Numerical Methods for PDEs: An Interactive Journey

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Chapter 1

Numerical Methods for PDEs: An Interactive Journey

Chapter 2

Welcome

Welcome to this interactive journey through **Numerical Methods for Partial Differential Equations (PDEs)**.

You will explore the subject through **dialogues between Acharya and Pavni**, discovering history, classification, and numerical methods step by step.

2.1 Levels

- Level 1: Origins of PDEs
- Level 2: Classification of PDEs
- Level 3: Physical Interpretation and boundary conditions
- Level 4: Finite Difference Methods- Introduction with application to the Heat Eqaution
- Level 5 : Hyperbolic PDEs - Wave Equation

Chapter 3

Stay tuned as new levels unlock — from classification of PDEs to discretization techniques and beyond!

Chapter 4

Level 1: A Historical Glimpse of PDEs

Pavni: Acharya, where did all these partial differential equations come from? They seem so abstract.

Acharya: Ah, Pavni, they did not begin in abstraction. They began with strings, heat, and the mysteries of the heavens.

Pavni: Strings? You mean music?

Acharya: Exactly! In 1746, *d'Alembert* studied how a vibrating string produces sound. From that, he wrote down the **wave equation**. Soon after, *Euler* extended it to drums and membranes. So you see, music and mathematics are deeply connected.

Pavni: That's beautiful! And the heat equation?

Acharya: That came from *Joseph Fourier* in the early 1800s. He asked: *How does heat spread through a solid body?* His answer was the **heat equation**, and in solving it he gave us the gift of **Fourier series**.

Pavni: So Fourier series were born from studying heat?

Acharya: Precisely. And then *Laplace* studied gravitational attraction and derived the **Laplace equation**, describing potentials in physics. *Poisson* later generalized it with the **Poisson equation**, where sources appear inside the field.

Pavni: So each new equation came from a real phenomenon.

Acharya: Just so. Later, in the 19th century, *Navier* and *Stokes* wrote down the equations of fluid motion — the **Navier–Stokes equations**. Even today, their mysteries are not fully solved.

Pavni: (smiling) So PDEs are not just formulas on paper. They are echoes of sound, flows of heat, gravity, and water.

Acharya: Well said, Pavni. They are the language by which nature speaks to us.

Chapter 5

Level 2: Classification of PDEs

Pavni: Acharya, last time you told me how PDEs were born from strings, heat, and flows. But there seem to be so many kinds of PDEs. How do we organize them?

Acharya: A good question, Pavni. Mathematicians classify PDEs in several ways, much like a botanist classifies plants. Let us begin with the simplest.

Pavni: I am listening.

Acharya: First, by **order**. A PDE is first-order if the highest derivative is first order, second-order if the highest is second, and so on. For example, the transport equation $u_t + cu_x = 0$ is first-order, while the heat equation $u_t = \alpha u_{xx}$ is second-order.

Pavni: That part seems simple enough. What else?

Acharya: Next comes **linearity**. A PDE is linear if the unknown function and its derivatives appear only linearly — not multiplied together, not inside a sine or square. The heat equation is linear. But if you had a term like uu_x, that would make it nonlinear.

Pavni: So, nonlinear PDEs are trickier?

Acharya: Very much so! Nonlinearity makes life both harder and richer.

Pavni: Are there other distinctions?

Acharya: Yes. Equations can be **homogeneous** or **inhomogeneous** depending on whether the right-hand side is zero. Laplace's equation is homogeneous, Poisson's equation is inhomogeneous.

Acharya: More generally, a non-homogeneous PDE can be written as:

$$F(t, x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n, u, u_t, u_{x_1}, \dots, u_{x_n}, u_{tt}, u_{x_1x_1}, \dots) = g(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n, t),$$

where g is a nonzero source or forcing term. If $g \equiv 0$, the PDE is homogeneous.

Pavni: So the right-hand side introduces an external influence, like heat sources or forces?

Acharya: Exactly. For example, $u_{xx} + u_{yy} = f(x, y)$ is the Poisson equation with a source term $f(x, y)$. .

Pavni: I think I follow. But I have also heard words like elliptic and hyperbolic. What do they mean?

Acharya: Ah, those arise for **second-order PDEs in two variables**. Suppose we have:

$$Au_{xx} + Bu_{xy} + Cu_{yy} + \cdots = 0.$$

We look at the discriminant: $B^2 - 4AC$.
- If it is less than 0, the PDE is **elliptic** (like Laplace's equation).
- If it equals 0, the PDE is **parabolic** (like the heat equation).
- If it is greater than 0, the PDE is **hyperbolic** (like the wave equation).

Pavni: This reminds me of conic sections! Circles, parabolas, and hyperbolas.

Acharya: Exactly. The analogy is deliberate — both come from the same quadratic form.

