

# Geometric Interpretation of Derivatives in Higher Dimensions

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6 February, 2025

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# Introduction

## ● Overview:

- Extends the concept of derivatives from one-dimensional calculus to functions of several variables.
- Provides a framework for understanding how functions change along multiple directions.

## ● Key Ideas:

- **Linear Approximation:** The derivative at a point is the best linear approximation of the function near that point.

## ● Why It Matters:

- **Visualization:** Offers intuitive geometric insights into the behavior of multivariable functions.
- **Applications:** Fundamental in optimization, solving differential equations and modeling real-world phenomena.

# Geometric Meaning of the derivative of a vector Function I

The geometric meaning of the derivative of a vector function is closely related to the concept of the rate of change and the tangent vector.

- *Rate of change of position:*

Let  $r : \mathbb{R} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^n$ , where  $r$  is differentiable meaning  $r(t) = (r_1(t), r_2(t), \dots, r_n(t))$  and all  $r_i(t)$  such that  $r_i : \mathbb{R} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  are differentiable functions, and  $r'(t) = (r'_1(t), r'_2(t), \dots, r'_n(t))$  describes how the position of the vector-valued function  $r(t)$  changes with respect to the parameter  $t$ .

- *Tangent Vector:*

$r'(t)$  at a specific point on the curve indicates the direction of the tangent line to the curve at that point.

# Geometric Meaning of the derivative of a vector Function II

- Visualisation in 3D and 2D Spaces:*

If a particle moving along a curve,  $r'(t)$  at any point shows how the particle would continue moving if it maintains its current velocity and direction

Consider the unit circle defined by

$$r(t) = (\cos t, \sin t).$$

Its derivative is

$$r'(t) = (-\sin t, \cos t),$$

Which represents the tangent vector at each point.

At  $t = \frac{\pi}{4}$ :

$$r\left(\frac{\pi}{4}\right) = \left(\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}, \frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}\right),$$

# Geometric Meaning of the derivative of a vector Function

## III

$$r'\left(\frac{\pi}{4}\right) = \left(-\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}, \frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}\right).$$

The tangent line is then given by

$$L(s) = r\left(\frac{\pi}{4}\right) + s r'\left(\frac{\pi}{4}\right) = \left(\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}, \frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}\right) + s\left(-\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}, \frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}\right), \quad s \in \mathbb{R}.$$

# Geometric Meaning of the derivative of a vector Function IV

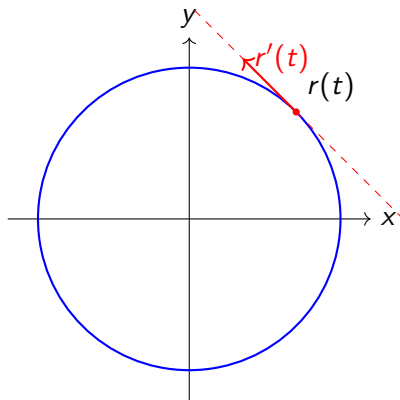


Figure: A unit circle with its tangent vector and the tangent line at  $t = \pi/4$ .

# Understanding the Gradient of a Function

## What is the Gradient?

The **gradient** of a function is a vector that tells us two things:

- **Direction** – Where the function increases the fastest.
- **Steepness** – How fast the function increases in that direction.

Mathematically, for a function  $f(x, y)$ , the gradient is written as:

$$\nabla f = \left( \frac{\partial f}{\partial x}, \frac{\partial f}{\partial y} \right)$$

This means:

- $\frac{\partial f}{\partial x}$  tells how much  $f$  changes as we move in the  $x$ -direction.
- $\frac{\partial f}{\partial y}$  tells how much  $f$  changes as we move in the  $y$ -direction.



## Example: Climbing a Hill

Imagine you are hiking on a hill where the height at any point is given by  $f(x, y)$ .

- The **gradient** tells you the steepest path to climb up.
- The bigger the gradient's length, the steeper the climb.

**Mathematical Example:** If  $f(x, y) = x^2 + y^2$ , then:

$$\nabla f = (2x, 2y)$$

- At  $(1, 1)$ , the gradient is  $(2, 2)$ , meaning the function increases fastest in the  $(1, 1)$  direction.
- At  $(0, 0)$ , the gradient is  $(0, 0)$ , meaning it's a flat point (no steepest direction).

# Geometric Meaning

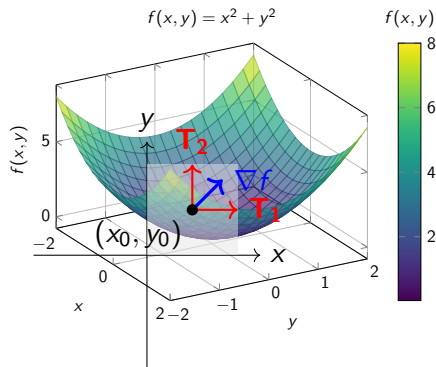
- The **gradient vector** always points in the direction where the function increases the fastest.
- The **steepness** (magnitude of the gradient) tells how quickly the function increases.
- The gradient is **perpendicular** to the level curves (contour lines).

# Physical Meaning (Real-World Examples)

The gradient is useful in many areas of science:

- **Heat Flow:** If  $f(x, y)$  represents temperature, then  $\nabla f$  shows the direction where heat increases fastest.
- **Electric Fields:** The gradient of voltage tells us how electric potential changes in space.
- **Water Flow:** Water flows **downhill**, opposite to the gradient of elevation.

# Gradient of a Scalar-Valued Function Figure I



**Figure:** Illustration of the function  $f(x, y) = x^2 + y^2$ , its tangent plane at  $(1, 1)$ , and the gradient vector perpendicular to the plane.

# The End