1   17.3: Conservative Vector Fields

Definition. (Simple and Closed Curves)
Suppose a curve C (in $\mathbb{R}^2$ or $\mathbb{R}^3$) is described parametrically by $\mathbf{r}(t)$, where $a \le t \le b$. Then C is a **simple curve** if $\mathbf{r}(t_1) \ne \mathbf{r}(t_2)$ for all t_1 and t_2, with $a < t_1 < t_2 < b$; that is, C never intersects itself between its endpoints. The curve C is **closed** if $\mathbf{r}(a) = \mathbf{r}(b)$; that is, the initial and terminal points of C are the same.

Definition. (Connected and Simply Connected Regions)
An open region R in $\mathbb{R}^2$ (or D in $\mathbb{R}^3$) is **connected** if it is possible to connect any two points of R by a continuous curve lying in R. An open region R is **simply connected** if every closed simple curve in R can be deformed and contracted to a point in R.

Definition. (Conservative Vector Field)
A vector field $\mathbf{F}$ is said to be **conservative** on a region (in $\mathbb{R}^2$ or $\mathbb{R}^3$) if there exists a scalar function φ such that $\mathbf{F} = \nabla\varphi$ on that region.

Theorem 17.3: Test for Conservative Vector Fields
Let $\mathbf{F} = \langle f, g, h \rangle$ be a vector field defined on a connected and simply connected region D of $\mathbb{R}^3$, where f, g, and h have continuous first partial derivatives on D. Then $\mathbf{F}$ is a conservative vector field on D (there is a potential function φ such that $\mathbf{F} = \nabla\varphi$) if and only if
$$\frac{\partial f}{\partial y} = \frac{\partial g}{\partial x}, \qquad \frac{\partial f}{\partial z} = \frac{\partial h}{\partial x}, \qquad \text{and} \qquad \frac{\partial g}{\partial z} = \frac{\partial h}{\partial y}.$$
For vector fields in $\mathbb{R}^2$, we have the single condition $\dfrac{\partial f}{\partial y} = \dfrac{\partial g}{\partial x}$.

Procedure: Finding Potential Functions in $\mathbb{R}^3$
Suppose $\mathbf{F} = \langle f, g, h \rangle$ is a conservative vector field. To find φ such that $\mathbf{F} = \nabla\varphi$, use the following steps:

1. Integrate $\varphi_x = f$ with respect to x to obtain φ, which includes an arbitrary function $c(y, z)$.

2. Compute φ_y and equate it to g to obtain an expression for $c_y(y, z)$.

3. Integrate $c_y(y, z)$ with respect to y to obtain $c(y, z)$, including an arbitrary function $d(z)$.

4. Compute φ_z and equate it to h to get $d(z)$.

A similar procedure beginning with $\varphi_y = g$ or $\varphi_z = h$ may be easier in some cases.

Theorem 17.4: Fundamental Theorem for Line Integrals
Let R be a region in $\mathbb{R}^2$ or $\mathbb{R}^3$ and let φ be a differentiable potential function defined on R. If $\mathbf{F} = \nabla\varphi$ (which means that $\mathbf{F}$ is conservative), then

$$\int_C \mathbf{F} \cdot \mathbf{T}\, ds = \int_C \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = \varphi(B) - \varphi(A),$$

for all points A and B in R and all piecewise-smooth oriented curves C in R from A to B.

Definition. (Independence of Path)
Let $\mathbf{F}$ be a continuous vector field with domain R. If $\int_{C_1} \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = \int_{C_2} \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r}$ for all piecewise-smooth curves C_1 and C_2 in R with the same initial and terminal points, then the line integral is **independent of path**.

Theorem 17.5
Let $\mathbf{F}$ be a continuous vector field on an open connected region R in $\mathbb{R}^2$. If $\int_C \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r}$ is independent of path, then $\mathbf{F}$ is conservative; that is, there exists a potential function φ such that $\mathbf{F} = \nabla\varphi$ on R.

Line Integrals on Closed Curves
Let R be on open connected region in $\mathbb{R}^2$ or $\mathbb{R}^3$. Then $\mathbf{F}$ is a conservative vector field on R if and only if $\oint_C \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = 0$ on all simple closed piecewise-smooth oriented curves C in R.