13.3 Arc Length and the Unit Tangent Vector T

Imagine the motions you might experience traveling at high speeds along a path through the air or space. Specifically, imagine the motions of turning to your left or right and the up-and-down motions tending to lift you from, or pin you down to, your seat. Pilots flying through the atmosphere, turning and twisting in flight acrobatics, certainly experience these motions. Turns that are too tight, descents or climbs that are too steep, or either one coupled with high and increasing speed can cause an aircraft to spin out of control, possibly even to break up in midair, and crash to Earth.

In this and the next two sections, we study the features of a curve's shape that describe mathematically the sharpness of its turning and its twisting perpendicular to the forward motion.

Arc Length Along a Space Curve

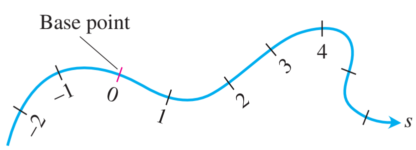

FIGURE 13.14 Smooth curves can be scaled like number lines, the coordinate of each point being its directed distance along the curve from a preselected base point.

One of the features of smooth space curves is that they have a measurable length. This enables us to locate points along these curves by giving their directed distance s along the curve from some **base point**, the way we locate points on coordinate axes by giving their directed distance from the origin (Figure 13.14). Time is the natural parameter for describing a moving body's velocity and acceleration, but s is the natural parameter for studying a curve's shape. Both parameters appear in analyses of space flight.

To measure distance along a smooth curve in space, we add a z-term to the formula we use for curves in the plane.

DEFINITION Length of a Smooth Curve

The **length** of a smooth curve $\mathbf{r}(t) = x(t)\mathbf{i} + y(t)\mathbf{j} + z(t)\mathbf{k}$, $a \le t \le b$, that is traced exactly once as t increases from $t = a$ to $t = b$, is

$$L = \int_a^b \sqrt{\left(\frac{dx}{dt}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{dy}{dt}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{dz}{dt}\right)^2}\, dt. \qquad (1)$$

Just as for plane curves, we can calculate the length of a curve in space from any convenient parametrization that meets the stated conditions. We omit the proof.

The square root in Equation (1) is $|\mathbf{v}|$, the length of a velocity vector $d\mathbf{r}/dt$. This enables us to write the formula for length a shorter way.

Arc Length Formula

$$L = \int_a^b |\mathbf{v}|\, dt \qquad (2)$$

EXAMPLE 1 Distance Traveled by a Glider

A glider is soaring upward along the helix $\mathbf{r}(t) = (\cos t)\mathbf{i} + (\sin t)\mathbf{j} + t\mathbf{k}$. How far does the glider travel along its path from $t = 0$ to $t = 2\pi \approx 6.28$ sec?

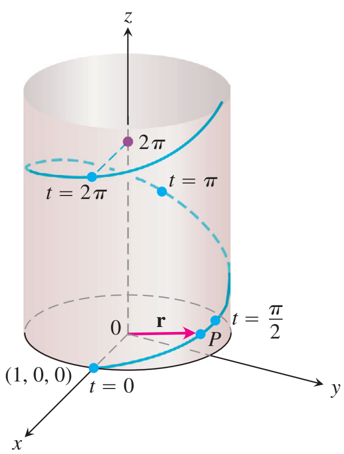

FIGURE 13.15 The helix $\mathbf{r}(t) = (\cos t)\mathbf{i} + (\sin t)\mathbf{j} + t\mathbf{k}$ in Example 1.

Solution The path segment during this time corresponds to one full turn of the helix (Figure 13.15). The length of this portion of the curve is

$$L = \int_a^b |\mathbf{v}|\,dt = \int_0^{2\pi} \sqrt{(-\sin t)^2 + (\cos t)^2 + (1)^2}\,dt$$

$$= \int_0^{2\pi} \sqrt{2}\,dt = 2\pi\sqrt{2} \text{ units of length.}$$

This is $\sqrt{2}$ times the length of the circle in the xy-plane over which the helix stands. ■

If we choose a base point $P(t_0)$ on a smooth curve C parametrized by t, each value of t determines a point $P(t) = (x(t), y(t), z(t))$ on C and a "directed distance"

$$s(t) = \int_{t_0}^{t} |\mathbf{v}(\tau)|\,d\tau,$$

measured along C from the base point (Figure 13.16). If $t > t_0$, $s(t)$ is the distance from $P(t_0)$ to $P(t)$. If $t < t_0$, $s(t)$ is the negative of the distance. Each value of s determines a point on C and this parametrizes C with respect to s. We call s an **arc length parameter** for the curve. The parameter's value increases in the direction of increasing t. The arc length parameter is particularly effective for investigating the turning and twisting nature of a space curve.

