2.3 — Cost Minimization

ECON 306 · Microeconomic Analysis · Fall 2020

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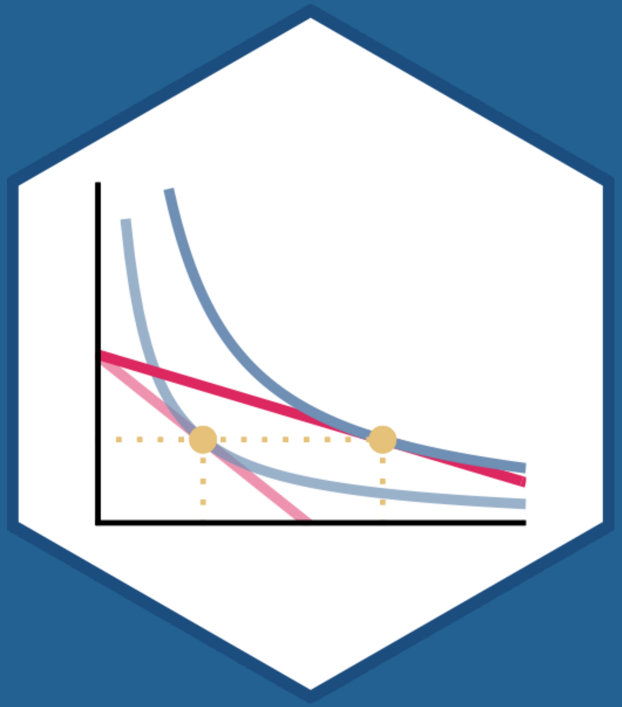
[ryansafner/microF20](https://github.com/ryansafner/microF20)

microF20.classes.ryansafner.com



Recall: The Firm's Two Problems

- 1st Stage: **firm's profit maximization problem**:

  1. **Choose:** **< output >**
  2. **In order to maximize:** **< profits >**

- We'll cover this later...first we'll explore:

- 2nd Stage: **firm's cost minimization problem**:

  1. **Choose:** **< inputs >**
  2. **In order to *minimize*:** **< cost >**
  3. **Subject to:** **< producing the optimal output >**

- Minimizing costs $\iff$ maximizing profits

Solving the Cost Minimization Problem

The Firm's Cost Minimization Problem

- The **firm's cost minimization problem** is:

1. **Choose:** < inputs: l, k>
2. **In order to maximize:** < total cost: $wl + rk$ >
3. **Subject to:** < producing the optimal output: $q^* = f(l, k)$ >

The Cost Minimization Problem: Tools

- Our tools for firm's input choices:
- **Choice**: combination of inputs (l, k)
- **Production function/isoquants**: firm's technological constraints
    - How the *firm* trades off between inputs
- **Isocost line**: firm's total cost (for given output and input prices)
    - How the *market* trades off between inputs

The Cost Minimization Problem: Verbally

- The **firms's cost minimization problem**:

> choose a combination of l and k to minimize total cost that produces the optimal amount of output

