1.4 Exponential Functions

The function $f(x) = 2^x$ is called an *exponential function* because the variable, x, is the exponent. It should not be confused with the power function $g(x) = x^2$, in which the variable is the base.

In general, an **exponential function** is a function of the form

$$f(x) = b^x$$

In Appendix G we present an alternative approach to the exponential and logarithmic functions using integral calculus.

where b is a positive constant. Let's recall what this means.

If $x = n$, a positive integer, then

$$b^n = \underbrace{b \cdot b \cdot \cdots \cdot b}_{n \text{ factors}}$$

If $x = 0$, then $b^0 = 1$, and if $x = -n$, where n is a positive integer, then

$$b^{-n} = \frac{1}{b^n}$$

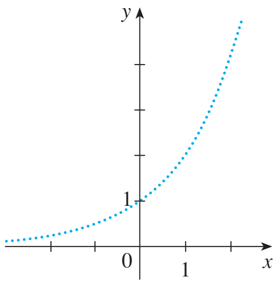

FIGURE 1
Representation of $y = 2^x$, x rational

If x is a rational number, $x = p/q$, where p and q are integers and $q > 0$, then

$$b^x = b^{p/q} = \sqrt[q]{b^p} = \left(\sqrt[q]{b}\right)^p$$

But what is the meaning of b^x if x is an irrational number? For instance, what is meant by $2^{\sqrt{3}}$ or 5^π?

To help us answer this question we first look at the graph of the function $y = 2^x$, where x is rational. A representation of this graph is shown in Figure 1. We want to enlarge the domain of $y = 2^x$ to include both rational and irrational numbers.

There are holes in the graph in Figure 1 corresponding to irrational values of x. We want to fill in the holes by defining $f(x) = 2^x$, where $x \in \mathbb{R}$, so that f is an increasing function. In particular, since the irrational number $\sqrt{3}$ satisfies

$$1.7 < \sqrt{3} < 1.8$$

we must have

$$2^{1.7} < 2^{\sqrt{3}} < 2^{1.8}$$

and we know what $2^{1.7}$ and $2^{1.8}$ mean because 1.7 and 1.8 are rational numbers. Similarly, if we use better approximations for $\sqrt{3}$, we obtain better approximations for $2^{\sqrt{3}}$:

$$\begin{aligned}
1.73 < \sqrt{3} < 1.74 \quad &\Rightarrow \quad 2^{1.73} < 2^{\sqrt{3}} < 2^{1.74} \\
1.732 < \sqrt{3} < 1.733 \quad &\Rightarrow \quad 2^{1.732} < 2^{\sqrt{3}} < 2^{1.733} \\
1.7320 < \sqrt{3} < 1.7321 \quad &\Rightarrow \quad 2^{1.7320} < 2^{\sqrt{3}} < 2^{1.7321} \\
1.73205 < \sqrt{3} < 1.73206 \quad &\Rightarrow \quad 2^{1.73205} < 2^{\sqrt{3}} < 2^{1.73206} \\
\vdots \qquad\quad \vdots \qquad\qquad & \qquad\qquad \vdots \qquad\qquad \vdots
\end{aligned}$$

A proof of this fact is given in J. Marsden and A. Weinstein, *Calculus Unlimited* (Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin/Cummings, 1981).

It can be shown that there is exactly one number that is greater than all of the numbers

$$2^{1.7}, \quad 2^{1.73}, \quad 2^{1.732}, \quad 2^{1.7320}, \quad 2^{1.73205}, \quad \ldots$$

and less than all of the numbers

$$2^{1.8}, \quad 2^{1.74}, \quad 2^{1.733}, \quad 2^{1.7321}, \quad 2^{1.73206}, \quad \ldots$$

We define $2^{\sqrt{3}}$ to be this number. Using the preceding approximation process we can compute it correct to six decimal places:

$$2^{\sqrt{3}} \approx 3.321997$$

Similarly, we can define 2^x (or b^x, if $b > 0$) where x is any irrational number. Figure 2 shows how all the holes in Figure 1 have been filled to complete the graph of the function $f(x) = 2^x$, $x \in \mathbb{R}$.

