

Differential Equations

R (Chandra) Chandrasekhar

2025-02-17 | 2025-02-17

Isaac Newton was the first to glimpse this secret of the universe. He found that the orbits of the planets, the rhythm of the tides, and the trajectories of cannonballs could all be described, explained, and predicted by a small set of differential equations. Today we call them Newton's laws of motion and gravity. Ever since Newton, we have found that the same pattern holds whenever we uncover a new part of the universe. From the old elements of earth, air, fire, and water to the latest in electrons, quarks, black holes, and superstrings, every inanimate thing in the universe bends to the rule of differential equations. I bet this is what Feynman meant when he said that calculus is the language God talks. If anything deserves to be called the secret of the universe, calculus is it.

STEVEN STROGATZ
Infinite Powers, [1]

A Promise kept

You might recall from my blog [Expressions, Equations, and Formulae](#) that my friend Solus “Sol” Simkin had asked me to write on differential equations as well, when he first requested a blog. This blog is my promise kept to him.

A Gentle Entry

When you make a cup of tea, you must allow time for the tea to infuse. Likewise, with a cup of coffee, you need percolation time. With new knowledge, it is no different. You need time to allow the new knowledge to steep into your mind and find its place alongside old knowledge. It is only then that you become comfortable with what is new. Be gentle on yourself if things do not pop out of the page at once. You are making friends with mathematical ideas that took centuries to evolve and mature.

To many students, mathematics is daunting, calculus even more so, and differential equations are downright terrifying. Nevertheless, there are authors who tame the subject rather than taunt the student. They approach the subject leisurely, allowing the reader to enjoy the view, and explaining interesting sights along the way. There are others who use pictures in preference to words. I have chosen two books—one from each category—as recommended books to read, along with this blog, or even before it. Here are my two selections.

Steven Strogatz

The applied mathematician **Steven Strogatz** is one of my favourite authors active in the popular mathematics genre today. He knows how to interest, educate, and sometimes, even entertain. Learning becomes easy and enjoyable as a consequence. He has written a masterful popularization of calculus, its history, techniques, significance, and applications, entitled *Infinite Powers: How calculus reveals the secrets of the universe* [1]. Make the effort to read this book—even if it is a little at a time—and complete it. You will become a better scholar as a result, and calculus will become your friend.

Blanchard, Devaney, and Hall

The second recommendation, a textbook by three authors, is the result of a radical departure in the teaching of differential equations—from being a hodgepodge of mundane and special techniques, memorized and regurgitated, to a fascinating picture of how nature unfolds in time. The pedagogy of the book leverages the ubiquity of computing technology to enable a syncretic view and more profound appreciation of differential equations as the time-evolution of natural systems. Their book is called, unsurprisingly, *Differential Equations* and is in its fourth edition [2]. It is not a book that you need to work through, but one you should consult for its approach and ideas. The earnest student will also doubtless, tackle a few problems! 😊.

Newton's Second Law

Perhaps the very first encounter with differential equations occurs, for most people, with the statement of **Newton's Second Law of Motion**. It is usually stated as *the net force on a body is proportional to the rate of change of the body's momentum*.

Wait a minute! Is this not physics? Yes, it is. But is it also mathematics? Yes indeed. Let us not quibble over how we divide knowledge into compartments. Let us instead consider knowledge as a porthole with which to view Nature. Nature behaves as Nature does. But humankind has imposed disciplinary barriers into the framework of human knowledge. Let us not respect those barriers or be deterred by them.

Differential equations

Classification

ODE/homogeneous and links to polynomials <https://math.stackexchange.com/questions/3614864/why-are-most-natural-phenomena-described-using-differential-equations>

<https://math.stackexchange.com/questions/3782499/is-there-a-reason-it-is-so-rare-we-can-solve-differential-equations>

Idea of a function must be clarified.

Where time and or space vary

DEs model physical phenomena where time and space vary along with possibly other variables.

Linear differential equations with constant coefficients

Examples of LDEs in real life

Spring under displacement

Wave motion

Simple pendulum

Electric circuits

Physics

<https://www.quora.com/What-are-some-real-world-phenomena-that-can-be-described-by-using-differential-equations>

<https://www.physicsforums.com/insights/differential-equation-systems-and-nature/>

<https://math.stackexchange.com/questions/3614864/why-are-most-natural-phenomena-described-using-differential-equations>

Schrödinger equation etc.

Nonlinear DEs

Weather forecasting Chaos etc.

Population growth and Logistic equation

Predator-prey models

Catenary

Acknowledgements

Feedback

Please **email me** your comments and corrections.

A PDF version of this article is **available for download here**:

<https://swanlotus.netlify.app/blogs/differential-equations.pdf>

References

- [1] Steven H Strogatz. 2019. *Infinite Powers: How calculus reveals the secrets of the universe*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- [2] Paul Blanchard and Robert L Devaney and Glen R Hall. 2012. *Differential Equations* (4th ed.). Brooks Cole/Cengage Learning.