The Cost Minimization Problem: Math

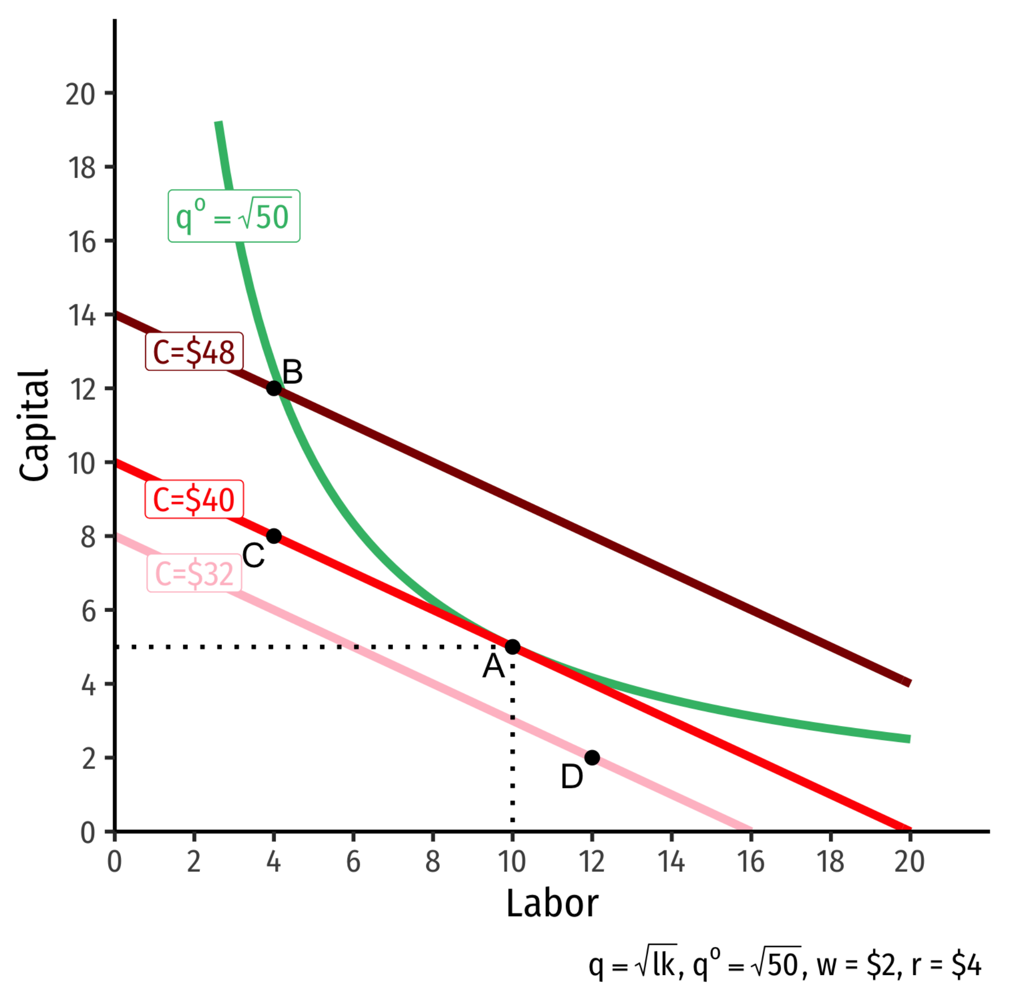
$$\min_{l,k} wl + rk$$

$$s.t.\ q^* = f(l,k)$$

- This requires calculus to solve. We will look at **graphs** instead!

The Firm's Least-Cost Input Combination: Graphically

- **Graphical solution**: **Lowest isocost line *tangent* to desired isoquant** (A)



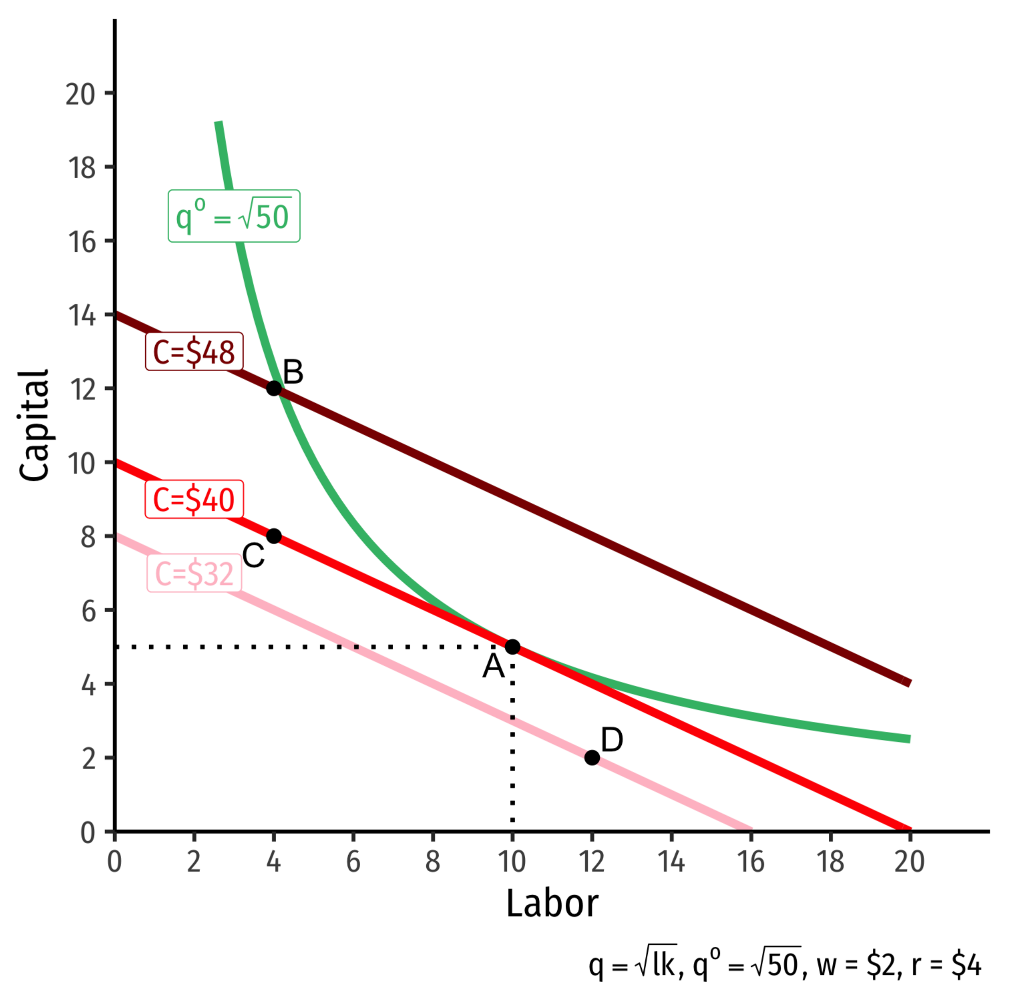
The Firm's Least-Cost Input Combination: Graphically