Pavni: And physically?

Acharya: Elliptic equations describe steady states — like equilibrium temperature distributions. Parabolic equations describe diffusion, the smoothing of irregularities over time. Hyperbolic equations describe wave-like motion, signals traveling with finite speed.

Pavni: That helps me imagine them. So classification is not just a game, but it tells us the nature of the solutions.

Acharya: Well said, Pavni. And it also guides how we design numerical methods. An elliptic problem requires different strategies than a hyperbolic one.

Pavni: Then I am eager to learn those strategies!

Acharya: Patience, Pavni. First we must prepare the ground. Classification is the map; numerical methods are the journey.

5.1 Mini Quizzes

Quiz 1: Identify the order
Which of the following is a second-order PDE?
1. $ u_t + cu_x = 0 $
2. $ u_t = u_{xx} $
3. $ u u_x = 0 $

Answer 1

Equation (2) $ u_t = u_{xx} $ is second-order because of the u_{xx} term.

Quiz 2: Linearity check
Which PDE is nonlinear?
1. $ u_t = u_{xx} $
2. $ u_t + u u_x = 0 $

Answer 2

Equation (2) is nonlinear because of the product term uu_x.

Quiz 3: Homogeneous or inhomogeneous
Classify: $ u_{xx} + u_{yy} = f(x,y) $.

Answer 3

It is **inhomogeneous**, since the right-hand side is not zero.

Quiz 4: Type of second-order PDE
For $ u_{xx} + 2u_{xy} + u_{yy} = 0 $, compute $ B^2 - 4AC $. What type is it?

Answer 4

Here, $A = 1, B = 2, C = 1$.
$ B^2 - 4AC = 2^2 - 4(1)(1) = 0 $.
So it is **parabolic**.

Quiz 5: Physical meaning
Match each equation with its physical interpretation:
- Heat equation
- Wave equation
- Laplace's equation

(a) Steady state

(b) Wave-like motion

(c) Diffusion in time

Answer 5

- Heat equation → (c) Diffusion in time
- Wave equation → (b) Wave-like motion
- Laplace's equation → (a) Steady state

Chapter 6

Level 3: PDEs, their Physical Meaning, and Boundary Conditions

Pavni: Acharya, PDEs still feel mysterious. What do they *really* mean?

Acharya: Good question. PDEs describe how a quantity changes with respect to **both time and space**. Think of:
- Heat spreading in a rod
- Waves traveling along a string
- Fluid flowing through a pipe

All of these involve rates of change in multiple directions, and that's why PDEs come into play.

Pavni: So PDEs are the language of physics in extended domains?

Acharya: Exactly. But to make their solutions unique and physically meaningful, we need **boundary conditions**. Let's explore them one by one.

6.1 Dirichlet Condition

Acharya: Dirichlet means fixing the value of the solution at the boundary.

Pavni: Like holding both ends of a rod at 100 °C?

Acharya: Precisely. It represents physical situations where the boundary is controlled by an external source—like contact with a thermostat.

6.2 Neumann Condition

Acharya: Neumann means fixing the derivative, often representing **flux**.

Pavni: So in the rod, saying no heat flows out means the temperature gradient at the end is zero?

Acharya: Exactly. That's an insulated boundary.

6.3 Robin (Mixed) Condition

Acharya: Robin mixes the two:

$$au + b\frac{\partial u}{\partial n} = c.$$

Pavni: Is that like when heat escapes to the air?

Acharya: Yes—convective cooling. The flux depends on both the temperature at the boundary and the environment.

Quick Recap

- **Dirichlet** → Value fixed (e.g., temperature = 100 °C).
- **Neumann** → Flux fixed (e.g., insulated boundary).
- **Robin** → Combination (e.g., convective heat loss).

6.3.1 Mini-Quiz

1. A vibrating string held fixed at both ends uses which boundary condition?

   Answer
   Dirichlet. The displacement of the string is zero at both ends.
2. If a wall is perfectly insulated, what type of boundary condition applies to temperature?

   Answer
   Neumann. The derivative (temperature gradient) is zero, meaning no heat flux.
3. Which boundary condition models cooling of hot coffee in a room?

   Answer

Robin. Heat loss depends on both the coffee's surface temperature and the room temperature (convection).

Pavni: Now I see it! PDEs tell the story inside the domain, and boundary conditions set the rules at the edges.

Acharya: Well said. Together, they form the complete model of a physical system.

Chapter 7

Level 3: Finite Differences and the Heat Equation

Pavni: Acharya, how do we actually *approximate* derivatives on a computer?

Acharya: We use the **finite difference method**. A computer only works with discrete points, so we replace continuous derivatives with **difference quotients** on a **grid**. These come directly from the **Taylor series**, and because we truncate the series, each formula comes with a predictable **error term**.

