Situation 41: Square Roots

Prepared at Penn State
Mid-Atlantic Center for Mathematics Teaching and Learning
14 July 2005 – Tracy, Jana, Christa, Jim

Edited at University of Georgia
August 1 25, 2006 – Sarah Donaldson, Jim Wilson
August 31 – Sarah Donaldson
September 25 – Sarah Donaldson

Prompt

A teacher asked her students to sketch the graph of $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$. A student responded, "That's impossible! You can't take the square root of a negative number!"

Commentary

The student's comment communicates a common misunderstanding that "*-x*" always represents a negative number, rather than signifying "opposite of *x*." The following Mathematical Foci address several key concepts that occur frequently in school mathematics: opposites, graphs of functions, reflections, domains, and ranges.

Focus 1 highlights the importance of precise language in mathematics. Specifically, the difference between "opposite," and "negative" is discussed.

Focus 2 provides an introduction to the domain of a function, and specifically examines the domain of $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$. This Focus also briefly mentions how an extension of the domain and range could allow for complex numbers, or at least the imaginary numbers.

In Focus 3, the graph of $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$ is examined by considering it as a horizontal reflection of $g(x) = \sqrt{x}$. It is here that the range of the function can be clearly seen.

Focus 4 presents a numerical approach: create a table of values. Though not a proof, it provides evidence that $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$ does, in fact, exist, and that its domain is $x \leq 0$.

Mathematical Foci

Mathematical Focus 1: Language

Mathematics requires precise language in order to distinguish between the many differences (sometimes drastic, sometimes subtle) in mathematical concepts. Words are critical, both for mathematical accuracy and to avoid misconceptions. We cannot be sloppy in our choice of language.

Mathematical terms have precise meanings. The words "negative" and "opposite" come up in this Situation. "Negative" is a <u>kind</u> of number, while "opposite" describes the <u>relationship</u> of one number to another. It was noted earlier that part of the students' misconception was that "-x" is always a negative number. This no doubt arises from the habit of calling -x "negative x." Perhaps a better (and less confusing) name for -x is "opposite of x." This way it is clear that x could be positive or negative; "-x" will simply be its opposite.

Mathematical Focus 2: Domain

A concept of domain is crucial in each of the following foci. Our discussion for discerning whether the function $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$ exists is based on the idea that if we can define a domain (such as $x \leq 0$) for the function, then the function exists. That is, if a function has a domain, then it exists for each value in that domain.

In most cases in school curriculum, it is assumed that when defining the domain of a function, only real number values of x and $f(x)$ are considered. There are times, however, when we need to explicitly examine and specify the domain and range. The statement "You can't take the square root of a negative number" is accurate if the domain is restricted to positive <u>real</u> numbers. It is true that the square root of a negative number is not a <u>real</u> number. But it does exist as a complex (or imaginary) value.

Since complex numbers typically appear later in school curriculum than do

square root functions, we limit our discussion in the remaining Foci to real-number values for domain and range.

If we only consider real values of x and $f(x)$, then the domain of the square root function $f(x) = \sqrt{x}$ is all nonnegative real numbers (D: $x \geq 0$). To find the domain of any square root function, then, one must consider x-values for which the radicand is greater than or equal to zero. For example, if the function were $f(x) = \sqrt{x + 2}$, the domain can be found algebraically:

$$x + 2 \geq 0$$
$$x \geq -2$$

In the case of $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$, an algebraic approach for finding the domain is to set $-x \geq 0$:

$$-x \geq 0$$
$$x \leq 0$$

In other words, the function $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$ does exist and its domain is $x \leq 0$ (see graph in Focus 3).

Note: The last step in the algebraic manipulation above demonstrates an important rule when working with inequalities: when multiplying (or dividing) by a negative number (such as -1 in this case), the inequality symbol must be flipped. For example, the statement 2 < 5 is true, but if the terms are multiplied by -1, then the resulting expression, -2 < -5, is no longer true. The inequality must be flipped: -2 > -5.

Mathematical Focus 3: Graph of the function

In this Focus, we shall again consider only real input and output values. That is, we shall graph functions on a coordinate plane of real values. Using a transformation of the graph of the known function $g(x) = \sqrt{x}$, the less familiar function, $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$, can be generated. This requires a look into reflections of graphs of functions:

When the graph of $-h(x)$ is compared to the graph of $h(x)$, it can be seen that the two graphs are reflections of each other about the horizontal axis. This is because by graphing the opposite of $h(x)$, each point in the positive part of the range of $h(x)$ (i.e. above the x-axis) becomes negative, and each point in the negative part of the range of $h(x)$ becomes positive. Since zero has no opposite, $h(x) = 0$ and $-h(x) = 0$ are the same on both graphs.

