

Nowadays, graphing calculators are no big deal, but when I was going to school, they seemed like the cutting edge in high tech. I got a TI 82 graphing calculator in high school, and I have to say that it was one of the neatest toys I have ever seen. Stuff that seemed impossible before - difficult calculus problems - was easy to do on the calculator. Of course, you could not always solve them completely - not in the traditional method - but you could get intercepts and other values for your lines.

A lot of classrooms discourage calculator graphing. There are basic two ways of looking at graphic calculators. In one approach, it is all about technology. The graphing calculator makes mathematics easier to do. If you can get the right answer, that is what is important. Therefore, you can use any high-tech tools that are useful to do it. My math teacher, however, was from the old school. He kind of frowned on the use of a graphing calculator. Although he allowed us to do it, we had to show all our work. The numerical value that we got from the calculator graphing was not what was important - it was solving things for x .

In spite of this approach, the graphing calculator still came in handy. You see, although it couldn't me give me the answer all the time, and it certainly couldn't give me the work, it could show me if I was on the right track and give me the right representation. Often, if I was confused and unsure of what way to do the problem, plugging it into the graphing calculator was the only way to really get my mind around it. By the time I was done with that, I would always know if my approach was wrong or right. If it was wrong, I could usually correct it and figure out what to do based on the answer I was looking for.

Another great thing about graphing calculators is that a lot of them store most of the useful formulas for advanced mathematics. Teachers have different views of these. Some of them think that, as long as you can plug-in the formula, it is okay. Other ones want you to be able to remember the formula without the aid of a graphing calculator. Depending on the teacher, you may or may not be able to use a particular scientific calculator on the tests. Even if you can't, however, you can still use it during homework. After all, who is going to stop you?