form*; that is, one will arrive at the same reduced row-echelon form for a given matrix no matter how the row operations are varied. (A proof of this result can be found in the article "The Reduced Row Echelon Form of a Matrix Is Unique: A Simple Proof," by Thomas Yuster, *Mathematics Magazine*, Vol. 57, No. 2, 1984, pp. 93–94.) In contrast, *a row-echelon form of a given matrix is not unique*: different sequences of row operations can produce different row-echelon forms.

EXAMPLE 4 Gauss–Jordan Elimination

Solve by Gauss–Jordan elimination.

$$\begin{aligned}
x_1 + 3x_2 - 2x_3 \qquad\qquad + 2x_5 \qquad\qquad &= 0 \\
2x_1 + 6x_2 - 5x_3 - 2x_4 + 4x_5 - 3x_6 &= -1 \\
5x_3 + 10x_4 \qquad\qquad + 15x_6 &= 5 \\
2x_1 + 6x_2 \qquad\qquad + 8x_4 + 4x_5 + 18x_6 &= 6
\end{aligned}$$

Solution.

The augmented matrix for the system is

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 3 & -2 & 0 & 2 & 0 & 0 \\ 2 & 6 & -5 & -2 & 4 & -3 & -1 \\ 0 & 0 & 5 & 10 & 0 & 15 & 5 \\ 2 & 6 & 0 & 8 & 4 & 18 & 6 \end{bmatrix}$$

Karl Friedrich Gauss

Wilhelm Jordan

Karl Friedrich Gauss (1777–1855) was a German mathematician and scientist. Sometimes called the "prince of mathematicians," Gauss ranks with Isaac Newton and Archimedes as one of the three greatest mathematicians who ever lived. In the entire history of mathematics there may never have been a child so precocious as Gauss—by his own account he worked out the rudiments of arithmetic before he could talk. One day, before he was even three years old, his genius became apparent to his parents in a very dramatic way. His father was preparing the weekly payroll for the laborers under his charge while the boy watched quietly from a corner. At the end of the long and tedious calculation, Gauss informed his father that there was an error in the result and stated the answer, which he had worked out in his head. To the astonishment of his parents, a check of the computations showed Gauss to be correct!

In his doctoral dissertation Gauss gave the first complete proof of the fundamental theorem of algebra, which states that every polynomial equation has as many solutions as its degree. At age 19 he solved a problem that baffled Euclid, inscribing a regular polygon of seventeen sides in a circle using straightedge and compass; and in 1801, at age 24, he published his first masterpiece, *Disquisitiones Arithmeticae*, considered by many to be one of the most brilliant achievements in mathematics. In that paper Gauss systematized the study of number theory (properties of the integers) and formulated the basic concepts that form the foundation of the subject.

Among his myriad achievements, Gauss discovered the Gaussian or "bell-shaped" curve that is fundamental in probability, gave the first geometric interpretation of complex numbers and established their fundamental role in mathematics, developed methods of characterizing surfaces intrinsically by means of the curves that they contain, developed the theory of conformal (angle-preserving) maps, and discovered non-Euclidean geometry 30 years before the ideas were published by others. In physics he made major contributions to the theory of lenses and capillary action, and with Wilhelm Weber he did fundamental work in electromagnetism. Gauss invented the heliotrope, bifilar magnetometer, and an electrotelegraph.

Gauss was deeply religious and aristocratic in demeanor. He mastered foreign languages with ease, read extensively, and enjoyed mineralogy and botany as hobbies. He disliked teaching and was usually cool and discouraging to other mathematicians, possibly because he had already anticipated their work. It has been said that if Gauss had published all of his discoveries, the current state of mathematics would be advanced by 50 years. He was without a doubt the greatest mathematician of the modern era.

Wilhelm Jordan (1842–1899) was a German engineer who specialized in geodesy. His contribution to solving linear systems appeared in his popular book, *Handbuch der Vermessungskunde* (*Handbook of Geodesy*), in 1888.

Adding -2 times the first row to the second and fourth rows gives

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 3 & -2 & 0 & 2 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & -1 & -2 & 0 & -3 & -1 \\ 0 & 0 & 5 & 10 & 0 & 15 & 5 \\ 0 & 0 & 4 & 8 & 0 & 18 & 6 \end{bmatrix}$$

Multiplying the second row by -1 and then adding -5 times the new second row to the third row and -4 times the new second row to the fourth row gives

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 3 & -2 & 0 & 2 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 & 0 & 3 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 6 & 2 \end{bmatrix}$$

Interchanging the third and fourth rows and then multiplying the third row of the resulting matrix by $\frac{1}{6}$ gives the row-echelon form

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 3 & -2 & 0 & 2 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 & 0 & 3 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & \frac{1}{3} \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

Adding -3 times the third row to the second row and then adding 2 times the second row of the resulting matrix to the first row yields the reduced row-echelon form

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 3 & 0 & 4 & 2 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & \frac{1}{3} \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

The corresponding system of equations is

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 + 3x_2 \qquad + 4x_4 + 2x_5 \qquad &= 0 \\ x_3 + 2x_4 \qquad\qquad &= 0 \\ x_6 &= \tfrac{1}{3} \end{aligned}$$

(We have discarded the last equation, $0x_1 + 0x_2 + 0x_3 + 0x_4 + 0x_5 + 0x_6 = 0$, since it will be satisfied automatically by the solutions of the remaining equations.) Solving for the leading variables, we obtain

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 &= -3x_2 - 4x_4 - 2x_5 \\ x_3 &= -2x_4 \\ x_6 &= \tfrac{1}{3} \end{aligned}$$

If we assign the free variables x_2, x_4, and x_5 arbitrary values r, s, and t, respectively, the general solution is given by the formulas

$$x_1 = -3r - 4s - 2t, \quad x_2 = r, \quad x_3 = -2s, \quad x_4 = s, \quad x_5 = t, \quad x_6 = \tfrac{1}{3} \quad \blacklozenge$$

Back-Substitution It is sometimes preferable to solve a system of linear equations by using Gaussian elimination to bring the augmented matrix into row-echelon form without continuing all the way to the reduced row-echelon form. When this is done, the corresponding system of equations can be solved by a technique called ***back-substitution***. The next example illustates the idea.

