Functions and their inverse

A function f from a set D to a set Y is a rule that assigns a unique (single) element $f(x) \in Y$ to each element $x \in D$.

The set D of all possible input values is called the domain of the function. The set of all output values of $f(x)$ as x varies throughout D is called the range of the function.

A function $f(x)$ is one-to-one on a domain D if $f(x_1) \neq f(x_2)$ whenever $x_1 \neq x_2$ in D.

The inverse function of a function *f* (also called the inverse of *f*) is a function that undoes the operation of *f*.

DEFINITION Suppose that f is a one-to-one function on a domain D with range R. The **inverse function** f^{-1} is defined by

$$f^{-1}(b) = a \text{ if } f(a) = b.$$

The domain of f^{-1} is R and the range of f^{-1} is D.

The symbol f^{-1} for the inverse of f is read "f inverse." The "-1" in f^{-1} is *not* an exponent; $f^{-1}(x)$ does not mean $1/f(x)$. Notice that the domains and ranges of f and f^{-1} are interchanged.

The process of passing from f to f^{-1} can be summarized as a two-step procedure.

1. Solve the equation $y = f(x)$ for x. This gives a formula $x = f^{-1}(y)$ where x is expressed as a function of y.
2. Interchange x and y, obtaining a formula $y = f^{-1}(x)$ where f^{-1} is expressed in the conventional format with x as the independent variable and y as the dependent variable.

EXAMPLE Find the inverse of $y = \frac{1}{2}x + 1$, expressed as a function of x.

Solution

1. *Solve for x in terms of y:* $y = \frac{1}{2}x + 1$

The graph is a straight line satisfying the horizontal line test (Fig. 1.60).

$$2y = x + 2$$
$$x = 2y - 2.$$

2. *Interchange x and y:* $y = 2x - 2$.

The inverse of the function $f(x) = (1/2)x + 1$ is the function $f^{-1}(x) = 2x - 2$. To check, we verify that both composites give the identity function:

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

EXAMPLE Find the inverse of the function $y = x^2, x \geq 0$, expressed as a function of x.

Solution For $x \geq 0$, the graph satisfies the horizontal line test, so the function is one-to-one and has an inverse. To find the inverse, we first solve for x in terms of y:

$$y = x^2$$
$$\sqrt{y} = \sqrt{x^2} = |x| = x \qquad |x| = x \text{ because } x \geq 0$$

We then interchange x and y, obtaining

$$y = \sqrt{x}.$$