



Grade 6 Math Circles

March 24/25 2020

Unsolved Problems

Introduction

What do mathematicians do?

The way in which math is taught in schools seems to imply that we know everything there is to know about math. However, this cannot be further from the truth! There are many questions in math that we do not have the answers to. This is what mathematicians work on every day.

Scientists observe things in their discipline, make hypotheses, and then design tests to find the answers to those questions. Mathematicians work in a similar way. They observe patterns and formulate hypotheses (which in math are called **conjectures**) based on their observations.

The difference between scientific research and mathematical research is the way we reach conclusions. In science, to show that something is true, you must follow the scientific method. You test the hypothesis rigorously and look for consistent results. However, in math, it is not enough to show that a statement is true for 100 numbers, 1,000 numbers, or even 1,000,000 numbers. We have to show that it is true for **all numbers**.

Proofs

A **proof** is a way of showing that a mathematical statement is true. Let's explore a few statements to see how we might prove or disprove them.

Example 1. The sum of two even integers is even.

This seems like an obvious statement, but how do we know it is true? Before we start, let's establish the definition of even. An integer s is even if it is divisible by 2. In other words, there exists some integer t such that $s = 2t$.

Let a and b be two even integers.

$$\Rightarrow a = 2x \text{ and } b = 2y \text{ for some integers } x \text{ and } y.$$

$$\Rightarrow a + b = 2x + 2y$$

$$\Rightarrow a + b = 2(x + y)$$

$$\Rightarrow a + b \text{ is even by definition.}$$

□

That square at the end is called a halmos or a tombstone, and it is used to indicate that a proof is finished. Alternatively, you can write “Q.E.D.,” which stands for *quod erat demonstrandum*, Latin for “that which was to be shown.”

Exercise 1. The sum of two odd integers is even.

The next type of proof we will try is proof by **contradiction**. For this type of proof, we assume that the statement is false, and then prove that this leads to some nonsensical result. Therefore, the statement must be true.

Example 2. There exist no integers x and y such that $8x + 4y = 1$.

Assume that the statement is false. That is, there exist some integers x and y such that $8x + 4y = 1$.

$$\begin{aligned}8x + 4y &= 1 \\ \Rightarrow \frac{8x + 4y}{4} &= \frac{1}{4} \\ \Rightarrow 2x + y &= \frac{1}{4}\end{aligned}$$

A whole number multiplied by 2 is still a whole number, and a whole number plus another whole number is still a whole number, therefore the left-hand side of this equation is a whole number. However, the right-hand side is not! This is a contradiction, so our assumption must be wrong. Therefore the statement is true. \square

Exercise 2. There do not exist whole numbers a and b such that $4a - 4b = 2$.

Fermat's Last Theorem

The generalization of the problem that we worked on before class is known as Fermat's Last Theorem. It states that there do not exist three positive integers a , b , and c which satisfy the equation

$$a^n + b^n = c^n$$

for integer values of n greater than 2. Fermat made this observation in 1637 as a margin note in a book. He stated that he had a general proof for this theorem, but that it was too large to fit in the margin. It remained unsolved for over three centuries, until it was proven by British mathematician Andrew Wiles in 1995.

Wiles' proof unified two different areas of mathematics: elliptic curves and modular forms. This is what we aim for when we work on problems in mathematics. Sometimes, the result is useful. Other times, the proof itself can be useful if it shows us a new technique or builds connections between seemingly unrelated branches of math.

Millenium Problems

In the year 2000, the Clay Mathematics Institute established a list of 7 "Millenium Prize Problems," which are some of the most difficult unsolved problems. Whoever solves any of these problems will be awarded \$1 million!

Most of these problems involve very difficult math, but the Institute has published accessible introductions to each of the problems on their website: <https://www.claymath.org/millennium-problems>. One of the problems, the Poincaré conjecture, was solved in 2006 by Russian mathematician Grigori Perelman. The other six problems remain unsolved.

