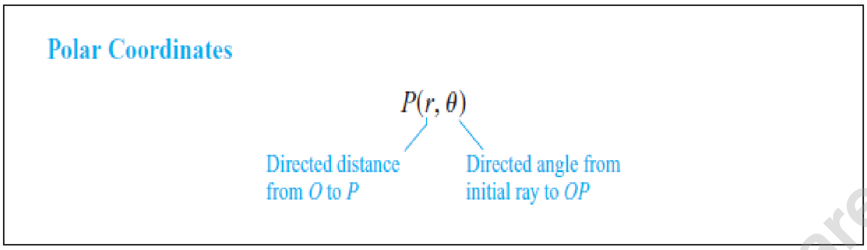
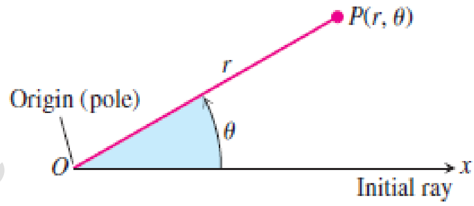
Polar Coordinates

In this section, we study polar coordinates and their relation to Cartesian coordinates. While a point in the plane has just one pair of Cartesian coordinates, it has infinitely many pairs of polar coordinates. This has interesting consequences for graphing, as we will see in the next section.

Definition of Polar Coordinates

To define polar coordinates, we first fix an **origin** O (called the **pole**) and an **initial ray** from O. Then each point P can be located by assigning to it a **polar coordi nate pair** (r, θ) in which r gives the directed distance from O to P and θ gives the directed angle from the initial ray to ray OP.

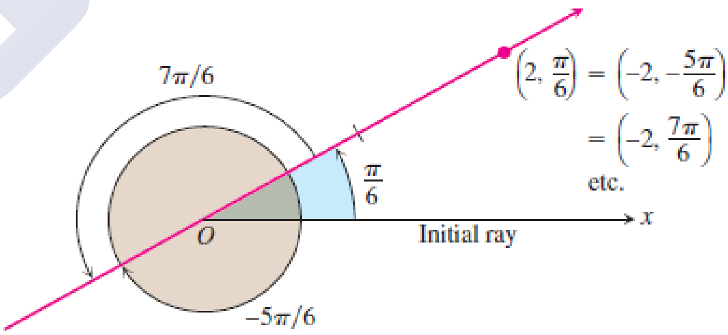




EXAMPLE Find all the polar coordinates of the point $P(2, \pi/6)$.

Solution We sketch the initial ray of the coordinate system, draw the ray from the origin that makes an angle of $\pi/6$ radians with the initial ray, and mark the point $(2, \pi/6)$

We then find the angles for the other coordinate pairs of P in which $r = 2$ and $r = -2$.



For $r = 2$, the complete list of angles is $\frac{\pi}{6}, \quad \frac{\pi}{6} \pm 2\pi, \quad \frac{\pi}{6} \pm 4\pi, \quad \frac{\pi}{6} \pm 6\pi, \quad \ldots .$

For $r = -2$, the angles are $-\frac{5\pi}{6}, \quad -\frac{5\pi}{6} \pm 2\pi, \quad -\frac{5\pi}{6} \pm 4\pi, \quad -\frac{5\pi}{6} \pm 6\pi, \quad \ldots .$

The corresponding coordinate pairs of P are $\left(2, \frac{\pi}{6} + 2n\pi\right), \quad n = 0, \pm 1, \pm 2, \ldots$

and $\left(-2, -\frac{5\pi}{6} + 2n\pi\right), \quad n = 0, \pm 1, \pm 2, \ldots.$

When $n = 0$, the formulas give $(2, \pi/6)$ and $(-2, -5\pi/6)$. When $n = 1$, they give $(2, 13\pi/6)$ and $(-2, 7\pi/6)$, and so on. ■

Polar Equations and Graphs

Equation	Graph
$r = a$	Circle radius $\lvert a \rvert$ centered at O
$\theta = \theta_0$	Line through O making an angle θ_0 with the initial ray

EXAMPLE Finding Polar Equations for Graphs

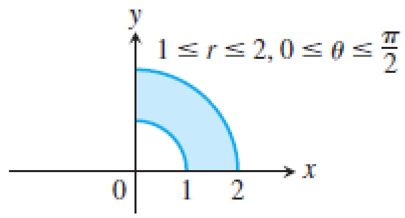
(a) $r = 1$ and $r = -1$ are equations for the circle of radius 1 centered at O.

