1.2 ELLIPSES

■ Geometric Definition of an Ellipse ■ Equations and Graphs of Ellipses
■ Eccentricity of an Ellipse

■ Geometric Definition of an Ellipse

An ellipse is an oval curve that looks like an elongated circle. More precisely, we have the following definition.

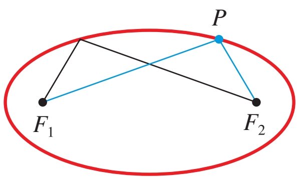


FIGURE 1

GEOMETRIC DEFINITION OF AN ELLIPSE

An **ellipse** is the set of all points in the plane the sum of whose distances from two fixed points F_1 and F_2 is a constant. (See Figure 1.) These two fixed points are the **foci** (plural of **focus**) of the ellipse.

The geometric definition suggests a simple method for drawing an ellipse. Place a sheet of paper on a drawing board, and insert thumbtacks at the two points that are to be the foci of the ellipse. Attach the ends of a string to the tacks, as shown in Figure 2(a). With the point of a pencil, hold the string taut. Then carefully move the pencil around the foci, keeping the string taut at all times. The pencil will trace out an ellipse, because the sum of the distances from the point of the pencil to the foci will always equal the length of the string, which is constant.

If the string is only slightly longer than the distance between the foci, then the ellipse that is traced out will be elongated in shape, as in Figure 2(a), but if the foci are close together relative to the length of the string, the ellipse will be almost circular, as shown in Figure 2(b).

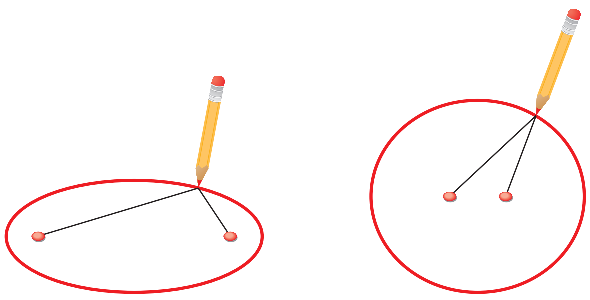


FIGURE 2 (a) (b)

place the foci on the x-axis at $F_1(-c, 0)$ and $F_2(c, 0)$ so that the origin is halfway be-

Deriving the Equation of an Ellipse To obtain the simplest equation for an ellipse, we

tween them (see Figure 3).

For later convenience we let the sum of the distances from a point on the ellipse to the foci be $2a$. Then if $P(x, y)$ is any point on the ellipse, we have

$$d(P, F_1) + d(P, F_2) = 2a$$

So from the Distance Formula we have

$$\sqrt{(x+c)^2 + y^2} + \sqrt{(x-c)^2 + y^2} = 2a$$

or

$$\sqrt{(x-c)^2 + y^2} = 2a - \sqrt{(x+c)^2 + y^2}$$

Squaring each side and expanding, we get

$$x^2 - 2cx + c^2 + y^2 = 4a^2 - 4a\sqrt{(x+c)^2 + y^2} + (x^2 + 2cx + c^2 + y^2)$$

which simplifies to

$$4a\sqrt{(x+c)^2 + y^2} = 4a^2 + 4cx$$

Dividing each side by 4 and squaring again, we get

$$a^2[(x+c)^2 + y^2] = (a^2 + cx)^2$$

$$a^2x^2 + 2a^2cx + a^2c^2 + a^2y^2 = a^4 + 2a^2cx + c^2x^2$$

$$(a^2 - c^2)x^2 + a^2y^2 = a^2(a^2 - c^2)$$

Since the sum of the distances from P to the foci must be larger than the distance between the foci, we have that $2a > 2c$, or $a > c$. Thus $a^2 - c^2 > 0$, and we can divide each side of the preceding equation by $a^2(a^2 - c^2)$ to get

$$\frac{x^2}{a^2} + \frac{y^2}{a^2 - c^2} = 1$$

For convenience let $b^2 = a^2 - c^2$ (with $b > 0$). Since $b^2 < a^2$, it follows that $b < a$. The preceding equation then becomes