Tips for approaching problems

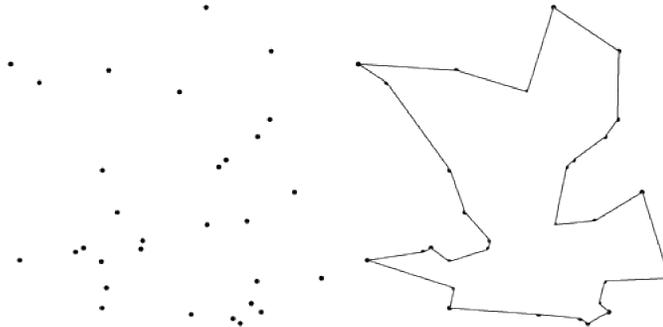
1. Test the statement using some examples. This can help us to understand why a statement is true for ourselves.
2. Draw diagrams and try to visualize the problem.
3. Try to prove a modified version of the statement. Simplify it in some way to see if that gives you any clues as to what works and what doesn't work.
4. Work together! Talk with your neighbour, brainstorm different ways of approaching the problem, and try working on examples together.

Problem Set

The following problem set contains a mix of both solved and unsolved problems.

Have fun!

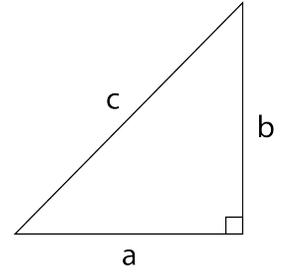
1. Pick a positive whole number. If it is even, divide it by 2. If it is odd, multiply it by 3 and add 1. Repeat this process indefinitely. Will the sequence always eventually reach 1?
2. Can every even integer greater than 2 be written as the sum of two primes?
3. There is no greatest even whole number.
4. Are there infinitely many primes p such that $p+2$ is prime?
5. Given a list of cities and the distances between each pair of cities, you want to find the shortest possible route that visits each city exactly once before returning to the city you started in. Can you find a general method to solve a problem like this?



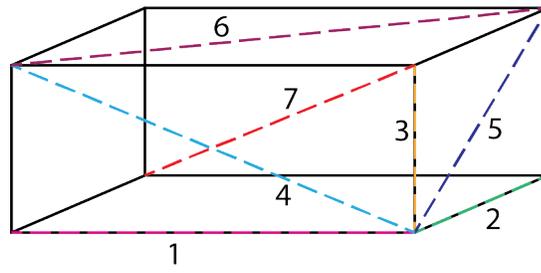
Retrieved from: <http://mathworld.wolfram.com/TravelingSalesmanProblem.html>

6. There is no smallest rational number greater than 0.
Note: A rational number is a number that can be expressed as a fraction of integers in lowest terms. An irrational number cannot. For example, $\frac{6}{5}$ and 19 are rational numbers, but π is irrational.
7. $\sqrt{2}$ is irrational.
8. What is the least number of colours required to color a 2D plane so that any two points that are exactly 1 unit apart are different colors? (This number is called the “chromatic number of the plane”) (Note: you can choose “1 unit” to be anything, as long as you keep it consistent. It can be 1 cm, 1 in, 5.2 cm, the length of a toothpick, etc.)

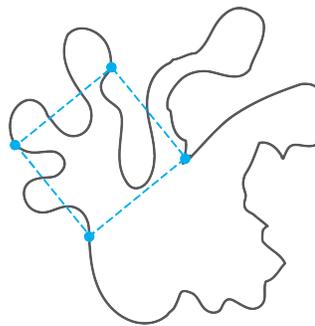
9. For every right-angled triangle with legs of length a and b and hypotenuse (longest side) of length c , prove that $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$.



10. Does there exist a rectangular prism whose length, width, height, diagonals of each face, and main diagonal (connecting the bottom back left corner to the top front right corner) are all integers?



11. For any Jordan curve (a closed loop that doesn't cross itself), can you draw a square whose vertices are on the curve?



12. What is the shape of largest area that can be moved through an L-shaped corridor?