(b) $\theta = \pi/6$, $\theta = 7\pi/6$, and $\theta = -5\pi/6$ are equations for the line

EXAMPLE Graph the sets of points whose polar coordinates satisfy the following conditions.

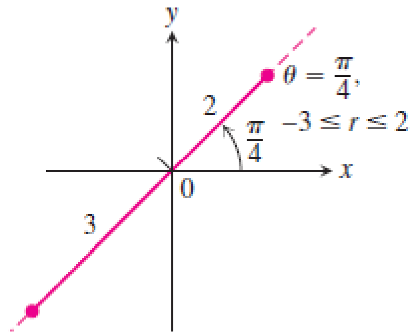
(a) $1 \le r \le 2 \quad$ and $\quad 0 \le \theta \le \frac{\pi}{2}$

(a)

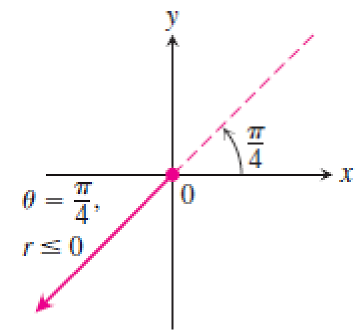


(b) $-3 \le r \le 2 \quad$ and $\quad \theta = \frac{\pi}{4}$

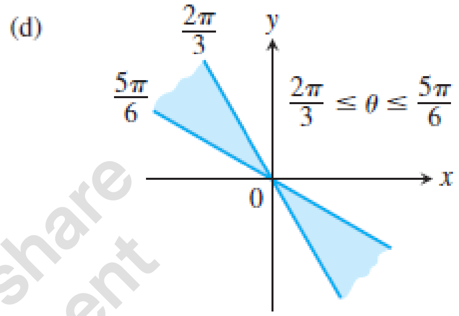
(b)



(c) $r \leq 0$ and $\theta = \frac{\pi}{4}$



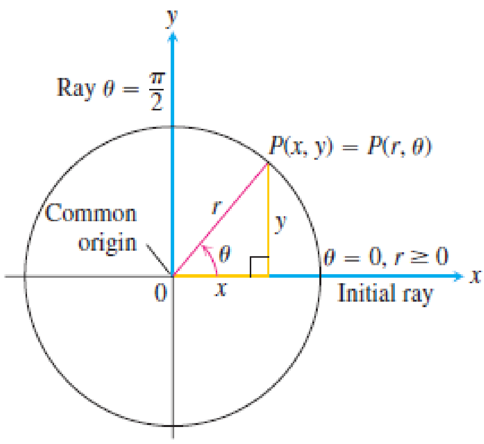
(d) $\frac{2\pi}{3} \leq \theta \leq \frac{5\pi}{6}$ (no restriction on r)



Relating Polar and Cartesian Coordinates

Equations Relating Polar and Cartesian Coordinates

$$x = r\cos\theta, \qquad y = r\sin\theta, \qquad x^2 + y^2 = r^2$$



EXAMPLE Equivalent Equations

Polar equation	Cartesian equivalent
$r\cos\theta = 2$	$x = 2$
$r^2\cos\theta\sin\theta = 4$	$xy = 4$
$r^2\cos^2\theta - r^2\sin^2\theta = 1$	$x^2 - y^2 = 1$
$r = 1 + 2r\cos\theta$	$y^2 - 3x^2 - 4x - 1 = 0$
$r = 1 - \cos\theta$	$x^4 + y^4 + 2x^2y^2 + 2x^3 + 2xy^2 - y^2 = 0$

With some curves, we are better off with polar coordinates; with others, we aren't. ■

EXAMPLE

Find a polar equation for the circle $x^2 + (y-3)^2 = 9$

Solution

$x^2 + y^2 - 6y + 9 = 9$ Expand $(y-3)^2$.

$x^2 + y^2 - 6y = 0$ The 9's cancel.

$r^2 - 6r\sin\theta = 0$ $x^2 + y^2 = r^2$

$r = 0$ or $r - 6\sin\theta = 0$ $r = 6\sin\theta$ Includes both possibilities

EXAMPLE

Replace the following polar equations by equivalent Cartesian equations, and identify their graphs.

