Chapter 2

Introduction to CFD

2.1 Background and Motivation

Computational fluid dynamics, commonly known by its abbreviation CFD, is made of three words. The word 'computational' stands for techniques which can be programmed effectively to solve problems using computers. The techniques used in CFD are numerical in nature and computers are used to do repetitive logical computations. The words, 'fluid and dynamics' means related to gases and liquids in motion and being acted upon by forces or imparting forces on other objects. However, the currently available software using the CFD techniques are not limited only to fluid dynamics. The techniques learnt in CFD are applicable to any physical phenomena which can be modeled in form of partial differential equations (PDEs) or integral equations. The governing equations for a well understood physical phenomenon, under the assumption of continuum, is fairly easy to obtain and test for simple problems. On the other hand, solving these PDEs for complicated geometries (for real world applications) and arbitrary time scales is not very easy and in many cases general closed form solutions are not possible even with extreme mathematical rigor. This is where CFD techniques come in for rescue.

2.2 Applications

The areas in which CFD techniques are applied are enormous and evolving. As a matter of fact, if you have an unsolved problem defined as a PDE or integral equations, than you can apply CFD techniques to solve your problem. As such, the areas of application are continuously growing. Some of these applications are in the fields listed below.

- Aerospace engineering
- Automobile engineering
- Civil engineering
- Chemical engineering
- Shipbuilding engineering
- Internal Combustion Engines
- Wildfire simulations

- Evacuation planning
- Ground water simulations
- Petroleum explorations
- Weather predictions
- Biomedical applications
- Entertainment industry
- Pollution control

TODO: Add pictures of applications

This list is in no way a comprehensive list, as there are countless applications where CFD is relied upon for quick decision making and saving lot of money. In general, CFD is used for simulating conditions where analytical tools are inadequate and experiments are too expensive, hazardous or just not possible. In fact, if you type any of these applications in your favorite internet search engine, you will find lot of examples where CFD is used.

2.3   How Does CFD Work?

The process of CFD is made up of the following three steps:

1. **Pre-processing** or setting up the problem and geometry and making it solvable by computer.

2. **Solving** or numerical manipulations to solve for the parameters of interest at required points in space and time.

3. **Post-processing** or displaying results so that the solution is presented in a much more understandable way, then just numbers.

These three steps are explained with a simple example problem by solving the differential equation for hydrostatic law. Consider a problem, where we need to calculate the pressure under the ocean at a depth of $H = 400$m below the water level. The differential equation is the well known hydrostatic law given by, $dp = \rho g\,dh$, where p is the pressure, ρ is the density, $g = 9.81$ m/s^2 is the acceleration due to gravity and h is the depth. To make things interesting, let us assume that the density is a function of height given by $\rho = (1000 + h)$ kg/m^3. A schematic of this problem is shown in figure 2.1.
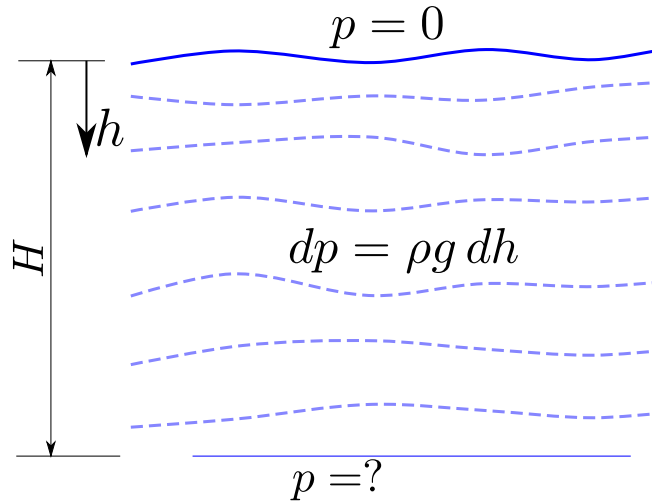

Figure 2.1: Calculation of pressure under the ocean

Before attempting to solve this problem numerically, let us solve it analytically using the rules of calculus. Integrating the differential equation between $h_0 = 0$m and $h = 400$m, we get,

$$\int_0^p dp = \int_0^{h=H} g\,(1000 + h)\ dh \tag{2.1}$$

$$\implies p = 9.81 \times \left(1000 \times H + \frac{H^2}{2}\right) \tag{2.2}$$

$$\implies p|_{h=400} = 9.81 \times \left(1000 \times 400 + \frac{400^2}{2}\right) = \mathbf{4708800}\text{Pa}. \tag{2.3}$$

This is the exact solution of pressure governed by the differential equation at a depth of $h = 400$m, with the assumed density distribution. Some observations that one can make here are,

1. We have obtained a closed form solution. In other words, we may substitute any value of depth in place of h to obtain an exact solution of pressure as required.