Pavni: Can you give me an example?

Acharya: Suppose we have points $x_0, x_1, \dots, x_N$ with spacing Δx. Around a point x_i, Taylor's theorem gives us expansions for $u(x_{i+1})$ and $u(x_{i-1})$. By combining them, we obtain difference formulas:

- **Forward difference** for the first derivative:

$$u'(x_i) = \frac{u(x_{i+1}) - u(x_i)}{\Delta x} - \tfrac{1}{2}u''(\xi)\,\Delta x,$$

  so the truncation error is $\mathcal{O}(\Delta x)$.

- **Backward difference**:

$$u'(x_i) = \frac{u(x_i) - u(x_{i-1})}{\Delta x} + \tfrac{1}{2}u''(\xi)\,\Delta x,$$

  also error $\mathcal{O}(\Delta x)$.

- **Central difference**:

$$u'(x_i) = \frac{u(x_{i+1}) - u(x_{i-1})}{2\Delta x} - \tfrac{1}{6}u^{(3)}(\xi)\,(\Delta x)^2,$$

  so the error is $\mathcal{O}((\Delta x)^2)$ — more accurate.

- **Second derivative** (central difference):

$$u''(x_i) = \frac{u(x_{i-1}) - 2u(x_i) + u(x_{i+1})}{(\Delta x)^2} - \tfrac{1}{12}u^{(4)}(\xi)\,(\Delta x)^2,$$

  with error $\mathcal{O}((\Delta x)^2)$.

Pavni: So these formulas are not exact — they always come with an error term?

Acharya: Precisely. That error is called the **local truncation error**. When we build numerical schemes for PDEs, these errors accumulate step by step, and we'll have to balance them with stability.

Pavni: I see. So finite differences give us algebraic formulas for derivatives, but with a known accuracy.

Acharya: Exactly. That's the foundation of finite difference methods.

7.1 Application: The Heat Equation

Acharya: Consider the 1D heat equation:

$$u_t = \alpha^2 u_{xx}^2, \quad 0 < x < 1,\ t > 0$$

with boundary conditions $u(0,t) = u(1,t) = 0$ and initial profile $u(x,0) = f(x)$.

We set up a grid: - In space: $x_i = i\Delta x,\ i = 0, \ldots, N$
- In time: $t^n = n\Delta t,\ n = 0, 1, 2, \ldots$

At each point, let $u_i^n \approx u(x_i, t^n)$.

Pavni: And now we replace derivatives?

Acharya: Correct.
- Time derivative (forward difference):

$$u_t(x_i, t^n) \approx \frac{u_i^{n+1} - u_i^n}{\Delta t}$$

- Spatial second derivative (central difference):

$$u_{xx}(x_i, t^n) \approx \frac{u_{i-1}^n - 2u_i^n + u_{i+1}^n}{(\Delta x)^2}$$

Plugging these into the PDE, we get:

$$\frac{u_i^{n+1} - u_i^n}{\Delta t} = \alpha^2\,\frac{u_{i-1}^n - 2u_i^n + u_{i+1}^n}{(\Delta x)^2}.$$

Rearranging:

$$u_i^{n+1} = u_i^n + \lambda\,(u_{i-1}^n - 2u_i^n + u_{i+1}^n),$$

where $\lambda = \frac{\alpha^2 \Delta t}{(\Delta x)^2}$.

7.2 Stability Condition

Pavni: So we can just keep applying this formula to march forward in time?

Acharya: Yes, but with a caveat. This scheme, called **FTCS (Forward Time, Central Space)**, is only stable if:

$$\lambda \leq \tfrac{1}{2}.$$

Pavni: So if Δt is too large, the scheme fails?

Acharya: Exactly. The numerical solution will blow up, even though the true solution is stable. Choosing Δt small enough ensures stability.

i Why the FTCS stability condition is $\lambda \leq \frac{1}{2}$

If the update is

$$u^{(n+1)} = Au^{(n)},$$

and the initial error is e^0, then after n steps the error is

$$e^{(n)} = A^n e^0.$$

Using an induced matrix norm:

$$\|e^{(n)}\| = \|A^n e^0\| \;\leq\; \|A^n\|\,\|e^0\| \;\leq\; \|A\|^n \|e^0\|.$$

- If $\|A\| \leq 1$, the error never grows.
- If $\|A\| < 1$, the error decays as $n \to \infty$.
- In general, the asymptotic condition is that the **spectral radius** $\rho(A) < 1$.