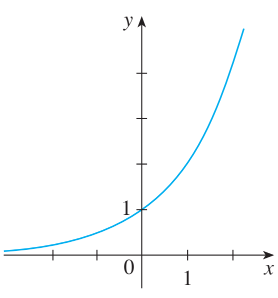

FIGURE 2
$y = 2^x$, x real

The graphs of members of the family of functions $y = b^x$ are shown in Figure 3 for various values of the base b. Notice that all of these graphs pass through the same point $(0, 1)$ because $b^0 = 1$ for $b \neq 0$. Notice also that as the base b gets larger, the exponential function grows more rapidly (for $x > 0$).

If $0 < b < 1$, then b^x approaches 0 as x becomes large. If $b > 1$, then b^x approaches 0 as x decreases through negative values. In both cases the x-axis is a horizontal asymptote. These matters are discussed in Section 2.6.

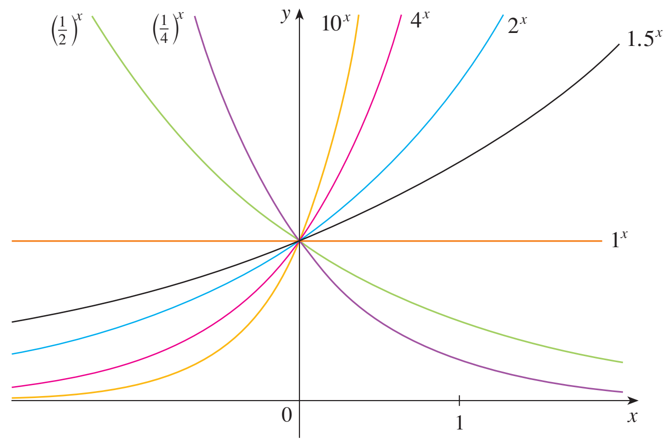

FIGURE 3

You can see from Figure 3 that there are basically three kinds of exponential functions $y = b^x$. If $0 < b < 1$, the exponential function decreases; if $b = 1$, it is a constant; and if $b > 1$, it increases. These three cases are illustrated in Figure 4. Observe that if $b \neq 1$, then the exponential function $y = b^x$ has domain $\mathbb{R}$ and range $(0, \infty)$. Notice also that, since $(1/b)^x = 1/b^x = b^{-x}$, the graph of $y = (1/b)^x$ is just the reflection of the graph of $y = b^x$ about the y-axis.

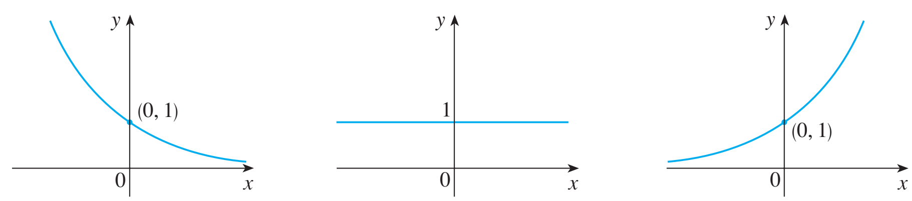

FIGURE 4

(a) $y = b^x,\ 0 < b < 1$ (b) $y = 1^x$ (c) $y = b^x,\ b > 1$

One reason for the importance of the exponential function lies in the following properties. If x and y are rational numbers, then these laws are well known from elementary algebra. It can be proved that they remain true for arbitrary real numbers x and y.

www.stewartcalculus.com
For review and practice using the Laws of Exponents, click on *Review of Algebra*.

Laws of Exponents If a and b are positive numbers and x and y are any real numbers, then

1. $b^{x+y} = b^x b^y$ **2.** $b^{x-y} = \dfrac{b^x}{b^y}$ **3.** $(b^x)^y = b^{xy}$ **4.** $(ab)^x = a^x b^x$

EXAMPLE 1 Sketch the graph of the function $y = 3 - 2^x$ and determine its domain and range.