(a) $r\cos\theta = -4$

(b) $r^2 = 4r\cos\theta$

(c) $r = \dfrac{4}{2\cos\theta - \sin\theta}$

Solution We use the substitutions $r\cos\theta = x$, $r\sin\theta = y$, $r^2 = x^2 + y^2$.

(a) $r\cos\theta = -4$

The Cartesian equation: $r\cos\theta = -4$

$x = -4$

The graph: Vertical line through $x = -4$ on the x-axis

(b) $r^2 = 4r\cos\theta$

The Cartesian equation:
$$r^2 = 4r\cos\theta$$
$$x^2 + y^2 = 4x$$

$$x^2 - 4x + y^2 = 0$$
$$x^2 - 4x + 4 + y^2 = 4 \quad \text{Completing the square}$$
$$(x-2)^2 + y^2 = 4$$

The graph: Circle, radius 2, center $(h, k) = (2, 0)$

(c) $r = \dfrac{4}{2\cos\theta - \sin\theta}$

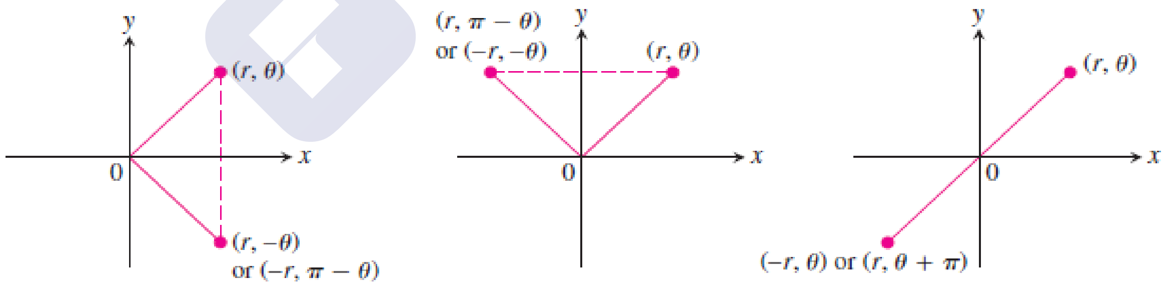
The Cartesian equation:
$$r(2\cos\theta - \sin\theta) = 4$$
$$2r\cos\theta - r\sin\theta = 4$$
$$2x - y = 4$$
$$y = 2x - 4$$

The graph: Line, slope $m = 2$, y-intercept $b = -4$

Graphing in Polar Coordinates

This section describes techniques for graphing equations in polar coordinates.

Symmetry



(a) About the x-axis (b) About the y-axis (c) About the origin

Symmetry Tests for Polar Graphs

1. *Symmetry about the x-axis:* If the point (r, θ) lies on the graph, the point $(r, -\theta)$ or $(-r, \pi - \theta)$ lies on the graph (Figure 10.43a).
2. *Symmetry about the y-axis:* If the point (r, θ) lies on the graph, the point $(r, \pi - \theta)$ or $(-r, -\theta)$ lies on the graph (Figure 10.43b).
3. *Symmetry about the origin:* If the point (r, θ) lies on the graph, the point $(-r, \theta)$ or $(r, \theta + \pi)$ lies on the graph (Figure 10.43c).

Slope

The slope of a polar curve $r = f(\theta)$ is given by dy/dx, not by $r' = df/d\theta$. To see why, think of the graph of f as the graph of the parametric equations

$$x = r\cos\theta = f(\theta)\cos\theta, \qquad y = r\sin\theta = f(\theta)\sin\theta.$$

Slope of the Curve $r = f(\theta)$

$$\left.\frac{dy}{dx}\right|_{(r,\,\theta)} = \frac{f'(\theta)\sin\theta + f(\theta)\cos\theta}{f'(\theta)\cos\theta - f(\theta)\sin\theta},$$

provided $dx/d\theta \neq 0$ at (r, θ).

If the curve $r = f(\theta)$ passes through the origin at $\theta = \theta_0$, then $f(\theta_0) = 0$, and the slope equation gives

$$\left.\frac{dy}{dx}\right|_{(0,\,\theta_0)} = \frac{f'(\theta_0)\sin\theta_0}{f'(\theta_0)\cos\theta_0} = \tan\theta_0.$$

If the graph of $r = f(\theta)$ passes through the origin at the value $\theta = \theta_0$, the slope of the curve there is $\tan\theta_0$. The reason we say "slope at $(0, \theta_0)$" and not just "slope at the origin" is that a polar curve may pass through the origin (or any point) more than once, with different slopes at different θ-values. This is not the case in our first example, however.