We use the Greek letter τ ("tau") as the variable of integration because the letter t is already in use as the upper limit.

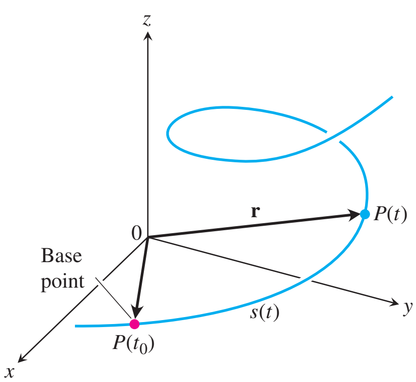

FIGURE 13.16 The directed distance along the curve from $P(t_0)$ to any point $P(t)$ is

$$s(t) = \int_{t_0}^{t} |\mathbf{v}(\tau)|\,d\tau.$$

Arc Length Parameter with Base Point $P(t_0)$

$$s(t) = \int_{t_0}^{t} \sqrt{[x'(\tau)]^2 + [y'(\tau)]^2 + [z'(\tau)]^2}\,d\tau = \int_{t_0}^{t} |\mathbf{v}(\tau)|\,d\tau \qquad (3)$$

If a curve $\mathbf{r}(t)$ is already given in terms of some parameter t and $s(t)$ is the arc length function given by Equation (3), then we may be able to solve for t as a function of s: $t = t(s)$. Then the curve can be reparametrized in terms of s by substituting for t: $\mathbf{r} = \mathbf{r}(t(s))$.

You Try It

EXAMPLE 2 Finding an Arc Length Parametrization

If $t_0 = 0$, the arc length parameter along the helix

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = (\cos t)\mathbf{i} + (\sin t)\mathbf{j} + t\mathbf{k}$$

from t_0 to t is

$$s(t) = \int_{t_0}^{t} |\mathbf{v}(\tau)|\,d\tau \qquad \text{Equation (3)}$$

$$= \int_0^{t} \sqrt{2}\,d\tau \qquad \text{Value from Example 1}$$

$$= \sqrt{2}\,t.$$

Solving this equation for t gives $t = s/\sqrt{2}$. Substituting into the position vector **r** gives the following arc length parametrization for the helix:

$$\mathbf{r}(t(s)) = \left(\cos \frac{s}{\sqrt{2}}\right)\mathbf{i} + \left(\sin \frac{s}{\sqrt{2}}\right)\mathbf{j} + \frac{s}{\sqrt{2}}\mathbf{k}. \qquad \blacksquare$$

Unlike Example 2, the arc length parametrization is generally difficult to find analytically for a curve already given in terms of some other parameter t. Fortunately, however, we rarely need an exact formula for $s(t)$ or its inverse $t(s)$.

EXAMPLE 3 Distance Along a Line

Show that if $\mathbf{u} = u_1\mathbf{i} + u_2\mathbf{j} + u_3\mathbf{k}$ is a unit vector, then the arc length parameter along the line

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = (x_0 + tu_1)\mathbf{i} + (y_0 + tu_2)\mathbf{j} + (z_0 + tu_3)\mathbf{k}$$

from the point $P_0(x_0, y_0, z_0)$ where $t = 0$ is t itself.

Solution

$$\mathbf{v} = \frac{d}{dt}(x_0 + tu_1)\mathbf{i} + \frac{d}{dt}(y_0 + tu_2)\mathbf{j} + \frac{d}{dt}(z_0 + tu_3)\mathbf{k} = u_1\mathbf{i} + u_2\mathbf{j} + u_3\mathbf{k} = \mathbf{u},$$

so

$$s(t) = \int_0^t |\mathbf{v}|\, d\tau = \int_0^t |\mathbf{u}|\, d\tau = \int_0^t 1\, d\tau = t. \qquad \blacksquare$$

HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHY

Josiah Willard Gibbs
(1839–1903)

Speed on a Smooth Curve

Since the derivatives beneath the radical in Equation (3) are continuous (the curve is smooth), the Fundamental Theorem of Calculus tells us that s is a differentiable function of t with derivative

$$\frac{ds}{dt} = |\mathbf{v}(t)|. \tag{4}$$

As we already knew, the speed with which a particle moves along its path is the magnitude of **v**.

Notice that although the base point $P(t_0)$ plays a role in defining s in Equation (3), it plays no role in Equation (4). The rate at which a moving particle covers distance along its path is independent of how far away it is from the base point.