$$\frac{x^2}{a^2} + \frac{y^2}{b^2} = 1 \qquad a > b$$

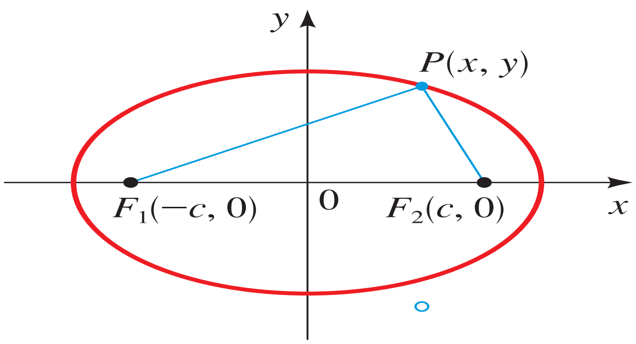


FIGURE 3

This is the equation of the ellipse. To graph it, we need to know the x- and y-intercepts. Setting $y = 0$, we get

$$\frac{x^2}{a^2} = 1$$

so $x^2 = a^2$, or $x = \pm a$. Thus the ellipse crosses the x-axis at $(a, 0)$ and $(-a, 0)$, as in Figure 4. These points are called the **vertices** of the ellipse, and the segment that joins them is called the **major axis**. Its length is $2a$.

If $a = b$ in the equation of an ellipse, then

$$\frac{x^2}{a^2} + \frac{y^2}{a^2} = 1$$

so $x^2 + y^2 = a^2$. This shows that in this case the "ellipse" is a circle with radius a.

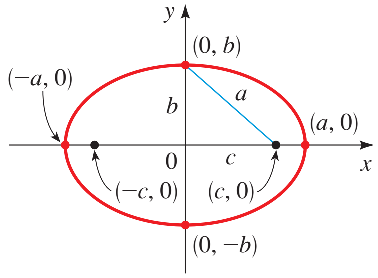


FIGURE 4

$\frac{x^2}{a^2} + \frac{y^2}{b^2} = 1$ with $a > b$

Similarly, if we set $x = 0$, we get $y = \pm b$, so the ellipse crosses the y-axis at $(0, b)$ and $(0, -b)$. The segment that joins these points is called the **minor axis**, and it has length $2b$. Note that $2a > 2b$, so the major axis is longer than the minor axis. The origin is the **center** of the ellipse.

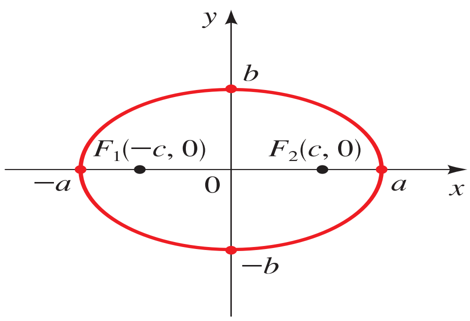
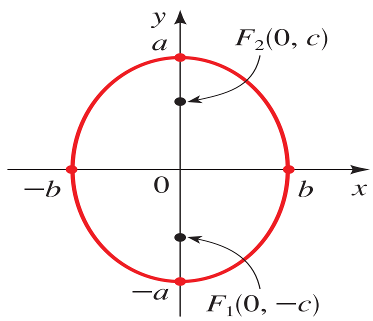
If the foci of the ellipse are placed on the y-axis at $(0, \pm c)$ rather than on the x-axis, then the roles of x and y are reversed in the preceding discussion, and we get a vertical ellipse.

Equations and Graphs of Ellipses

The following box summarizes what we have just proved about ellipses centered at the origin.

ELLIPSE WITH CENTER AT THE ORIGIN

The graph of each of the following equations is an ellipse with center at the origin and having the given properties.

EQUATION	$\frac{x^2}{a^2} + \frac{y^2}{b^2} = 1$ $a > b > 0$	$\frac{x^2}{b^2} + \frac{y^2}{a^2} = 1$ $a > b > 0$
VERTICES	$(\pm a, 0)$	$(0, \pm a)$
MAJOR AXIS	Horizontal, length $2a$	Vertical, length $2a$
MINOR AXIS	Vertical, length $2b$	Horizontal, length $2b$
FOCI	$(\pm c, 0)$, $c^2 = a^2 - b^2$	$(0, \pm c)$, $c^2 = a^2 - b^2$
GRAPH		

EXAMPLE 1 ■ Sketching an Ellipse

An ellipse has the equation

$$\frac{x^2}{9} + \frac{y^2}{4} = 1$$

(a) Find the foci, the vertices, and the lengths of the major and minor axes, and sketch the graph.

(b) Draw the graph using a graphing calculator.

SOLUTION

(a) Since the denominator of x^2 is larger, the ellipse has a horizontal major axis. This gives $a^2 = 9$ and $b^2 = 4$, so $c^2 = a^2 - b^2 = 9 - 4 = 5$. Thus $a = 3$, $b = 2$, and $c = \sqrt{5}$.