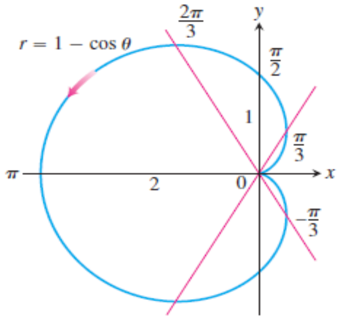
EXAMPLE Graph the curve $r = 1 - \cos\theta$.

Solution The curve is symmetric about the x-axis because

$$\begin{aligned}(r, \theta) \text{ on the graph} &\Rightarrow r = 1 - \cos\theta \\ &\Rightarrow r = 1 - \cos(-\theta) \qquad \cos\theta = \cos(-\theta) \\ &\Rightarrow (r, -\theta) \text{ on the graph}.\end{aligned}$$

Solution The curve is symmetric about the x-axis because

$$\begin{aligned}(r, \theta) \text{ on the graph} &\Rightarrow r = 1 - \cos\theta \\ &\Rightarrow r = 1 - \cos(-\theta) \qquad \cos\theta = \cos(-\theta) \\ &\Rightarrow (r, -\theta) \text{ on the graph}.\end{aligned}$$



EXAMPLE Graph the Curve $r^2 = 4\cos\theta$.

Solution The equation $r^2 = 4\cos\theta$ requires $\cos\theta \geq 0$, so we get the entire graph by running θ from $-\pi/2$ to $\pi/2$. The curve is symmetric about the x-axis because

$$\begin{aligned}(r, \theta) \text{ on the graph } &\Rightarrow r^2 = 4\cos\theta \\ &\Rightarrow r^2 = 4\cos(-\theta) \qquad \cos\theta = \cos(-\theta) \\ &\Rightarrow (r, -\theta) \text{ on the graph.}\end{aligned}$$

The curve is also symmetric about the origin because

$$\begin{aligned}(r, \theta) \text{ on the graph } &\Rightarrow r^2 = 4\cos\theta \\ &\Rightarrow (-r)^2 = 4\cos\theta \\ &\Rightarrow (-r, \theta) \text{ on the graph.}\end{aligned}$$

Together, these two symmetries imply symmetry about the y-axis.

The curve passes through the origin when $\theta = -\pi/2$ and $\theta = \pi/2$. It has a vertical tangent both times because $\tan\theta$ is infinite.

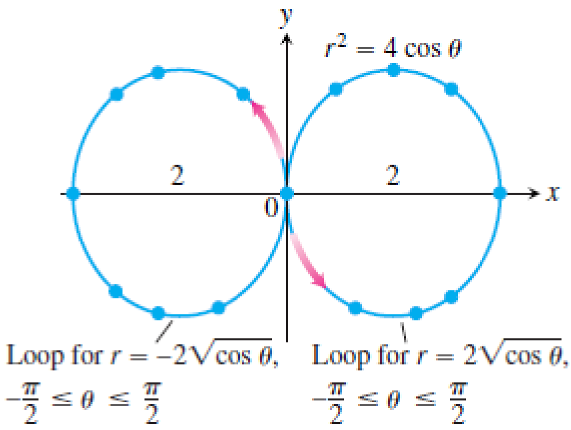
For each value of θ in the interval between $-\pi/2$ and $\pi/2$, the formula $r^2 = 4\cos\theta$ gives two values of r:

$$r = \pm 2\sqrt{\cos\theta}.$$

We make a short table of values, plot the corresponding points, and use information about symmetry and tangents to guide us in connecting the points with a smooth curve

θ	$\cos\theta$	$r = \pm 2\sqrt{\cos\theta}$
0	1	± 2
$\pm\frac{\pi}{6}$	$\frac{\sqrt{3}}{2}$	$\approx \pm 1.9$
$\pm\frac{\pi}{4}$	$\frac{1}{\sqrt{2}}$	$\approx \pm 1.7$
$\pm\frac{\pi}{3}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	$\approx \pm 1.4$
$\pm\frac{\pi}{2}$	0	0

(a)



(b)