13.4 Curvature and the Unit Normal Vector N

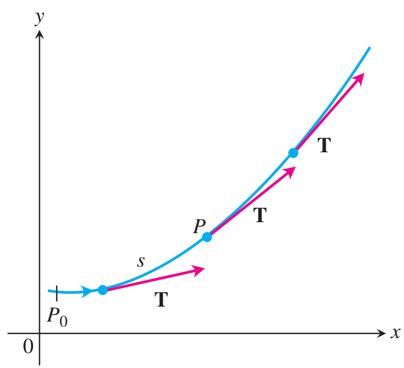

FIGURE 13.19 As P moves along the curve in the direction of increasing arc length, the unit tangent vector turns. The value of $|d\mathbf{T}/ds|$ at P is called the *curvature* of the curve at P.

In this section we study how a curve turns or bends. We look first at curves in the coordinate plane, and then at curves in space.

Curvature of a Plane Curve

As a particle moves along a smooth curve in the plane, $\mathbf{T} = d\mathbf{r}/ds$ turns as the curve bends. Since $\mathbf{T}$ is a unit vector, its length remains constant and only its direction changes as the particle moves along the curve. The rate at which $\mathbf{T}$ turns per unit of length along the curve is called the *curvature* (Figure 13.19). The traditional symbol for the curvature function is the Greek letter κ ("kappa").

DEFINITION Curvature

If $\mathbf{T}$ is the unit vector of a smooth curve, the **curvature** function of the curve is

$$\kappa = \left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{ds}\right|.$$

If $|d\mathbf{T}/ds|$ is large, $\mathbf{T}$ turns sharply as the particle passes through P, and the curvature at P is large. If $|d\mathbf{T}/ds|$ is close to zero, $\mathbf{T}$ turns more slowly and the curvature at P is smaller.

If a smooth curve $\mathbf{r}(t)$ is already given in terms of some parameter t other than the arc length parameter s, we can calculate the curvature as

$$\begin{aligned}
\kappa &= \left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{ds}\right| = \left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt}\frac{dt}{ds}\right| && \text{Chain Rule} \\
&= \frac{1}{|ds/dt|}\left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt}\right| \\
&= \frac{1}{|\mathbf{v}|}\left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt}\right|. && \frac{ds}{dt} = |\mathbf{v}|
\end{aligned}$$

Formula for Calculating Curvature

If $\mathbf{r}(t)$ is a smooth curve, then the curvature is

$$\kappa = \frac{1}{|\mathbf{v}|}\left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt}\right|, \tag{1}$$

where $\mathbf{T} = \mathbf{v}/|\mathbf{v}|$ is the unit tangent vector.

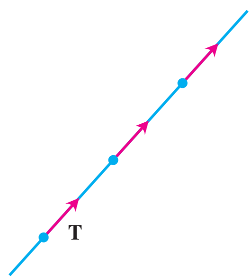

FIGURE 13.20 Along a straight line, $\mathbf{T}$ always points in the same direction. The curvature, $|d\mathbf{T}/ds|$, is zero (Example 1).

Testing the definition, we see in Examples 1 and 2 below that the curvature is constant for straight lines and circles.

EXAMPLE 1 The Curvature of a Straight Line Is Zero

On a straight line, the unit tangent vector $\mathbf{T}$ always points in the same direction, so its components are constants. Therefore, $|d\mathbf{T}/ds| = |\mathbf{0}| = 0$ (Figure 13.20). ■

EXAMPLE 2 The Curvature of a Circle of Radius a is $1/a$

To see why, we begin with the parametrization

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

of a circle of radius a. Then,

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

$$|\mathbf{v}| = \sqrt{(-a\sin t)^2 + (a\cos t)^2} = \sqrt{a^2} = |a| = a.$$

Since $a > 0$, $|a| = a$.

From this we find

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

$$\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt} = -(\cos t)\mathbf{i} - (\sin t)\mathbf{j}$$

$$\left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt}\right| = \sqrt{\cos^2 t + \sin^2 t} = 1.$$

Hence, for any value of the parameter t,

$$\kappa = \frac{1}{|\mathbf{v}|}\left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt}\right| = \frac{1}{a}(1) = \frac{1}{a}.$$ ■

Although the formula for calculating κ in Equation (1) is also valid for space curves, in the next section we find a computational formula that is usually more convenient to apply.