Comparing the graphs of $h(x)$ and $h(-x)$ also reveals a reflection: this time the graphs are reflections of each other about the vertical axis. Rather than the range values being negated (as in $-h(x)$), the domain values are negated, resulting in a reflection of x-values about the vertical axis. Again, since zero has no opposite, $h(0)$ and $h(-0)$ are the same point.

Specifically, the graph of the function $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$ is a reflection of the graph of $g(x) = \sqrt{x}$ about the vertical axis, as is shown in the following figure.
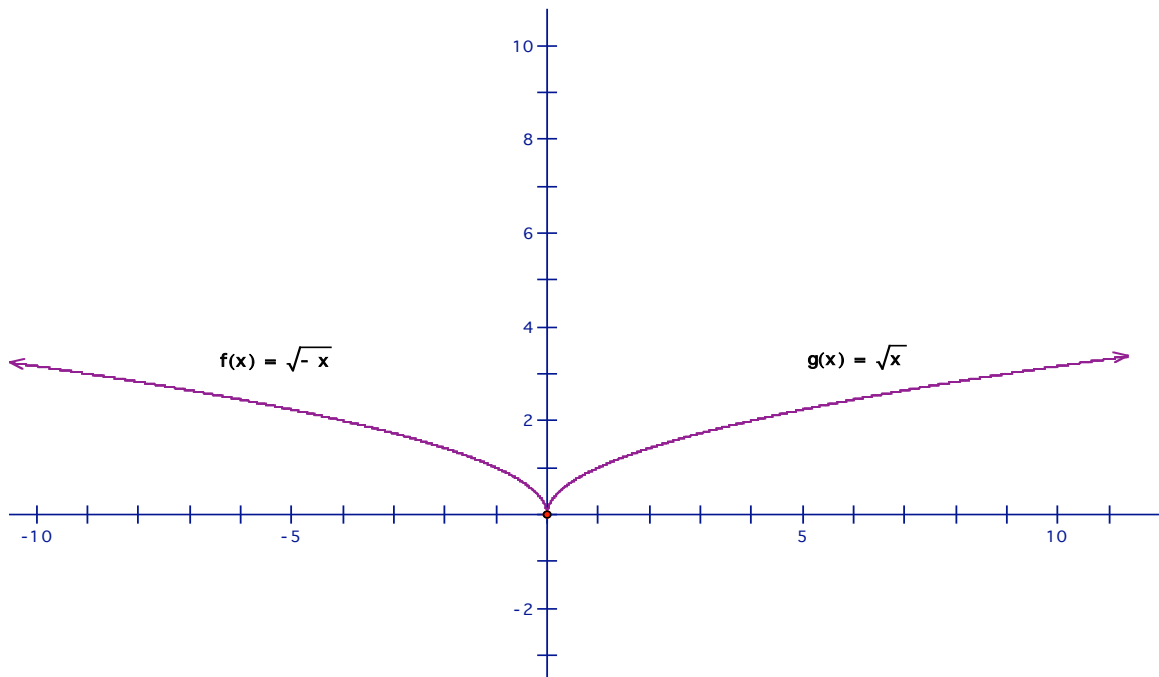
The graph illustrates that $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$ does exist, and that its domain is $x \le 0$. The range of $f(x)$ is the same as that of $g(x)$. That is, $f(x) \ge 0$.

Mathematical Focus 4: Table of values

The results from a numerical approach to $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$ echo what has been examined algebraically and graphically. Below is a chart of values of $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$ for various *x*-values:

x	$\sqrt{-x}$
-4	$\sqrt{-(-4)} = 2$
-3	$\sqrt{-(-3)} = \sqrt{3}$
-2	$\sqrt{-(-2)} = \sqrt{2}$
-1	$\sqrt{-(-1)} = 1$
0	$\sqrt{-0} = 0$
1	$\sqrt{-1} = i$
2	$\sqrt{-2} = i\sqrt{2}$
3	$\sqrt{-3} = i\sqrt{3}$
4	$\sqrt{-4} = 2i$

The results show that $f(x) = \sqrt{-x}$ exists, and suggest that its domain is $x \le 0$. When *x* is a <u>positive</u> number, the resulting *f(x)* is an imaginary number (i.e. does not exist on the real-number coordinate plane).