2. However, if the density function was complicated then carrying out the integration would have been very difficult. In fact, for problems in two or three dimensions it may not be possible to integrate complicated functions over a general geometry analytically.

Now let us attempt to solve this problem numerically. Before we start, we need to understand that computers cannot efficiently work with continuous equations or obtain closed form solutions. So we need to prepare the geometry and equations in a discrete form, also known as the **pre-processing** step. The basic idea is to divide the domain (fluid depth), where we want to apply the differential equation, into smaller parts so that the integration can be performed numerically. This process of division of geometry is also known as meshing or grid generation. This being a simple equation with one independent variable h, the domain can be represented by a straight line. It is therefore very easy to divide the domain by laying down N number of points as shown in figure 2.2.
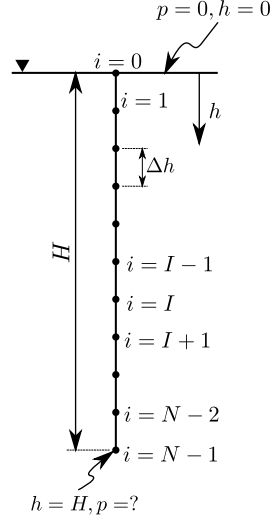
Figure 2.2: Discretized domain for ocean depth

The N grid points are numbered as $i = 0, 1, 2, \ldots, N-1$; and the corresponding depths and pressures are denoted as $h_0, h_1, h_2, \ldots, h_{N-1}$ and $p_0, p_1, p_2, \ldots, p_{N-1}$ respectively. Using the definition of derivatives we may write,

$$\frac{dp}{dh} = \lim_{\Delta h \to 0} \frac{p(h) - p(h - \Delta h)}{\Delta h}. \tag{2.4}$$

Assuming that the value of Δh is very small, we may drop the limit to obtain an approximation for the derivative as,

$$\frac{dp}{dh} \approx \frac{p(h) - p(h - \Delta h)}{\Delta h}. \tag{2.5}$$

Evaluating the derivative at an arbitrary point, $i = I$, in the domain we can write the above equation as,

$$\frac{dp}{dh} \approx \frac{p(h_I) - p(h_I - \Delta h)}{\Delta h} = \frac{p_I - p_{I-1}}{\Delta h}. \tag{2.6}$$

This is the end of the pre processing stage of CFD process.

The **solver** step starts by substituting the discretized form (2.6) of derivatives into the governing equation (hydrostatic law) to obtain an approximate form of governing equation. The governing equation,

$$\frac{dp}{dh} = \rho g, \tag{2.7}$$

may be therefore written at point, $i = I$, as,

$$\frac{p_I - p_{I-1}}{\Delta h} = \rho_I g. \tag{2.8}$$

$$p_I = p_{I-1} + \rho_I g \Delta h. \tag{2.9}$$

Here, ρ_I is the density at point I, which can be easily obtained by using the function for density as $\rho_I = (1000 + h_I)$ and the value of depth $h_I = h_0 + I \, \Delta h = I \, \Delta h$, assuming uniform division of the domain. The approximate form

of the governing equation is basically an algebraic equation which can be solved by a computer to obtain an approximate solution. Writing equation (2.9) for point $i = 1$, we get,

$$p_1 = p_0 + \rho_1 g \Delta h, \tag{2.10}$$

$$p_1 = p_0 + (1000 + 1 \times \Delta h) \, g \, \Delta h. \tag{2.11}$$

Since the gauge pressure at the surface of the ocean can be taken as zero, $p_0 = 0$, this results in