7.2.0.1 Eigenvalues of the FTCS matrix

For the FTCS tridiagonal matrix A (symmetric Toeplitz), the eigenvalues are

$$\mu_k = 1 - 4\lambda \sin^2\left(\frac{k\pi}{2(N-1)}\right), \qquad k = 1, 2, \ldots, N-2,$$

where $\lambda = \dfrac{\alpha^2 \Delta t}{(\Delta x)^2}$.
Thus the spectral radius is

$$\rho(A) = \max_{1 \leq k \leq N-2} |\mu_k| = \max_{1 \leq k \leq N-2} \left|1 - 4r \sin^2\left(\tfrac{k\pi}{2(N-1)}\right)\right|.$$

7.2.0.2 Stability condition

- As $N \to \infty$ (i.e. $\Delta x \to 0$), the maximum of $\sin^2(\cdot)$ tends to 1.
- Therefore the most restrictive case is

$$|1 - 4\lambda| \leq 1.$$

- This simplifies to

$$0 \ \leq \ \lambda \ \leq \ \tfrac{1}{2}.$$

Thus, the **FTCS scheme is stable if and only if**

$$\lambda = \frac{\alpha \Delta t}{(\Delta x)^2} \ \leq \ \tfrac{1}{2}.$$

7.3 Mini-Quizzes

Quiz 1:
Let $u(x) = x^2$. With $\Delta x = 0.1$, approximate $u'(1)$ using:
1. Forward difference
2. Central difference

Compare with the exact derivative $u'(1) = 2$. Which is more accurate?

Answer 1

- Forward difference:

$$\frac{u(1 + \Delta x) - u(1)}{\Delta x} = \frac{(1.1)^2 - 1^2}{0.1} = \frac{1.21 - 1}{0.1} = 2.1.$$

- Central difference:

$$\frac{u(1 + \Delta x) - u(1 - \Delta x)}{2\Delta x} = \frac{(1.1)^2 - (0.9)^2}{0.2} = \frac{1.21 - 0.81}{0.2} = 2.0.$$

- Exact derivative: $u'(1) = 2$.

Conclusion: The central difference gives the exact value here (error 0), while the forward difference has error 0.1. Central is more accurate (as expected — it is second-order).

Quiz 2:

Suppose $\alpha = 1$, $\Delta x = 0.1$. What is the maximum Δt for stability in the explicit scheme?

(Hint: $\lambda = \dfrac{\alpha \Delta t}{(\Delta x)^2} \leq \frac{1}{2}$.)

Answer 2

We need

$$\lambda = \frac{\alpha\, \Delta t}{(\Delta x)^2} \leq \frac{1}{2}.$$

With $\alpha = 1$ and $\Delta x = 0.1$, $(\Delta x)^2 = 0.01$. So

$$\frac{\Delta t}{0.01} \leq \frac{1}{2} \quad \Rightarrow \quad \Delta t \leq 0.01 \times \frac{1}{2} = 0.005.$$

Maximum allowable $\Delta t = 0.005$.

7.4 Heat equation — Matrix Method with Non-zero Dirichlet Conditions

Pavni: We already saw how to discretize the heat equation with FTCS. But can we write the whole scheme in a more compact way?

Acharya: Yes. That's where the **matrix method** comes in. Let's recall the PDE:

$$u_t = \alpha^2 u_{xx}, \quad 0 < x < 1,\ t > 0,$$

with Dirichlet conditions

$$u(0,t) = L, \qquad u(1,t) = R,$$

and initial condition $u(x,0) = f(x)$.

Pavni: So we still set up the grid in space and time?

Acharya: Exactly. The FTCS update at interior nodes is

$$u_i^{j+1} = u_i^j + \lambda\,(u_{i-1}^j - 2u_i^j + u_{i+1}^j), \quad i = 1, \ldots, N_x - 2,$$

where $\lambda = \frac{\alpha^2 \Delta t}{\Delta x^2}$.

Pavni: That's a lot of coupled equations. How do we collect them?

Acharya: We put all interior values into a vector

$$u^{(j)} = \begin{bmatrix} u_1^j \\ u_2^j \\ \vdots \\ u_{N_x-2}^j \end{bmatrix}.$$

Pavni: And the update rule becomes a matrix multiplication?

Acharya: Yes. We can write

$$u^{(j+1)} = A\,u^{(j)} + b,$$

where A is tridiagonal and b accounts for the boundary conditions:

$$A = \begin{bmatrix} 1-2\lambda & \lambda & & & & \\ \lambda & 1-2\lambda & \lambda & & & \\ & \ddots & \ddots & \ddots & & \\ & & \lambda & 1-2\lambda & \lambda & \\ & & & \lambda & 1-2\lambda \end{bmatrix}, \qquad b = \begin{bmatrix} \lambda L \\ 0 \\ \vdots \\ 0 \\ \lambda R \end{bmatrix}.$$