- **Graphical solution**: **Lowest isocost line *tangent* to desired isoquant** (A)

- B produces same output as A, but higher cost

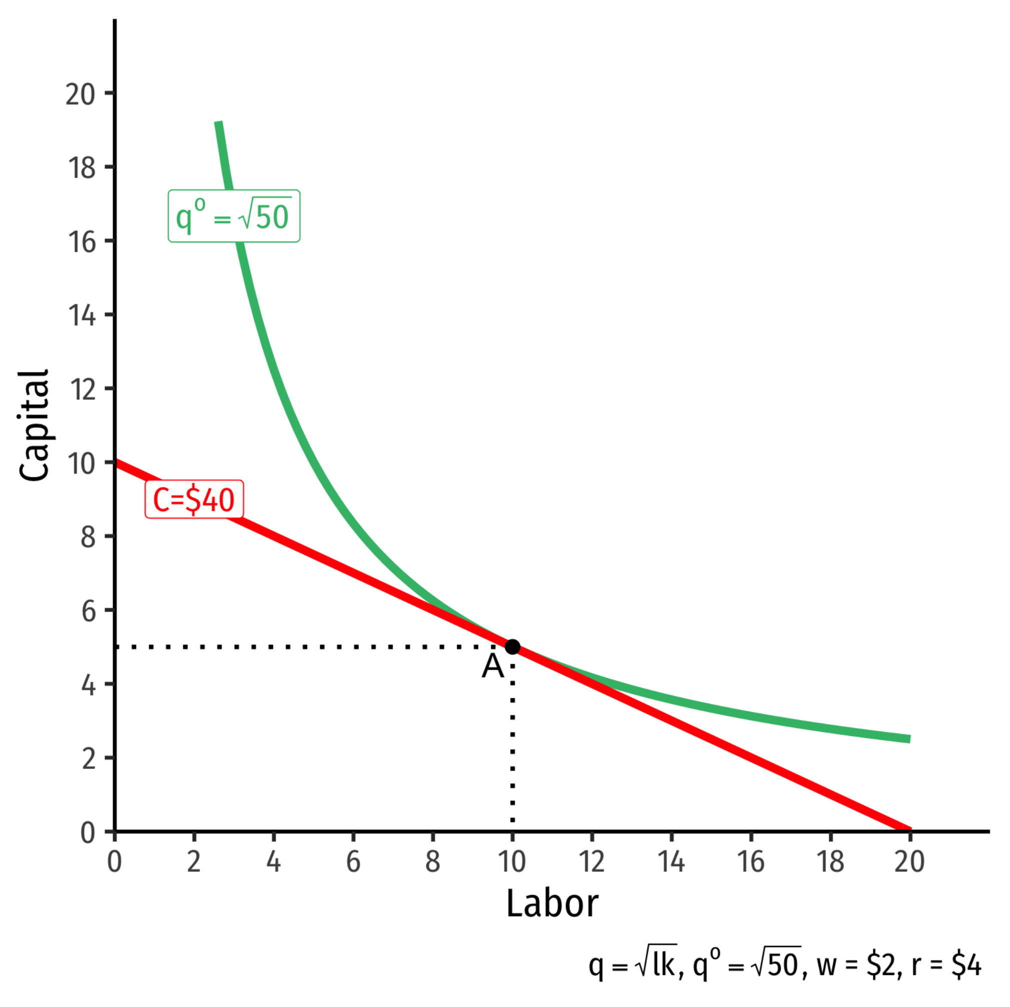
- C is same cost as A, but produces less than desired output