Notice also that $ds/dt > 0$ since, by definition, $|\mathbf{v}|$ is never zero for a smooth curve. We see once again that s is an increasing function of t.

Unit Tangent Vector T

We already know the velocity vector $\mathbf{v} = d\mathbf{r}/dt$ is tangent to the curve and that the vector

$$\mathbf{T} = \frac{\mathbf{v}}{|\mathbf{v}|}$$

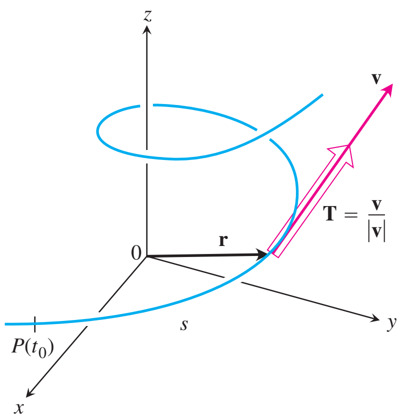

FIGURE 13.17 We find the unit tangent vector $\mathbf{T}$ by dividing $\mathbf{v}$ by $|\mathbf{v}|$.

is therefore a unit vector tangent to the (smooth) curve. Since $ds/dt > 0$ for the curves we are considering, s is one-to-one and has an inverse that gives t as a differentiable function of s (Section 7.1). The derivative of the inverse is

$$\frac{dt}{ds} = \frac{1}{ds/dt} = \frac{1}{|\mathbf{v}|}.$$

This makes $\mathbf{r}$ a differentiable function of s whose derivative can be calculated with the Chain Rule to be

$$\frac{d\mathbf{r}}{ds} = \frac{d\mathbf{r}}{dt}\frac{dt}{ds} = \mathbf{v}\frac{1}{|\mathbf{v}|} = \frac{\mathbf{v}}{|\mathbf{v}|} = \mathbf{T}.$$

This equation says that $d\mathbf{r}/ds$ is the unit tangent vector in the direction of the velocity vector $\mathbf{v}$ (Figure 13.17).

DEFINITION Unit Tangent Vector

The **unit tangent vector** of a smooth curve $\mathbf{r}(t)$ is

$$\mathbf{T} = \frac{d\mathbf{r}}{ds} = \frac{d\mathbf{r}/dt}{ds/dt} = \frac{\mathbf{v}}{|\mathbf{v}|}. \tag{5}$$

The unit tangent vector $\mathbf{T}$ is a differentiable function of t whenever $\mathbf{v}$ is a differentiable function of t. As we see in Section 13.5, $\mathbf{T}$ is one of three unit vectors in a traveling reference frame that is used to describe the motion of space vehicles and other bodies traveling in three dimensions.

EXAMPLE 4 Finding the Unit Tangent Vector T

Find the unit tangent vector of the curve

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = (3\cos t)\mathbf{i} + (3\sin t)\mathbf{j} + t^2\mathbf{k}$$

representing the path of the glider in Example 4, Section 13.1.

Solution In that example, we found

$$\mathbf{v} = \frac{d\mathbf{r}}{dt} = -(3\sin t)\mathbf{i} + (3\cos t)\mathbf{j} + 2t\mathbf{k}$$

and

$$|\mathbf{v}| = \sqrt{9 + 4t^2}.$$

Thus,

$$\mathbf{T} = \frac{\mathbf{v}}{|\mathbf{v}|} = -\frac{3\sin t}{\sqrt{9+4t^2}}\mathbf{i} + \frac{3\cos t}{\sqrt{9+4t^2}}\mathbf{j} + \frac{2t}{\sqrt{9+4t^2}}\mathbf{k}. \qquad \blacksquare$$

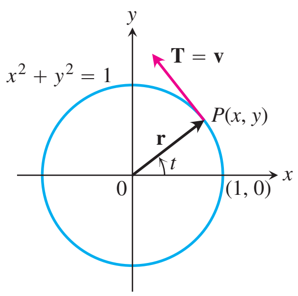

FIGURE 13.18 The motion $\mathbf{r}(t) = (\cos t)\mathbf{i} + (\sin t)\mathbf{j}$ (Example 5).

EXAMPLE 5 Motion on the Unit Circle

For the counterclockwise motion

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = (\cos t)\mathbf{i} + (\sin t)\mathbf{j}$$

around the unit circle,

$$\mathbf{v} = (-\sin t)\mathbf{i} + (\cos t)\mathbf{j}$$

is already a unit vector, so $\mathbf{T} = \mathbf{v}$ (Figure 13.18). ■