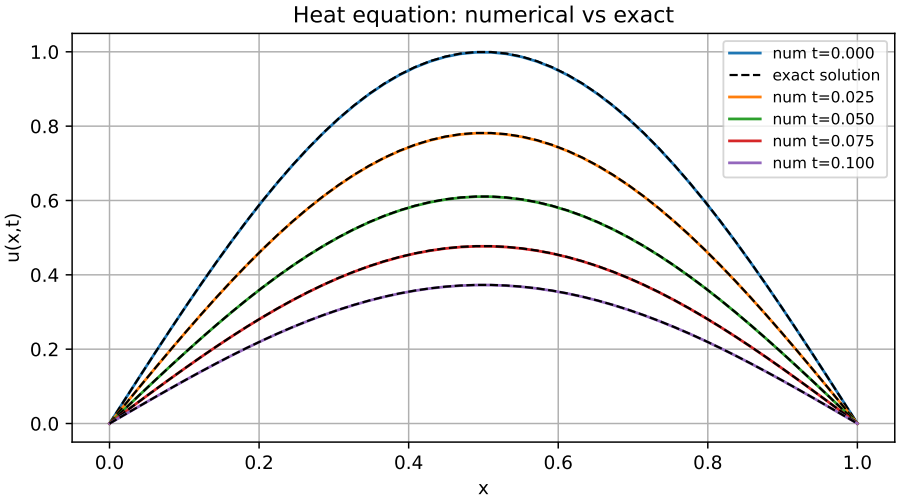
Pavni: So if $L = R = 0$, then $b = 0$ and we just have $u^{(j+1)} = Au^{(j)}$.

Acharya: Precisely. That's the beauty of the matrix method: it organizes the scheme into a linear algebra update.

7.4.1 Implementation in Python

Let us now implement the method in Python and compare with the exact solution for $f(x) = \sin(\pi x)$:

$$u(x,t) = e^{-\pi^2 \alpha t}\,\sin(\pi x).$$



7.4.2 Remarks

- The **linear algebra structure** $u^{(j+1)} = Au^{(j)} + b$ makes the scheme compact and systematic.
- The stability restriction $\lambda \leq \frac{1}{2}$ follows from analyzing the eigenvalues of A.
- For large N_x, A is sparse and tridiagonal — in practice, use `scipy.sparse.diags` for efficiency.

7.5 Backward Difference (Implicit) Scheme for the Heat Equation

Pavni: Acharya, the FTCS scheme works only if $\lambda \leq \frac{1}{2}$. Is there a method that avoids this restriction?

Acharya: Yes. We can use a **backward difference in time**, together with the same central difference in space. This gives the **Backward Euler scheme**, which is implicit but unconditionally stable.

Pavni: Implicit? What does that mean?

Acharya: It means that the new values u^{n+1} appear on both sides of the equation, so we must solve a system of equations at each time step.

7.5.1 Derivation

Start from the PDE:

$$u_t = \alpha^2 u_{xx}.$$

- Approximate the time derivative with a **backward difference**:

$$u_t(x_i, t^{n+1}) \;\approx\; \frac{u_i^{n+1} - u_i^n}{\Delta t}.$$

- Approximate the spatial second derivative at the new time level:

$$u_{xx}(x_i, t^{n+1}) \;\approx\; \frac{u_{i-1}^{n+1} - 2u_i^{n+1} + u_{i+1}^{n+1}}{(\Delta x)^2}.$$

The scheme becomes:

$$\frac{u_i^{n+1} - u_i^n}{\Delta t} = \alpha^2 \, \frac{u_{i-1}^{n+1} - 2u_i^{n+1} + u_{i+1}^{n+1}}{(\Delta x)^2}.$$

Rearrange:

$$-\lambda \, u_{i-1}^{n+1} + (1 + 2\lambda) \, u_i^{n+1} - \lambda \, u_{i+1}^{n+1} = u_i^n, \qquad \lambda = \frac{\alpha^2 \Delta t}{(\Delta x)^2}.$$

7.5.2 Matrix Form

Let $u^{(n)}$ be the vector of interior values at time step n. Then

$$Bu^{(n+1)} = u^{(n)},$$

where

$$B = \begin{bmatrix} 1+2\lambda & -\lambda & & & \\ -\lambda & 1+2\lambda & -\lambda & & \\ & \ddots & \ddots & \ddots & \\ & & -\lambda & 1+2\lambda & -\lambda \\ & & & -\lambda & 1+2\lambda \end{bmatrix}_{(N_x-2)\times(N_x-2)}.$$

So each step requires solving the linear system

$$u^{(n+1)} = B^{-1}u^{(n)}.$$

7.5.3 Stability

Pavni: Doesn't that make it more expensive than FTCS?

Acharya: It does, because we must solve a tridiagonal system at every time step.
But the reward is **unconditional stability**: for any $\Delta t > 0$ and $\Delta x > 0$, the scheme does not blow up.