- D produces is cheaper, but produces less than desired output



The Firm's Least-Cost Input Combination: Why A?

Isoquant curve slope $=$ Isocost line slope



The Firm's Least-Cost Input Combination: Why A?

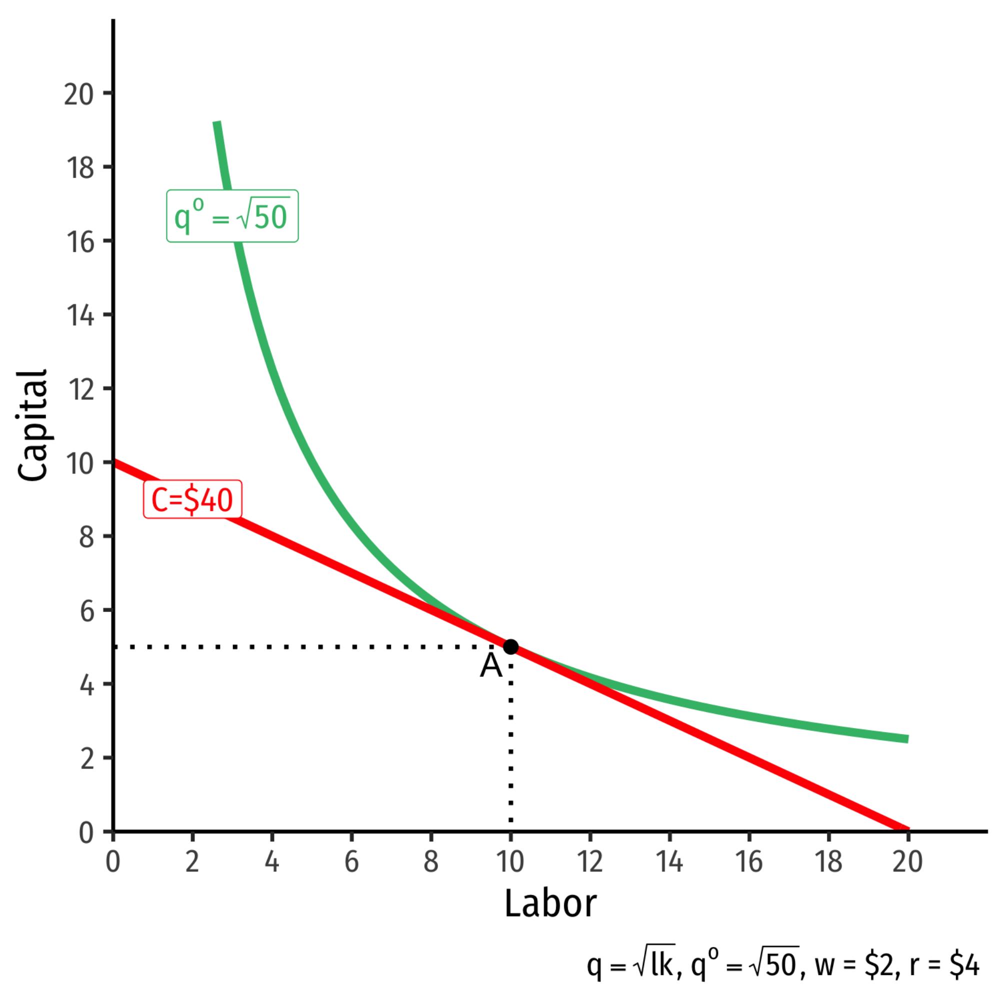
$$\text{Isoquant curve slope} = \text{Isocost line slope}$$

$$|MRTS_{l,k}| = |\frac{w}{r}|$$

$$|\frac{MP_l}{MP_k}| = |\frac{w}{r}|$$

$$|-0.5| = |-0.5|$$

- **Firm** would exchange at same rate as **market**
- **No other combination** of (l, k) **exists** at current prices & output that could lower cost to produce q^*!