EXAMPLE 5 Example 4 Solved by Back-Substitution

From the computations in Example 4, a row-echelon form of the augmented matrix is

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 3 & -2 & 0 & 2 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 2 & 0 & 3 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & \frac{1}{3} \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

To solve the corresponding system of equations

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 + 3x_2 - 2x_3 \quad\quad + 2x_5 \quad\quad &= 0 \\ x_3 + 2x_4 \quad\quad + 3x_6 &= 1 \\ x_6 &= \tfrac{1}{3} \end{aligned}$$

we proceed as follows:

Step 1. Solve the equations for the leading variables.

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 &= -3x_2 + 2x_3 - 2x_5 \\ x_3 &= 1 - 2x_4 - 3x_6 \\ x_6 &= \tfrac{1}{3} \end{aligned}$$

Step 2. Beginning with the bottom equation and working upward, successively substitute each equation into all the equations above it.

Substituting $x_6 = \frac{1}{3}$ into the second equation yields

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 &= -3x_2 + 2x_3 - 2x_5 \\ x_3 &= -2x_4 \\ x_6 &= \tfrac{1}{3} \end{aligned}$$

Substituting $x_3 = -2x_4$ into the first equation yields

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 &= -3x_2 - 4x_4 - 2x_5 \\ x_3 &= -2x_4 \\ x_6 &= \tfrac{1}{3} \end{aligned}$$

Step 3. Assign arbitrary values to the free variables, if any.

If we assign x_2, x_4, and x_5 the arbitrary values r, s, and t, respectively, the general solution is given by the formulas

$$x_1 = -3r - 4s - 2t, \quad x_2 = r, \quad x_3 = -2s, \quad x_4 = s, \quad x_5 = t, \quad x_6 = \tfrac{1}{3}$$

This agrees with the solution obtained in Example 4. ◆

REMARK. The arbitrary values that are assigned to the free variables are often called ***parameters***. Although we shall generally use the letters $r, s, t, \ldots$ for the parameters, any letters that do not conflict with the variable names may be used.

EXAMPLE 6 Gaussian Elimination

Solve

$$\begin{aligned} x + y + 2z &= 9 \\ 2x + 4y - 3z &= 1 \\ 3x + 6y - 5z &= 0 \end{aligned}$$

by Gaussian elimination and back-substitution.

Solution.

This is the system in Example 3 of Section 1.1. In that example we converted the augmented matrix

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 & 2 & 9 \\ 2 & 4 & -3 & 1 \\ 3 & 6 & -5 & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

to the row-echelon form

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 & 2 & 9 \\ 0 & 1 & -\frac{7}{2} & -\frac{17}{2} \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 3 \end{bmatrix}$$

The system corresponding to this matrix is

$$\begin{aligned} x + y + 2z &= 9 \\ y - \tfrac{7}{2}z &= -\tfrac{17}{2} \\ z &= 3 \end{aligned}$$

Solving for the leading variables yields

$$\begin{aligned} x &= 9 - y - 2z \\ y &= -\tfrac{17}{2} + \tfrac{7}{2}z \\ z &= 3 \end{aligned}$$

Substituting the bottom equation into those above yields

$$\begin{aligned} x &= 3 - y \\ y &= 2 \\ z &= 3 \end{aligned}$$

and substituting the second equation into the top yields $x = 1, y = 2, z = 3$. This agrees with the result found by Gauss–Jordan elimination in Example 3 of Section 1.1. ♦

Homogeneous Linear Systems A system of linear equations is said to be ***homogeneous*** if the constant terms are all zero; that is, the system has the form

$$\begin{aligned} a_{11}x_1 + a_{12}x_2 + \cdots + a_{1n}x_n &= 0 \\ a_{21}x_1 + a_{22}x_2 + \cdots + a_{2n}x_n &= 0 \\ \vdots \qquad \vdots \qquad\qquad \vdots \quad &\quad \vdots \\ a_{m1}x_1 + a_{m2}x_2 + \cdots + a_{mn}x_n &= 0 \end{aligned}$$

Every homogeneous system of linear equations is consistent, since all such systems have $x_1 = 0, x_2 = 0, \ldots, x_n = 0$ as a solution. This solution is called the ***trivial solution***; if there are other solutions, they are called ***nontrivial solutions***.

Because a homogeneous linear system always has the trivial solution, there are only two possibilities for its solutions:

- The system has only the trivial solution.
- The system has infinitely many solutions in addition to the trivial solution.

In the special case of a homogeneous linear system of two equations in two unknowns, say

$$\begin{aligned} a_1x + b_1y &= 0 \quad (a_1, b_1 \text{ not both zero}) \\ a_2x + b_2y &= 0 \quad (a_2, b_2 \text{ not both zero}) \end{aligned}$$