Pavni: So no restriction like $\lambda \leq \frac{1}{2}$?

Acharya: Exactly. Backward Euler is stable for all λ.
It is only first-order accurate in time (like FTCS), but still second-order in space.

7.5.4 Remarks

- Backward Euler is more robust but requires solving a linear system at each step.
- For large systems, efficient algorithms like the **Thomas algorithm** (specialized Gaussian elimination for tridiagonal matrices) are used.
- In practice, one balances cost (explicit FTCS, cheap but conditionally stable) against robustness (implicit Backward Euler, unconditionally stable).

i Why the Backward Euler scheme is unconditionally stable

If the update is

$$u^{(n+1)} = Au^{(n)},$$

and the initial error is e^0, then after n steps the error is

$$e^{(n)} = A^n e^0.$$

As before, the asymptotic condition is that the **spectral radius** $\rho(A) < 1$.

7.5.4.1 Eigenvalues of the Backward Euler iteration matrix

The Backward Euler scheme for the heat equation is

$$\frac{U^{n+1} - U^n}{\Delta t} = \alpha^2 A U^{n+1},$$

which rearranges to

$$U^{n+1} = (I - \lambda A)^{-1} U^n, \qquad \lambda = \frac{\alpha^2 \Delta t}{(\Delta x)^2}.$$

- If $\lambda_i(A)$ are the eigenvalues of the discrete Laplacian A, then the eigenvalues of the iteration matrix are

$$\mu_i = \frac{1}{1 - \lambda_i(A)}.$$

- For the 1D Laplacian with Dirichlet BCs,

$$\lambda_i(A) = -4 \sin^2\left(\frac{i\pi}{2m}\right), \qquad i = 1, 2, \dots, m-1.$$

Thus

$$\mu_i = \frac{1}{1 + 4\lambda \sin^2\left(\frac{i\pi}{2m}\right)}.$$

7.5.4.2 Stability condition

- Since $\lambda > 0$ and $\sin^2(\cdot) \geq 0$, the denominator is always greater than 1.

- Therefore

$$0 < \mu_i < 1, \qquad \forall i.$$

This means all eigenvalues of the iteration matrix lie strictly inside the unit circle.

Thus, the **Backward Euler scheme is unconditionally stable**: - No restriction on Δt.
- Every mode decays monotonically.
- In contrast, FTCS required $\lambda \leq \frac{1}{2}$ for stability.

7.5.5 Interactive plots to see the eigenvalues of FTCS and Backward Differencce methods

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How to interact with the plots - Move the **slider** to change $\lambda = \frac{\alpha^2 \Delta t}{(\Delta x)^2}$.
- **FTCS plot**: notice that for $\lambda > 0.5$ some eigenvalues leave $[-1, 1]$, indicating instability.
- **Backward Euler plot**: eigenvalues always remain in $(0, 1)$, showing unconditional stability.
- Hover over points to see their values, zoom by dragging, double-click to reset.

Chapter 8

Crank–Nicolson scheme

Pavni: We've studied FTCS and Backward Euler for the heat equation. FTCS was simple, but had that annoying stability restriction $\lambda \leq \frac{1}{2}$.

Acharya: Yes. And Backward Euler solved that problem — it was unconditionally stable.

Pavni: But both of them are only *first-order accurate in time*, right?

Acharya: Exactly. And that's a problem if we want more accuracy without shrinking Δt too much.

Pavni: So FTCS is unstable unless $\lambda \leq \frac{1}{2}$, and Backward Euler is stable but too diffusive. We're still missing something better.

Acharya: That's where the **Crank–Nicolson scheme** comes in. The idea is to apply the trapezoidal rule in time — using the *average* of the spatial derivative at times n and $n+1$.

Pavni: So instead of evaluating only at the old time (FTCS) or the new time (Backward Euler), we take a balance of both?

Acharya: Exactly. That trick makes the scheme **second-order accurate in time** and **unconditionally stable**. It's like combining the strengths of both FTCS and Backward Euler.

Pavni: Ah, so Crank–Nicolson is really about accuracy as well as stability. That sounds worth deriving!
Pavni: Let's derive Crank–Nicolson starting from the heat equation $u_t = \alpha^2 u_{xx}$. How do we get the time-centered scheme?

Acharya: Start by integrating the PDE in time over one step, from t^n to t^{n+1} at a fixed x:

$$u(x, t^{n+1}) - u(x, t^n) = \alpha^2 \int_{t^n}^{t^{n+1}} u_{xx}(x, t)\, dt.$$

Pavni: Now approximate that time integral — I remember the trapezoidal (averaging) rule.