$$p_1 = (1000 + \Delta h) \times 9.81 \times \Delta h \tag{2.12}$$

This is the numerically calculated pressure for point $i = 1$. The value of Δh depends on the number of divisions chosen for discretization of the domain. If we choose $N = 5$, then $\Delta h = H/4$, since there are 4 parts of the domain with 5 points. In general we will get $\Delta h = H/(N-1)$. Continuing with the calculation of pressure for the next few points $i = 2$, $i = 3$ and $i = 4$ using equation (2.9) we get,

$$p_2 = p_1 + (1000 + 2 \times \Delta h) \times 9.81 \times \Delta h \tag{2.13}$$

$$p_3 = p_2 + (1000 + 3 \times \Delta h) \times 9.81 \times \Delta h \tag{2.14}$$

$$p_4 = p_3 + (1000 + 4 \times \Delta h) \times 9.81 \times \Delta h \tag{2.15}$$

It can be observed that we can progressively calculate the value of pressure at grid points with increasing depth applying (2.9) again and again. Let us now manually do some calculations to obtain the pressure values at various grid points. Let us choose $N = 5$, therefore $\Delta h = 400/4 = 100$. Substituting Δh in (2.12) we can obtain a solution as $p_1 = (1000 + 100) \times 9.81 \times 100 = \mathbf{1079100}$Pa. The unit of the pressure as Pascal is an outcome of using consistent standard units for all the the substitutions. Computers do not understand physical units, so we need to make sure that all numbers are in consistent standard units. Moving on, let us now calculate the pressure at point 2. Now using equation (2.13) we can substitute the already calculated value of p_1 and Δh to obtain the pressure p_2. Therefore, $p_2 = 1079100 + (1000 + 2 \times 100) \times 9.81 \times 100 = \mathbf{2256300}$Pa. Continuing the calculation let us now use (2.14) for calculation of pressure at point 3 which turns out to be $p_3 = 2256300 + (1000 + 3 \times 100) \times 9.81 \times 100 = \mathbf{3531600}$Pa. Finally, the value that we are interested in $p_4 = 3531600 + (1000 + 4 \times 100) \times 9.81 \times 100 = \mathbf{4905000}$Pa. Compare this value to the analytically calculated value of 4708800Pa. There is such a huge error $(4905000 - 4708800) = 196200$Pa. But if we look at the percentage error it turns out to be, $100 \times 196200/4708800 = 4.17\%$. The behavior of error and its understanding is very important and we will look at it briefly in the next section. But before we do that, let us make a couple of observations to contradict with the analytical solutions. The numerical solutions obtained have the following characteristics:

1. The solution process did not require any application of the rules of calculus. The approximate integration was done purely by algebraic additions, which computers can perform easily. This is beneficial as the process can be generalized to very complex geometries.

2. The solution is obtained only at few discrete points along the depth. We do not have a continuous solution and therefore this is more of an engineering solution. If you want to analyze the solution mathematically then this is of not much use.

This is the end of the solver step and next step in the CFD process is post processing.

The **post-processing** step mostly refers to visualization of the data produced by the solver in a meaningful manner. However, it may mean other things like generation of report or passing on the data as input to other processes. The visualization of data can be done in numerous ways, like line or point graph, histogram or bar charts, contour plots, generation of images from the data etc. For visualization of our data I have used the matplotlib library from Python to draw a simple line plot of pressure versus depth as shown in figure 2.3.
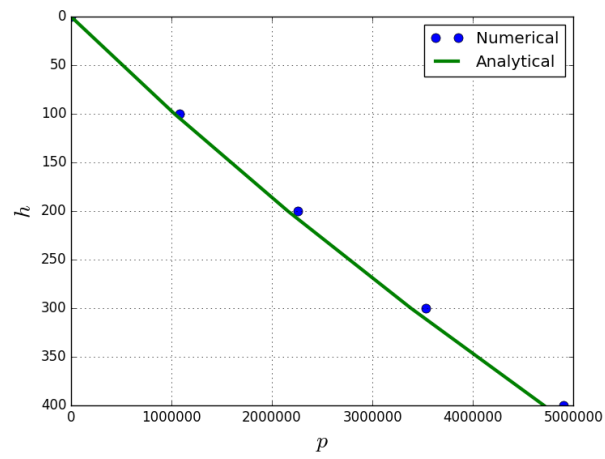
Figure 2.3: Visualization of pressure variation versus depth (post processing step)