Among the vectors orthogonal to the unit tangent vector $\mathbf{T}$ is one of particular significance because it points in the direction in which the curve is turning. Since $\mathbf{T}$ has constant length (namely, 1), the derivative $d\mathbf{T}/ds$ is orthogonal to $\mathbf{T}$ (Section 13.1). Therefore, if we divide $d\mathbf{T}/ds$ by its length κ, we obtain a *unit* vector $\mathbf{N}$ orthogonal to $\mathbf{T}$ (Figure 13.21).

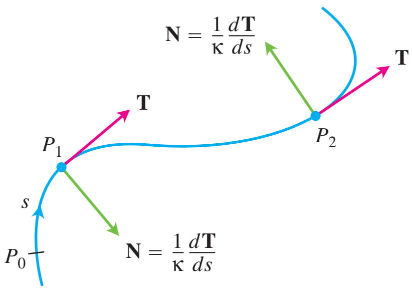

FIGURE 13.21 The vector $d\mathbf{T}/ds$, normal to the curve, always points in the direction in which $\mathbf{T}$ is turning. The unit normal vector $\mathbf{N}$ is the direction of $d\mathbf{T}/ds$.

DEFINITION Principal Unit Normal

At a point where $\kappa \neq 0$, the **principal unit normal** vector for a smooth curve in the plane is

$$\mathbf{N} = \frac{1}{\kappa}\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{ds}.$$

The vector $d\mathbf{T}/ds$ points in the direction in which $\mathbf{T}$ turns as the curve bends. Therefore, if we face in the direction of increasing arc length, the vector $d\mathbf{T}/ds$ points toward the right if $\mathbf{T}$ turns clockwise and toward the left if $\mathbf{T}$ turns counterclockwise. In other words, the principal normal vector $\mathbf{N}$ will point toward the concave side of the curve (Figure 13.21).

If a smooth curve $\mathbf{r}(t)$ is already given in terms of some parameter t other than the arc length parameter s, we can use the Chain Rule to calculate $\mathbf{N}$ directly:

$$\begin{aligned}\mathbf{N} &= \frac{d\mathbf{T}/ds}{|d\mathbf{T}/ds|} \\ &= \frac{(d\mathbf{T}/dt)(dt/ds)}{|d\mathbf{T}/dt||dt/ds|} \\ &= \frac{d\mathbf{T}/dt}{|d\mathbf{T}/dt|}. \qquad \frac{dt}{ds} = \frac{1}{ds/dt} > 0 \text{ cancels}\end{aligned}$$

This formula enables us to find $\mathbf{N}$ without having to find κ and s first.

Formula for Calculating N

If $\mathbf{r}(t)$ is a smooth curve, then the principal unit normal is

$$\mathbf{N} = \frac{d\mathbf{T}/dt}{|d\mathbf{T}/dt|}, \qquad (2)$$

where $\mathbf{T} = \mathbf{v}/|\mathbf{v}|$ is the unit tangent vector.

EXAMPLE 3 Finding $\mathbf{T}$ and $\mathbf{N}$

You Try It

Find $\mathbf{T}$ and $\mathbf{N}$ for the circular motion

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

Solution We first find $\mathbf{T}$:

$$\begin{aligned}\mathbf{v} &= -(2\sin 2t)\mathbf{i} + (2\cos 2t)\mathbf{j} \\ |\mathbf{v}| &= \sqrt{4\sin^2 2t + 4\cos^2 2t} = 2 \\ \mathbf{T} &= \frac{\mathbf{v}}{|\mathbf{v}|} = -(\sin 2t)\mathbf{i} + (\cos 2t)\mathbf{j}.\end{aligned}$$

From this we find

$$\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt} = -(2\cos 2t)\mathbf{i} - (2\sin 2t)\mathbf{j}$$

$$\left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt}\right| = \sqrt{4\cos^2 2t + 4\sin^2 2t} = 2$$

and

$$\mathbf{N} = \frac{d\mathbf{T}/dt}{|d\mathbf{T}/dt|}$$

$$= -(\cos 2t)\mathbf{i} - (\sin 2t)\mathbf{j}. \qquad \text{Equation (2)}$$

Notice that $\mathbf{T} \cdot \mathbf{N} = 0$, verifying that $\mathbf{N}$ is orthogonal to $\mathbf{T}$. Notice too, that for the circular motion here, $\mathbf{N}$ points from $\mathbf{r}(t)$ towards the circle's center at the origin. ■