Acharya: Exactly. Apply the trapezoidal rule to the integral on the right:

$$\int_{t^n}^{t^{n+1}} u_{xx}(x,t)\,dt \approx \frac{\Delta t}{2}(u_{xx}(x,t^n) + u_{xx}(x,t^{n+1}))$$

with pointwise quadrature error $O(\Delta t^3)$ (so after division by Δt the time-discretization error is $O(\Delta t^2)$).

Pavni: Then substitute that into the integrated PDE.

Acharya: We get

$$u(x,t^{n+1}) - u(x,t^n) = \alpha^2 \frac{\Delta t}{2}(u_{xx}(x,t^n) + u_{xx}(x,t^{n+1})) + O(\Delta t^3).$$

Pavni: Next we discretize u_{xx} in space with the centered second difference.

Acharya: Right. At grid point x_j,

$$u_{xx}(x_j,t^\ell) \approx \frac{U_{j-1}^\ell - 2U_j^\ell + U_{j+1}^\ell}{(\Delta x)^2},$$

which in vector form for interior nodes is $\dfrac{1}{(\Delta x)^2} AU^\ell$, where A is the usual tridiagonal Laplacian (stencil $[1,-2,1]$).

Substituting gives (collecting interior points into U^n)

$$U^{n+1} - U^n = \frac{\alpha^2 \Delta t}{2(\Delta x)^2}(AU^n + AU^{n+1}) + (\text{truncation terms}).$$

Pavni: Introduce the nondimensional parameter λ?

Acharya: Yes, set $\lambda = \dfrac{\alpha^2 \Delta t}{(\Delta x)^2}$. Then

$$U^{n+1} - U^n = \frac{\lambda}{2}(AU^n + AU^{n+1}) + (\text{truncation terms}).$$

Bring U^{n+1} terms to the left to obtain

$$\Big(I - \tfrac{\lambda}{2}A\Big)U^{n+1} = \Big(I + \tfrac{\lambda}{2}A\Big)U^n.$$

Now, let's write these matrices explicitly. The left-hand side matrix is

$$L = I - \tfrac{\lambda}{2}A = \begin{bmatrix} 1+\lambda & -\frac{\lambda}{2} & 0 & \cdots & 0 \\ -\frac{\lambda}{2} & 1+\lambda & -\frac{\lambda}{2} & \ddots & \vdots \\ 0 & \ddots & \ddots & \ddots & 0 \\ \vdots & \ddots & -\frac{\lambda}{2} & 1+\lambda & -\frac{\lambda}{2} \\ 0 & \cdots & 0 & -\frac{\lambda}{2} & 1+\lambda \end{bmatrix}.$$

The right-hand side matrix is

$$R = I + \tfrac{\lambda}{2}A = \begin{bmatrix} 1-\lambda & \frac{\lambda}{2} & 0 & \cdots & 0 \\ \frac{\lambda}{2} & 1-\lambda & \frac{\lambda}{2} & \ddots & \vdots \\ 0 & \ddots & \ddots & \ddots & 0 \\ \vdots & \ddots & \frac{\lambda}{2} & 1-\lambda & \frac{\lambda}{2} \\ 0 & \cdots & 0 & \frac{\lambda}{2} & 1-\lambda \end{bmatrix}.$$

So the Crank–Nicolson scheme can be written as

$$\boxed{L\,U^{n+1} = R\,U^n}.$$

Pavni: Great — and the eigenvalue form and stability follow from the spectral map of A.

Acharya: Right — each eigenvalue α_k of A is mapped to

$$\mu_k = \frac{1 + \frac{\lambda}{2}\alpha_k}{1 - \frac{\lambda}{2}\alpha_k},$$

and substituting $\alpha_k = -4\sin^2\!\left(\frac{k\pi}{2(N+1)}\right)$ yields

$$\mu_k = \frac{1 - 2\lambda\sin^2\!\left(\frac{k\pi}{2(N+1)}\right)}{1 + 2\lambda\sin^2\!\left(\frac{k\pi}{2(N+1)}\right)}.$$

This shows $|\mu_k| \le 1$, so CN is unconditionally stable.

i Crank–Nicolson: derivation summary & stability

Starting point (integrated PDE):

$$u(x,t^{n+1}) - u(x,t^n) = \alpha^2 \int_{t^n}^{t^{n+1}} u_{xx}(x,t)\,dt.$$

Trapezoidal rule (time) + centered difference (space):

$$\int_{t^n}^{t^{n+1}} u_{xx}\,dt \approx \frac{\Delta t}{2}\left(u_{xx}(t^n) + u_{xx}(t^{n+1})\right), \qquad u_{xx}(x_j,t^\ell) \approx \frac{(AU^\ell)_j}{(\Delta x)^2}.$$

Matrix form (with $\lambda = \dfrac{\alpha^2\Delta t}{(\Delta x)^2}$):

$$\boxed{\left(I - \tfrac{\lambda}{2}A\right)U^{n+1} = \left(I + \tfrac{\lambda}{2}A\right)U^n\ .}$$