FOCI	$(\pm\sqrt{5}, 0)$
VERTICES	$(\pm 3, 0)$
LENGTH OF MAJOR AXIS	6
LENGTH OF MINOR AXIS	4

The graph is shown in Figure 5(a).

(b) To draw the graph using a graphing calculator, we need to solve for y.

$$\frac{x^2}{9} + \frac{y^2}{4} = 1$$

$$\frac{y^2}{4} = 1 - \frac{x^2}{9} \qquad \text{Subtract } \frac{x^2}{9}$$

$$y^2 = 4\left(1 - \frac{x^2}{9}\right) \qquad \text{Multiply by 4}$$

$$y = \pm 2\sqrt{1 - \frac{x^2}{9}} \qquad \text{Take square roots}$$

To obtain the graph of the ellipse, we graph both functions

$$y = 2\sqrt{1 - x^2/9} \qquad \text{and} \qquad y = -2\sqrt{1 - x^2/9}$$

as shown in Figure 5(b).

Note that the equation of an ellipse does not define y as a function of x That's why we need to graph two functions to graph an ellipse.

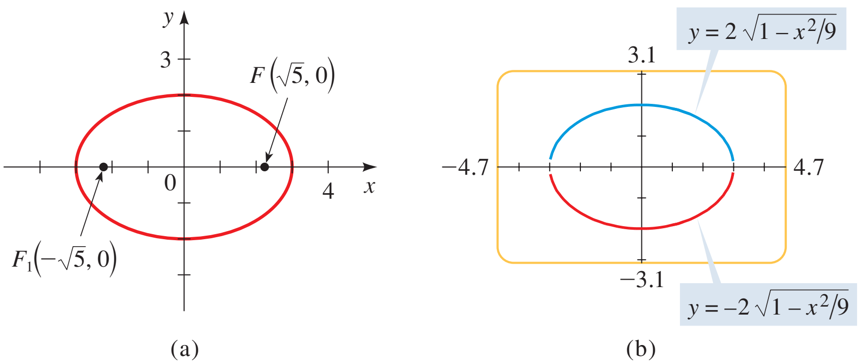


FIGURE 5
$\frac{x^2}{9} + \frac{y^2}{4} = 1$

EXAMPLE 2 ■ Finding the Foci of an Ellipse

Find the foci of the ellipse $16x^2 + 9y^2 = 144$, and sketch its graph.

SOLUTION First we put the equation in standard form. Dividing by 144, we get

CHAPTER 1 ■ Conic Sections

$$\frac{x^2}{9} + \frac{y^2}{16} = 1$$

Since $16 > 9$, this is an ellipse with its foci on the y-axis and with $a = 4$ and $b = 3$. We have

$$c^2 = a^2 - b^2 = 16 - 9 = 7$$
$$c = \sqrt{7}$$

Thus the foci are $(0, \pm\sqrt{7})$. The graph is shown in Figure 6(a).

We can also draw the graph using a graphing calculator as shown in Figure 6(b).

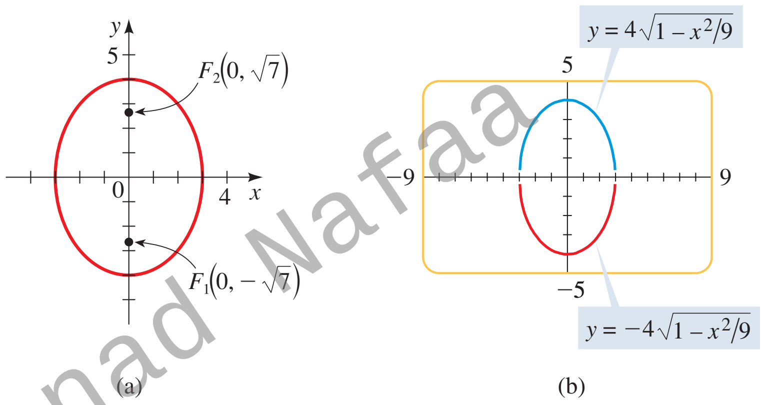


FIGURE 6
$16x^2 + 9y^2 = 144$

EXAMPLE 3 ■ Finding the Equation of an Ellipse

The vertices of an ellipse are $(\pm 4, 0)$, and the foci are $(\pm 2, 0)$. Find its equation, and sketch the graph.