For a review of reflecting and shifting graphs, see Section 1.3.

SOLUTION First we reflect the graph of $y = 2^x$ [shown in Figures 2 and 5(a)] about the x-axis to get the graph of $y = -2^x$ in Figure 5(b). Then we shift the graph of $y = -2^x$

upward 3 units to obtain the graph of $y = 3 - 2^x$ in Figure 5(c). The domain is $\mathbb{R}$ and the range is $(-\infty, 3)$.

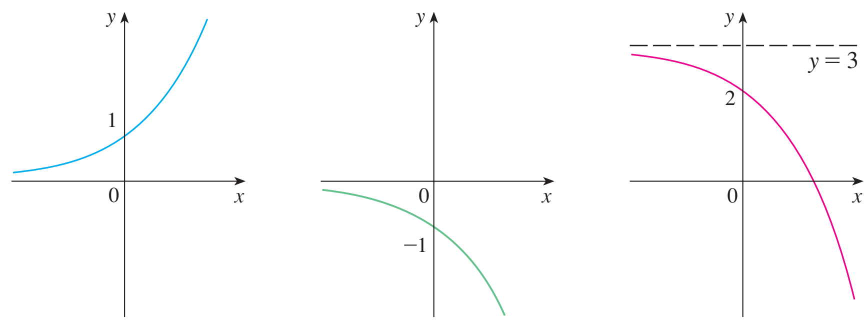

FIGURE 5 (a) $y = 2^x$ (b) $y = -2^x$ (c) $y = 3 - 2^x$ ■

EXAMPLE 2 Use a graphing device to compare the exponential function $f(x) = 2^x$ and the power function $g(x) = x^2$. Which function grows more quickly when x is large?

SOLUTION Figure 6 shows both functions graphed in the viewing rectangle $[-2, 6]$ by $[0, 40]$. We see that the graphs intersect three times, but for $x > 4$ the graph of $f(x) = 2^x$ stays above the graph of $g(x) = x^2$. Figure 7 gives a more global view and shows that for large values of x, the exponential function $y = 2^x$ grows far more rapidly than the power function $y = x^2$.

Example 2 shows that $y = 2^x$ increases more quickly than $y = x^2$. To demonstrate just how quickly $f(x) = 2^x$ increases, let's perform the following thought experiment. Suppose we start with a piece of paper a thousandth of an inch thick and we fold it in half 50 times. Each time we fold the paper in half, the thickness of the paper doubles, so the thickness of the resulting paper would be $2^{50}/1000$ inches. How thick do you think that is? It works out to be more than 17 million miles!

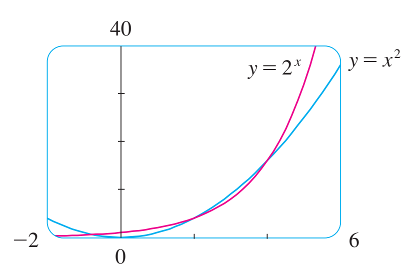

FIGURE 6

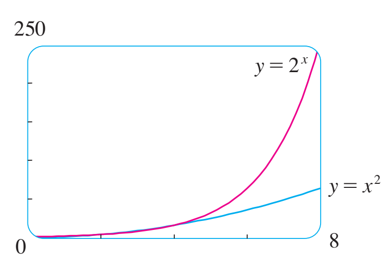

FIGURE 7 ■

Applications of Exponential Functions

The exponential function occurs very frequently in mathematical models of nature and society. Here we indicate briefly how it arises in the description of population growth and radioactive decay. In later chapters we will pursue these and other applications in greater detail.

First we consider a population of bacteria in a homogeneous nutrient medium. Suppose that by sampling the population at certain intervals it is determined that the population doubles every hour. If the number of bacteria at time t is $p(t)$, where t is measured in hours, and the initial population is $p(0) = 1000$, then we have

$$p(1) = 2p(0) = 2 \times 1000$$

$$p(2) = 2p(1) = 2^2 \times 1000$$

$$p(3) = 2p(2) = 2^3 \times 1000$$