Eigenvalues (mode-wise): if $s_k = \sin(\frac{k\pi}{2(N+1)})$ then

$$\boxed{\mu_k = \frac{1 - 2\lambda s_k^2}{1 + 2\lambda s_k^2}\ , \quad k = 1, \dots, N.}$$

Stability check (short): - For $\lambda \geq 0$ and $0 \leq s_k^2 \leq 1$ the denominator $1 + 2\lambda s_k^2 > 0$.
- Hence

$$|\mu_k| = \frac{|1 - 2\lambda s_k^2|}{1 + 2\lambda s_k^2} \leq 1,$$

and for nontrivial modes with $\lambda > 0$ strict inequality holds.
Conclusion: Crank–Nicolson is **unconditionally stable** and second-order accurate in time and space (global error $O(\Delta t^2 + \Delta x^2)$).

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How to interact:
- Move the slider to vary $\lambda = \dfrac{\alpha^2 \Delta t}{(\Delta x)^2}$.
- Hover on a marker to see the exact (k, μ_k).
- Zoom by dragging, double-click to reset.

Observe: all μ_k satisfy $|\mu_k| \leq 1$ for every $\lambda \geq 0$, confirming unconditional stability; for small λ the modes are near 1, for large λ high-frequency modes move nearer to -1 but remain bounded in magnitude by 1.

Chapter 9

Level 4: Hyperbolic PDEs: Wave Equation

Pavni: We've studied the heat equation as an example of a parabolic PDE. What about hyperbolic ones? Where do we begin?

Acharya: A natural starting point is the **wave equation**:

$$u_{tt} = c^2 u_{xx}.$$

Pavni: Oh! That's the equation for vibrations of a string, right?

Acharya: Exactly. Imagine a taut string. Newton's law applied to a small element gives:

$$\rho u_{tt} = T u_{xx},$$

where T is tension and ρ is density. Dividing through, we get

$$u_{tt} = \left(\frac{T}{\rho}\right) u_{xx},$$

so the wave speed is $c = \sqrt{T/\rho}$.

Pavni: So physically, it describes oscillations moving along the string. But why do we call this *hyperbolic*?

Acharya: Let's look at the general second-order PDE in two variables:

$$Au_{xx} + 2Bu_{xt} + Cu_{tt} = 0.$$

Its type depends on the discriminant $D = B^2 - AC$.

- If $D < 0$, it's elliptic.
- If $D = 0$, parabolic.
- If $D > 0$, hyperbolic.

Pavni: For the wave equation, we have $A = -c^2, B = 0, C = 1$. Then

$$D = B^2 - AC = c^2 > 0.$$

Acharya: Exactly — that's why it's **hyperbolic**.

Pavni: Does that mean it has some special geometry?

Acharya: Yes. Notice how the operator factors:

$$u_{tt} - c^2 u_{xx} = (\partial_t - c\partial_x)(\partial_t + c\partial_x)u.$$

This reveals the **characteristics**: the lines

$$x - ct = \text{constant}, \quad x + ct = \text{constant}.$$

Pavni: So along those lines, the solution behaves in a simple way?

Acharya: Precisely. The general solution is

$$u(x,t) = f(x - ct) + g(x + ct).$$

It's just the sum of two waves, one traveling right, one traveling left.

Pavni: That's beautiful! It really captures the idea of finite-speed propagation.

Acharya: Indeed. If you disturb the string at one point, the influence spreads only within the cone $|x - x_0| \leq c(t - t_0)$.
That's the hallmark of hyperbolic PDEs: signals travel with finite speed, unlike diffusion where influence is instant.

Pavni: So the wave equation is the prototype for hyperbolic PDEs?

Acharya: Exactly. From here, we can explore more complex hyperbolic equations — nonlinear ones, conservation laws, and shock waves — but the wave equation is where the story begins.

```
\begin{tikzpicture}[scale=1.2]
  % Axes
  \draw[->] (-2,0) -- (2,0) node[right] {$x$};
  \draw[->] (0,0) -- (0,3) node[above] {$t$};

  % Point of disturbance
  \fill (0,0) circle (2pt) node[below left] {$(x_0,t_0)$};
```

```
  % Characteristics
  \draw[thick,red] (0,0) -- (1.5,3) node[right] {$x = x_0 + c(t-t_0)$};
  \draw[thick,red] (0,0) -- (-1.5,3) node[left] {$x = x_0 - c(t-t_0)$};

  % Shaded influence region
  \fill[blue!20,opacity=0.5] (-1.5,3) -- (0,0) -- (1.5,3) -- cycle;

  % Labels
  \node at (0,1.8) {Region of influence};
\end{tikzpicture}
```