SOLUTION Since the vertices are $(\pm 4, 0)$, we have $a = 4$, and the major axis is horizontal. The foci are $(\pm 2, 0)$, so $c = 2$. To write the equation, we need to find b. Since $c^2 = a^2 - b^2$, we have

$$2^2 = 4^2 - b^2$$
$$b^2 = 16 - 4 = 12$$

Thus the equation of the ellipse is

$$\frac{x^2}{16} + \frac{y^2}{12} = 1$$

The graph is shown in Figure 7.

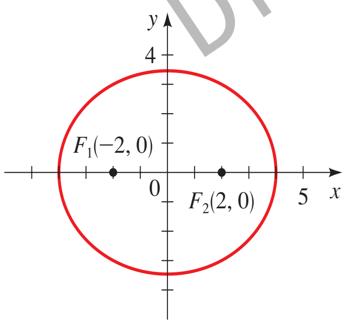


FIGURE 7
$\frac{x^2}{16} + \frac{y^2}{12} = 1$

■ Eccentricity of an Ellipse

We saw earlier in this section (Figure 2) that if $2a$ is only slightly greater than $2c$, the ellipse is long and thin, whereas if $2a$ is much greater than $2c$, the ellipse is almost circular. We measure the deviation of an ellipse from being circular by the ratio of a and c.

DEFINITION OF ECCENTRICITY

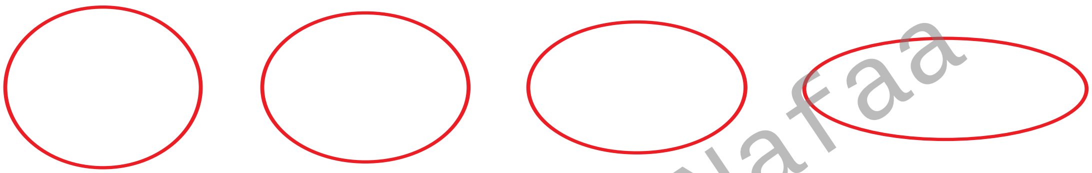
For the ellipse $\dfrac{x^2}{a^2} + \dfrac{y^2}{b^2} = 1$ or $\dfrac{x^2}{b^2} + \dfrac{y^2}{a^2} = 1$ (with $a > b > 0$), the **eccentricity** e is the number

$$e = \frac{c}{a}$$

where $c = \sqrt{a^2 - b^2}$. The eccentricity of every ellipse satisfies $0 < e < 1$.

Thus if e is close to 1, then c is almost equal to a, and the ellipse is elongated in shape, but if e is close to 0, then the ellipse is close to a circle in shape. The eccentricity is a measure of how "stretched" the ellipse is.

In Figure 8 we show a number of ellipses to demonstrate the effect of varying the eccentricity e.



$e = 0.1$ $e = 0.5$ $e = 0.68$ $e = 0.86$

FIGURE 8 Ellipses with various eccentricities

EXAMPLE 4 ■ Finding the Equation of an Ellipse from Its Eccentricity and Foci

Find the equation of the ellipse with foci $(0, \pm 8)$ and eccentricity $e = \frac{4}{5}$, and sketch its graph.

SOLUTION We are given $e = \frac{4}{5}$ and $c = 8$. Thus

$$\frac{4}{5} = \frac{8}{a} \qquad \text{Eccentricity } e = \frac{c}{a}$$

$$4a = 40 \qquad \text{Cross-multiply}$$

$$a = 10$$

To find b, we use the fact that $c^2 = a^2 - b^2$.

$$8^2 = 10^2 - b^2$$

$$b^2 = 10^2 - 8^2 = 36$$

$$b = 6$$

Thus the equation of the ellipse is

$$\frac{x^2}{36} + \frac{y^2}{100} = 1$$

Because the foci are on the y-axis, the ellipse is oriented vertically. To sketch the ellipse, we find the intercepts. The x-intercepts are ± 6, and the y-intercepts are ± 10. The graph is sketched in Figure 9.

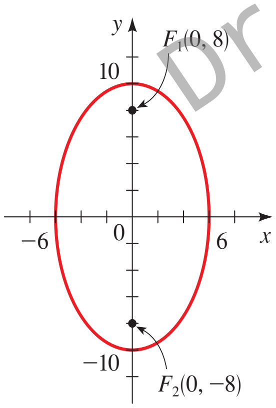


FIGURE 9 $\dfrac{x^2}{36} + \dfrac{y^2}{100} = 1$