
This help document accompanies Richard Johnsonbaugh: *Discrete Mathematics*, 7th edition, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2009.

Mathematical Induction

Mathematical induction is used to prove a sequence of statements indexed by the positive integers. For example, if

$$S(n) : 1 + 2 + \cdots + n = \frac{n(n+1)}{2},$$

mathematical induction can be used to prove that $S(n)$ is true for all positive integers n . In other words, mathematical induction can be used to prove that

$$\begin{aligned} S(1) : \quad & 1 = \frac{1 \cdot 2}{2}, \\ S(2) : \quad & 1 + 2 = \frac{2 \cdot 3}{2}, \\ S(3) : \quad & 1 + 2 + 3 = \frac{3 \cdot 4}{2}, \\ & \vdots \\ S(n) : \quad & 1 + 2 + 3 + \cdots + n = \frac{n(n+1)}{2}, \\ S(n+1) : \quad & 1 + 2 + 3 + \cdots + n + (n+1) = \frac{(n+1)(n+2)}{2}, \\ & \vdots \end{aligned}$$

are all true. [Notice that $S(n+1)$ is obtained from $S(n)$ by everywhere substituting $n+1$ for n .]

In its simplest form (we discuss the *strong* form of mathematical induction at the end of this WebHelp), mathematical induction requires two steps

- **Basis Step.** Prove that $S(1)$ is true.

- **Inductive Step.** For every n , *assume* that $S(n)$ is true and *prove* that $S(n + 1)$ is true.

To see why the Basis and Inductive Steps prove that $S(n)$ is true for all n , consider any specific value of n , for example, $n = 5$. Is $S(5)$ true? Well, because of the Basis Step, $S(1)$ is true. The Inductive Step says that if $S(1)$ is true, then $S(2)$ is true. $S(1)$ is true! Therefore $S(2)$ is true. The Inductive Step says that if $S(2)$ is true, then $S(3)$ is true. $S(2)$ is true! Therefore $S(3)$ is true. The Inductive Step says that if $S(3)$ is true, then $S(4)$ is true. $S(3)$ is true! Therefore $S(4)$ is true. The Inductive Step says that if $S(4)$ is true, then $S(5)$ is true. $S(4)$ is true! Therefore $S(5)$ is true! We could use a similar argument *for any value of n* , therefore $S(n)$ is true for every n .

The Basis Step is usually straightforward. In the previous example, the Basis Step is to prove

$$1 = \frac{1 \cdot 2}{2},$$

which is certainly true! In the previous example, the Inductive Step is to *assume* that

$$1 + 2 + \cdots + n = \frac{n(n + 1)}{2}$$

is true, and then prove that

$$1 + 2 + \cdots + n + (n + 1) = \frac{(n + 1)(n + 2)}{2}$$

is true. *We recommend that you always write out both case n and case $n + 1$ before proceeding further with the Inductive Step.*

The key to proving the Inductive Step is to “uncover” case n within case $n + 1$. Although the meaning of “uncover” depends on the context, it is *always* the case that the success of the Inductive Step rests on uncovering case n within case $n + 1$.

For our example, case n involves

$$1 + 2 + \cdots + n,$$

which appears within case $n + 1$:

$$\underbrace{1 + 2 + \cdots + n}_{\text{This is case } n.} + (n + 1).$$

Since we are assuming that case n is true, that is, that

$$1 + 2 + \cdots + n = \frac{n(n + 1)}{2},$$

we may substitute

$$\frac{n(n + 1)}{2}$$

for

$$1 + 2 + \cdots + n$$

in case $n + 1$ to obtain

$$1 + 2 + \cdots + n + (n + 1) = \frac{n(n + 1)}{2} + (n + 1).$$

[Notice that the term $(n + 1)$ was not replaced by anything and, so, is just copied from the left side to the right side of the equation.] The Inductive Step is completed by using algebra to get the right side into the correct form, namely,

$$\frac{(n + 1)(n + 2)}{2}.$$

We have

$$\begin{aligned} 1 + 2 + \cdots + n + (n + 1) &= \underbrace{\frac{n(n + 1)}{2} + (n + 1)}_{\text{factor out } n + 1} \\ &= (n + 1) \left(\frac{n}{2} + 1 \right) \\ &= \frac{(n + 1)(n + 2)}{2}. \end{aligned}$$

The Inductive Step is finished and the proof by mathematical induction is complete.

Summary

To give a proof that $S(n)$ is true for every positive integer n using mathematical induction in its simplest form:

- Prove directly that $S(1)$ is true.
- *Assume* that $S(n)$ is true and *prove* that $S(n + 1)$ is true. As an aid, write out $S(n)$ and $S(n + 1)$ explicitly, remembering that $S(n + 1)$ is obtained from $S(n)$ by everywhere replacing n by $n + 1$.

To help with the latter step, look for $S(n)$ within $S(n + 1)$.

Strong Form of Mathematical Induction

In the strong form of mathematical induction, the preceding Inductive Step

- **Inductive Step.** For every n , *assume* that $S(n)$ is true and *prove* that $S(n + 1)$ is true.

is replaced by

- **Inductive Step for Strong Form of Mathematical Induction.** For every n , *assume* that $S(k)$ is true for all $k < n$ and *prove* that $S(n)$ is true.

The Basis Step is unchanged. In the strong form of mathematical induction, to prove that $S(n)$ is true we may assume the truth of $S(k)$ *for all k that precede n* , namely $1, 2, \dots, n - 1$. In the simple form of mathematical induction, to prove that $S(n + 1)$ is true, we assume the truth of $S(k)$ *only for the k that immediately precedes $n + 1$* , namely n . In other words, in the strong form of mathematical induction, to prove that $S(n)$ is true, we assume that $S(1), S(2), \dots, S(n - 1)$ are all true. In the simple form of mathematical induction, to prove that $S(n + 1)$ is true, we assume only that $S(n)$ is true. The strong form of mathematical induction is useful when the truth of *all* the preceding cases helps prove case n .