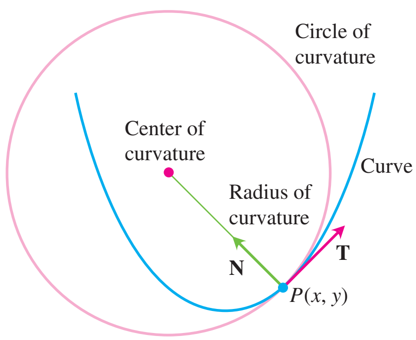

FIGURE 13.22 The osculating circle at $P(x, y)$ lies toward the inner side of the curve.

Circle of Curvature for Plane Curves

The **circle of curvature** or **osculating circle** at a point P on a plane curve where $\kappa \neq 0$ is the circle in the plane of the curve that

1. is tangent to the curve at P (has the same tangent line the curve has)
2. has the same curvature the curve has at P
3. lies toward the concave or inner side of the curve (as in Figure 13.22).

The **radius of curvature** of the curve at P is the radius of the circle of curvature, which, according to Example 2, is

$$\text{Radius of curvature} = \rho = \frac{1}{\kappa}.$$

To find ρ, we find κ and take the reciprocal. The **center of curvature** of the curve at P is the center of the circle of curvature.

EXAMPLE 4 Finding the Osculating Circle for a Parabola

Find and graph the osculating circle of the parabola $y = x^2$ at the origin.

Solution We parametrize the parabola using the parameter $t = x$ (Section 10.4, Example 1)

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = t\mathbf{i} + t^2\mathbf{j}.$$

First we find the curvature of the parabola at the origin, using Equation (1):

$$\mathbf{v} = \frac{d\mathbf{r}}{dt} = \mathbf{i} + 2t\mathbf{j}$$

$$|\mathbf{v}| = \sqrt{1 + 4t^2}$$

so that

$$\mathbf{T} = \frac{\mathbf{v}}{|\mathbf{v}|} = (1 + 4t^2)^{-1/2}\mathbf{i} + 2t(1 + 4t^2)^{-1/2}\mathbf{j}.$$

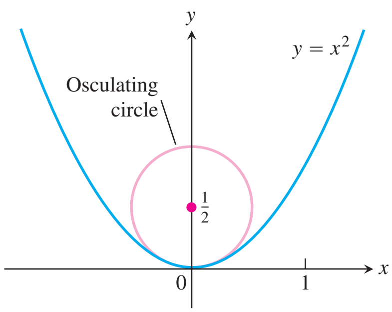

FIGURE 13.23 The osculating circle for the parabola $y = x^2$ at the origin (Example 4).

From this we find

$$\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt} = -4t(1 + 4t^2)^{-3/2}\mathbf{i} + [2(1 + 4t^2)^{-1/2} - 8t^2(1 + 4t^2)^{-3/2}]\mathbf{j}.$$

At the origin, $t = 0$, so the curvature is

$$\begin{aligned} \kappa(0) &= \frac{1}{|\mathbf{v}(0)|}\left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt}(0)\right| \qquad \text{Equation (1)} \\ &= \frac{1}{\sqrt{1}}|0\mathbf{i} + 2\mathbf{j}| \\ &= (1)\sqrt{0^2 + 2^2} = 2. \end{aligned}$$

Therefore, the radius of curvature is $1/\kappa = 1/2$ and the center of the circle is $(0, 1/2)$ (see Figure 13.23). The equation of the osculating circle is

$$(x - 0)^2 + \left(y - \frac{1}{2}\right)^2 = \left(\frac{1}{2}\right)^2$$

or

$$x^2 + \left(y - \frac{1}{2}\right)^2 = \frac{1}{4}.$$

You can see from Figure 13.23 that the osculating circle is a better approximation to the parabola at the origin than is the tangent line approximation $y = 0$. ■