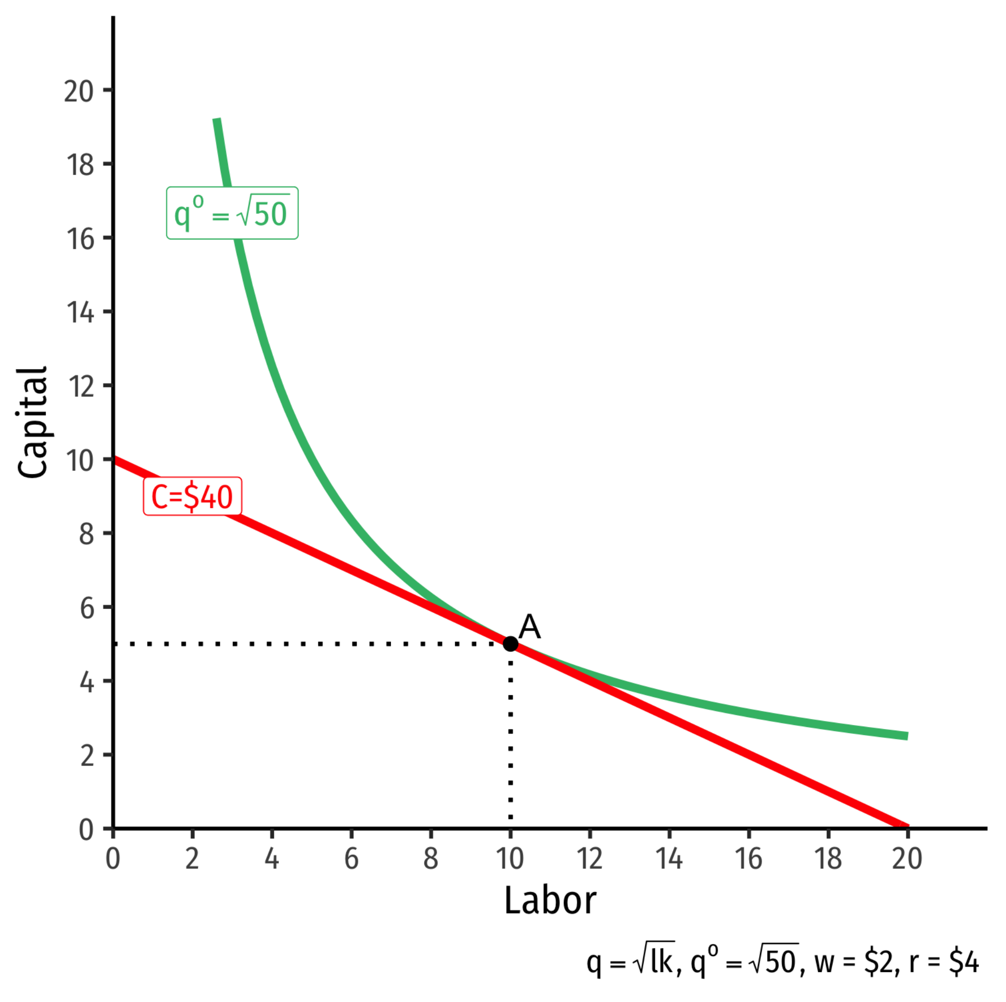


Two Equivalent Rules

Rule 1

$$\frac{MP_l}{MP_k} = \frac{w}{r}$$

- Easier for solving math problems



Two Equivalent Rules

Rule 1

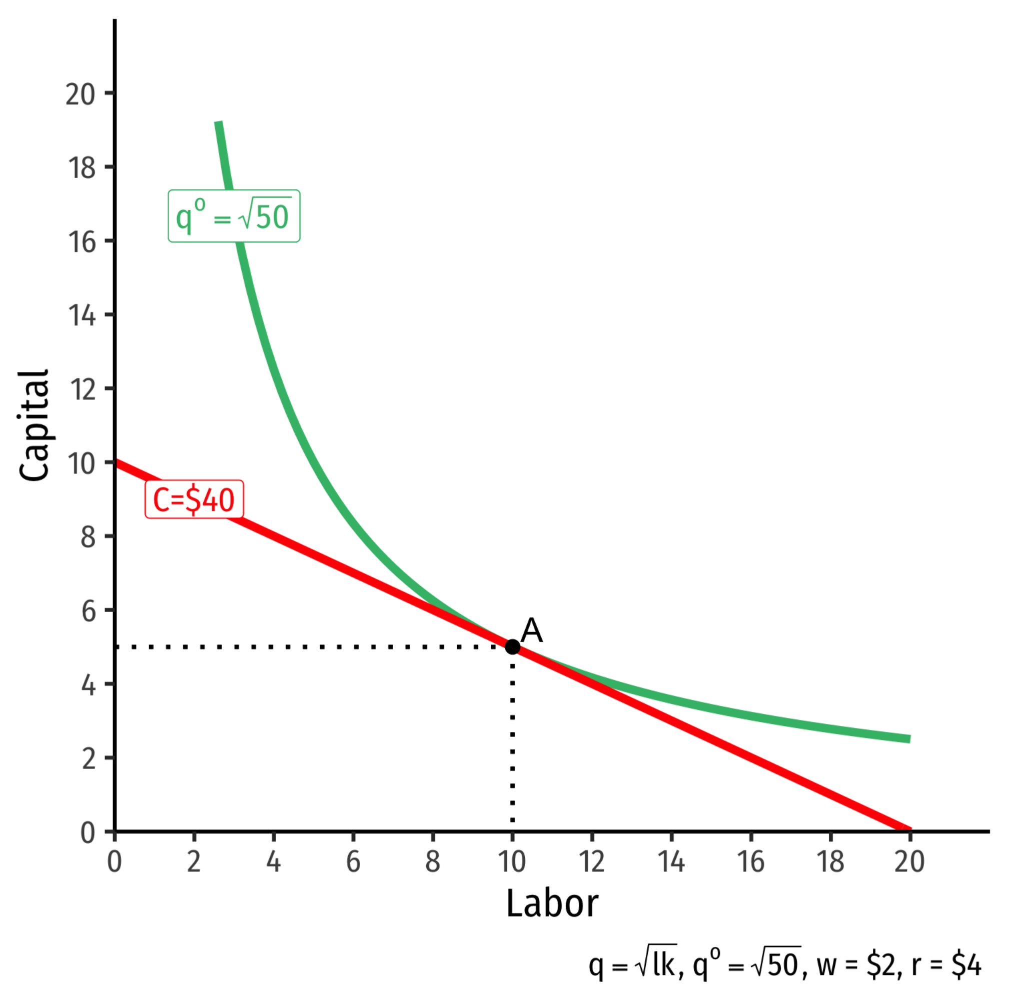
$$\frac{MP_l}{MP_k} = \frac{w}{r}$$

- Easier for solving math problems

Rule 2

$$\frac{MP_l}{w} = \frac{MP_k}{r}$$

- Easier for intuition (next slide)



The Equimarginal Rule Again I

$$\frac{MP_l}{w} = \frac{MP_k}{r} = \cdots = \frac{MP_n}{p_n}$$

- **Equimarginal Rule**: the cost of production is minimized where the **marginal product per dollar spent** is **equalized** across all n possible inputs

- Firm will always choose an option that gives higher marginal product (e.g. if $MP_l > MP_k$)
    - But each option has a different cost, so we weight each option by its cost, hence $\frac{MP_n}{p_n}$

The Equimarginal Rule Again II

$$\frac{MP_l}{w} = \frac{MP_k}{r} = \cdots = \frac{MP_n}{p_n}$$

- Why is this the optimum?

- **Example:** suppose firm could get a higher marginal product per \$1 spent on l than for k (i.e. "more bang for your buck"!)