Curvature and Normal Vectors for Space Curves

If a smooth curve in space is specified by the position vector $\mathbf{r}(t)$ as a function of some parameter t, and if s is the arc length parameter of the curve, then the unit tangent vector $\mathbf{T}$ is $d\mathbf{r}/ds = \mathbf{v}/|\mathbf{v}|$. The **curvature** in space is then defined to be

$$\kappa = \left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{ds}\right| = \frac{1}{|\mathbf{v}|}\left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt}\right| \tag{3}$$

just as for plane curves. The vector $d\mathbf{T}/ds$ is orthogonal to $\mathbf{T}$, and we define the **principal unit normal** to be

$$\mathbf{N} = \frac{1}{\kappa}\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{ds} = \frac{d\mathbf{T}/dt}{|d\mathbf{T}/dt|}. \tag{4}$$

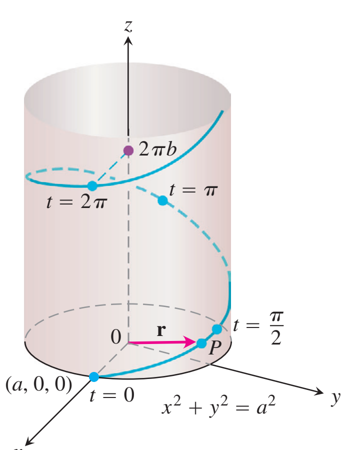

FIGURE 13.24 The helix

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

drawn with a and b positive and $t \geq 0$ (Example 5).

EXAMPLE 5 Finding Curvature

You Try It | Video

Find the curvature for the helix (Figure 13.24)

$$\mathbf{r}(t) = (a\cos t)\mathbf{i} + (a\sin t)\mathbf{j} + bt\mathbf{k}, \qquad a, b \geq 0, \qquad a^2 + b^2 \neq 0.$$

Solution We calculate **T** from the velocity vector **v**:

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

$$|\mathbf{v}| = \sqrt{a^2 \sin^2 t + a^2 \cos^2 t + b^2} = \sqrt{a^2 + b^2}$$

$$\mathbf{T} = \frac{\mathbf{v}}{|\mathbf{v}|} = \frac{1}{\sqrt{a^2 + b^2}}[-(a \sin t)\mathbf{i} + (a \cos t)\mathbf{j} + b\mathbf{k}].$$

Then using Equation (3),

$$\begin{aligned}
\kappa &= \frac{1}{|\mathbf{v}|}\left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt}\right| \\
&= \frac{1}{\sqrt{a^2 + b^2}}\left|\frac{1}{\sqrt{a^2 + b^2}}[-(a \cos t)\mathbf{i} - (a \sin t)\mathbf{j}]\right| \\
&= \frac{a}{a^2 + b^2}|-(\cos t)\mathbf{i} - (\sin t)\mathbf{j}| \\
&= \frac{a}{a^2 + b^2}\sqrt{(\cos t)^2 + (\sin t)^2} = \frac{a}{a^2 + b^2}.
\end{aligned}$$

From this equation, we see that increasing b for a fixed a decreases the curvature. Decreasing a for a fixed b eventually decreases the curvature as well. Stretching a spring tends to straighten it.

If $b = 0$, the helix reduces to a circle of radius a and its curvature reduces to $1/a$, as it should. If $a = 0$, the helix becomes the z-axis, and its curvature reduces to 0, again as it should. ■

EXAMPLE 6 Finding the Principal Unit Normal Vector N

Find **N** for the helix in Example 5.

Solution We have

$$\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt} = -\frac{1}{\sqrt{a^2 + b^2}}[(a \cos t)\mathbf{i} + (a \sin t)\mathbf{j}] \qquad \text{Example 5}$$

$$\left|\frac{d\mathbf{T}}{dt}\right| = \frac{1}{\sqrt{a^2 + b^2}}\sqrt{a^2 \cos^2 t + a^2 \sin^2 t} = \frac{a}{\sqrt{a^2 + b^2}}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
\mathbf{N} &= \frac{d\mathbf{T}/dt}{|d\mathbf{T}/dt|} \qquad \text{Equatiion (4)} \\
&= -\frac{\sqrt{a^2 + b^2}}{a} \cdot \frac{1}{\sqrt{a^2 + b^2}}[(a \cos t)\mathbf{i} + (a \sin t)\mathbf{j}] \\
&= -(\cos t)\mathbf{i} - (\sin t)\mathbf{j}.
\end{aligned}$$

■