    - Not minimizing costs!
    - Should use more l and less k!
        - This will raise MP_k and lower MP_l!
    - Continue until cost-adjusted marginal products are equalized

The Equimarginal Rule Again III

- Any **optimum** in economics: no better alternatives exist under current constraints

- No possible change in your inputs to produce q^* that would lower cost

The Firm's Least-Cost Input Combination: Example

Example:

Your firm can use labor l and capital k to produce output according to the production function:

$$q = 2lk$$

The marginal products are:

$$MP_l = 2k$$
$$MP_k = 2l$$

You want to produce 100 units, the price of labor is \$10, and the price of capital is \$5.

Returns to Scale

Returns to Scale

- The **returns to scale** of production refers to the change in output when all inputs are increased *at the same rate*

- **Constant returns to scale**: output increases at same proportionate rate as inputs increase

    - e.g. if you double all inputs, output doubles

- **Increasing returns to scale**: output increases *more than* proportionately to the change in inputs
    - e.g. if you double all inputs, output *more than* doubles

- **Decreasing returns to scale**: output increases *less than* proportionately to the change in inputs
    - e.g. if you double all inputs, output *less than* doubles

Returns to Scale: Example

Example: Does each of the following production functions exhibit constant returns to scale, increasing returns to scale, or decreasing returns to scale?

1. $q = 4l + 2k$
2. $q = 2lk$
3. $q = 2l^{0.3}k^{0.3}$

Returns to Scale: Cobb-Douglas

- One reason we often use Cobb-Douglas production functions is to easily determine returns to scale:

$$q = Ak^{\alpha}l^{\beta}$$

- $\alpha + \beta = 1$: constant returns to scale

- $\alpha + \beta > 1$: increasing returns to scale
- $\alpha + \beta < 1$: decreasing returns to scale
- Note this trick *only* works for Cobb-Douglas functions!

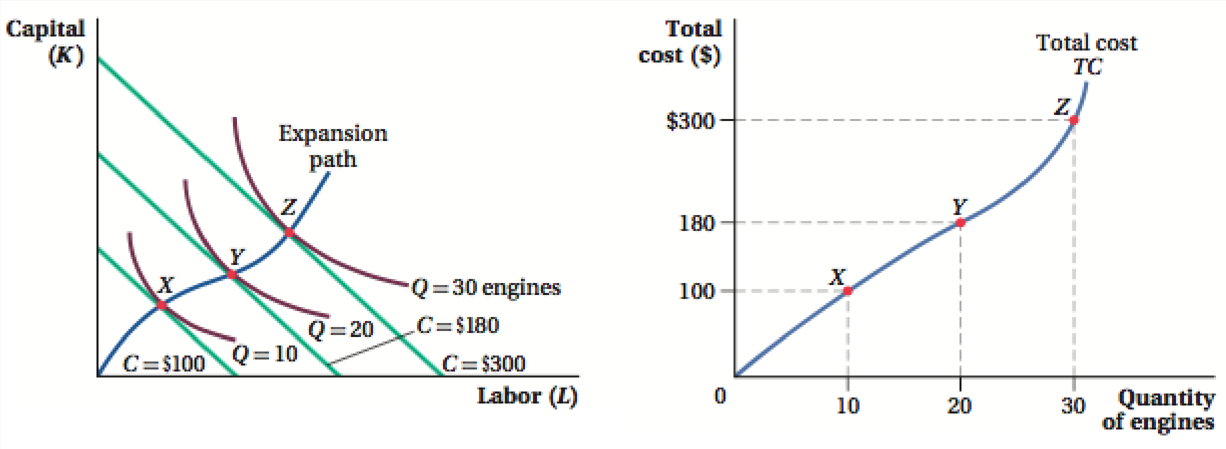
Cobb-Douglas: Constant Returns Case

- In the constant returns to scale case (most common), Cobb-Douglas is often written as:

$$q = Ak^{\alpha}l^{1-\alpha}$$

- α is the **output elasticity of capital**
  - A 1% increase in k leads to a α% increase in q
- $1-\alpha$ is the **output elasticity of labor**
  - A 1% increase in l leads to a $(1-\alpha)$% increase in q

Output-Expansion Paths & Cost Curves



Goolsbee et. al (2011: 246)

- **Output Expansion Path**: curve illustrating the changes in the optimal mix of inputs and the total cost to produce an increasing amount of output

- **Total Cost curve**: curve showing the total cost of producing different amounts of output (next class)